“Become a global citizen, challenge your leaders, use your voice.” – UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon accepting the honorary doctorate by the University of Leuven, Belgium, on 28 May 2015.
The world is at a crossroads. Humanity can continue down the brutal and regressive path of division and conflict being cut by violent extremists, oppressors and others who trample on human rights - or we can embark on the progressive and promising path of integration and cooperation that has been embraced by leaders and advanced by principled individuals around the world. The choice is obvious and the way forward is clear. In September 2015, more than 150 world leaders adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, a comprehensive, integrated plan of action to create a better future where all people enjoy the dignity and rights they deserve. Realizing this ambitious agenda requires global participation and partnership among all sectors of the international community. Outreach and engagement can help people understand their direct connection to the Sustainable Development Goals, and that can drive action.

Education holds the key to success. But what is education? Clearly, it goes beyond the transfer of knowledge. Agenda 21, which was adopted in 1992 at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, saw education as “a process by which human beings and societies can reach their fullest potential” recognizing it as a driver and facilitator for transformative changes.

It also identified both formal and non-formal education as “indispensable to changing people's attitudes so that they have the capacity to assess and address their sustainable development concerns.”

The Soka Gakkai International, as a global network of ordinary citizens who practice Buddhism, has primarily been engaged in non-formal education through panel exhibitions, surveys, petition drives and other means and tools with a simple but consistent message: “one person can make a difference.” Our aim is to give hope and courage to people, instilling the sense of empowerment that sparks action and leadership.

Global Citizenship Education has gained more recognition and support at the United Nations in recent years, including through the Secretary-General’s Global Education First Initiative as well the 2030 Agenda itself. Academics have described its essence as civic global responsibility, service to community, and a shared sense of belonging to our human family that transcends national borders.

Kartikeya Sarabhai, Founder and Director of the Centre for Environment Education in Ahmedabad, has emphasized the importance of personal responsibility, saying, “A global citizen is not someone who can be passive, but needs to contribute.”

Daisaku Ikeda, President of SGI, has long stressed the value of mobilizing people to care about our world. In a lecture twenty years ago at Teachers College, Columbia University, he said:

“I have many friends who could be considered quite ordinary citizens, but who possess an inner nobility; who have never traveled beyond their native place, yet who are genuinely concerned for the peace and prosperity of the world.”

This stance directly and beautifully links with the 2030 Agenda's pledge to leave no one behind.

Global citizenship shouldn't belong only to a certain group of people; it must include and embrace as many people, friends and colleagues, sisters and brothers, families near and far, as possible.

In this spirit, we hope and resolve that this media project will continue to help foster global citizenship throughout the world, so that we can ensure no one - not a single person - will be left behind.
The concept of Global Citizenship has found inroads into policy discourses since Buddhist philosopher, peace builder, educator and Soka Gakkai International President Daisaku Ikeda expressed his thoughts about Education for Global Citizenship in an address at Teachers College, Columbia University on June 13, 1996.

In fact in September 2012, UN Secretary-General launched the Global Education First Initiative (GEFI), gathering a broad spectrum of world leaders and advocates who all aspire to use the transformative power of education to build a better future for all.

UNESCO has also taken to Global Citizenship Education (GCED) with a view to empowering learners to assume active roles to face and resolve global challenges and to become proactive contributors to a more peaceful, tolerant, inclusive and secure world.

Its Focus areas are:

- Global advocacy and policy dialogue
- The global measurement of progress on GCED and ESD (SDG Target 4.7)
- Peace and human rights education
- Preventing violent extremism through education
- Education about the Holocaust

At Teachers College, Ikeda outlined the following three characteristics of a global citizen:

- The wisdom to perceive the interconnectedness of all life and living.
- The courage not to fear or deny difference; but to respect and understand people of different cultures and grow from encounters with them.
- The compassion to maintain an imaginative empathy that reaches beyond one’s immediate surroundings and extends to those suffering in distant places.

The global citizenship ideal is present in all of the educational institutions that Ikeda has founded, but it has perhaps been most clearly realized in the establishment of Soka University of America, with its emphasis on the global diversity of its student body and its compulsory second language acquisition and study abroad programs, as well as in its core curriculum.

In my view, the three characteristics mentioned by Ikeda constitute the core of global citizenship as it manifests itself in our day-to-day lives in the face of an increasingly complicated world: a world in which things seem to be falling apart.

Though the concept of global citizenship and its core does not appear to draw much attention of the global media, the fact is that the 17 Goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development call for promoting the spirit of global citizenship. This is underlined also by a series of articles written by journalists from around the world, which you will find in this compilation.
Call for Gender-Responsive Implementation of Agenda 2030

By J C Suresh

TORONTO | NEW YORK (IDN) - UN member states committed themselves to the gender-responsive implementation of Agenda 2030 as the 60th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW60) concluded on March 24 agreeing on a set of conclusions, calling for stronger laws, policies and institutions, better data and scaled-up financing.

The Commission recognized women’s vital role as agents of development. It acknowledged that progress on the Sustainable Development Goals at the heart of Agenda 2030 will not be possible without gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. The conclusions agreed at CSW60 urge a comprehensive approach to implementing all 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets through thorough integration of gender perspectives across all statutes still permitting discrimination. Temporary special measures may be required to guarantee that women and girls can obtain justice for human rights violations.

Five targets if Goal 5 of the SDGs are:

5.1 End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere
5.2 Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including
5.3 Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation
5.4 Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate
5.5 Ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life
5.6 Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agreed in accordance with the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences

5.a Undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance and natural resources, in accordance with national laws
5.b Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women
5.c Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels.

The Commission endorsed significantly increased investment to close resource gaps for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. Funds should be mobilized from all sources, domestic and international, ranging from fulfilling official development assistance commitments to combatting illicit financial flows that shortchange public resources for gender equality, the Commission resolved.

With humanitarian crises and other emergencies disproportionately affecting women and girls, the Commission underlined the imperative of empowering women in leadership and decision-making in all aspects of responding to and recovering from crisis. On the eve of the World Humanitarian Summit on May 23-24 in Istanbul, it emphasized prioritizing women’s and girls’ needs in humanitarian action and upholding their rights in all emergency situations. Every humanitarian response should take measures to address sexual and gender-based violence.

In his opening remarks at the launch of the Report for World Humanitarian Summit, titled ‘One Humanity: Shared Responsibility’, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said on February 9, 2016: “We must also empower and protect women and girls. . . Education in protracted crises must also be given priority. No child or adolescent should be denied an education because they are in a crisis situation or because of a lack of funds.”

Members of the Commission united behind ensuring women’s equal participation in leadership at all levels of decision-making in the public and private spheres, encompassing governments, businesses and other institutions, and across all areas of sustainable development. Depending on different circumstances, this may involve establishing temporary special measures, setting and achieving concrete benchmarks and removing barriers to women’s participation.

UN Women Executive Director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka welcomed the agreement and the commitment of UN Member States to make the 2030 Agenda, adopted in September 2015, a reality in countries around the world. She said: “Countries gave gender inequality an expiry date: 2030. Now it is time to get to work. These agreed conclusions entrench and start the implementation of a gender-responsive agenda 2030 with which we have the best possibility to leave no one behind.”

Growing global commitment was already in evidence with a record number of more than 80 government ministers from around the world attending the Commission, UN Women said in a media release. Around 4,100 non-governmental representatives from more than 540 organizations participated as well, the highest number ever for one of the Commission’s regular annual meetings.

Given the major contributions to Agenda 2030 of civil society, including women’s and community-based organizations, feminist groups, human rights defenders and girls’ and youth-led organizations, the Commission welcomed open engagement and cooperation with them in gender-responsive implementation. It emphasized fully engaging with men and boys as agents of change and allies in the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls.

To guide systematic progress towards gender equality and women’s empowerment throughout the 2030 Agenda, the Commission stressed enhanced national statistical capacity and the systematic design, collection and sharing of high-quality, reliable and timely data disaggregated by sex, age and income. Members also agreed to bolster the role of national mechanisms for women and girls in championing their equality and empowerment.

UN Women is the UN organization dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women. A global champion for women and girls, UN Women was established to accelerate progress on meeting their needs worldwide.

[IDN-InDepthNews – 25 March 2016]

Photo: Closing plenary of CSW60

Credit: UN Women
The Gap Between Principle and Practice in Ecuador

By Nelsy Lizarazo

QUITO (IDN) - Universal or global citizenship is, according to the Dictionary of Humanitarian Action a principle, category or condition thanks to which anyone in any part of the world may be recognised as a subject with rights.

It’s an established and accepted concept, at least in an international sphere, which is directly linked to the universality of Human Rights. The concept of Universal citizenship fundamentally means that human rights are not related to which particular state an individual may come from and therefore must be protected and respected anywhere a person may find themselves. The Ecuadorian Constitution, approved by a wide majority of the population in 2008 consecrates Universal Citizenship as one of the principle guidelines of Ecuador’s international relations in the following terms: “It advocates the principle of Universal Citizenship, the free movement of all inhabitants of the planet, and the progressive extinction of the status of alien or foreigner as an element to transform the unequal relations between countries, especially those between North and South.”

With the introduction of this principle into constitution, Ecuador became the global flag-bearer for free movement of human beings and the elimination of borders. In other words, it became the vanguard of a movement of human beings and the elimination of borders.

Competitive extinction that in time can eliminate the discrimination status. Without doubt this was a completely integrative principle that understands that no human being can be considered illegal as a result of their migration status.

In the midst of broad backing from movements and organisations working for human rights, and despite direct criticism by conservative sectors of Ecuadorian society and the fears of a population with a high dose of xenophobia and racism, President Rafael Correa made public his decision to eliminate tourist visas for all foreigners coming to the country, allowing everyone to stay for 90 days.

Less than one year later, the government of the Citizens’ Revolution – a term used by President Rafael Correa to describe his project for government – reviewed the measure and re-imposed the tourist visa; first for citizens of the People’s Republic of China, and then, a few months later, for those coming from countries such as Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Nigeria, among others. The Citizen’s Revolution realised that Ecuadorian territory was becoming a transit-point to Brazil and the USA and the opening of Ecuador’s borders also led to regional tensions, due to the “instability” that the measure caused across the continent.

Over the next two years, the influx of Cubans and Haitians into Ecuador increased exponentially and the principle of Universal Citizenship was found to have no applicable legislation to back it up and so the Interior Ministry and the police force intervened, exercising powers given to them under existing Migration Law.

In fact, back in 2010, the government set up a detention centre for immigrants to which foreign citizens found to have “irregular situations” and who have been detained in police raids are taken. In this place, that was previously a hotel and continues to be known as “Carrion Hotel”, people cannot leave until they have resolved their situation, either through deportation or through the receipt of some kind of visa.

Human Rights organisations and those working in the fields of migration and refugees systematically denounce the abuse of rights that immigrants in irregular situations are subject to. On the other hand, the authorities argue for the need to control immigration in order to guarantee people’s security and they have given assurances – right from the beginning – that the detention centre measure was taken in order to guarantee dignified treatment for people.

So, the principle of Universal Citizenship, an advanced principle as regards the right to freedom of movement, continues to find itself today with numerous obstacles both in a national and international context.

Nationally; Migration Law that has not been modified in accordance with this principle and, therefore, orientates many of the practices by the authorities and relevant bodies in a way contrary to the meaning of Universal Citizenship; in addition to an atmosphere that is unfavourable to the entry and integration of people from other countries due to the usual arguments regarding work and security.

Internationally; a region that, despite advances in integration, still doesn’t count on migration policies that are aligned among the different countries and, even less so, to the principle of Universal Citizenship; and a world in which the need to seek a better life in other places – whatever those reasons may be – is the object of business and is ground lost to the abuse of human rights.

Nevertheless, to count on the principle of Universal Citizenship in the country’s constitution continues to be a great advance from the perspective of those of us who believe in freedom of movement as a right and the exercising of human freedom: an exemplary decision that marks a long and difficult road, but not an impossible one.

[IDN-InDepthNews – 21 March 2016]

Photo: Quito
Credit: Patricio Mena Vásconez, Wikimedia Commons
By Rita Joshi

BERLIN | VIENNA (IDN) - The United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO) and the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO) are determined to undertake necessary steps to make “Planet 50-50 by 2030: Step It Up for Gender Equality”, the theme of the International Women’s Day 2016, a reality.

Director General, Li Yong, said: “UNIDO recognizes that investing in the economic empowerment of women sets a direct path towards gender equality, poverty eradication and inclusive industrial development.”

He added: “Women make an enormous economic contribution, whether in businesses, as entrepreneurs, as employers or as employees, or by doing care work at home. But they also remain disproportionately affected by poverty, discrimination and exploitation.”

Li declared: “To step up its game for gender equality, UNIDO has recently adopted a new gender policy and gender strategy, and is constantly increasing its portfolio of projects designed to empower women economically.”

The CTBTO admitted that as a security-related organization with a strong technical focus, the Organization is active in traditionally male-dominated fields. “While the CTBTO has yet to reach the aspirated 50 per cent female representation across all staff levels, there has been slow but steady progress over recent years towards that goal. The CTBTO has now reached female representation of 43 per cent overall, and 35 per cent in the professional and higher positions,” the Organization said.

CTBTO Executive Secretary Lassina Zerbo highlighted women’s contribution to the nuclear test-ban: “Women were and are the driving force behind the ban on nuclear testing. The civil society movements that pushed for the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) in 1996 and its predecessors were to a large extent grounded in women’s initiatives.”

He recalled a crucial contribution by Dr. Louise Reiss, the scientist who helped to convince President John F. Kennedy to conclude the 1963 Partial Test Ban Treaty through her ground-breaking Baby Tooth Study. Dr. Reiss, who died at the age of 90 in January 2011, directed a study that examined hundreds of thousands of baby teeth during the cold war and helped persuade the world’s leading powers to ban nuclear testing in the atmosphere.

Dr. Reiss and her husband, Eric, both physicians, were founding members of the Greater St. Louis Citizens’ Committee for Nuclear Information, which joined with the schools of dentistry at Washington University in St. Louis and St. Louis University in 1959 to create the Baby Tooth Survey.

The goal was to show that radioactive fallout from nuclear testing was getting into the nation’s food supply and ultimately working its way into human bones and teeth. And the study succeeded. Dr. Reiss was named director of the project and, along with her husband, worked with other scientists in the project’s laboratory.

Zerbo said: “I am particularly proud of the women working at the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO). They brave the elements in the world’s remotest corners to build and maintain our monitoring stations, they work long hours to screen vast amounts of data for suspicious events, and they develop new methods of analysis and management practices. My sincere appreciation and thanks go to all of them, for without them we could not have become what we are today: the world’s centre of verification excellence.”

In CTBTO, women hold responsible positions not only as budget officers and in-charge of corporate communications but also network infrastructure engineers and responsible for the International Monitoring System (IMS), which when completed, would consist of 337 facilities worldwide to monitor the planet for signs of nuclear explosions.

Female staff includes Radionuclide Analysts. Only these measurements can give a clear indication as to whether an explosion detected by the other methods was actually nuclear or not. They are supported by 16 radionuclide laboratories. 80 stations measure the atmosphere for radioactive particles; 40 of them also pick up noble gas.

According to the CTBTO Chief, “there is still a long way to go to achieve real equality on a global scale, where the gap is closing slower than anticipated only a few years ago: In 2015 the World Economic Forum estimated that it may take up to the year 2133 to fully close the gender gap”.

In a profound personal note, the CTBTO Executive Secretary said: “International Women’s Day is of the utmost significance to me – not only professionally, but also as a father to three girls and husband to a woman who has sacrificed part of her own professional career to be the rock of our family. For me, celebrating Women’s Day means being appreciative and mindful of the road ahead where gender parity is achieved through common endeavour.”

He added; “It is a day that reminds all men that their mother is the first woman in their lives! The one who teaches empathy, building in all of us something we need: perspective and prospective. . . Together, women and men are the two wings of humanity; they must both fly in harmony.”

[IDN-InDepthNews – 9 March 2016]
Photo: CTBTO Staff
South Korea Set to Make Rapid Strides in Global Arena

By Valentina Ieri

NEW YORK (IDN | INPS) - North Korea’s nuclear ambition has not been checked effectively even though there were four resolutions of the United Nations Security Council. And North Korea’s alleged hydrogen bomb test and a successive rocket launch early February culminated their die-hard ambition to have a substantial nuclear capability together with delivery means.

Against this backdrop, the Republic of Korea (ROK, South Korea) is certainly putting its foot down and stepping up as a key player in the global arena, particularly on North Korean issue.

Since 2006, North Korea has conducted four rounds of nuclear tests and six rounds of missile launches, making it an unprecedented precarious situation surrounding the Korean Peninsula.

In an interview with INPS (the International Press Syndicate), Ambassador Choonghee Hahn, Deputy Permanent Representative of the Mission of South Korea to the United Nations, said: “Talking for the sake of talking is not acceptable anymore. This is a systematic and intentional violation of the UN Security Council resolution by North Korea, that clearly disdains and ridicules us. It is an outrageous situation which requires an extreme response.”

“North Korea’s militarization and nuclear capabilities are much more advanced than ten years ago,” said Hahn. “We want robust and substantive sanctions measures to make North Korea to realize that they do not have any other choices but to stop their provocations and abandon their nuclear weapons programme.”

Responding to the launch of the space satellite on February 7, the UN Security Council called for an “emergency meeting” referring to it as an act of threat against international security. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon condemned the act as a “deplorable violation” of UN sanctions.

“The Security Council must be united in sending a strong and unequivocal message, as ‘mediocre’ measures will simply embolden North Korea to continue to conduct further nuclear test and missiles launch in the future,” remarked Hahn.

Also South Korea’s Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se, who held discussions with representatives of the Security Council members and the UN Secretary-General on February 9-10 in New York, has stressed the need for a strong and effective Security Council sanctions resolution. This resolution should become “the terminating resolution in order to prevent North Korea from conducting fifth and sixth nuclear tests”, he said.

In response to North Korea’s tests, the ROK government closed down on February 10 the Gaesong Industrial Complex, a special administrative zone located ten kilometres (six miles) north of the Korean Demilitarised Zone.

“The Gaesong complex,” explained the Korean Ambassador, “has been an historic symbol of the inter-Korean relationship for over 15 years, which fetches the North Korean economy between 100-120 million U.S. dollars a year.”

“It was not an easy decision to close down all the 125 small companies of the complex, but we do not want any part of this money to go towards the development of weapons of mass destruction,” stressed Hahn.

Over 54,000 North Korean workers lost their jobs and along with their immediate families altogether 200,000 would suffer from economic distress.

To add fuel to the fire, North Korea’s President Kim Jong-un expelled all the South Korean managerial personnel from Gaesung, forcing them to leave immediately and abandon all the expensive equipment.

However, despite the tensions on the peninsula, South Korea is keen on taking a leading role to maintain stability, peace and economic prosperity in the country – in the hope of a reunification of the two Koreas – and in the entire East Asia region.

“The ROK is indeed a historical example of good governance, whose policies managed to transform the country from a major aid-recipient to a major aid-donor,” underlined Hahn.

“The Korean development process, known as Saemaul Undong, led to successful political and economic outcomes. Today we are trying to share our experience by combining our regional contribution with our global contribution.”

Recently, the ROK expanded its leadership by launching initiatives to guarantee sustainable development, environmental protection and international cooperation, in accordance with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

In 2013, President Park launched the North-East Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI) in order to promote sustainable peace and cooperation among the neighbouring countries – China and Japan – and move beyond the so-called “Asian Paradox”.

According to the NAPCI 2015 report, the initiative “is a key element of the Trustpolitik [...] A future oriented effort by the ROK Government to replace a structure of conflict and discord in the region with an order of dialogue and cooperation”.

Another project proposed in 2014 is the Eurasia Initiative, aimed at economic cooperation in the energy sector between East Asia, Central Asia, Russia and the South Caucasus.

The plan is to build a new energy network, of gas and oil pipeline in the region, and a Silk Road Express (SRE), which would connect Busan (South Korea) with London, via North Korea and Russia.
Additionally, in July 2015, the ROK was elected to the presidency of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), and will chair the council until July 2016. On his election as ECOSOC President, Oh Joon, the Permanent Representative of the Republic of Korea to the UN, said: "I believe that the development that my country experienced can happen anywhere in the world. The ECOSOC will support bringing economic and social development to regions where they are in need."

Hahn explained that in July 2016, under the umbrella of ECOSOC at the UN Headquarters, Korea would preside over a High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) for the first time since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, as a way to review and follow up on the SDGs.

"Korea not only will lead the modalities of the Forum, but will also set the stage for the discussion of issues such as sustainable development, gender issues, girls education, inequality and good governance, for the next 15 years," added Hahn.

South Korea will also strengthen its role in the global arena due to the fact that for the first time the UN Department of Public Information-NGOs (DPI-NGO) Conference will be held in Asia. The 66th annual conference takes place in the city of Gyeongju on May 30 and June 1, 2016. Known as the largest gathering of NGOs from all over the world, with over 1,500 NGO representatives, the Conference will bring together members of the civil society, UN officials, academics, policy experts, parliamentarians and the private sectors to discuss the theme: "Education for Global Citizenship". It is the first time that a major UN high-level event will focus on the concept of Education and Global Citizenship, noted Hahn.

"There are many global challenges – climate change, extremism and intolerance – so we need to educate people to understand such complexities, raise awareness, increase mutual respect, accept diversity regardless of race and restore human dignity." Global Citizenship Education is an education that encompasses all other types of educations. "It is an opportunity to discuss the responsibilities and strategies to best achieve the 17 Goals of the 2030 Agenda among all the different stakeholders," he continued.

The ideals of equality, respect and transparency are reflected as well in the way the Korean Mission to the UN in New York is leading the group Uniting for Consensus (UfC), which calls for a vital reform of the Security Council. The group asks for a transparent, accountable, democratic and inclusive reform, where any country could be eligible for running for a seat in the Council on the base of its constructive role and contribution. An expansion or enlargement of the number of permanent seats with veto power is not right and appropriate answer considering the current and future situation of the international community, explained the Korean Ambassador: "The permanent seat with veto power reflects the unique and special political arrangement of the post-WWII based on the lessons of twenty years’ crisis between the two world wars, which aims to assure the unity of the big five players of the Cold War era – UK, France, China, Russia, U.S. – but after 70 years it is unrealistic to just enlarge the same format maintaining the same concept."

Contrarily to the UfC, other groups such as the G4 – led by Germany, Japan, Brazil and India – and the African Group whose position was known as the Ezulwini Consensus, argue for an increase of permanent seats with veto together with an increase in non-permanent seats.

According to Hahn, UfC ’s main idea is to provide countries that perform well during their initial presence in the Council with an opportunity to be re-elected. "The concept of 'long-term re-electable seats' is an appropriate way to abide to the principles of the U.N. Charter of fair and democratic representation and equal opportunity based on the accountability. It also reflects the current international political environment, whereby a country's power configuration and influence can shift quite rapidly," highlighted Hahn.

The novelty behind UfC is its willingness to involve other actors around the activities of the Security Council, as the reform of the Council could also touch on the daily life of ordinary people, said Hahn. "Gaining the support of all important stakeholders such as private sector, think-tanks, NGOs, and the civil society is important and necessary in helping the UN member states reaching a consensus," said the Korean Ambassador.

"The general public needs to know what is happening in the Security Council and how the reform of the Council will affect their life, which will support their legitimate right to express their opinions on the Security Council reform. In this way, the Council can improve its performance, its democratic representation and accountability," he added. [IDN-InDepthNews – 24 February 2016] Photo: Ambassador Hahn Choong-hee, Deputy Permanent Representative of the Republic of Korea to the United Nations in New York | Credit: UN Multimedia
By Jaya Ramachandran

PARIS (IDN) - While the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has signed an agreement with the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) to measure global citizenship and sustainable development education, the persistent marginalization of mother languages worldwide is threatening Goal 4 of the UN Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The Agenda 2030 includes seven targets in Goal 4 that aims to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”.

The seventh target – Goal 4.7 – obliges the international community to ensure that in the next 15 years “all learners (would) acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development”.

UNESCO relates global citizenship to the empowerment of learners to assume active roles to face and resolve global challenges and to become proactive contributors to a more peaceful, tolerant, inclusive and secure world.

But the chances that Goal 4.7 would be achieved are rather bleak unless adequate steps are taken urgently. The reason can be deduced from some important data released by the UNESCO on the occasion of the International Mother Language Day, celebrated annually on February 21.
The GEM Report’s World Inequality Database on Education (WIDE) shows that this trend seriously hampers students’ chances of learning. In Côte d’Ivoire, for example, 55% of grade 5 students who speak the test language at home learned the basics in reading in 2008, compared with only 25% of those who speak another language.

In Iran, 80% of grade 4 students who did not speak Farsi at home reached the basics in reading, compared with over 95% of Farsi speakers.

In Honduras, in 2011, 94% of grade 6 students who spoke the language of instruction at home learned the basics in reading compared to 62% of those who did not.

In Turkey in 2012, around 50% of poor non-Turkish speaking 15 year olds achieved minimum benchmarks in reading, against the national average of 80%.

In multi-ethnic societies, including Turkey, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Guatemala, the paper shows that imposing a dominant language through a school system – while sometimes a choice of necessity – has frequently been a source of grievance linked to wider issues of social and cultural inequality.

Aaron Benavot, Director of UNESCO’s GEM Report says language can serve as a double-edged sword. “While it strengthens an ethnic group’s social ties and sense of belonging, it can also become a basis for their marginalization. Education policy must ensure that all learners, including minority language speakers, access school in a language they know.”

The paper offers key recommendations to ensure that children are taught in a language they understand:

1. At least six years of mother tongue instruction is needed so that gains from teaching in mother tongue in the early years are sustained.
2. Education policies should recognize the importance of mother tongue learning. A review of 40 countries’ education plans finds that only less than half of them recognize the importance of teaching children in their home language, particularly in early grades.
3. Teachers need to be trained to teach in two languages and to understand the needs of second-language learners. Teachers are rarely prepared for the reality of bilingual classrooms, including with inclusive teaching materials and appropriate assessment strategies. In Senegal, only 8%, and in Mali, only 2% of trained teachers expressed confidence about teaching in local languages.

UNESCO Director-General Bokova emphasized that “mother languages in a multilingual approach are essential components of quality education, which is itself the foundation for empowering women and men and their societies.”

With this in view, UNESCO’s Education 2030 Framework for Action, a road-map to implement the 2030 Agenda, encourages full respect for the use of mother language in teaching and learning, and the promotion and preservation of linguistic diversity, noted Bokova. “Multilingualism is essential to drive these objectives forward – it is vital for success across the 2030 Agenda, regarding growth, employment and health, as well as sustainable consumption and production, and climate change,” she added.

Bokova assured that UNESCO brings the same focus to advancing linguistic diversity on the Internet, through support to relevant local content as well as media and information literacy.

Through the Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (LINKS) programme, she said, UNESCO is highlighting the importance of mother and local languages as channels for safeguarding and sharing indigenous cultures and knowledge, which are vast reservoirs of wisdom.

International Mother Language Day was proclaimed by the UNESCO General Conference in November 1999, and has been observed every year since February 2000 to promote linguistic and cultural diversity and multilingualism.

The date represents the day in 1952 when students demonstrating for recognition of their language, Bangla, as one of the two national languages of the then Pakistan, were shot and killed by police in Dhaka, the capital of what is now Bangladesh.

[IDN-InDepthNews – 21 February 2016]
Photo credit: UNESCO
Countering Religious Hardliners Through Dialogue

By Monzurul Huq

TOKYO (IDN) - Religious identity, which in a broader context is perceived as belonging to a certain faith, is a topic of heated debate these days, mainly because a religious sense of belonging is directed toward achieving a certain goal by inflicting harm on others. The ongoing debate has been intensified in recent years with the concept of a clash of civilizations winning support among a group of Western academics and intellectuals.

It has received further impetus with the involvement of Western governments in the process of toppling regimes that the leaders of the Western world termed as “evil empires” – and thus paving the way for a backlash in the form of emergence of various religious-based terrorist groups claiming the righteousness in the name of divinity.

As a result, religion has become an item of sale and journeyman vendors of faith are busy selling the tickets to heaven to confused and puzzled human beings all over the world.

Against this backdrop, healthy academic discussions among people belonging to different religious faiths are increasingly being sidelined, and thus creating a dangerous vacuum that has been easily filled up by zealots from all sides.

This is what lends significance to the latest initiatives taken jointly by the National Center for Peace and Conflict Studies of the University of Otago, New Zealand, and the Toda Institute for Global Peace and Policy Research, Honolulu, Hawai’i.

The four-day international conference held in Tokyo in early February attracted leading scholars of three Abrahamic religions as well as Buddhism. It focused on the possibility of engaging positively with the followers of four religions in actions that would lead to mutual understanding and thus harnessing the process of establishment of peace and justice in the world.

Warrior and pacifist tendencies are inherent parts of almost all religious faiths. A delicate balance between the two contradictory trends is essential for avoiding conflict among the believers of different faiths.

However, the current world situation proves beyond doubt that the warrior trend is gaining leverage over the pacifist one – not only in the Middle East where the religious-based division is sharper than in many other parts of the world, but also in other regions that were seen less confrontational until recently.

The conference was composed of two separated plenary and 11 sessions focusing on ways of enhancing the pacifist and non-violent traditions of four major religions of our time that would act as a means of countering the destructive teachings fueling religious intolerance around the world.

While the two plenaries worked as a common basis of broadening the perception of the complicated issue of intra-faith understanding leading to the realization of what has been termed as global citizenship, the individual sessions focused more on specific issues related to the pacifist and militarist trends as well as on ways of nurturing and enhancing the pacifist traditions in all four religions.

In his welcome remarks, Dr. Olivier Urbain, Director of Toda Institute of Global Peace and Policy Research, highlighted the importance of holding periodic dialogues among the followers of different religions and emphasized the need for a return to the original purpose of religion that provides the answer to many of the complexities of the world.

Since the paradoxical role of religion reflected in warrior and pacifist traditions is predominant in almost all of the mainstream religious trends, he stressed the importance of dialogue that can bring out the best of all religious teachings of each other to apply these in transforming the conventional perception that many behold as they see the world through a narrow perception of “my religion is the best”.

The founder of Toda Institute for Global Peace and Policy Research, Daisaku Ikeda, had sent a message to the conference in which he emphasized that the manifold challenges the world is facing today “remind us of the urgency to bring together the call of human conscience and shift the focus of peace studies to transform the current ‘culture of war’ and counter the xenophobia that continues to plague our planet”.

He said that because of this he had found it profoundly meaningful that scholars were joining religious practitioners and leaders representing Abrahamic and Buddhist traditions to discuss the role of religion in ending the vicious cycle of violence and hatred. His message concluded with the hope that “a world in which all may live in peace, in which none are marginalized or ignored and the inalienable dignity of every man, woman and child is allowed to shine – I believe religions will have an increasingly vital role in the building of such a world”.

The keynote speaker, Shem Bensedrine, President of the Truth and Dignity Commission of Tunisia, spoke about the difficulties in finding a common ground not only among the believers of various religious groups, but also among those belonging to one particular religion but having different opinions on a number of important issues. She cited the example of her own country, which, with a population of just 11 million has supplied around 6,000 Islamic State fighters involved in merciless political violence in the name of religion.

Religion, she said, is now at the heart of most ruthless violence and barbarism prevailing in the name of Islam. As President of the Truth and Dignity Commission of Tunisia, Bensedrine had to supervise the difficult task of reconciliation and according to her the biggest challenge that she faces in the process of finding a conciliatory ground is the dismantling of dictatorial organisations that for very long ruled over the society with absolute impunity.

Since transition always provides losers, it is important that those who are on that side also become part of the process; and preservation of national memory is essential to ensure that violence is never repeated, she said. Though essentially different in nature, the Tuni
sian example of reconciliation however, can serve as an important lesson capable of providing clues of how to narrow the existing gap among the believers of different faiths.

In a panel discussion in the second plenary, representatives of four participating religions outlined the perception of warrior and pacifist traditions in their respective religions and looked at ways of strengthening the pacifist trend as a means of establishing peace on earth. Each religion was represented by two participants coming from different geographic locations and thus ensuring a broader representation of religious thoughts.

Moderated by Kevin Clements, the Chair of Peace and Conflict Studies and Director of the National Center for Peace and Conflict Studies of the University of Otago, New Zealand, each participant first expressed his or her view about the issue from religious understanding, which was followed by a lively Q&A.

If the essence of all religions is to ensure a peaceful existence of believers followed by an afterlife of rewards for abiding by the rules, the violent element too has become an essential part of religions for various reasons. Believers of Judaism, for example, had resorted to warrior trend out of the feeling of constant insecurity.

A tiny minority dwelling in a terrible place is what Noam Zion sees as the ultimate reason for the Jewish people to turn warriors. Omar Farouk, on the other hand, considers Jihad as the highest form of pacifism in Islam and some other conference participants, including the keynote speaker, find foreign jihadists joining the ranks of IS fighters no less vulnerable in their adopted societies than the Jewish people of Palestine. Even some Buddhists are turning violent in some parts of the world and thus running against the teachings of Buddha.

Amid such contrasting and disturbing development surrounding religions, panelists reminded the audience of the need to intensify the effort for diminishing the warrior tendencies and enhancing the pacifist ones. There was general agreement that this difficult goal can only be achieved through dialogue and debate.

The conference, thus, turned out to be a timely initiative that put into limelight the importance of focusing on global issues discussed through religious positions. However, the organizers as well as participants were well aware of the fact that to make the dialogue and debates more meaningful and comprehensive, it is essential to broaden the scope of participation by including the representation of other religions and non-believers as well; the groups that jointly account for a huge chunk of the global population.

[IDN-InDepthNews – 14 February 2016]
Photo: A view of the plenary
Credit: Katsuhiro Asagiri/International Press Syndicate
Migrant Workers Help Singapore Students Gain a Global Perspective

By Kalinga Seneviratne

SINGAPORE (IDN) - Government statistics show that in this affluent Southeast Asian nation, one in three workers are migrants. They build the modern infrastructure, clean the buildings, cook and serve in restaurants, look after the children and elderly at home, while often being paid very poorly and treated shabbily and looked at suspiciously by the locals.

Beginning with the 2013 Little India riots where hundreds of Indian workers attacked police vehicles to the recent arrest of 27 Bangladeshi workers suspected of having links to Islamic terrorist groups, there has been much tension in the community with regards to migrant workers. As one law student put it: “We only find out about migrant workers through second hand sources which does not really say who they are.”

Though this is not a peculiar phenomenon to Singapore, yet, with one of the highest ratios in the world between migrant workers and the local population, and with most of these workers coming from neighbouring countries in Asia, ill treatment of foreign workers in the country could have regional diplomatic repercussions.

The weeklong Migrant Workers Awareness Week (MWAW) that started on January 31 was an initiative launched by the National University of Singapore (NUS) in 2014 and expanded this year to include the Yale-NUS joint-venture university.

It was designed to expand the scope of law studies by getting the students to mingle with migrant workers and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that work with them to find out first hand about the workers, their hopes and aspirations that have brought them to Singapore to work. It was an initiative of the law school to especially sensitise the law students to the legal, social and political issues that encompass labour migration.

The five-day series of events brought together close to 400 students from the two elite universities with NGOs and up to about 130 foreign workers. It started with Bengali poetry reading on January 31 that reflected the loneliness of Bangladeshi workers here and ended with a “talk in the park” between students and migrant workers in a darkened area at night on February 5. In between there were panel discussions on the law and migrant workers, social issues dealing with domestic workers and trafficked sex workers.

“Many of our students come from rather affluent middle class backgrounds,” law student Victor David Lau, Vice President of Events at NUS Law School told IDN. “So we come from a position of privilege and we may overlook certain matters such as the rights of migrant workers.”

“Many of our students may have a domestic worker at home,” he added. “This person is a citizen of another country and needs to be respected.”

Though Lau believes that the changes in mind-set of law students may not come overnight and would take time to develop, the university’s out-of-class room education strategy is designed to address the problem of students having a stereotype view of migrant workers through second hand information obtained from the media that does not reflect the hardships workers go through, nor their hopes and aspirations that drives them to work overseas.

In addition to the panel discussions and meeting in the park, students were also taken on guided tours to a foreign worker dormitory and the “red light” Geylan area to observe sex workers at work.

Opening the weeklong education process, Dean of the NUS Law Faculty Prof Simon Chesterman said that there is an underbelly to Singapore’s prosperity and that is the rights of migrant workers. “Our students are encouraged to do pro-bono work to help migrant workers deal with constant problems,” he noted. “I have seen at Changi airport foreign workers returning home without their legal grievances resolved.”

In the opening panel discussion of the MWAW under the theme of ‘Migrant Workers: Persons or Projects?’ there was much debate about the need to improve legal protection for the foreign workers. The panel’s moderator, senior law lecturer Prof Sheila Hayne, said that when she first came to Singapore she was warned that Singaporean law students were only interested in getting their grades and going on to make money. “But, I have found many are socially aware,” she noted.

“Many migrant workers come to us and complain about the injustice.”

Prof Hayne believes that with socially aware law students there will be possibilities of making a difference working and networking with migrant workers, NGOs, community, government officials and the media.

Pointing out that there is a foreign domestic worker force of 227,000 in a population of 4 million in Singapore, Jolovan Wham, Executive Director of the domestic worker advocacy NGO HOME argued that there is a historical perspective about unpaid home care that tends to downplay the rights of domestic workers.

“There is no focus on human rights and labour rights of domestic workers, instead the relationship between the employer and the worker is based on loyalty and trust,” he noted. “By treating the domestic worker as part of the family, it reinforces that she is not an employee. So limits on working hours, holiday entitlements and union protection are not given.”

Wham argued that domestic workers have to be included in the Labour Act. But, fellow panellist, Tan Fang Qun, Deputy Director of Workforce Policy and Strategy of Ministry of Manpower (MOM) disagreed, arguing that the domestic workplace is very difficult to be included in a legal framework. He cited a recent foreign worker survey conducted by his ministry that found that only one in ten foreign workers were unhappy with working conditions in Singapore.

Alex Au from the NGO Transient Workers Count Too, another NGO that handles thousands of migrant worker complaints each year, disagreed and in a passionate address to the students and academics, he argued that the structure of the Singapore economy need to be understood before healing the problem of exploitation of foreign labour. “Migrant workers are disposable,
Singapore gives priority to corporate rights over human rights and workers’ rights,” he lamented.

Both Wham and Au pointed out that one of the biggest areas where migrant workers are exploited is by recruitment agents.

As of December 2014, there have been more than 1.3 million migrant workers in Singapore. 73% of these workers are work permit holders who are classified as unskilled or low-skilled workers and they come here through recruitment agents who charge them anything between $3,000 to $10,000 to find them a job that would pay you as little as $400-600 a month.

Most of the workers who come under this category are from the Philippines, Bangladesh, Myanmar, India, Indonesia, Nepal and China, where these payments are not documented. Thus, even though such payments are outlawed in Singapore, MOM is unable to stop the practice.

Both Wham and Au believe that if the future lawyers are made aware of the problem they may be able to help to find legal remedies to this modern day scourge.

“All the NGOs give plenty of opportunities for volunteers to participate in our work” said Au, adding that they take sometimes 100s of students at a time to help them to conduct surveys, to go out to the community and talk to workers and find out if they get proper salaries and so forth.

Wham pointed out that HOME has only 6 full time staff and the missing link is to translate awareness into action. He believes that law students in particular should be well equipped to help in this task.

“You need to go and talk to your MPs (member of parliament) about migrant worker rights,” he argues. “Let your MP know that we care about global issues – about rights of migrant workers”.

Law student Lau says that with the seminars involving the NGOs, they are trying to reach out to the academically oriented students. “Not only that these students will bring these issues into their assignments, but also need to incorporate it in their work as well,” he argues. “Education is not only about studying but also creating a social effect and if we can bring these social ideas to their work it will be great.”

[IDN-InDepthNews – 6 February 2016]

Photo: A student viewing the migrant worker exhibition at the National University of Singapore (NUS) library
Credit: Kalinga Seneviratne
By Rita Joshi

BERLIN | DAVOS (IDN) - Declaring that the empowerment of the world’s women is “a global imperative”, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has announced the first-ever High-Level Panel on Women’s Economic Empowerment.

The establishment of the Panel, backed by the United Kingdom, the World Bank Group and UN Women, was proclaimed in Davos, Switzerland, the venue of the annual World Economic Forum (WEF), on January 21. The announcement did not surprise observers: The UN’s fifth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 5) envisages achievement of gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls. And gender equality is one of the ten key global challenges the WEF has singled out this year for the four-day event concluding January 23.

For the past decade, the World Economic Forum has been measuring the pace of change through the Global Gender Gap Report. With a decade of data, this edition of the Global Gender Gap Report – first published in 2006 – shows that “while the world has made progress overall, stubborn inequalities remain”. At this rate, “it will take the world another 118 years – or until 2133 – to close the economic gap entirely”, says the report.

This is because, as the report finds, despite an additional quarter of a billion women entering the global workforce since 2006, wage inequality persists, with women only now earning what men did a decade ago.

The global gender gap across health, education, economic opportunity and politics has closed by only 4% in the past 10 years, with the economic gap closing by just 3%, suggesting it will take another 118 years to close this gap completely.

Asking whether education is failing women, the report finds that the gap has widened in 22% of 145 surveyed countries since 2006 and, while more women than men are enrolling at university in 97 countries, women make up the majority of skilled workers in only 68 countries and the majority of leaders in only four.
The Nordic countries still dominate the Global Gender Gap Index. Ireland is the highest placed non-Nordic country, ranking fifth. Rwanda (6), Philippines (7) and New Zealand (10) are the only non-European countries in the top 10; and the United States falls eight places to 28th.

On the other hand, research shows that women invest their income back into their families and communities, including in health and education. McKinsey Global Institute estimates that if women in every country were to play an identical role to men in markets, as much as US$28 trillion would be added to the global economy by 2025.

But at present, women continue to earn less, have fewer assets, bear the burden of unpaid work and care and be largely concentrated in vulnerable and low-paying activities. Women spend more than twice as much time on unpaid care and domestic work as men and women on average are paid 24 per cent less than men globally for the same work.

Moreover, 75 per cent of women’s employment in developing regions is informal and unprotected. These gaps constrain women’s rights and hinder economic growth and productivity.

Significantly scaled up actions and political will are therefore considered necessary by the UN to ensure that governments, development organizations and others invest in the economic empowerment of women for the benefit of whole societies.

Against this backdrop, the High-Level Panel on Women’s Economic Empowerment will provide thought leadership and mobilize concrete actions aimed at closing economic gender gaps that persist around the world.

In particular, it will give recommendations for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to improve economic outcomes for women and promote women’s leadership in driving sustainable and inclusive, environmentally sensitive economic growth.

The Panel will advise recommendations for key actions that can be taken by governments, the private sector, the UN system and other stakeholders, as well as policy directives needed to achieve the new targets and indicators in the SDGs that call for the economic empowerment of women.

“The empowerment of the world’s women is a global imperative,” said UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon announcing the establishment of the Panel.

“Yet despite important progress in promoting gender equality, there remains an urgent need to address structural barriers to women’s economic empowerment and full inclusion in economic activity. If the world is to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, we need a quantum leap in women’s economic empowerment,” Ban said.

The Co-Chairs of the Panel are Luis Guillermo Solis, President of Costa Rica, and Simona Scarpaleggia, CEO of IKEA Switzerland. They will be joined by the leaders of the International Monetary Fund, World Bank Group, UN Women and a diverse range of eminent gender and equality actors, economics experts, academics, trade union leaders, business and government representatives from all regions.

The Panel will be supported by an independent Secretariat, hosted by UN Women with backing from the UK Government.

UK International Development Secretary Justine Greening, a founding member of the Panel, welcomed its launch. She said: “I am hugely proud to be a part of this Panel. Investing in girls and women isn’t just about basic human rights, it’s about fully unlocking the potential of half the world’s population. The UK is already at the forefront of this effort.”

She added: “At the Department for International Development I have put improving the lives of girls and women at the very heart of our work and Britain is successfully leading the fight against FGM and child marriage, as well as getting girls into school and women into jobs. Strong economies need the contribution of everyone – including women – and this panel will spearhead a movement to put women’s economic empowerment on the global agenda like never before.”

Jim Yong Kim, World Bank Group President, also a founding member of the Panel, stated: “The World Bank Group is strongly committed to gender equality, which is integral to ending poverty and boosting shared prosperity. Our new Gender Equality Strategy puts a much sharper focus on economic empowerment.”

He added: “No society, community or economy can achieve its full potential – or meet the escalating challenges of the 21st century – until all its people can achieve theirs. We are pleased to partner with the UK’s Department for International Development and the United Nations in convening this important panel, whose work will accelerate progress towards the goals we share.”

The High-Level Panel will help tackle gender gaps in economic opportunities and outcomes which persist around the world, building on the growing evidence and recognition by governments and the private sector that women’s economic empowerment has a multiplier effect and boosts whole economies.

The High-Level Panel will have its inaugural meeting during the 60th session of the Commission on the Status of Women at the United Nations in March 2016. A series of regional consultative meetings will also take place, and the Panel’s first report with action-oriented recommendations will be issued in September 2016.

[IDN-InDepthNews – 21 January 2016]
Photo credit: UN | Sylvain Lietchti
We are building a new reality for our people, a new future for our children, and a new model of development.
The project hopes to reach more than 130 million people in at least 116 countries by 2025, though much of its work will target the Arab world. The foundation also plans to invest 544.5 million USD to set up medical research centres and hospitals in the region and 136 million USD on water shortage research.

Sheikh Mohammed further stressed that humanitarian and development work should keep pace with, and benefit from technology developments and work in an institutional manner to fulfill the UAE’s vision of transforming into “a real humanitarian capital”.

The culture of giving is deeply rooted in our society, and it has always been nurtured by UAE leaders since the inception of the UAE. We are humbled and pleased that the UAE came in the first place worldwide in terms of the value of its official aids as a percent of gross national income," Sheikh Mohammed said.

The foundation will consolidate the work of 28 organisations focusing on four main sectors: fighting poverty and illness, spreading knowledge and culture, empowering the community and driving innovation.

By 2025, the Mohammed bin Rashid Global Initiatives Foundation plans to support and educate 20 million children, and prevent or treat blindness and eye diseases for 30 million people.

Commenting on the launch, Sheikh Mohammed said: “The Arab region is undergoing massive challenges. We will not turn our backs on our region, we will provide our support and bring hope for our youth.”

He added: “The world today is facing great challenges on all levels; in terrorism, wars and mass immigration and the only solution lies in human development which can be achieved by educating people and helping them build their future.”

The Foundation will continue with its relief work and will empower more than 2 million families, enabling them to become self-sufficient within the next ten years. The new institution will also support young entrepreneurs in order to provide more than half a million jobs over the next few years.

In the field of spreading knowledge and science, and encouraging the translation of key works into Arabic, the Mohammed bin Rashid Global Initiatives will work on printing and distributing more than 10 million books, and the translation of the top 25,000 titles from various languages to Arabic, as well as continuing with promoting a vibrant reading culture among school students.

The Foundation will support programmes that aim to see over than 500 million books read over the next ten years across the Arab world. The investment in educational, knowledge, and scientific initiatives will total about 409 million USD to create real change in this sector.

The Global Initiatives will also work within its overall development strategy on establishing a new culture in societies based on tolerance and cultural and civilization openness.

“To achieve this goal, the foundation has dedicated more than 163 million USD to promote a transparent and lively media dialogue and also to enable communities to live in harmony, away from extremism, ethnic, religious or sectarian discrimination.” The institution will target over a million participants in awards and forums related to community empowerment over the next 10 years.

As part of its overall vision to develop the region, the Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum Global Initiatives will support innovation and scientists in the region by fostering 5,000 innovators and researchers and will invest more than 1.5 billion USD in building a better, world-standard environment for innovators in the region.

The institution will also focus on fostering entrepreneurship by supporting and nurturing 50,000 young entrepreneurs and supporting the establishment of new companies that will provide 500,000 job opportunities in the region during the coming years.

“All of this is part of the institution’s comprehensive development vision to contribute, even if for just a little bit, towards eradicating unemployment and providing Arab youth with a dignified life, preventing them from being misguided and lured to terrorism,” states the Global Initiatives on its website.

[IDN-InDepthNews – 5 January 2016]

Photo: Sheikh Mohammed.
Credit: www.sheikhmohammed.co.ae
Women leaders in the Pacific Islands have acclaimed the agreement on reducing global warming achieved at the United Nations (COP21) Climate Change conference in Paris as an unprecedented moment of world solidarity on an issue which has been marked to date by division between the developing and industrialized world. But for Pacific Small Island developing states, which name climate change as the single greatest threat to their survival, it will only be a success if inspirational words are followed by real action.

“It’s a huge step forward and I don’t think it would have been possible without the voices of indigenous Pacific Islanders banding together and demanding action and justice…. I am very optimistic about the future,” Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner, climate activist and poet from the Republic of the Marshall Islands, who attended the historic meeting, told IPS.

Dame Meg Taylor, Secretary General of the regional Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS), said that “while not all the issues identified by Pacific Island countries were included in the final outcome and agreement, there were substantive advances with recognition of the importance of pursuing efforts to limit temperature increases to 1.5 degrees Celsius, the inclusion of loss and damage as a separate element in the agreement and simplified and scaled up access to climate change finance.”

Claire Anterea of the Kiribati Climate Action Network in the small Central Pacific atoll nation of around 110,000 people added that the outcome was “good, but not perfect,” highlighting that the new temperature goal and call to boost climate finance were particularly important.

The World Meteorological Organisation predicted this year will be the hottest on record with average global temperatures expected to reach 1 degree Celsius above the pre-industrial age. Meanwhile Pacific Island countries are bracing for further rising temperatures, sea levels, ocean acidification and coral bleaching this century. Maximum sea level rise in many island states could reach more than 0.6 metres, reports the Pacific Climate Change Science Program.

Due to rising seas in the Marshall Islands “a simple high tide results in waves flooding and crashing through sea walls built of cement and rocks and completely destroying homes. The salt from the flooding also destroys our crops and food,” Jetnil-Kijiner said.

In the best case scenario, Kiribati and Papua New Guinea could experience a temperature increase of 1.5 degrees Celsius, but under high emissions this might soar to 2.9 degrees Celsius by 2090.

Global warming could result in yields of sweet potato, a common staple crop, declining by more than 50 per cent in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands by 2050, estimates the Asian Development Bank. The burden of crop losses will fall on the shoulders of Pacific Islands’ women who are primarily responsible in communities for growing fresh produce, producing food and fetching water.

Pacific Islanders led a campaign in Paris this year to recognize a new temperature rise threshold of 1.5 degrees Celsius. This is critical, they argued, to stem future climate shocks and mitigate forced displacement as islands become increasingly uninhabitable due to loss of food, water and land.

And in a sign of shifting views in the industrialized world, Pacific Islanders were joined in their campaigning on this issue by numerous developed and developing nations in a ‘Coalition of High Ambition’ which emerged during the second week of COP21. Solidarity was demonstrated by, amongst others, Mexico, Brazil, Norway, Germany, the European Union and United States.

The final Paris agreement which seeks to limit global warming to below 2 degrees Celsius and ‘pursue efforts’ to further reduce it by another 0.5 degree was a win for the coalition.

“1.5 degrees Celsius wasn’t even on the table before the conference began, so hearing it first announced that it even made it into the text made me cry with relief. That being said, the vague wording definitely has me worried and I know it’ll take a continued push from all of us to actually reach 1.5,” Jetnil-Kijiner said.

This will not decrease the immense challenges the region already faces in adapting to extreme weather, which cannot be met by small island economies.
without access to international climate finance. This year island leaders called for the international community to honour its pledge to raise 100 billion dollars per year by 2020 to fund adaptation in developing countries, an objective first conceived in Copenhagen in 2009. Assessments since then of how much has been raised vary, but the World Bank claimed in April there was a serious shortfall of 70 billion dollars.

Taylor believes “there is a positive outlook for climate financing post-2020 with Article 9 of the Paris Agreement identifying that, for Small Island Developing States, financing needs to be public and grant-based resources for adaptation.” There has been debate about whether finance mechanisms, such as the Green Climate Fund (GCF), should issue free grants or concessional loans.

Anterea emphasised that, to be effective, funding “needs to reach grassroots people through a simple processing method.”

Recognition of loss and damage caused by extreme weather and natural disasters in the final pact was also a milestone, the PIFS Secretary General added, even though it does not provide for vulnerable nations to claim liability or compensation from big polluters.

“The legal right of countries to test the liabilities of other Parties using other avenues has not been diminished by this decision,” she said.

But the greatest hope is being invested in the binding commitment by nations to set emission reduction targets and be subject to a process of long term monitoring and review, a move which would accelerate the global transition toward renewable energy and make the burning of fossil fuels, the greatest driver of greenhouse gas emissions, increasingly unviable.

“We need the five-year review as a crucial step to keeping countries’ governments accountable to our targets and goals,” Jetnil-Kijiner emphasised. If nations are not emboldened to better their goals every time, the planet may continue toward a devastating temperature increase of 2.7 degrees Celsius or more, experts conclude.

The most pressing question, after the euphoria of the global accord demonstrated in Paris has died down, is how will these lofty promises be implemented? Pacific Islanders are depending on it.

(IPS | 1 January 2016)

Photo: Coastal communities in the Solomon Islands in the southwest Pacific Islands are already threatened by climate change with rising seas and stronger storm surges.

Credit: Catherine Wilson/IPS
By Kalinga Seneviratne

BANGKOK (IDN) - While a ‘Mindful Communication’ fad is currently sweeping across the United States, a group of Asian scholars and media practitioners gathered here to examine how this traditional Asian way of communicating could be adopted to train 21st century journalists to create a media that would promote harmony rather than conflict.

Phuwadol Piyasilo Bhikku, a communication arts graduate from Chulalongkorn University and a former journalist, who is now a Forest Monk in northern Thailand, in an opening speech to the symposium noted that mindfulness practiced in the West is “a bit problematic”, because it is used mainly on an individualistic level to de-stress.

“Mindful practice in the West tries to be secular and is practiced without having any religious values in it,” he argued. “You need to accompany it with panna (wisdom). Without this moral wisdom, the practice will not be enough to drive us in the right direction to help society.”

As a practical approach to journalism, Bhikku Phuwadol explained that because at the root of Buddhism is the need to eradicate suffering, by being mindful of the suffering, you can report an issue without promoting division and conflict.

The symposium titled ‘Mindful Communication for ASEAN Integration’ was held on December 14 and 15 at the Communication Arts Faculty of Chulalongkorn University in association with the International Program for the Development of Communication (IPDC) of UNESCO. This gathering was part of a process to develop a new journalism training curriculum for Asia incorporating thoughts, concepts and ideas from Asia’s age-old Buddhist, Hindu and Confucius philosophies.

The other keynote speaker, renowned Thai social activist Sulak Sivaraksa warned that a fixation on mindfulness could lead to something negative. Pointing out that mindfulness training has become popular with American corporate executives, he said it could make them more ruthless in pursuit of profit making, if this training is not accompanied by ethical training. “Learning about sila (ethics), greed, hatred and delusion are needed for mindful communication towards sustainable development,” he argued.

Many speakers pointed out that these Asian philosophical thoughts are as valid today as they were 2000 years ago, and these are being appropriated by western intellectual community – like the current Mindful Communication fad – without giving due recognition to its origins. At the same time young Asians are growing up with the delusion that anything modern comes from the West, and their ancient philosophies are irrelevent to shaping their modern lifestyles.

Dr Binod Agarwal, former Vice Chancellor Himgiri Zee University from India pointed out that UNESCO’s earlier attempts to introduce a journalism curriculum for ‘emerging countries’ have “largely been Euro-American n approach and incorporated theoretical and ideological perspectives being followed in the West”. He blemes this more on the Asian intellectual communities that are largely educated in the West and uncritically transmit this knowledge to their Asian counterparts.

As one speaker said, Asian communication scholars teach their students that the mass media originated with the printing of the Gutenberg Bible in Germany in the 15th century, while ignoring the fact that six centuries earlier the Chinese had printed the ‘Diamond Sutra’ that helped to spread Buddhism across Asia through the printed word.

There was also discussion on why the Asian media uncritically follows the western media’s focus on the South China Sea disputes that could lead to conflict in the region, while paying lip service to China’s proposed Silk Routes projects on land and sea that could bring much economic progress to the region and propel cooperation and prosperity across Asia.

Professor Kwangsoo Park, Director of Research Centre of Religions at Wonkwang University in South Korea, pointed out a similar trend in the media in his country when it comes to reporting North Korea. “They always
report of North Korea’s nuclear weapons but ignore such issues as family reunions and economic relations between the two countries,” he noted, adding that “(Korean) media needs to understand these issues more deeply”.

Retired Malaysian diplomat Dr Ananda Kumaraseri of the Human Development and Peace Foundation believes that, we need to “de-culturalise” the journalist. “We need to understand what the mind is because problems are created by humans,” he said, arguing that the media plays on the mind by sensationalizing the problems, promoting sensual desires and consumerism. “We need to train journalists to direct their minds towards the roots of the problems (not sensationalizing it),” he added.

Professor Supaporn Phokaew of Chulalongkorn University’s Communications Arts Faculty tends to agree. She argued that a good knowledge of the concepts of loving kindness and compassion towards living beings, a fundamental aspect of Buddhist teachings, could equip the journalist with a deep sense of empathy towards others (they report about). “We teach students writing and speaking skills, but not listening skills,” she noted, adding: “We need to introduce teaching deep listening skills to practice mindful communication. We need to listen to people to relate to society.”

The western gospel of human rights also came in for much criticism with Asian scholars pointing out that ill conceived and arrogant applications of individualistic rights have created chaos in the Middle East turning the Arab Spring into a bleak winter. They also pointed out that free speech has limits citing the Prophet Mohammad cartoon episodes in Denmark and France. They argue that this gospel needs to be critically examined in Asia.

Bhutan’s Royal Thimpu College Dean Dorji Wangchuk believes that what is good from the West could be adapted in Asia “to suit our needs and values”. He described his kingdom’s national ideology Gross National Happiness (GNH) as “development with values”. He pointed out that the ‘fourth estate’ model of western journalism is fast disappearing due to the rise of the social media, which is offering different forms of story telling and social interaction. Rather than a commercial model, he argues that Asia should aspire to development of a media model based on contentment.

He calls the contentment media model as the Middle Path. “Bhutan is building a form of journalism that advocates contentment, community, compassion and core values of Bhutanese society,” Dorji explained. “The Middle-Path journalism will promote news as a social good and not as a commercial commodity – and will help build communities, consensus and contentment and not thrive on conflicts, controversies and commercialism.”

While open discussion and debate is essential for a healthy human community, Malaysian Lim Kooi Fong, Director of the Buddhist Channel argued that it has to be accompanied by responsibility. He pointed out that there is much to learn from the Buddhist philosophy in this regard, but it should not be used to distort criticalism of authoritative ruling elites, like in the ‘Asian Values’ debate of the 1990s.

“Underlying some of the Asian voices is the genuine concern that a liberal individualistic ethos in conjunction with a legalistic, aggressive and consumerist attitude does not meet traditional values of Asian societies, that is, values such as social harmony, respect for family and authorities and in particular emphasis on duty and responsibility rather than on claimable rights,” argues Lim, adding: “The representatives of ‘Asian Values’ and the defenders of a ‘Western Liberalism’ – who believe that, we need to “de-culturalise” the journalist.

Noting that the practice of mindful journalism is a secular practice rather than a spiritual one, Hanchanalash believes compassion and respect for the individual, as a positive link, will be essential in the creation of ASEAN community as a beautiful mosaic of culture and beliefs. “With mindfulness of the users, the powerful tool of mass communication can become an effective agent in the building of an unselfish and constructive society,” she argues.

[IDN-InDepthNews – 19 December 2015]
Photo: News Media.
Credit: News Media Association of India
First Ever UN Security Council Resolution on Youth, Peace and Security

By J Nastranis

NEW YORK (IDN) - The United Nations Security Council has adopted a resolution on youth, peace and security, which for the first time in its history focuses entirely on the role of young men and women in peace-building and countering violent extremism.

The resolution, sponsored by Jordan, embodies an unprecedented acknowledgment of the urgent need to engage young peace-builders in promoting peace and frustrating extremism. Adopted on December 9, 2015 it also regards the youth and youth-led organizations as important partners in the global efforts to thwart violent extremism and promote lasting peace.

The resolution comes at a time when about 600 million young people are living in fragile and conflict-affected settings and are confronted with the challenge of halting the rise of radicalization and violent extremism, especially among young women and men. The resolution gives a boost to the youth-led peace-building and conflict-prevention interventions to build peaceful communities and underpin democratic, inclusive governance.

The resolution urges Member States to consider ways to increase inclusive representation of youth in decision-making at all levels and to offer mechanisms for the prevention and resolution of conflict in partnership with young people.
The resolution also responds to the limited opportunities for young people to participate in formal peace processes by calling for the inclusion of youth in peace negotiations and peace-building efforts.

The resolution emphasizes the importance of addressing conditions and factors leading to the rise of radicalization and violent extremism among youth. It also notes the significant role young women and men can play as positive role models in preventing and countering violent extremism.

Commenting on the adoption of Resolution 2250, UN Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth, Ahmad Alhendawi, said: “This is a major breakthrough in our collective efforts to change the predominantly negative narrative on youth and recognize the significant role of young people in peace-building.

“Youth have for too long been cast away as either the perpetrators of violence or its victims. With this resolution, the Security Council recognizes the important contributions that young people make in countering violent extremism and supporting peace-building efforts around the world.”

Helen Clark, head of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) said: “This resolution recognizes the significant role young people will play in how our world adapts to today's global challenges, including those to peace and security.” She added: “With youth comes energy, innovation, and optimism – if there are supportive environments and opportunities.”

Dr. Babatunde Osotimehin, the Executive Director of UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund said: “This resolution recognizes that it is imperative for us to invest in young people to fulfill their potential and help achieve peace and security.”

He called for transforming the words in this “historic” Security Council resolution into concrete actions on the ground. “UNFPA is committed to continue working in partnership with young people, Member States and other partners to achieve this,” Dr. Osotimehin added.

Oscar Fernandez-Tarango, Assistant Secretary-General for Peacebuilding Support noted: “With the adoption of SCR 2250, the Security Council is making history. The recognition that young people have a positive and constructive role to play in building sustainable peace and preserving international security will mark a shift in the way the world seeks to end violence and build inclusive and peaceful societies.”

Young women and men have always worked tirelessly at building peace and reconciling their communities, he said, and with this resolution their work gets very much the recognition they deserve.

Young people, youth peace-building organizations and civil society organizations have been calling for years on the UN to establish a global policy framework to engage them in building sustainable peace and preventing extremism.

Most recently this call culminated in the Amman Youth Declaration, adopted in Jordan in August with inputs from over 10,000 young peace-builders at the first-ever Global Forum on Youth, Peace, and Security, outlining the need to leverage institutional support for youth-driven initiatives and programmes.

The significance of youth-driven initiatives was also highlighted at a three-day International Youth Summit on Nuclear Abolition in Hiroshima, commemorating the 70th anniversary of the atomic bombings that razed Hiroshima and Nagasaki to the ground.

Participants in the Summit in August 2015, issued a pledge stating: "We, the Generation of Change, invite you to join us as we raise our collective voice to call for action; we refuse to stand by while nuclear weapons continue to threaten our lives and future generations. Join us, take action and create change!"

As the Generation of Change, they vowed to:
- Continue to educate and empower ourselves in order to better spread this awareness amongst our peers;
- Recognize that diversity in this work is important and work to educate ourselves on how gender impacts disarmament;
- Take action, raise our voices and pursue nuclear abolition in our communities and our countries;
- Share our knowledge about the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons and the experiences of hibakushas and survivors of nuclear weapons tests; and
- Encourage others to join the nuclear abolition movement and establish a strong unity among all nuclear abolition campaigners.
- Call upon every State to start negotiations on an international treaty for the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons;
- Call on our elected representatives to adopt national legislation prohibiting and criminalizing the manufacture, investment in, testing, deployment, threat or use of nuclear weapons.

The pledge was issued at a wider public forum joined by 250 participants at which summit cochairs Rick Wayman of the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation (NAPF) and Anna Ikeda of Soka Gakkai International (SGI) presented the Youth Pledge to Ahmad Alhendawi, the UN Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth.

Alhendawi urged, "Let’s be the generation that makes peace possible. This youth summit is sending a strong message to the world, that the youth are for peace and for a nuclear-free-world, and the world must listen."

Responding to the adoption of Resolution 2250, Gwendolyn S. Myers, head of a youth-led NGO involved in peace-building efforts in Liberia, noted: “A UN Security Council Resolution on Youth, Peace and Security legitimizes the meaningful involvement of young people in peace and security issues and will accelerate the peace consolidation programmes particularly in Liberia, Africa and other parts of the world.”

[IDN-InDepthNews – 11 December 2015]
Photo: UN Security Council adopting historic resolution on youth, peace and security.
Credit: UN
Bribing One’s Way to Basic Necessities of Life in Africa

By Jutta Wolf

BERLIN (IDN) - A man raped a nine-year old girl who was on her way to school and infected her with HIV. The Zimbabwean police initially arrested the attacker, but then released him in secret. The reason: he paid bribe.

This case is by no means an exception. The police and private sector have regularly been rated as highly corrupt, says Transparency International in a report entitled People and Corruption: Africa Survey 2015, adding: “we hear stories like this every day. . . In many countries you can pay off police officers to ignore any crime, however horrific and devastating – it’s just a matter of price.”

In fact, the report, bribery affects more than one-in-five Africans. “Shockingly, we estimate that nearly 75 million people have paid a bribe in the past year – some of these to escape punishment by the police or courts, but many also forced to pay to get access to the basic services that they desperately need.”

For this latest African edition of the Global Corruption Barometer, Transparency International partnered with the Afrobarometer, which spoke to 43,143 respondents across 28 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa between March 2014 and September 2015 to ask them about their experiences and perceptions of corruption in their countries.

“A majority of Africans perceive corruption to be on the rise and think that their government is failing in its efforts to fight corruption; and many also feel disempowered as regards to taking action against corruption. In Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Liberia and Ghanai citizens are the most negative about the scale of corruption in their country,” notes the report.

However, the results also highlight that there are a small number of countries in the region that are seen as doing quite well in addressing the scourge of corruption – where only a few people have to pay bribes or where citizens feel that they can contribute to stopping corruption.

According to the report, citizens in Botswana, Lesotho, Senegal and Burkina Faso tend to have the most positive views compared with citizens from other countries in the region.

The main finding of the report is that there is a clear disparity between a few strong performing countries in regard to anti-corruption and the many weak performers on anti-corruption across the continent.

Transparency International perceives in this finding both a hopeful message, that addressing corruption is indeed possible, as well as a disappointing message, as most African countries have failed to make headway in stemming the tide of corruption.

The report sums up its main findings as follows:

1. The majority of Africans (58%) say that corruption has increased over the past year. This is particularly the case in South Africa where more than four-in-five citizens (83%) say they have seen corruption rise recently.
2. There is no government, which is rated positively on its anti-corruption efforts by a clear majority of its citizens. On the contrary, 18 out of 28 governments are seen as fully failing to address corruption by a large majority.
3. The survey asked how much corruption there was in 10 key institutions and groups in society. Across the region, the police and business executives are seen to have the highest levels of corruption. While the police have regularly been rated as highly corrupt, the strongly negative assessment of business executives is new compared to previous Transparency International Global Corruption Barometer (GCB) survey rounds.
4. Twenty-two per cent of people that have come into contact with a public service in the past 12 months in Sub-Saharan Africa have paid a bribe, but the situation is worst in Liberia where nearly seven-in-ten paid a bribe. Across the continent, poor people are twice as likely as rich people to have paid a bribe, and in urban areas they are even more likely to pay bribes.
5. Out of six key public services, people who come into contact with the police and the courts are the most likely to have paid a bribe. This is consistent with previous Transparency International surveys and highlights the lack of progress made in addressing bribery in these two institutions, which are crucial for citizen security and the rule of law.
6. People in the region are divided as to whether ordinary people can make a difference in the fight against corruption – just over half of people think that they can (53 per cent), while 38 per cent think they cannot. Reporting incidences when they occur, or saying no when asked to pay a bribe, are seen as the most effective things people can do. However, only roughly one-in-ten people who paid a bribe actually reported it.
7. Despite this, turning back corruption is possible. There are a few countries in which citizens see low levels of corruption in their public institutions and see corruption as on the wane in their own country. The views of citizens in Botswana, Lesotho, Senegal and Burkina Faso are particularly favourable.

As corruption can be a major hindrance for development and economic growth, and as it weakens people’s trust in government and the accountability of public
institutions, the report calls on governments to act against the corruption, which exists in their country by resorting to concerted measures. These include strengthening and enforcing legislation on corrupt business people and anti-money laundering to curb the high volume of illicit flows from the continent. This could address the negative perception of business if those profiting are held to account.

Governments are asked to establish right to information and whistle-blower protection legislation to facilitate the role of civil society in making public institutions more transparent, accountable and corruption-free.

Transparency international wants governments to show a sustained and deep commitment to acting on police corruption at all levels by promoting reforms that combine punitive measures with structural changes over the short- and medium-term. Cracking down on petty bribery has direct impact on the most vulnerable in society.

Also the African Union and its members, emphasizes Africa Survey, should provide the political will and financing needed to implement the review mechanism established for its anti-corruption convention.

[IDN-InDepthNews – 01 December 2015]

Image: Cover (cropped) of the Transparency International report.
By Fabiola Ortiz

SAN JOSE (IDN) - With less than five million inhabitants, Costa Rica became famous for abolishing its army in the late 1940’s, when its Central American neighbours were involved in armed conflicts. After becoming a model of peace in the region, the country now wants to be known as a laboratory for a deep de-carbonisation process of the world economy.

This tropical nation is committed to become carbon-neutral by 2021 – the first country worldwide to achieve the goal by the second decade of the 21st century. Such a political ambitious announcement made in 2007 by the Costa Rican government will have to count on the support of society and private sector to become a reality. The year of 2021 marks the bicenten-
Participants from 13 Latin American countries stretch Latin America. Tourism, biodiversity and environmental conservation in a protected area on the Pacific coast of Costa Rica. The vice-president spoke to IDN during the XI Latin reserves,” Chacón said.

more than 25% of the territory with public natural services and connecting biological corridors. We have respect of sustainability, the payment of environmental global and show what we have achieved so far in

The Costa Rican National Parks System run by the public sector has been a model to improve upon sustainable efforts. The National Conservation Areas System (SINAC) now protects 32 national parks, 51 wildlife refuges, 13 forest reserves and 8 biological reserves.

“Nowadays Costa Rica has 52% of the total landmass protected, nearly half of it belongs to national parks, but a portion of more than 10% belongs to private areas. The country has a combined conservation model that is unique, joining public and private areas, and works perfectly well,” Rafael Gallo, president of the Costa Rican Network of Natural Reserves told IDN.

Founded in 1997, this network gathers 220 private protected landowners within an area of 82,000 hectares. Around 60% of the private reserves affiliated to the network are exclusively dedicated to conservation; others address ecotourism, research and education.

“From the 50’s until the 70’s, Costa Rica suffered a lot from deforestation due to coffee cultivation, rice, sugarcane, cattle raising and livestock. People would think in a short term and were not concerned about environment. The shift in mentality came after the 80’s,” explained Gallo.

According to him, the key is to include communities in the conservation activities. “We have to educate and show the new generation that is good to preserve the environment. Communities should know that they can get benefits out of the conservation,” Gallo stressed.

Gallo is thoroughly engaged in the country’s carbon-neutrality target towards 2021. “Our forests produce oxygen and can offset what others emit.”

Edmundo Castro, an agricultural economist specialized in natural resources, has developed a pioneer program in Costa Rica to support the country’s movement to carbon-neutrality. Over the last sixteen years, the expert has been lecturing classes in theEARTH University – an international non-profit school of sustainable agriculture based in Costa Rica. In 2008, Castro founded a program addressing carbon emissions reduction.

“We are creating a culture of carbon-neutrality and diminishing greenhouse gas emissions. We aim that our

more than 1,000 graduated students become leaders and agents of change that could work in their communities bringing local based solutions”, Castro told IDN.

Castro said the academia and companies are “deeply concerned” to help Costa Rica to meet its pledges. Becoming carbon-neutral, in his opinion, means that corporate responsibility should internalize the environmental costs in their productive activities.

“It is a new concept that can generate opportunities for businesses and for the society. When we deteriorate environment, people might be affected negatively, especially the poorest ones who are the most impacted.”

Castro dreams of converting Costa Rica’s economy into a huge protected area in which not only the State should drive the change in the economic development but also the society should be engaged in this paradigm shift.

Environmental conservation is closely related to social indicators. If natural resources are poorly managed, local communities will also lose jobs and income.

“My dream is to transform Costa Rica into an enormous natural reserve. We ought to understand that we can generate wealth from preserving nature, engaging in carbon markets and having a positive social impact within the families.”

A sense of optimism is spread throughout the public sector, such as the Ministry of Environment and Energy (MINAET) that is leading the change, and the academy that took the forefront in developing ground breaking research methods to certify companies in order to achieve zero carbon emissions.

One of the contributions came from Castro who developed a certification process through EARTH to verify and assess greenhouse gas emissions. Costa Rica has certified 50 enterprises so far, but it is still far from achieving the goal: having all the country’s businesses – over 50,000 certified.

[[IDN-InDepthNews – 23 November 2015]

Photo: The natural reserve Finca Rosa Blanca in Heredia Province, Costa Rica.
Credit: Fabiola Ortiz
Education Can Promote Global Citizenship and Help the SDGs Succeed

By Tharanga Yakupitiyage

UNITED NATIONS (IDN) - Since its inception, the United Nations has highlighted people-centred development. This is echoed in the newly adopted Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which aim to leave no one behind. But how can this be achieved? This question was posed at an event on November 10 to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the UN Academic Impact (UNAI) that focused on ‘The Next Generation of Global Citizens’.

UNAI, a global partnership between academia and the UN, underscores the model of global citizenship in not only creating an inclusive, unified community, but a community that is committed to achieving the well-being of all. “What started as just an idea has now become a well-established network of more than 1,000 institutions in more than 120 countries. Collectively, their field of study covers every issue on the international agenda,” said UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in his address delivered by Chef de Cabinet, Susana Malcorra.

While discussing the theme of the event, President and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of ELS Educational Services, Mark Harris stated: “Global citizenship is a way of thinking about oneself as part of a global community...a way of thinking that has been described...as shared intellectual and social responsibility.”

Harris and his fellow participants particularly highlighted the critical role of education in fostering global citizenship. Education helps build cross-cultural understanding, create dialogue, and provide essential humanistic values and problem-solving skills to address global challenges, participants noted.

“Educating more people and educating them better is simply the best bet a society can make,” said State University of New York Chancellor Nancy Zimpher in her keynote address. This view was shared by Ban at the opening of the Academic Impact Forum on May 21, 2015 during which the Korean Association in Support of UNAI was launched. Ban emphasized the importance of education to encourage youth to become global citizens.

“There is a very important role for educators to teach [youth] what would be significant to become a global citizen, to become a leader in the future,” Ban remarked. “Educated young people are our greatest hope to defeat global threats,” he added.


The SDGs, endorsed later in September 2015, included the strong commitments on education reflected in the Incheon Declaration. During UNAI’s Fifth Anniversary event, Principal Assistant to the Director of the Rockefeller Institute Robert Bullock also highlighted the role of youth in the SDGs. “The UN cannot achieve the global goals if only policymakers know about them,” he said.

There have been significant achievements in education around the world, including increases in primary school enrollment and decreases in the gender gap in schools. However, the international community continues to struggle with the provision of universal education. Approximately 60 million children of primary school age are not in school, more than half of whom are girls. Since the Millennium Dev Education Can Promote Global Citizenship and Help the SDGs Succeed elopment Goals (MDGs) focused solely on primary education, access to secondary and tertiary education also remains limited, especially for girls and women, hindering the ability to participate in the global community.

The inaccessibility of education has only been exacerbated due to conflict and the world’s biggest humanitarian crisis since World War II. According to the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 34 million children and adolescents in conflict-affected countries are out of school. In Nigeria alone, 10.5 million children are not attending schools. Most of them are from the Northern war-afflicted region of the country.

Almost half of the world’s forcibly displaced people are also children, making the idea of sitting in a classroom a dream for many. The lack of education opportunities for refugee and displaced children is not simply due to the complexity of the situation, but also the result of neglect and underfunding. In 2014, less than 1.7 percent of humanitarian funding went to education. Pakistani education activist Malala Yousafzai exposed the issue during the Oslo Summit on Education for Development in July 2015, stating: “Thirty-nine billion dollars is spent on [the world’s] militaries in only eight days.”

“If the world leaders decide to take one week and a day off from war and military work, we can put every child in school,” she continued.

Ban also urged for more attention to education and noted its greater societal role at the Oslo Summit by recalling his personal experience fleeing from the Korean War and receiving textbooks from UNESCO. “They taught us more than math and reading. They taught us the meaning of global solidarity,” Ban told world leaders. “When we put every child in school, provide them with quality learning, and foster global citizenship, we will transform our future,” he said.

There has been growing awareness of the importance of education and the creation of global citizens. The Global Citizen Festival, which not only brought celebrities such as Beyoncé and their thousands of fans together in New York this year, also raises awareness and promotes action among youth on key global issues.

“Don’t stand by. Don’t stand back. Stand up. Stand up for justice. Stand up for dignity. Stand up for a better world,” Ban told the 60,000 attendees in Central Park in September 2015.
These sentiments were echoed during UNAI’s event as Director for Education Initiatives at the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) Chandrika Bahadur told participants: “It is you students that are either going to make the SDGs succeed, or make the goals fail.”

Though education alone cannot solve all of the world’s development challenges, participants in the UNAI’s fifth anniversary event agreed that a humanistic and holistic approach to education can contribute to a sustainable, inclusive, and accountable global community as put forth by the SDGs.
Kazakh President Urges One Percent of Arms Budget for Development Agenda

By Rodney Reynolds

NEW YORK (IDN) - The UN’s post-2015 development agenda, which includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), is desperately in need of funds for its successful implementation. The goals include an ambitious target: the elimination of hunger and poverty worldwide by 2030.

But that elusive goal can be reached only if the United Nations can help garner – both from the public and private sector – a staggering 3.5 to 5.0 trillion dollars per year.

Addressing the 193-member General Assembly in September, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon asked: “Why is it easier to find money to destroy people and planet than it is to protect them?” He rightly pointed out that the world continues to squander trillions in wasteful military spending.

Last year (2014) the world’s total military expenditure amounted to a hefty 1.8 trillion dollars – roughly about 2.5 percent of world Gross Domestic Product (GDP). When President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan addressed the General Assembly and the SDG summit in September, he focused specifically on a new political and economic order.

Speaking of SDGs, he urged every country to contribute 1.0 percent of its military budget towards the funding of Sustainable Development Goals.

Perhaps the United Nations should take the lead – and follow up on it.

Among the other suggestions he made, the President called for the transformation of the UN’s Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) into a Global Development Council.

Along with UN member states elected by the General Assembly, it could consist of the heads of all UN Specialized agencies, including the International Monetary Fund.

The Council should be tasked to become a global economic regulator involving projects carried out by this Council to promote economic growth worldwide. This, he pointed out, will help decrease considerably the risks of global crises and ensure responsible behaviour by the states in maintaining their national economic and social policies.

Thirdly, he proposed a Global Strategic Initiative Plan whose core idea was to launch a new trend in global development based on fair conditions “where all nations would have equal access to world infrastructure, resources and markets as well as to maintain comprehensive accountability for human development.”

And equally important, he proposed the adoption of a Universal Declaration of the United Nations to achieve a world free of nuclear weapons.

“Kazakhstan was the first ever country to close a nuclear test site, renounced the world’s fourth largest nuclear arsenal and has contributed to the creation of a nuclear weapon free zone in Central Asia,” he said.

There is an acute need to establish nuclear-free zones in other regions of the world, particularly the Middle East. The nuclear powers must provide guarantees of the non-use of force for all countries that renounce possession of nuclear weapons, he insisted.

He also said the most pressing and serious global challenges – terrorism, demolition of the states, migration and other negative issues – are the result of the economic crisis, poverty, illiteracy and unemployment.

To tackle this global crisis, he said, “we need to start with clear rules for the emission and trade of the world reserve currencies as they do not now meet the criteria of justice, democracy, competitiveness, effectiveness and international control.”

Towards this end, he proposed the idea of a World Anti-crisis Plan, the draft of which was actively discussed on the margins of Astana Economic Forum last May.

He said he is also planning to convene in 2016 the United Nations International conference at the highest level, designed to reaffirm the basic principles of international law.

The threat of terrorism and religious extremism has become global in its scale.

“I propose establishing under the auspices of the UN a unified global network to counter international terrorism and extremism. To achieve this objective it is necessary to first develop and adopt a comprehensive document of the United Nations to combat terrorism.”

Additionally, in support of the UN initiative ’Sustainable Energy for All’, an international EXPO on the theme Future Energy will be held in Astana in 2017.

“We invite all states to participate fully in the exhibition. Looking to the future and using the infrastructure put in place for EXPO 2017, I suggest opening in Astana an International Centre for the development of green technologies and investment projects under the auspices of the UN,” he said.

[IDN-InDepthNews – 29 October 2015]

Photo: Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev addressing the UN General Assembly in September 2015

Credit: almaty.sites.unicnetwork.org
Using Global Citizenship Education for Sustainable Development
By A.D. McKenzie

PARIS (IDN) - Since the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals in September, global citizenship education has been receiving increased attention for the role it can play in both sustainable development and in keeping youth from joining the ranks of "violent extremists".

"Many countries are increasingly aware of and concerned about violent extremism, and (UNESCO's) approach is to provide support to member states through global citizenship education because it puts an emphasis on values," said Christopher Castle, chief of UNESCO's section for Health and Global Citizenship Education.

He told IDN in an interview that it was important for children who are in school to learn about the values such as “solidarity and cooperation”.  

With the SDGs – which maintained universal education as a key objective – many governments emphasized that young people’s voices must be taken into consideration for the implementation of the goals, and one way for this to be achieved is to strengthen global citizenship education.

Concerns about violent extremism came up “very strongly on the agenda” of various countries, Castle told IDN, as governments examined ways to prevent this movement through education.

“Through GCED, we can improve critical thinking skills so that learners see the benefits of respect for (one) another,” Castle said. “We were delighted that the final version of the SDGs … retained the target about education for sustainable development education and GCED.

“But I think what the SDGs have really done is to underscore a growing interest in and consensus among member states that access to education, which had been a rallying cry under the Millennium Development Goals, is no longer enough,” he added.

“That continues to be important – and obviously we’re very concerned about the 57 million children who’re still not in school and should be – but we’re also aware that once children do have an opportunity to exercise their right to education, we need to start thinking more about the type of education that they can achieve while they’re at school.”

According to UNESCO, the aim of global citizen education is to “equip learners of all ages with those values, knowledge and skills that are based on and instill respect for human rights, social justice, diversity, gender equality and environmental sustainability and that empower learners to be responsible global citizens.”

GCED also gives learners “the competencies and opportunity to realise their rights and obligations to promote a better world and future for all”, and it is aimed at all ages: children, youth and adults.

Although global citizenship education can be delivered in a variety of ways, the main method in most states will be through the formal education system, UNESCO says. As such, governments can integrate the concept either as part of existing programmes or as a separate subject.

The values of “global citizenship” have been in consideration for some time, but it gained momentum with the launch of the UN Secretary-General’s Global Education First Initiative (GEFI) in 2012, which has identified ‘fostering global citizenship’ as one of its three priority areas of work, along with access to and quality of education”.

Castle said that UNESCO’s next forum on global citizenship education, scheduled for 2017 in Canada, would focus on both GCED and education for sustainable development.

The organization is working as well with tertiary institutions, such as UCLA in the United States, where it has established a chair. UCLA plans to offer a summer-school programme in global citizenship education, bringing different sectors of society together, Castle said.

In the area of learning about health and sexuality, universities have a key role to play too. UNESCO experts say that “universities are critical because they hold the next generation of leaders”.  

Teaching about certain issues needs to be international because diseases such as HIV and Ebola “don’t pay attention to borders”, Castle told IDN.

For female students meanwhile, it is “vitally important that they receive sexuality education to avoid early and unintended pregnancy”, he said, as becoming pregnant can disrupt their schooling, affecting their future.

UNESCO has created a clearinghouse on GCED, in cooperation with the Asia-Pacific Centre of Education for International Understanding and, in addition, the public has access to a health and HIV clearing house that is organized through the Paris-based International Institute of Educational Planning.

This is an extensive repository of information, policy documents, curricula activities, action plans and government documents.

UNESCO’s Director General Irina Bokova says that the world needs to “harness the energy of young people” as countries make the transition from the MDGs to a sustainable development agenda.

“By the time we reach the deadline for the SDGs in 2030, the population of young people will have increased by 7 percent. It is therefore vital that we engage them now if we are to stand a chance of achieving these goals,” she stated.

Stressing the “humanist” aspects of learning, Bokova has argued that education is not just about transmitting information and knowledge, but also about providing the values, capabilities and attitudes that can contribute to a more “peaceful, just, inclusive and sustainable” world.

She said that education could help foster greater respect and understanding between cultures, give learners “tools to make the most of diversity” and also “harness the energy of young women and men for the benefit of all”.

But UNESCO experts concede that education alone is not a “magic bullet”. Countries need to work on reducing youth unemployment, eradicating inequality and fostering inclusion.

[IDN-InDepthNews – 28 October 2015]
Large-scale Migration is Ushering in an Era of ‘Migitalisation’

By Lisa Monique Söderlindh*

STOCKHOLM (IDN) - Megatrends such as internationalisation, globalisation, urbanisation and digitalisation have been celebrated for decades; but the master narrative of humanity has yet to earn its fame. Now is the time for “migitalisation” to stage the scene. Stepping up to the age of migration urges a new mindset. Migitalisation offers the lens to catalyse the long needed, fundamental shift in emphasis – from framing and tackling migration as an episodic story and a disruptive event, towards steering a systemic structural change to adapt societies to a migratory world.

The practical mission of bringing about a sea-change in how we address what is neither a new nor passing reality cannot be separated from the conceptual necessity of recasting the often degrading discourses on migration prevailing in popular media, among the public and at political levels. “The world should welcome the dawn of the migration age,” was the strong message emerging from the first ever UN High-level Dialogue on International Migration in 2006. Almost a decade later and more than 60,000 years after the earliest human migrations across continents is believed to have taken place, migration remains confined to a noun.

The definition and conception of migration as a permanent process, embodying several transformations and results involving and pertaining to the whole world, have yet to earn a place in the dictionary and people’s mind. The migration age has its predecessor. The historical migration and digitalisation phenomenon both preceding and enabling the global era and globalisation. The historical aspect of migitalisation (migration and digitalisation) refers to the processes triggered by the earliest human migrations.

The momentous moves of Homo sapiens, venturing out of Africa towards a new continental horizon is what in the first place enabled the extension of human settlement across the entire planet. The drive to cross boundaries has ever since led humans to expand the distance within reach. Technological innovation of modern days, seeing revolutionary changes and accelerations in transportation and communication, would not have seen the dawn without the earliest innovations of transportation means. The past centuries of interchange of world-views, products, and ideas do not make up a determinant but a continuation of the human exodus. People’s intrinsic urge to move has given rise to the fundamental process by which practically every location have come into reach; turning the entire world into one destination.

The individual decision to move, whether by choice or necessity, and the impact of population movement, is at the core of today’s world. The drive to migrate, to seek opportunities, protection or better and safer lives, have brought, and continue to bring, a shift in our very life conditions and circumstances.

The transformative processes owing to migration as a central and powerful transformative drive, are evident everywhere. The growing number of states having become transit, receiving and sending countries, is giving rise to new transnational communities and interdependencies between previously disparate peoples and states, prompting the need to rethink the whole concept of space and territory.

Also demographic change is propelled by international migration that has become a dominant force for population growth, particularly among the major receiving countries and in the EU as a whole.

Migitalisation refers to this widespread dynamic with which contemporary migration is reshaping the political, cultural, economic and social spheres in countries throughout every region in the world and bringing standardization at structural levels.

The constant emergence of new systems and organizations that arrange themselves to sustain the opportunity to migrate, in and or outside the legal and institutional context of nations and unions, such as new routes navigated by human smugglers, speak of the degree of self-regulation at stake.

What involves the potential circumvention of legislation is in turn driving changes in institutional and policy regimes at national and international levels that both facilitate and curb the migrations systems continued existence. Neither the advent of international borders or the migration policy and legislations trends seen in the past few years, tending towards a more restrictive stand, has served an impasse for continued cross-border movement.

Urbanisation, denoting a population shift from rural to urban areas, gives an account of the ways in which towns, cities and societies are formed and adapt as more people begin living in urban areas. It casts light on transformations related to the urban condition, involving the ‘commonalisation’ of a certain lifestyle and pertaining to people and countries across the world.

“Globalisation”, in a similar vein, frames the economic and political implications, commonly perceived as a result of the broadening, deepening and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness in all aspects of life. “Digitalisation”, as yet another example, was coined as the digital technologies gained momentum and the digital transformation of society was evident.

Endorsing migration the suffix ‘-isation’ and a narrative in its own right, serves the need to start contextualizing international migration within its own historical, contemporary and future trajectory. Compounding migration and digitalisation

Casting light on migration’s central place in the sweep of human history forefronts migration as a phenomenon both preceding and enabling the global era and globalisation. The historical aspect of migitalisation (migration and digitalisation) refers to the processes triggered by the earliest human migrations.

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The transformative processes owing to migration as a central and powerful transformative drive, are evident everywhere. The growing number of states having become transit, receiving and sending countries, is giving rise to new transnational communities and interdependencies between previously disparate peoples and states, prompting the need to rethink the whole concept of space and territory.

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What involves the potential circumvention of legislation is in turn driving changes in institutional and policy regimes at national and international levels that both facilitate and curb the migrations systems continued existence. Neither the advent of international borders or the migration policy and legislations trends seen in the past few years, tending towards a more restrictive stand, has served an impasse for continued cross-border movement.
The current phase of migitalisation marks a historical stage of accelerated worldwide population movement, but large-scale cross-border migration is nothing new. Migration as a phenomena has consistently proved its inherently global nature, from the first intercontinental population movements in prehistoric times to contemporary era seeing large-scale movements such as the transatlantic migrations of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, continuing with the burst of population movement after 1945.

Not a short-term story

The present migratory stage is not a short-term story that will end when headlines across the globe redirect spotlight from the on-going refugee crises to a new agenda. The global humanitarian crises, spanning more than 60 million people forced to leave their homes because of the conditions created by protracted conflicts around the world, have inevitably brought forced migration and asylum politics to the forefront. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) refers to a paradigm change into an era in which conflicts and persecution are causing unprecedented mass displacement.

The complexity of changing needs and circumstances within the dynamic contexts of international migration will not leave the scene. What the world is currently witnessing is projected as merely the early stages of a long-term situation. Overall population movement is deemed to keep momentum for the better part of this century.

As detailed in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) International Migration Outlook 2015, overall immigration levels are on the rise in most countries. The prospect of a better future, a job, an education or family ties, is drawing people to move as ever before. As further emphasized in recent studies, development in low-income countries fosters more migration, not less as held by the popular belief.

Michael Clemens, senior fellow at the Center for Global Development (CDG), states the unmistakable historical pattern: that as development proceeds, an increase in emigration follows. Successful efforts to assist development of low-income countries and economic growth will stimulate rather than reduce mobility.

Migration’s historical role, its contemporary significance and prevailing projections of its future stake, need to serve the backdrop in the context of bringing about a turnaround in how we consider and address changing migratory dynamics and patterns. The persistence in downplaying migration has struck a long, agonizing chord; paying a heavy human price.

Migration is not a problem to be managed but a permanent feature of humankind. Large-scale migration is inevitable, necessary and an engine for human evolution. Population movement is a fact of reality and a defining feature of contemporary society from which we cannot retreat nor advance without.

Getting the migration equation right is an urgency the world cannot afford to continue failing on. Doing justice to the greatest story of humans is to start setting it right.

The era of migitalisation is here, whether we label it or not.

*Lisa Monique Soderlindh is a freelance journalist and Project Leader and Communicator at the Swedish Migration Agency.

[IDN-InDepthNews – 26 October 2015]

Photo: At sunset a group of mostly Syrian refugees arrive on the Greek island of Lesvos after crossing the Aegean Sea from Turkey. © UNHCR/I.Prickett
UN Report Highlights Women’s Role in Countering Terrorism

By Fabiola Ortiz

NEW YORK (IDN) - Two landmark studies are contributing to fostering global citizenship, by pleading not only for gender equality as such but also stressing the crucial role women can play and are playing in resolving conflict, overcoming violence, countering terrorism and bringing about peace and security.

According to data from the Institute for Economics and Peace in its 2015 Global Peace Index, conflict and violence are costing the planet 14.3 trillion dollars, or 13.4 percent of global Gross Domestic Product (Gross Domestic Product) equivalent to the combined economies of Canada, France, Germany, Spain and Britain.

“The world is less peaceful today than it was in 2008,” says the study. The indicators that have deteriorated the most, it adds, are the number of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), the number of deaths from internal conflict and the impact of terrorism. In 2014 alone, it is estimated, 20,000 people were killed in terrorist attacks up from an average of 2,000 a year only 10 years ago.

How much of over 14 trillion dollar costs have to be borne by women, when they are subordinated and become the targets of extremist ideologies, is not known. Nor does the 2015 Global Peace Index mention the number of women that fell prey to extremist ideologies.

But a global study released by the United Nations to mark the 15th anniversary of Security Council Resolution 1325 on October 13, highlights the important gains to be made by the greater empowerment of women in peace-building efforts. The Resolution on Women, Peace and Security is the first declaration to link women’s experiences of conflict to international peace and security.

Radhika Coomaraswamy, the independent lead author of the comprehensive new report commissioned by the UN Secretary-General in preparation for the 15th anniversary review on the implementation of Resolution 1325, said that the study proves “beyond any doubt” that women’s “participation in peace processes sustains [those] processes for a much longer time” than efforts that exclude them.

Coomaraswamy said: “We recognize the world has changed a lot since 2000 and we need to revive and move this agenda forward with more proactive dialogues.” But there is an ambivalent situation in which the world and the UN have not understood how to deal with this situation.

She cited the report’s focus on prevention, the nature of early warning systems, armed and unarmed presences, and the need for dialogue. “Levels of military spending are high and the cycle of escalation must stop,” she noted, adding that force should only be used as a last resort; when dialogue is impossible.

“It is clear: the current models of making peace are not working,” stated UN Women Executive Director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka.

Between 1990 and 2000, just 11 percent of peace agreements signed included a reference to women. When the Security Council adopted Resolution 1325, this figure reached 27 percent of peace agreements that made reference to women. Of the six agreements resulting from peace talks or national dialogue processes supported by the UN in 2014, 67 percent contained references relevant to women, peace and security.

Nonetheless, only 9 percent of negotiators were women out of 31 major peace processes between 1992 and 2011. Just 3 percent of the military in UN missions are women, and the majority of these are employed as support staff. “This is unacceptable,” declared Mlambo-Ngcuka.

When women are at the peace tables, their participation increases the probability to achieve peace by 35 percent in the following 15 years.

The UN Women representative and the lead author of the 100-page global report agree that empowering women contributes not only to peace, but also accelerates economic growth and improves humanitarian assistance. “The progress from the last 15 years remains far too slow,” said Mlambo-Ngcuka emphasizing that at least half of 50 percent of leaders dealing with peace processes must be women.

Women are still at the bottom of the agenda, criticized Muna Rihani Al-Nasser, chair of the UN Women for Peace Association. Founded in 2008. The association is committed to the prevention of violence against women and girls, and strengthening the implementation of laws and policies against violence. It also fundraises for the United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women.

“We need to push governments to place issues of women on top of the agenda. We believe women have to be involved in discussions about the peace process. They are more into peace than men; we are 55 percent of the whole population,” she told IDN Al-Nasser believes that there are currently so few women involved in working as police officials and judges or ranking among decision-makers against terror. “If we open the door, women will be engaged. They need to receive proper training and be treated as men in the sense of equal opportunities. We don’t want to sit and wait until the situation gets worse and worse. Terror is against humanity and we have to fight together, not only through governments; civil society should play a proactive role,” An-Nasser said.
Women in conflict-zones

When there is a conflict accompanied by terrorist attacks, women and children are often the most vulnerable ones and they suffer most, stressed Al-Nasser. This is evidenced in the global study with a special section about reality on women and girls who live in conflict zones, she said.

Half of the children of primary school age, who are not in school, live in conflict-affected areas. Girls, whose adjusted net enrolment rate in primary education is only 77.5 percent in conflict and post-conflict countries, are particularly affected.

In conflict and post-conflict countries, maternal mortality is on average 2.5 times higher. More than half of the world’s maternal deaths occur in conflict-affected and fragile states, with the 10 worst-performing countries on maternal mortality all either conflict or post-conflict countries.

The study also urges that funding should address projects that affect women on the ground. Al-Nasser is very emphatic against the terror committed against minorities by the self-proclaimed caliphate ISIS, particularly targeting the Yezidi communities.

It is estimated that there are around 3,000 women and children under captivity since ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) militants attacked and seized the Sinjar Mountains in the northern region of Iraq on August 3, 2014 – where this Iraqi ethnic and religious minority resides.

The Yezidis are predominantly ethnically Kurdish and are mostly living in the Iraqi Kurdistan (the provinces of Dohuk, Erbil and Sulaymaniyyah). ISIS troops are violently attacking people who do not convert to Islam and are also promoting massacres to the non-Muslim Yezidis.

Pari Ibrahim is a young 26 year-old Law student belonging to a Yezidi traditional family who fled Khanke, province of Dohuk, in the 90’s. After the ISIS attacks against her community, she started the Free Yezidi Foundation based in the Netherlands, where she currently lives.

“At that moment, nothing was being done for the Yezidis. Many men were killed and girls were forced to become sex slaves. Their testimonies are horrible. Yezidi are either being killed or forced to convert to Islam. We don’t know how many were killed but there are a lot of mass graves in Sinjar within the area Isis is controlling”, she told IDN.

Inaccurate data estimates that between 5,000 and 6,000 women and girls were kidnapped by Isis. Since then, more than 2,000 were rescued, but there is a great proportion of victims there are still under this extremist group control.

“When girls come back out of ISIS captivity they are traumatized, and most doctors don’t know how to treat them. Girls come back and don’t receive any help. The worlds’ reaction until now is far from enough; there is no real attempt to stop this,” said Pari striving to draw focus on the need for global action.

[IDN-InDepthNews – 24 October 2015]
Photo: An all-female Formed Police Unit from Bangladesh, serving with the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti, arrives in Port-au-Prince to assist with post-earthquake reconstruction. UN Photo/Marco Dormino
Global Citizenship Education Underpins Efforts of Youth to Build Peaceful Societies

By Kanya D’Almeida

UNITED NATIONS (IDN) - By mid-2015, the number of young people between the ages of 10 and 24 stood at 1.8 billion, representing the largest youth population the world has ever seen.

A large portion of this demographic is based in the global South, according to the United Nations, with children and adolescents making up a majority of the combined populations of the world’s 48 least developed countries (LDCs).

But as various youth leaders pointed out at a recent UN summit convened by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), young people today are confronted with a multitude of difficulties.

Conflicts, corruption and climate change represent just some of the challenges that young people face on a daily basis, said participants in the two-day conference on the role of Global Citizenship Education (GCED) in fostering youth peace builders, which took place on September 10-11.

Displacement, violence, unemployment and illiteracy also pose challenges to the younger generation, participants added, pointing to a need for a “radical” transformation of local, national and international structures to engage and involve youth at the highest levels of decision making and policy planning.

Using GCED, a framework based on inclusivity, mutual respect and tolerance for all cultures, faiths and peoples developed to support the UN Secretary-General’s Global Education First Initiative (GEFI), a new generation of youth leaders hopes to make in-roads in the arenas of development, human rights, peace and security.

Given that young people around the world are disproportionately impacted by violence and conflict, they feel that youth participation is most urgently required in the latter field, which is also one of the three pillars of the United Nations.

Data from the Office of the Secretary-General’s Special Envoy on Youth suggests that youth comprise 40 percent of the roughly 1.5 billion people living in fragile and war-torn areas around the globe, while the most recent UN report on children in armed conflicts showed that kids are increasingly becoming casualties of war.

Ongoing political, economic and environmental crises, including protracted conflicts such as the ones in Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, are also pushing hundreds of thousands of young people out of their homes; in 2011, 14 million youth had been forcibly displaced due to war and natural disasters.

A global study on homicide rates published by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) found males between the ages of 15 and 19 years to be most vulnerable to death by firearms, while young women and girls living in societies plagued by epidemics of
Indeed, young women face almost double the burden as their male counterparts, since they are also more prone to gender-based violence and risks relating to reproductive health.

According to the Women’s Refugee Commission, all 51 countries experiencing some form of conflict since 1986 also reported high levels of sexual violence against adolescent girls.

The UN says that complications arising during pregnancy and childbirth represent the “second leading killer of adolescent girls in developing countries”, amounting to tens of thousands of deaths annually.

Each year, 200,000 girls under the age of 18 give birth every day in developing countries.

And if current trends continue, a staggering 15 million girls in the 15-19 age bracket will endure female genital mutilation between now and the year 2030.

Young people also continue to be disproportionately excluded from the workforce, a survey released on October 13 found.

Reiterating theripple effect that Malala Yousafzai’s courageous stand had on the world, Bah pointed out the success of such initiatives as #UpForSchool, a movement that currently boasts 500 youth ambassadors in over 86 countries and has garnered over six million signatures for its petition aimed at getting the world’s 56 million out-of-school children back into their classrooms.

“We need a radical paradigm shift, so that we embrace young people and collectively celebrate acts of courage,” he stressed, adding that every single day millions of young people like Malala are standing up for their rights, though their actions often go unnoticed.

Underpinning every effort to bring young people into the nexus of policy-making is the concept of Global Citizenship Education (GCED), which aims to foster a new kind of literacy for the 21st century.

Deputy Permanent Representative of the Republic of Korea Ambassador Hahn Choong Hee said GCED, currently enshrined in the new Sustainable Development Agenda, should be viewed as a vehicle for thinking about our relationships with one another and with the planet.

For young people today living through political, economic and technological revolutions, the likes of which the world has never seen before, to say nothing of the impending threat of catastrophic climate change, GCED is not an option but an imperative.

[IDN-InDepthNews – 15 October 2015] 
Photo: Up for School (www.aworldatschool.org)
NEW YORK (IDN) - The United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon is keen that member countries make Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) an integral part of their national policies so as to ensure that these are achieved by 2030. In an interview with IDN, he also stressed the need for the civil society to play a critical role in pushing forward this new set of global targets.

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 targets assign global citizenship a significant role in promoting sustainable development, in line with the fact that Ban launched in September 2012 the five-year Global Education First Initiative (GEFI).

“I have been urging all leaders in the process of meeting them on a bilateral or multilateral basis that each and every member state should take a very strong ownership of these SDGs to make these goals their goals, change and reflect the goals into their national domestic economic social and environmental policies,” Ban told IDN in an interview.

The Secretary-General talked to IDN on the 38th floor of the Secretariat building at the UN Headquarters in New York after coming back from the 2015 Annual Meetings of the World Bank Group and the International Monetary Fund (October 9-11) in Lima, Peru.

The annual gathering of finance ministers and central bank governors from 188 countries took place two weeks after a historic vote at the United Nations to adopt the 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

Ban Ki-moon joined the discussion on October 10 at the Development Committee of the World Bank Group and IMF. The so-called Development Committee was established in 1974 and works as a ministerial-level forum for intergovernmental consensus building on development issues.

The 2030 Agenda is “centred on people”. In his remarks to the Development Committee meeting in Lima, Ban highlighted that the development path for the next fifteen years addresses the “structural factors” that have hindered poverty eradication, inclusive growth and sustainable development. Its motto is “Leave no one behind”.

“Success will rely on a renewed partnership for development among all actors, including governments, parliaments, local authorities, international institutions, civil society, academia and the private sector,” the UN Secretary-General said in Lima emphasizing: “The World Bank can step up capacity building and the mobilization of resources for sustainable development by drawing on its rich technical expertise.”

Ban Ki-Moon reiterated in IDN interview that the 17 goals with 169 targets aim to promote prosperity and well-being for everyone, everywhere, on a healthy planet.

“It is crucial and very important that these SDGs are implemented with everybody’s participation, not only with governments, but also with civil communities and philanthropists,” he declared.

The motto for the post 2000 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), “leave no one behind”, seeks to strengthen the sense of ownership societies should embrace.

Asked if he regrets that sexual diversity and LGBTI (Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex) rights were not included in any specific goal, Ban said that this issue is permeated in a “transversal way” all items in the new development agenda.

“It is already implicit that the SDGs are leaving no one behind. Everybody should be on board. The values of ethnicity, sexual orientation, regardless of sex or where you are coming from, whether is poor or rich. There is no discrimination, it is a people centred vision,” Ban told IDN.

For the UN Secretary-General, the next fifteen years are a “moment of hope” particularly for the people in Africa, where the SDGs shall work converging with the Agenda 2063 adopted in the African Union (AU) 24th Ordinary Assembly on January 31, 2015 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

African countries listed eight aspirations they want to achieve in the next five decades. These will serve as pillars for the continent to develop its economies. In operational terms, the Agenda 2063 will have a rolling plan of twenty-five, ten and five years with short term action plans.

The aspirations for the “Africa We Want” provide a framework for addressing past injustices and realization of the 21st century on the African continent by way of eradicating poverty in one generation and building a shared prosperity through social and economic trans
formation of the continent.

“We aspire that by 2063, Africa shall be a prosperous continent, with the means and resources to drive its own development,” with sustainable and long-term stewardship of its resources, reaffirms the document. Among the ideals, in fifty years, Africa shall be free from armed conflict, terrorism, extremism, intolerance and gender-based violence. Those are major threats to human security, peace and development.

The continent will also be drugs-free, with no human trafficking, with no organized crimes and other forms of criminal networks, such as the arms trade and piracy. Before that, by 2020, all remnants of colonialism will have ended and all African territories under occupation fully liberated.

Added to this, the continent’s population will enjoy affordable access to independent courts and judiciary that deliver justice without fear or favour.

In Ban Ki-moon’s words, the UN is seeing with “great priority” African peace and development, with good rule of law and good institutions.

“The production of the 17 SDGs covers all the spectrums of human lives as well as planet and Earth. Particularly when it comes to African development, the SDGs are alive with Africa Agenda 2063,” stressed the UN Secretary-General in a group meeting with four journalists.

And this is why the UN is “very much engaged with African Union and each of the African countries through development projects, through peace and security agendas,” he said.

Ban described the African development aspirations as a “visionary agenda” with which the UN is working very closely.

“I believe Agenda 2063 and SDGs should go hand in hand and their basic programs be aligned with each other,” he added.

According to Ban, the global development agreement was an inclusive process adopted by leaders around the globe in which “millions of people have participated”. Financial and technical cooperation play a key role in the full implementation of the SDGs in the next years, he pointed out. But it is also going to be costly. Heads of State or Government, relevant ministers – ministers for finance, foreign affairs and development cooperation – and other special representatives gathered in Ethiopia from July 13-16 to explore ways on how to fund the ambitious set of goals that include ending poverty, hunger and achieving food security.

The Addis Ababa Action Agenda was the outcome of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development that discussed mechanisms to finance development. According to UN estimates, to comply with the new goals the world will need $11.5 trillion a year or a total of $172.5 trillion over a 15-year period.

“After three long years of negotiation, the world has adopted this framework which lays down the ground rock of providing financial and technological support for the developing world”, said Ban to a selected group of journalists.

The final document in Ethiopia affirms the “strong political commitment” to address the challenge of financing and creating an enabling environment at all levels for sustainable development in the spirit of global partnership and solidarity.

“This agenda must be underpinned by equally ambitious and credible means of implementation. (…) to further strengthen the framework to finance sustainable development and the means of implementation for the universal post-2015 development agenda; and to reinvigorate and strengthen the financing for development”, says the document.

The final document recognizes that many countries, particularly developing nations, still face considerable challenges and “some have fallen further behind”.

Inequalities within many countries have “increased dramatically”, informed the paper.

The Secretary-General took office in January 1, 2007 and is due to finish his post as the chief administrative officer of the organisation by December 31, 2016. Ban welcomed the celebration of the 70th anniversary of the United Nations, founded in 1945 that is currently made up of 193 Member States.

In his opinion, one of the largest contributions of the UN was participating in the decolonization process in African and Asian countries. Between the 1950’s and 1960’s, more than forty nations became independent on those two continents.

“A huge contribution for humanity is the decolonization process of many countries from the colonial systems. It was the UN who really promoted the rapid decolonization process. This has been the basis of African development on developing states,” he told journalists.

In the course of the last decades of the independence of many African countries, some have undergone through a “smooth transition to democracy”, while most of the countries had to go through a “very turbulent tragic path towards democratic transition”. There are still some states facing this challenge nowadays.

“Looking back at the 70 years of the UN, I am conscious of certain concerns about effectiveness and efficiency and what kind of legacy UN has left. I am very proud what UN has been doing in the last seven decades. All the important agreements for human rights, good governance and democracy have been done at the UN,” Ban declared.

The sustainable development agenda will guide the world towards a better security, more prosperous and more sustainable path, he added.

[IDN-InDepthNews – 14 October 2015]

Photo: UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon

Credit: Fabiola Ortiz - IDN
Pacific Islanders Debating ‘Oceanian’ and Global Citizenship

By Shailendra Singh*

SUVA, Fiji (IDN) - Discussions about the concept of ‘Global Citizenship’ are gaining momentum in various international forums, but remain largely unexplored in the Pacific Islands.

According to Ron Israel, co-founder of The Global Citizens’ Initiative, Global Citizens think beyond communities based on shared group identities, and see themselves as part of a larger, emerging world community.

In the Pacific, the late Tongan academic and philosopher, Professor Epeli Hau’ofa, had gone as far as proposing a common regional identity he called the “new Oceania”, comprising of people with a common Pacific heritage and commitment, rather than as members of diverse nationalities and races.

In Hau’ofa’s conceptualization, an Oceanian was anyone who lived in the Pacific, and was committed to the region, regardless of ethnicity or religion. His framework also accounted for the “astounding mobility” of Pacific Islanders over the last half-century or more. This expanded version of Oceania covered larger areas than was “possible under the term Pacific Islands region,” forming a “world of social networks that criss-cross the ocean, all the way from Australia and New Zealand in the southwest, to the United States and Canada in the northeast.” Hau’ofa felt that a common, enlarged Pacific identity was crucial for the advancement of collective regional interests, including the protection of the vital Pacific Ocean.

Connecting and mobilizing people to gain strength in numbers in order to agitate for common interests, is the thread that binds the Oceanian and the Global Citizen concepts. Global Citizen is just more expansive. Its proponents link it to the universal values of justice, democratic participation, diversity, and global solidarity as the building blocks for peaceful, tolerant, inclusive and sustainable societies.

Pacific Island commentators laud the concept, but feel that certain cultural, economic, geographical and historical obstacles could stand in the way of its implementation. Former University of the South Pacific (USP) academic in literature, Dr Som Prakash, feels that some Global Citizen values are incompatible with the cultural beliefs, philosophies and life-styles of Pacific Island societies. For instance, egalitarianism is seen as inimical to the hierarchical nature of some Pacific societies, such as chiefly power in Fiji, the aristocracy in Tonga, and matai (chiefly) system in Western Samoa.

“Democracy, for example, is not always welcomed by traditional chiefs who are given much more power and authority than the ordinary folks,” says Prakash. “It takes a while for the ordinary Pacific cultures to get accustomed to the questioning of elders and chiefs. Often peace (one of the pillars of Global Citizenship) is argued to be better attained under a benevolent dictator,” adds Prakash.

There are some other apparent contradictions. As pointed out by Fiji’s former vice-president, Ratu Jone Madririwi, in collective Pacific societies like Fiji, group interests supersede individual interests. Global citizenry, on the other hand, centers on individuals as the agents of change through instilling in them “awareness of the interconnected nature of the world and the need for a global focus for development.”

However, the likes of Fiji-based university student, Duane Mar, do not see the above paradoxes as obstacles. Mar points out that the Pacific is equally affected, if not more, by some common world problems, which transcend geographical, cultural, and philosophical differences.

“Global citizen is a person whose ideals and thought processes are based around those of the general global issues, such as poverty, climate change and human rights,” says Mar. “In many rural Pacific communities, the people are very much aware of issues like climate change, and the need to combat poverty. These issues are discussed at the community level and from there, villages often work with NGO groups to address them,” adds Mar.

Moreover, collectivism, based on group solidarity, has some clear parallels with the Global Citizen concept of “interdependency”, even though the Global Citizen model encompasses an “interdependent world” rather than just the village, or clan. Global Citizen, as espoused by UNESCO and other institutions, promotes the idea that people’s “individual and collective actions have a global impact – and it is their responsibility to engage in positive actions for their communities and the planet.”

The idea of collective responsibility to address global problems is likely to resonate with Pacific peoples, especially in relation to global warming and sea-level rise, seen as a severe threat to the region. For more than a decade, one Pacific leader after another has stood up at various international forums to urge the industrialized nations to take responsibility for global warming and implement meaningful policies to reduce carbon emissions.

As Kiribati President Anote Tong has often pointed out, the Pacific region contributes the least, just three per cent, to global warming, but many islands are on the “frontline” of sea level rise.” Speaking at a recent meeting of Pacific Island leaders, Fiji Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama blamed the industrialized nations for “our slide into disaster.” He added that, “the industrialized world needs to reorganize its economies and its priorities to stop pumping excessive carbon emissions that are warming the planet. To let us sink beneath the waves is totally immoral. The world must not betray us.”

Another recent Pacific leaders’ meeting in the Papua New Guinean capital, Port Moresby, ended in a stalemate after Australia and New Zealand blocked a bid from low-lying island nations for a tougher global target. This stance has led to increased polarization, with one commentator stating that the “lacklustre response by Australia and New Zealand to the plight of Pacific nations has finally reached boiling point.”

Mar describes the Pacific’s global warming predicament as the “tragedy of the commons”, which in this...
case refers to the actions of some nations having an adverse impact on others, including those nations that did not contribute to the situation.

On his part, USP academic Prakash sees Australia and New Zealand's intransigency over the global warming issues as perhaps the most recent example of the many ways in which the greater powers have treated the Pacific with “carelessness, if not contempt.” Prakash feels that such treatment lead to skepticism in the region about what inevitably comes to be seen as “fancy notions of globalization, often emanating from well-to-do nations.” He adds that “the most visible and tangible effects of globalization is the crass TV, mobile phones and social media that inundate our Pacific societies.”

However, as Mar points out, the Pacific has, in some ways, benefited from globalization. Furthermore, globalization and Global Citizenry are two distinct ideas. In fact, Global Citizen principles aim to address situations such as “tragedy of the commons”, a by-product of globalization, although it is easy to see how the two terms could be confused.

The reality is that despite their smallness and isolation, the Pacific region’s destiny is tied up with that of the rest of the world, something which Hau’ofa was keenly aware of. Surely Hau’ofa was thinking along Global Citizen lines when he wrote that “we cannot confront the issues of the Pacific Century as individual, tiny countries created by colonial powers and acting alone. We could indeed ‘fall off the map’ or disappear into the black hole of a gigantic Pan-Pacific doughnut.”

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[IDN-InDepthNews – 05 October 2015]

Professor Epeli Hau’ofa, proponent of 'New Oceania'

Credit: usp.ac.fj
France Pumps Up Climate Change Volume to Avert Failure

By A.D. McKenzie

PARIS (IDN) - Tourists and locals walking along the River Seine, near the famed Musée d’Orsay, are currently able to charge their mobile phones at three unlikely installations: solar-powered street lamps.

The tall posts, topped by photovoltaic panels, have been set up by French NGO Electriciens sans frontières (ESF) in an attempt to heighten public awareness about climate change issues, ahead of COP 21, the next United Nations climate talks that will be held in the French capital.

“We’re also trying to show the public that there are solutions to the fight against climate change and to the lack of electricity in some parts of the world,” said Laura Cornu, ESF’s communications manager.

Over the past two decades the group has installed panels in rural areas in Africa, in refugee camps in Jordan, and in tent cities after earthquakes in both Haiti and Nepal. The Seine street lamps were among 170 projects submitted to the Paris Mayor’s office in a call for innovative climate action.

Not far from the lamps, meanwhile, is an embarkation area where tourists can board a solar-energy-powered boat for a cruise on the Seine. On rainy days, the boat sails on energy stored in its batteries, even as passengers shiver in the bracing wind.

But on sunny days, the vessel draws from power captured by the solar panels on its roof, with the crew explaining both the “wonders” of solar technology and that of the city to travellers.

Solar lamps and boats are just some of the high-profile initiatives being pushed as France pumps up the volume to make world leaders and the international community aware of the stakes in the run-up to the climate talks set for November 30 to December 11.

With his top ministers in attendance, French President François Hollande launched an ambitious drive in September to ensure success, though he warned that the possibility of failure was real.

“There is no miracle ... there is a chance we’ll succeed but also a great risk we might fail,” said Hollande, speaking at a half-day meeting that gathered political leaders, artists, scientists, CEOs, non-governmental organizations, students and others – at the imposing Elysée Palace, the president’s official residence.

Alongside NGOs, the government has supported numerous conferences and projects, and the French capital even declared a car-free day on September 27, following in the footsteps of Brussels, which has had such programmes for several years.

But the volume is now being pumped up in unprecedented fashion, through song and dance, artistic projects, citizen marches, a COP 21 postage stamp, and the highlighting of innovative ventures such as using a stationary bike to generate energy for a sound system.

On Oct. 3, French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius will also open a forum called “Make it work: civil society commits itself in support of climate”. Organized jointly by a local university and a newspaper, the forum will bring some 500 participants together to discuss climate change issues.

One can also take part in off-beat, civil-society actions that include “24 hours of meditation for the earth” – scheduled for November 1 – and a “fast for the climate” project – in which citizens have been asked to fast the first day of each month until COP 21, the 21st Conference of Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

Among the “artistic movers” is a group called ArtCOP21, which plans to “stage city-wide cultural events that address climate as a people’s challenge and work to create a cultural blueprint of positive and sustainable change”.

The group’s director, Lauranne Germond, said that sometimes artists can reach those that politicians can’t. But it’s anyone’s guess how much of an effect all this will have on reaching an agreement in December.

For a desired outcome, Hollande reiterated that one of the “keys to success” would be resolving the issue of financing for developing countries – an amount that has been set at $100 billion annually from 2020.

This funding is considered crucial for vulnerable states to adapt to climate change, and ways of raising the finances will be discussed at a European Council summit in mid-October, among other meetings. Some of the means will include taxes on financial transactions, Hollande said, outlining France’s own commitment to contributions.

He indicated that funding may also help to ease the migration crisis in the world, as climate change has also created refugees, along with conflict, “dictators ... and terrorism”.

French Prime Minister Manuel Valls has additionally stressed that the people mainly affected by global warming are the “most vulnerable, the poorest” and said that France has a “determining role to play” in taking action.

Describing some of the effects of global warming on small island states, one of the participants at the Elysee conference, Victorin Lurel of Guadeloupe, told IDN that Caribbean islands, for instance, have been suffering the loss of coastal areas, more intense hurricanes and other phenomena, even though they are not among the major emitters of greenhouse gases.

“It’s about survival for us,” said Lurel, President of the Regional Council of Guadeloupe, a French overseas territory.

He said that Caribbean islands are also mobilizing to raise awareness, as global warming is a universal problem, no matter who the main culprits might be.

Ségolène Royal, the French Minister for Ecology, Sustainable Development and Energy, said she was pleased to see the “formidable rise” in action among civil society. She said this needed to continue up to the
climate change conference and beyond.
Royal outlined the “challenges” in simple terms: halting the destruction of the environment including forests; reducing pollution, including of oceans; reducing emissions; and ending the over-exploitation of resources.
According to the French government, COP 21 will be the most important conference France has ever hosted, not only because of the great challenges to the world but because of the “tens of thousands” of people who will be physically participating as well as watching.
For some NGOs, it will be important for another reason: perhaps French citizens will start listening to them, as France has lagged behind other countries such as Germany and Switzerland in national environmental awareness.
In informal surveys done during previous climate change conferences, people on the streets of Paris, for example, showed a near-complete lack of interest in climate change issues and in the outcome of the talks. Many expressed ignorance about the negotiations to reduce carbon emissions or the international goal to keep global temperatures below an increase of 2 degrees Celsius.
“We still don’t think that we have been fully heard,” said Diane Simiu, director of conservation programmes at WWF in France and representative of an NGO network.
Will all the artistic input – including more films about the environment from renowned French directors – be effective?
“It’s late and maybe even too late,” Hollande emphasized in September. “Therefore action is urgent … we can’t say that we didn’t know.”
[IDN-InDepthNews – 02 October 2015]
Paris on a car-free day | Photo credit: A.D. McKenzie
By Fabiola Ortiz

UNITED NATIONS (IDN) - The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are all about “finishing the unfinished business” of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), says Amina Mohammed, special adviser to the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on post-2015 development planning.

The international community adopted a set of 17 new development goals with its 169 targets by 2030 during the Sustainable Development Summit at the United Nations headquarters September 25-27 in New York. Instead of eight MDGs that expire this year, the post-2015 agenda has gathered a higher number of objectives.

It required three-and-a-half years to get the scope of what would be the challenges the world should prioritize in the next 15 years.

Mohammed assures that this time it won’t be putting a ‘band-aid’ on the world’s problems. “We are going to talk about the root causes not the symptoms. The MDGs were a success, we wouldn’t be talking about a successor set of goals if they hadn’t worked to a degree, but the MDGs remain unfinished business,” she said talking to a small group of journalists.

There is a difference from what MDGs represented in the early years of 2000 “when a few men prescribed for the world what we should be doing in the following 15 years”.

Much has changed since then. “What we have now is universal goals. The agenda is for everybody. It is about a world that we all understand that it is inextricably linked. The SDGs are a response to the shared vision of how we are going to make sure by 2030 that we do eradicate poverty and how we deal with a number of complex issues”, Mohammed stressed.

For Kitty van der Heijden from the World Resources Institute (WRI), it may not sound as a revolution but the new set of goals has in its essence an innovative content. “It has the potential to transform our economies, our lives and our ecosystems. The 17 goals do something that MDGs have never done, that is, leaving no one behind. It is a step beyond,” she told IDN in an exclusive interview.

Sustainable development means a balance between three pillars of the economic, environmental and social. According to Heijden, in the past decades global economies grew significantly (world’s GDP more than tripled since 1990), the world achieved some equity by halving extreme poverty, but there are still big challenges in terms of gender equity and sexual reproductive health.

“We have grown our economies but have not been able to distribute economic and social wealth equitably across the world. In this regard, we have seen very bad news, rates of biodiversity loss, soil degradation, climate change, ocean acidification, fresh water scarcity, all these are in an accelerating negative trend,” declared Heijden.

According to the UN special adviser on Post-2015, MDGs did not look at the “root causes” of what was excluding people from the economy and why there was poverty. It failed to address a much wider and integrated perspective.

“On health, we did manage to deal with diseases such as HIV and Tuberculosis. But they were dealt in a silent manner; we didn’t look into the health systems. With the neglect of health systems we saw the outbreak of Ebola that really set us back years because our systems were too weak,” commented Mohammed.

That is the ‘band-aid’ the world should avoid and do not repeat, she stressed. “We tried to address problems up the face, but we didn’t go to the root causes. Now we should go beyond the quick fix.”

However civil society groups view the new development agenda with some scepticism, especially in regard to implementation.

“We’ve made huge progress on the MDGs, but if we don’t get the environmental component we face the huge risk of eroding all the gains we’ve made. Ultimately, this agenda needs to be judged not on the words that are written but on the actions that are implemented,” said Deon Nell, Acting Executive Director for Conservation at WWF, thinking ahead.

The world is reaching an irreversible tipping point in which there are many reasons to be “quite negative”, Nell told a small group of journalists. Humanity is consuming a huge amount of resources at about 1.5 planets each year, 60 per cent of the vital life ecosystems are declining and 2015 was considered the warmest year on record, Neil added.

On the other hand, civil society organisations have taken note of some signs of change. “This new agenda...
is literally a grassroots business plan for transforming the planet. There’s a lot to be done, but it is certainly a starter of transforming the world. We have more ownership to this process, it might not be perfect but it was developed from the ground up”, Nell highlighted. Nevertheless, in the opinion of Eni Lestari, an Indonesian rights activist, the SDGs show contradictions and are failing in address migrants’ needs.

“In every African village there is a group of women who are pushed away from their land into poverty to make way for development, agribusiness, oil plantation, mines and real estates. Millions of us are displaced by climate change and disasters becoming the underclass of globalization having denied our basic rights of citizens”, criticized Lestari who chairs the International Migrants Alliance (IMA).

Although some development goals tackle general inequalities, there have been no funding commitments to make real changes, Lestari told a small group of journalists reporting from the UN. “There is nothing in the agenda that commits governments to change the system that causes poverty.”

In her opinion, if the private sector and corporations are to finance the SDGs, there is a risk that they may not properly address the root causes.

“There is still a gap between how much it is going to cost to realize the SDGs and the willingness of the international donors. “That gap is huge and it runs into the trillions of dollars every year”, stated Paul O’Brien, the vice president for Policy and Campaigns at Oxfam America.

For him, given incentives for domestic expenditures particularly in developing countries, there would be enough money available to finance SDGs. “We have time and money to achieve all the goals,” assured O’Brien. The question is if there is enough political will. “I don’t think that everybody is going to rush back to their own countries and start investing in their goals”.

According to Amina Mohammed, the UN special adviser, the answer lies in making global partnerships. “The trillions exist in this world, they are locked up in private equity funds and different sources of investments. And we have to find the keys to unlock them, we do have the resources to do the SDGs.”

[IDN-InDepthNews – 28 September 2015]

Photo: Amina Mohammed, special adviser to the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on post-2015 development planning
Credit: Fabiola Ortiz Credit: 17 SDGs
By Thalif Deen

UNITED NATIONS (IPS) - The U.N.’s much-ballyhooed Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), unanimously adopted by over 150 world leaders at a three-day summit meeting, which concluded Sep. 27, has been touted as the biggest single contribution to humanity since the invention of sliced bread.

Speaking at the opening ceremony of the Summit, the Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon described the 17 SDGs as an integral part of a post-2015 development agenda to end poverty in all its forms.

“The true test of commitment to Agenda 2030 will be implementation. We need action from everyone, everywhere. Seventeen Sustainable Development Goals are our guide. They are a to-do list for people and planet, and a blueprint for success,” said Ban.

But what does it really take to ensure the SDGs are implemented over the next 15 years so that the world will witness a radical transformation of global society, including the elimination of poverty, hunger, gender discrimination, spreading diseases and environmental degradation — all by the year 2030.

Political will? Increased domestic resources and official development assistance (ODA)? A rise in private sector investments? Or all of it?

Ambassador Macharia Kamau of Kenya, one of the co-facilitators of the SDGs inter-governmental consultative process, told reporters last month the implementation of the agenda could cost a staggering 3.5 trillion to 5.0 trillion dollars per year.

Winnie Byanyima, Executive Director of Oxfam International said: “The new Sustainable Development Goals are ambitious on paper — and they could be historic in their impact. They seek to go beyond band-aid solutions by setting out to eradicate — not just reduce — extreme poverty and hunger in every country.”

“The key is to welcome the richest people back in touch with the rest of society, rather than allowing them to exist on the margins of privilege,” she added.

Leida Rijnhout, Director of Global Policies and Sustainability at the European Environmental Bureau, (in New York) said the 17 goals have the potential to push for higher ambitions and more coherence in policymaking, although the goal of ‘sustained economic growth’ could undermine the others.

“It is clear that the Earth’s carrying capacity is not increasing and that some countries need to substan
tially decrease their resource use to achieve more equitable sharing of resources and to allow other countries to develop and meet basic needs.”

“We are massively over-consumbing in Europe at the expense of the climate and the development of poorer countries – a trend that is causing increasing conflicts over ever scarcer resources.”

The European Commission, she said, has the perfect chance when it reviews the Europe 2020 Strategy and the EU Sustainable Development Strategy to come up soon with an action plan for the implementation of the SDGs that shows it has understood the goals and the need to change track.

Asked if SDGs are realistic and implementable over the next 15 years, Zubair Sayed, Head of Communication and Campaigns at CIVICUS, the global civil society alliance, told IPS the SDGs are much wider in scope than the MDGs and are also universal in scope which means they apply to both developed and developing countries.

There are two issues, however, with regard to their implementation, he pointed out.

“Do states have the means and more importantly, do they have the will to implement them,” he asked.

What will be common in all contexts is that their success will depend on the political will of governments to take them seriously, to include transformative targets in their national development plans, to put the necessary resources behind them and to include citizens and civil society in all aspects of the design, implementation and monitoring, he noted.

“It’s also important that relevant indicators are identified by the international community to underpin the targets.”

Asked what is most needed through 2030, Sayed told IPS the success of the SDG’s will depend on the extent to which decision makers take them seriously and commit to their implementation through the setting of transformative national targets and committing financial resources to achieve them, the full and meaningful involvement of citizens in setting targets, reporting, and monitoring progress, and the inclusion of civil society as an equal partner in multilateral forums and processes.

The mobilisation of public opinion to ensure meaningful implementation of the goals by leaders will also be critical, he added.

Yolanda Kakabadse, President of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) International, said “most importantly in the coming months, countries need to figure out how they’re going to contribute to achieving these goals and set benchmarks and indicators so they can report on their efforts.”

“We’re in the race and can finally see the finish line – but we need some runners at the starting line if we’re going to make this happen in 15 years.”

Every country is required to develop national indicators and programmes of implementation through individual development plans, she pointed out.

In March, countries will crucially agree a set of indicators that will allow the UN to report annually on global progress in coming years.

“The indicator question will be challenging, but if countries can unite to solve the financial crisis, they can figure this out. The crucial part will be working together and being as transparent with data as possible,” said Kakabadse.

Manish Bapna, executive vice president and managing director of World Resources Institute said the SDGs are a remarkable achievement that set a bold new agenda for international development.

Reflecting profound changes in the world, the new SDGs apply to all countries and importantly put environmental sustainability at their core.

“The SDGs recognize that we cannot eradicate extreme poverty and ensure lasting economic growth without also caring for the planet,” he noted.

“Fortunately, there are a growing number of examples where poverty reduction, economic growth and environmental protection go hand-in-hand. This includes creating compact cities that focus on people, restoring degraded land, expanding access to low-carbon energy, and many more.

“Of course, it’s not enough to have good goals. Now, it’s up to governments – and others in the private sector, international organizations, and civil society – to follow through on this vision. By setting smart policies, encouraging sustainable investment, and measuring progress, countries can put us on a path to achieve these goals.

“If successful, the SDGs will usher in a radical shift in development. We can move away from today’s imbalanced approach to one that benefits all people and protects the planet at the same time.

Adriano Campolina, chief executive at ActionAid, told IPS the SDGs are a step forward as they identify the causes of poverty, “but unless we change the rules that govern the global system, the same players will keep winning.”

“We need to build a more just future for all people and the planet where it’s no longer just money that talks and the gaps in society are narrower.”

“We need to make sure that people living in poverty around the world benefit from these new development goals. Massive corporate investments alone will not guarantee a reduction in poverty and inequality. Governments must change the rules of the game and stop looking to the corporate sector for all the answers. We urgently need to address inequality if these new development goals are to stand a chance of succeeding in the next 15 years.”

The SDGs, proposed by an Open Working Group comprising all 193 U.N.member states, are the result of a three-year-long transparent, participatory process inclusive of all stakeholders and people’s voices.

The 17 SDGs and 169 targets of the new agenda will be monitored and reviewed using a set of global indicators. The global indicator framework, to be developed by the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators, will be agreed on by the UN Statistical Commission by March 2016.

(IPS | 28 September 2015)

Credit: 17 SDGs
Pope Francis Appeals to World Leaders’ Conscience at UN Summit

By J R Nastranis

NEW YORK (IDN) - Pope Francis – born Jorge Mario Bergoglio in Buenos Aires in 1936 – has been noted in his home country “for his humility, his emphasis on God’s mercy, his concern for the poor, and his commitment to interfaith dialogue”. But in his wide-ranging address at the United Nations General Assembly on September 25, the Argentine pontiff has proved himself the sole world leader, unfettered by parochial interests of any sort whatsoever.

Speaking just ahead of the formal adoption of a new global framework, ‘Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,’ composed of 17 goals and 169 targets to wipe out poverty, fight inequality and tackle climate over the next 15 years, Pope Francis endorsed a series of specific economic policies on debt, trade and tax to alleviate poverty.

The Pope's UN speech followed his address to a joint session of the U.S. Congress on September 24 where he emphasized the need for building bridges to protect the vulnerable and address inequality.

"The Pope just called for responsible lending policies to benefit the vulnerable," noted Eric LeCompte, executive director of the religious anti-poverty coalition Jubilee USA Network. LeCompte advises the Vatican and the UN on finance and poverty issues. “He’s connecting the failure of austerity and reckless lending policies to poverty and plight,” Le Compte said.

Pope Francis began his speech by calling on international financial institutions to prevent "oppressive lending systems" from harming vulnerable communities. He specifically referenced "usury" – the practice of charging exceptionally high interest rates – as a form of abuse hurting developing countries.

Noting the achievements of the UN as it celebrates its 70th anniversary, the Pope said: “The history of this organized community of States is one of important common achievements over a period of unusually fast-paced changes . . . Without claiming to be exhaustive, we can mention the codification and development of international law, the establishment of international norms regarding human rights, advances in humanitarian law, the resolution of numerous conflicts, operations of peace-keeping and reconciliation, and any number of other accomplishments in every area of international activity and endeavour.”

But he cautioned that the experience of the last 70 years had revealed that reform and adaptation to the times were necessary. “The need for greater equity is especially true in the case of those bodies with effective executive capability, such as the Security Council, the financial agencies and the groups or mechanisms specifically created to deal with economic crises,” he said.

Addressing the effects of exclusion and inequality, Pope Francis said the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, was an important step forward, adding that he was confident that the December Conference of States Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), widely referred to as COP 21, would secure fundamental and effective agreements.

Photo: Pope Francis is welcomed by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and receives flower bouquets from children of UN staff members at the start of his visit to UN Headquarters. UN Photo/Mark Garten

The Pope encouraged the United Nations to use its administrative agencies to address structural poverty issues. This summer, Pope Francis endorsed a UN global bankruptcy process for countries.

"It’s amazing to see Pope Francis talk about usury and the responsibility of creditors," stated LeCompte. "Pope Francis told the UN that it has a responsibility to use its agencies to solve the debt crisis."

Pope Francis said: “The present time invites us to give priority to actions which generate new processes in society, so as to bear fruit in significant and positive historical events. We cannot permit ourselves to postpone ‘certain agendas’ for the future.”

"The future demands of us critical and global decisions in the face of world-wide conflicts which increase the number of the excluded and those in need," he declared.

Pope Francis also warned that the realities in the Middle East and Africa were grave. “I must renew my repeated appeals regarding the painful situation of the entire Middle East, North Africa and other African countries,” he said. “These realities should serve as a grave summons to an examination of conscience on the part of those charged with the conduct of international affairs.”

“Not only in cases of religious or cultural persecution, but in every situation of conflict, as in Ukraine, Syria, Iraq, Libya, South Sudan and the Great Lakes region, real human beings take precedence over partisan interests, however legitimate the latter may be,” he continued. "In wars and conflicts there are individual persons, our brothers and sisters, men and women, young and old, boys and girls who weep, suffer and die.”
UN High Level Forum Pledges for Culture of Peace

By J R Nastranis

NEW YORK (IDN) - The United Nations General Assembly deliberated on peace and non-violence at the UN headquarters in New York on September 9, making a significant contribution to fostering global citizenship at a point in time when the world is torn apart by multidimensional conflicts in all sectors of the globe.

At the fourth UN High Level Forum on the Culture of Peace, convened by General Assembly President Sam Kahamba Kutesa, senior UN officials and eminent peace advocates pointed out that peace neither meant absence of conflict nor did it automatically result from ending conflict, but rather from building societies that embraced diversity, equality, democratic participation and access to education.

The one-day UN High Level Forum has been convened since 2012. It highlights the importance of implementing the Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace adopted by the Assembly 1999, with former UN Under Secretary General and Bangldesh Ambassador Anwarul K. Chowdhury as Chair of the drafting committee.

September 9 Forum focused on the roles that all stakeholders – Governments, community and religious leaders, educators, the media and others – could play in creating a culture of non-violence. In the post-2015 era, many speakers agreed, the priority must be on advancing a vision for overall improved well-being for the peoples of the world.

“Peace is a distant dream without development,” said Einar Gunnarsson of Iceland, speaking on behalf of UNGA President Sam Kutesa. “This is part of the core challenge in promoting a culture of peace and ensuring peaceful societies,” he said. For more than 70 years, the desire for peace had driven nearly every facet of the UN’s work. However, new challenges such as terrorism, cybercrime, human trafficking and climate change continued to defer that dream.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, to be endorsed at UN Summit from September 25 to 27, he pointed out, contained goals that required the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies. “The onus is upon us to ensure effective implementation,” he stressed.

In a similar vein, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said the Forum was about confronting the “very hard truths in our world”, where, across many war-torn regions, there were brutal violations of international humanitarian and human rights law and, even in mostly peaceful and democratic societies, minorities were attacked. “We cannot turn our eyes away from the suffering,” he stressed. “We cannot close our hearts.”

Ban invoked the stern warning of Mahatma Gandhi: “There will be no lasting peace on earth unless we learn not merely to tolerate but even to respect the other faiths as our own.”

Elaborating on that theme in a keynote address, Arun Gandhi, grandson of Mahatma Gandhi, said his grandfather did not believe that nationalism could sustain the world, as it created the impression that one could exist without concern for others. “Our futures and destinies are interconnected,” he said. “The only way to live in stability was to create stability. That ought to be the common endeavour,” he added.

His grandfather’s philosophy of non-violence was about personal transformation, he noted. “We are all part of society”, he said, “and unless we, individually, recognize non-violence and live it, we cannot have a Government that believes in peace.” Peace must begin with the individual.

To drive home the point, he shared a memory of throwing away a pencil as a young boy, only to have his grandfather ask him to retrieve it. People’s use of natural resources, his grandfather had explained was, in fact, violence against nature. Violence was committed by over-consuming resources and depriving others. Today, in the United States alone, he pointed out, USD20 billion in food was thrown away annually, while more than 1 million people went to bed hungry.

A culture of non-violence was built through love, respect, understanding, appreciation and self-realization. “We have to respect our connection with all of creation. We are here for a purpose. We have to find and fulfil that purpose,” he stressed.

The Forum discussed the core themes in two round tables. The first round table, titled ‘promotion of the culture of peace in the context of the post-2015 sustainable development agenda’, examined strategies for fostering a culture of peace in over the next 15 years. The second, on ‘the role of the media in the promotion of the culture of peace’, considered how various forms of media could be used to foster tolerance and mutual understanding.

Opening the discussion in the first round table, Ambassador Chowdhury said that the international community must work to eliminate the structural violence embedded in society, stressing that in the absence of peace it would be impossible to achieve the goals of the 2030 agenda for sustainable development.

Former President of Romania Emil Constantinescu stated that recent popular movements in Tunisia, Egypt and Syria had drawn attention to the absence of a dialogue and efficient diplomacy. Preventing conflict required a comprehensive, balanced vision, which took into consideration the interests of various ethnic and religious communities and the rights and obligations of independent States’ citizens.

Former UNESCO Director General Federico Mayor pointed out that in the last 25 years, there had been many excellent plans and agendas and programmes of action that had been “completely useless”. Commitments had been made, but there had been no action. The reality was that children were dying of hunger everyday while countries invested in military spending. Sustainability was already at risk because there were potentially irreversible processes at work in the environment.

The present generation had an immense responsibility to reverse this situation, added, because the international community was on the verge of the point of no return. “I am sure that the measures that are going to
be adopted here in a few weeks will be very
good. But we have wonderful documents
already. Afterwards nothing happened,” he
said, warning that tomorrow could be too
late.
Other panellists included Maria Emma
Mejia, Permanent Representative of Colom-
bia; Amina Mohammed, the Secretary-
General’s Special Adviser on Post-2015
Development Planning; and Barbara Adams,
Adviser at the Global Policy Forum and Social
Watch. In addition, Elizabeth Shuman,
representing the Executive Committee of the
Department of Public Information’s pro-
grame for non-governmental organizations
(DPI/NGO), acted as the designated discus-
sant.
The panel discussion on ‘role of the media in
the promotion of the culture of peace’ was
chaired and moderated by Marjon V. Kamara,
Permanent Representative of Liberia. The
panellists included Abulkalam Abdul Momen,
Permanent Representative of Bangladesh;
Cristina Gallach, UN Under-Secretary-General
for Communication and Public Information;
Michael Nagler, President, Metta Centre for
Nonviolence; and Sharon Bhagwan-Rolls,
Founder-Director, FemLINKPACIFIC, Fiji.
Opening the panel, Liberia’s Permanent Represen-
tative Kamara said the media, a powerful driver of change
through the free and participatory exchange of infor-
mation, had a crucial role in advancing a culture of
peace.
Speaking from personal experience, Bangladesh’s
Permanent Representative Momen said the media
wielded enormous political power and was a vital agent
of social change if mobilized properly. The media had
transcended its traditional existence to encompass
online social platforms that informed and educated
people in an unprecedented way. The saying that “the
pen is mightier than the sword” underscored the
urgency of efforts to encourage the media towards
positive change. Specifically, the media needed to end
hatred and intolerance and create a mind-set of mutual
respect.
Rounding out the panel, Bhagwan-Rolls, Founder-
Director, FemLINKPACIFIC said community media had
the ability to transform the notion of security based on
was an express role for the community media beyond
traditional public relations, its role in the post-2015
agenda would be limited. Content should be able to
reflect progress or lack thereof in terms of achieving
goals while ensuring that women were able to define
peace, security and development.
Who made the news and why should not be based on
patriarchal patterns of power, she said, emphasizing
that Member States should be responsive to the views
of local communities. A legislative and regulatory
environment was needed to ensure diversity and
decentralization of power in an effort advance sustain-
able peace and development with a view to fostering
global citizenship.

[IDN-InDepthNews – 12 September 2015]
Photo: UN General Assembly
Credit: Wikimedia Commons
How Israel Contributes to Global Citizenship

By Mel Frykberg

HAIFA (IDN) - Israel has contributed to Global Citizenship in a number of ways including assisting students from developing countries to tackle development challenges, using the Jewish state’s experience in emergency situations to provide assistance and emergency relief around the world. Israel’s founding fathers, including David Ben Gurion, expressed a vision to be a force for good in the world by sharing expertise and resources with developing countries.

“I am prouder of Israel’s international cooperation programme than I am of any other single project we have ever undertaken. It typifies the drive towards social justice that is at the very heart of Judaism,” said former Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir as she highlighted the importance of Israel’s foreign aid programme.

A number of Israeli universities provide scholarships for students in developing countries to study public health and agriculture in Israel. The Pears Foundation, a British Foundation, which works closely with Israeli universities and academia, is one such organisation, which provides support infrastructure for Israel’s emerging international development sector.

“Our initiative contributes essential skills and builds lasting relationships between Israel and the developing world,” said the organisation. “Our programmes set out to create meaningful social change, increase respect and understanding and inspire people to support their communities and the causes they care about.”

As part of it Global Citizenship enterprise, Israel has also developed a formidable conflict resolution industry offering MA graduate programmes to international students.

“Israel has about 65 academic institutions and dozens of programmes involved in conflict resolution which is a significant number for a country of less than eight million people,” Professor Gad Barzilai, the dean of Haifa University’s Law Faculty told IDN.

However, Palestinian critics say there is a wide chasm between Israel’s expertise in theory and its behaviour on the ground. “Israel giving advice on resolving conflict is a bit of an oxymoron when it fails to put its advice into practise,” media consultant, former Al Jazeera correspondent and Palestinian Authority (PA) spokeswoman, Nour Odeh told IDN.

Barzilai said that most Israeli academics were critical of the occupation and that they were more active than American academics when it came to involvement in human rights issues. “Israel has enormous security challenges and this has to be part of the discussion. Israel is stuck in a turbulent Middle East and ISIS is only 9 miles away,” said Barzilai.

Odeh countered, “Israel has been using the security context since its inception and it’s become a bit of a self-fulfilling prophecy as well as a means of justifying the occupation.”

While talking about security Israel continues to build more settlements and commit more human rights abuses, further fuelling the conflict,” added Odeh. Under Barzilai, Haifa University’s Law Faculty holds about 40 conferences annually on human rights in Gaza, international law, and the rule of law under extreme circumstances, and many of its students are involved in human rights issues. The University also holds ‘legal clinics’ across the spectrum of human rights.

Students at Israeli schools also have at least one programme on democracy. “From an early age Israelis are politically aware and concerned about the problems with our neighbours,” said Barzilai.

“The views on how to resolve the conflict, however, differ between the left-wing and the right-wing which compromise 50-50 of Israeli society respectively. Thirty percent of Israelis believe human rights trump security while the other 70 percent say security is more important.

“These views have been convoluted and polarised due to rocket attacks from Gaza. Some Israelis advocate a military solution, while others want a more peaceful resolution. Although Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s government is the most right-wing in Israel’s history it only has a narrow margin,” Barzilai told IDN.

Nour disagrees with Barzilai. “Israeli settlers are part of Israel’s government and most Israeli governments have supported the settlements politically and economically,” said Odeh.

“When Israelis say they are against the occupation one has to define their definition of the occupation which differs from that of the international community and international law. Many of them support the separation wall, the larger settlements remaining in place, and the continued Judaisation of East Jerusalem,” Odeh told IDN.

“I think the Israelis have an immature interpretation of the occupation with their refusal to acknowledge the historical background of the conflict and the dispossession of Palestinians.”

“Let’s not forget Netanyahu won the 1996 elections by saying there were no Palestinians.” Dr Keren Sharvit, heads Haifa University’s International MA Programme, Peace and Conflict Management Studies, a programme which has been running for four years with the majority of students coming from abroad and the rest Israeli.

“It is an inter-disciplinary programme founded on the social sciences, part of it in English,” Sharvit told IDN.
“My students study intergroup conflicts on the local level, diverse communities, ethnic conflict at the intra-state level and on the international level. In regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict there are different perspectives and approaches.

“Some of the students research the community level, including how it would be possible for Israeli Jews and Palestinians to live in the same neighbourhood. Other students look at the issue at the state level in regard to what policies could be implemented to facilitate a better relationship between Jews and Arabs, the latter believing they are second-class citizens in Israel.

“On the international level the input of the global community is examined,” said Sharvit.

Despite Sharvit’s programme only running for four years, already some of her students have made significant contributions to the peace industry.

One of her graduates is the coordinator of the Haifa Centre for Dialogue and Conflict Resolution, which was created by the Haifa Municipality.

“Another of my students has developed a programme at Givat Haviva, The Centre for a Shared Society,” said Sharvit.

Sharvit says many Israelis are not concerned with resolving Israel’s conflict with the Arabs and believes there has to be more education.

“If we want to resolve our political problems there needs to be more work done to educate the public,” Sharvit told IDN.

[IDN-InDepthNews – 8 September 2015]
UN Marks Humanitarian Day Battling Its Worst Refugee Crisis

By Thalif Deen

UNITED NATIONS (IPS) - The United Nations is commemorating World Humanitarian Day with “inspiring” human interest stories of survival – even as the world body describes the current refugee crisis as the worst for almost a quarter of a century.

The campaign, mostly on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, is expected to flood social media feeds with stories of both resilience and hope from around the world, along with a musical concert in New York.

“It’s true we live in a moment in history where there’s never been a greater need for humanitarian aid since the United Nations was founded,” says U.N. spokesperson Stephane Dujarric.

“And every day, I talk about people and I use numbers, and the numbers are numbing, right — 10,000, 50,000,” he laments.

But as U.N. statistics go, the numbers are even more alarming than meets the eye: more than 4.0 million Syrians are now refugees in neighbouring countries, including Turkey, Iraq and Lebanon (not including the hundreds who are dying in mid-ocean every week as they try to reach Europe and escape the horrors of war at home).

And more troubling, at least an additional 7.6 million people have been displaced within Syria – all of them in need of humanitarian assistance—and over 220,000 have been killed in a military conflict now on its fifth year.
Meanwhile, the #ShareHumanity social media campaign, currently underway, hopes to build momentum towards the first-ever World Humanitarian Summit, scheduled to take place in Istanbul next May.

According to the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), this year’s World Humanitarian Day campaign, beginning Aug. 19, reflects a world where humanitarian needs are far outstripping the aid community’s capacity to help the millions of people affected by natural disasters, conflict, hunger and disease.

Oxfam’s Gottschalk told IPS World Humanitarian Day is an important opportunity to stop and honour the brave women and men who work tirelessly around the world every day to save lives in incredibly difficult circumstances.

He said local humanitarian workers are often the first to respond when a crisis hits and rarely get the recognition, and most importantly, the support they deserve to lead responses in their own countries.

Oxfam has been making a strong push for mandatory contributions from U.N. Member States to fund humanitarian responses, which it says, will provide a more consistent and robust funding stream.

More of that funding should flow directly to the local level, and be allocated more transparently so that donors can track impact and local communities can follow the aid and hold their leaders accountable and demand results, he noted.

The U.N.’s Emergency Relief Coordinator Stephen O’Brien said “with nearly 60 million people forcibly displaced around the world, we face a crisis on a scale not seen in generations.”

In early August, O’Brien decided to release some 70 million dollars from a U.N. reserve fund called the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) – primarily for chronically underfunded aid operations.

Besides Syria, Afghanistan and Yemen, the humanitarian crisis has also impacted heavily on Sudan, South Sudan, the Horn of Africa, Chad, the Central African Republic, Myanmar and Bangladesh, among others.

Noah Gottschalk, Senior Policy Advisor for Humanitarian Response at Oxfam International, told IPS the international humanitarian system created decades ago has saved countless lives but, the humanitarian system is “overwhelmed and underfunded” at a time when natural hazards are projected to increase in both frequency and severity at the same time as the world must respond to unprecedented protracted crises like the conflict in Syria.

“Some donors have been very generous and their support is crucial and deeply valued, but it’s simply not enough to meet the growing needs,” he said.

The United Nations and the greater humanitarian system, he pointed out, needs to be reformed to be more efficient and to better respond to needs by supporting local leadership and capacity and funding programmes that help communities reduce the impact of disasters before emergencies occur.

Gottschalk said millions of people around the world depend on the global humanitarian system, and this is in no small part due to the committed and compassionate people who are struggling to make the system work despite declining resources and increasing need.

These reforms will make the system more effective and better equip these dedicated humanitarians to save lives and ease suffering, he declared.

The ongoing military conflicts have also claimed the lives of hundreds of health workers, says the World Health Organisation (WHO) in Geneva.

In 2014 alone, WHO said it received reports of 372 attacks in 32 countries on health workers, resulting in 603 deaths and 958 injuries, while similar incidents have been recorded this year.

“WHO is committed to saving lives and reducing suffering in times of crisis. Attacks against health care workers and facilities are flagrant violations of international humanitarian law,” said Dr Margaret Chan, WHO Director-General, in a statement released to mark World Humanitarian Day.

She said health workers have an obligation to treat the sick and injured without discrimination. “All parties to conflict must respect that obligation,” she declared.

(IPS | 18 August 2015)

Photo: Portrait of a man inside the "27 February" Saharawi refugee camp near Tindouf, Algeria. 24 June 2010.

Credit: UN Photo/Martine Perret
UN to Unleash “Power of Education” to Fight Intolerance, Racism

By Thalif Deen

UNITED NATIONS (IPS) - The United Nations is planning to launch a global campaign against the spread of intolerance, extremism, racism and xenophobia — largely by harnessing the talents of the younger generation.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon pointedly says education is the key. “If you want to understand the power of education, just look at how the extremists fight education.”

“What they fear most are girls and young people with textbooks.” -- U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon

They wanted to kill the Pakistani teenage activist, Malala Yousafzai and her friends because they were girls who wanted to go to school, he said.

Violent extremists kidnapped more than 200 girls in Chibok, Nigeria, and scores of students were murdered in Garissa, Kenya and in Peshawar, Pakistan.

“What they fear most are girls and young people with textbooks,” said Ban, who will soon announce “a comprehensive Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism,” along with the creation of an advisory panel of religious leaders to promote interfaith dialogue.

The proposed plan is expected to be presented to the 70th session of the General Assembly which begins the third week of September.

As part of the campaign against intolerance and extremism, the U.N.’s Department of Public Information (DPI) recently picked 10 projects from young people from around the world, in what was billed as a “Diversity Contest,” singling out creative approaches to help address a wide range of discrimination, prejudice and extremism.

The projects, selected from over 100 entries from 31 countries, include challenging homophobia in India and Mexico; resolving conflicts to access water to decrease ethnic conflict in Burundi; promoting interfaith harmony in Pakistan; encouraging greater acceptance of migrant populations in South Africa and promoting greater employment opportunities to Muslim women in Germany.

Lara-Zuzan Golesorkhi, a PhD student and instructor at the New School in New York who submitted one of the prize-winning projects, told IPS she seeks to address one of the most discussed political issues in contemporary Germany: integration of Muslim immigrants.

At the centre of these discussions, Golesorkhi said, lies the so-called ‘veil debate’, which was brought about by the Ludin case in 1998.

That year, Fereshta Ludin (the daughter of Afghan immigrants) was rejected from a teaching position in the state’s public school system on the alleged basis of “lack of personal aptitude” that made her “unsuitable and unable to perform the duties of a public servant in accordance with German Basic Law.”

The endless dispute between Ludin and the German judicial system led to the inauguration of institutionalised state-based unveiling policies for public school teachers across Germany.

These policies have been in effect in eight states and have just recently been called into question on the federal level with a court decision that demands respective states to revise the inherently discriminatory policies, said Golesorkhi.

The DPI says Golesorkhi will return to Germany to challenge the perceived discrimination against Muslim women.

She will ask potential employers to symbolically pledge to hire Muslim women. She will also produce a list of those employers so that women can feel safe and empowered to apply to those workplace.
 Though the large majority (72 percent) of those interviewed in a 2008 study claimed that “people from minority groups enrich cultural life of this country”, Muslims are the least desirable neighbours, as data from the same year shows. Further, 23 percent of German interviewees, she said, associated Muslims with terror, while 16 percent viewed the hijab, the Muslim head scarf, as a threat to European culture.

In the latest study on anti-Muslim sentiments conducted by the Bertelsman Stiftung in late 2014, 57 percent of non-Muslim interviewees reported they perceive Islam as very threatening. The study also disclosed that 24 percent of the interviewees would like to prohibit Muslim immigration to Germany and an overwhelming 61 percent said they think Islam does not belong to the ‘Western’ world.

Particularly alarming, in the very recent context of anti-Muslim sentiments, she noted, is the continuously growing PEGIDA (Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlands), which rejects the alleged “Islamisation” of Europe and demands an overhaul of immigration policy.

Golesorkhi’s project includes a ‘Job Ready’ seminar and workshop series to prepare Muslim women for the German job market; “I Pledge Campaign”, an online and offline campaign (Twitter and photo series) to encourage employers to symbolically pledge to hire Muslim women; and an online and offline campaign (Twitter and photo series) to raise public awareness of difficulties faced by Muslim women in the German employment sector.

While the pledge does not guarantee employment, it allows WoW to produce a database of employers that would hire Muslim women.

(IPS | 12 August 2015)
UN Taps Private Sector to Fund Development, Advocate Social Causes

By Thalif Deen

UNITED NATIONS (IPS) - When the United Nations seeks outside financial assistance either for development needs or to advocate social causes, it invariably turns to the private sector these days.

Perhaps the most demanding is Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon’s appeal to private investors to help the United Nations reach its 100-billion-dollar target per year to battle the devastating consequences of climate change.

But critics have urged the United Nations to double-check the credentials of some of these companies — on issues such as human rights, fair wages, child labour and environmental record — before deciding to collaborate.

Still, on a more modest scale, the U.N. Development Programme (UNDP) received over 135 million dollars in funds from the business sector between 2009 and 2013 for some of its projects relating to water, energy, healthcare, agriculture and finance and information technology.

A South African company called Mediclave has provided sterilising machines that decontaminate used medical equipment and waste, such as syringes, personal protective suits and gloves, used in treating communicable diseases.

In Liberia, a Japanese company, Panasonic, has distributed its first batch of 240 solar lanterns to health workers in Monrovia, allowing them to work at night. The UNDP also has a partnership with Svanli Group Limited, a Ghanaian vehicle dealership, which has provided over eight armoured vehicles deployed to the UN Mission on Ebola Emergency Response (UNMEER) in Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Ghana.

And more recently, the U.N. Academic Impact (UNAI), created under the aegis of the Department of Public Information (DPI) has collaborated with United Colours of Benetton’s “UnHate Foundation” for a Diversity Contest to “showcase the engagement of young people around the world, and the innovation, energy and commitment they bring to personally-crafted solutions that address some of the world’s most pressing issues”, including racial intolerance and xenophobia.

The contest drew more than 100 entries from 31 countries worldwide with innovative ideas and solutions for tackling a wide range of issues, primarily intolerance, racism and extremism.

A panel of judges picked 10 winners who received 20,000 Euros each donated by United Colors of Benetton, a global fashion brand based in Italy. Benetton has also teamed with U.N. Women in its intense campaign to eliminate gender violence worldwide.

Nanette Braun Chief, Communications and Advocacy at U.N. Women, told IPS Benetton’s UnHate Foundation has been supporting U.N. Women in its advocacy on ending violence against women for the past two years through advertising and social media campaigns.

“We hope to expand the partnership and collaboration in the future,” she added.

Asked about Benetton’s role in advocating U.N. causes, Mariarosa Cutillo, Corporate Social Responsibility Manager at Benetton Group in Milan, told IPS the main reason is “because, first of all, this is an integral part of the DNA of our company, which has always been in the frontline – often in provocative and very progressive ways – on social issues, including the fight against any form of intolerance and discrimination.”

She pointed out this approach has been consolidated through social projects and communication campaigns, and has been translated also through the establishment of the UnHate Foundation.

Since 2011, the Foundation representing one of the arms of the company has developed social programmes to fight against hate in all its forms, while supporting youth leadership.

“We believe that youth can make a difference, especially in the achievement of the post 2015 agenda: but giving voice to them is not enough. It is important to give new generations the tools to make a change.”

With the UnHate news initiative, in partnership with UNAI/DPI, “we activated youth and gave them a possibility to concretely develop projects on human rights and development.”

Cutillo also cited “another outstanding example of successful support and activation of youth promoted by UnHate Foundation, which is the ‘Unemployee of the Year’ initiative through which the Foundation financed 100 projects and start-ups submitted and implemented by youth coming from all over the world in 2012.”

Unemployee of the Year celebrated young people’s ingenuity, creativity, and their ability to create new smart ways of addressing the problem of unemployment.

In general, she said, “putting people at the centre of our activities is one of the key points of Benetton Group sustainability strategy, of which UnHate Foundation is one of the assets.”

She described it as an example of private/public partnership that can work in an innovative way, by activating new generations and giving them the means to become leaders of change.
Asked if Benetton is planning to get involved in any other U.N. sponsored events in the future, Cutillo told IPS: “We are presently exploring further joint possible collaboration programmes for the future with UNAI/DPI.”

She also said Benetton has a record of 20 years of cooperation, in different ways, with the United Nations. More than ever before, “Benetton finds the United Nations as a most crucial partner within the stakeholders’ engagement of our present sustainability strategy.”

She said she sees partnerships with U.N. agencies as “a mutual growth process in our respective roles, where we can bring an active contribution to the achievement of the U.N.’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGS) by putting in place partnerships that can bring an innovative approach and a real, concrete impact.”

(IPS | 5 August 2015)

Photo: Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon addresses the International Business Forum of the UN’s Third International Conference on Financing for Development, hosted by the Ffd Business Sector Steering Committee. Credit: UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe
UN’s Post-2015 Development Agenda Under Fire

By Thalif Deen

UNITED NATIONS (IPS) - The U.N.’s highly ambitious post-2015 development agenda, which is expected to be finalised shortly, has come fire even before it could get off the ground.

A global network of civil society organisations (CSOs), under the banner United Nations Major Groups (UNMG), has warned that the agenda, which includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), “lacks urgency, a clear implementation strategy and accountability.”

Savio Carvalho of Amnesty International (AI), which is part of the UNMG, told IPS the post-2015 agenda has become an aspirational text sans clear independent mechanisms for people to hold governments to account for implementation and follow-up.

“Under the garb of national ownership, realities and capacities, member states can get away doing absolutely nothing. We would like them to ensure national priorities are set in conformity with human rights principles and standards so that we are not in the same place in 2030,” he added.

The 17 SDGs, which are to be approved by over 150 political leaders at a U.N. summit meeting in September, cover a wide range of socio-economic issues, including poverty, hunger, gender equality, sustainable development, full employment, quality education, global governance, human rights, climate change and sustainable energy for all.

All 17 goals, particularly the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger worldwide, are expected to be met by the year 2030.

The proposed follow-up and review, as spelled out, lacks a strong accountability mechanism, “with several references to national sovereignty, circumstances and priorities which risk undermining the universal commitment to deliver on the SDGs,” says UNMG.

“We are wondering how committed member states will be able to ensure genuine public participation, in particular of the most marginalised in each society, in decisions that will have an impact on their lives.”

This applies also to questions related to financing (budget allocations) in the actual implementation of the agenda, says a statement titled “Don’t break Your Promise Before Making it”.

“We are keen to ensure that people are able to hold governments to account to these commitments so that these goals are delivered and work for everyone,” says UNMG, which includes a number of coalitions and networks who will be monitoring the post-2015 process.
They have much to gain: better economic opportunities, education, and lives free from violence, she noted. “But in order to make this vision a reality, we have to ensure gender equality is at the heart of our efforts, recognising that it is a prerequisite for sustainable development,” she added.

The coalition includes Women in Europe for a Common Future, Equidad de Genero (Mexico), Global Forest Coalition, Women Environmental Programme, Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development, WEDO (Women’s Environment and Development) and the Forum of Women’s NGOs (Kyrgyzstan).

Kowalski also expressed disappointment over the outcome of the recently concluded conference on Financing for Development (FfD) in Addis Ababa. “We hoped for a progressive and fair financing agreement that addressed the root causes of global economic inequality and its impact on women’s and girls’ lives. But that’s not what we got,” she said.

“We expected strong commitments on financing for gender equality and recognition of the value of women’s unpaid care work. We expected governments to address the systemic drivers of inequalities within and between countries, to establish fair tax policies, to stop illicit financial flows, and to address injustices in international trade structures that disadvantage the poorest countries.”

“We were disappointed that there were no new commitments to increase public financing in order to achieve the SDGs,” Kowalski declared.

Carvalho of Amnesty International said, “It will be impossible to achieve truly transformative sustainable development and to leave no one behind without conducting regular, transparent, holistic and participatory reviews of progress and setbacks at all levels.”

“The agenda acknowledges the need for international financial institutions (IFIs) to respect domestic policy, but does not go far enough to ensure that their activities do not contribute to any human rights violations.”

“I think we need to strengthen the argument for the agenda to be universal – when all countries have to deliver on their commitments and obligations.”

These, he said, include Official Development Assistance (ODA) and tax justice.

Meanwhile, in a statement released to IPS, Beyond 2015, described as a global civil society campaign pushing for a strong successor to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), said “for the SDGs to have a real impact on people’s lives everywhere, people themselves must participate in implementing the goals and reviewing progress, and be active agents in decisions affecting them.”

The Beyond 2015 Campaign said it welcomes the focus on inclusion and participation reflected in the current draft that is being negotiated at the United Nations, and “we count on governments to translate their commitments into action as soon as the SDGs are adopted.”

In implementing the SDGs, it is crucial that states honour their commitment to “leave no one behind”.

“This means tracking progress for all social and economic groups, especially the most vulnerable and marginalized, drawing upon data from a wider range of sources, and regular scrutiny with the involvement of people themselves,” the statement added.

Additionally, an even higher level of participation and inclusion is needed, at all levels, when implementation starts.

“People must be aware of the new agenda and take ownership of the goals for real and sustainable changes to occur.”

The Beyond 2015 campaign also welcomed the commitment to an open and transparent follow-up framework for the SDGs, grounded in people’s participation at multiple levels.

“We believe the current draft could be improved by including specific time-bound commitments and endorsing civil society’s role in generating data to review commitments,” it said.

“We insist on the need for governments to translate the SDGs into national commitments as this is a crucial step for governments to be genuinely accountable to people everywhere.”

(IPS | 29 July 2015)
Museums Taking Stand for Human Rights, Rejecting ‘Neutrality’

By A. D. McKenzie

LIVERPOOL, England (IPS) - An exhibition on modern-day slavery at the International Slavery Museum in this northern English town is just one example of a museum choosing to focus on human rights, and being “upfront” about it.

“Social justice just doesn’t happen by itself; it’s about activism and people willing to take risks,” says Dr David Fleming, director of National Museums Liverpool, which includes the city’s International Slavery Museum (ISM). The institution looks at aspects of both historical and contemporary slavery, while being an “international hub for resources on human rights issues”.

It is a member of the Liverpool-based Social Justice Alliance for Museums (SJAM), formed in 2013 and now comprising more than 80 museums worldwide, and it coordinated the founding of the Federation of International Human Rights Museums (FIHRM) in 2010.

The aim of FIHRM is to encourage museums which “engage with sensitive and controversial human rights themes” to work together and share “new thinking and initiatives in a supportive environment”. Both organisations reflect the way that museums are changing, said Fleming.

“Museums are not dispassionate agents,” he told IPS. “They have a role in safeguarding memory. We have to look at the role of museums and see how they can transform lives.”

The International Slavery Museum’s current exhibition, titled “Broken Lives” and running until April 2016, focuses on the victims of global modern-day slavery – half of whom are said to be in India, and most of whom are Dalits, or people formerly known as “untouchables”.

The display “provides a window into the experiences of Dalits and others who are being exploited and abused through modern slavery in India”, say the curators.

“Dalits still experience marginalisation and prejudice, live in extreme poverty and are vulnerable to human trafficking and bonded labour,” they add.

Presented in partnership with the Dalit Freedom Network, the exhibition uses photographs, film, personal testimony and other means to show “stories of hardship” that include sexual servitude and child bondage. It also profiles the activists working to mend “broken lives”.

The display occupies a temporary exposition space at the museum, which has a permanent section devoted to the atrocities of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the legacy of racism.

Along with the Memorial to the Abolition of Slavery in the French city of Nantes and the recently opened Mémorial ACTe in Guadeloupe, the Liverpool museum is one of too few national institutions focused on raising awareness about slavery, observers say.

“When they were given explanations about the images, the schoolchildren “switched on to the idea that people can behave abominably, based on nothing but ethnicity,” he said.

Fleming visits social justice exhibitions around the world and gives information about the museum’s work, he said. As a keynote speaker, he recently delivered an address about the role of museums at a conference in

“We try to overtly encourage the public to get involved in the fight for human rights,” Fleming told IPS in an interview. “We’ve often said at the Slavery Museum that we want people to go away fired up with the desire to fight racism.

“You can’t dictate to people what they’re going to think or how they’re going to respond and react,” he continued. “But you can create an atmosphere, and the atmosphere at the Slavery Museum is clearly anti-racist. We hope people will leave thinking: I didn’t know all those terrible things had happened and I’m leaving converted.”

Despite Liverpool’s undeniable history as a major slaving port in the 18th century, not everyone will be affected in the same way, however. There have been swastikas painted on the walls of the museum in the past, as bigots reject the institution’s aims.

“Some people come full of knowledge and full of attitude already, and I don’t imagine that we affect these people. But we’re looking for people in the middle, who might not have thought about this,” Fleming said.

He described a visit to the museum by a group of English schoolchildren who initially did not comprehend photographs depicting African youngsters whose hands had been cut off by colonialists.

When they were given explanations about the images, the schoolchildren “switched on to the idea that people can behave abominably, based on nothing but ethnicity,” he said.

Fleming visits social justice exhibitions around the world and gives information about the museum’s work, he said. As a keynote speaker, he recently delivered an address about the role of museums at a conference in
Liverpool titled ‘Mobilising Memory: Creating African Atlantic Identities’.
The meeting – organised by the Collegium for African American Research (CAAR) and a new UK-based body called the Institute for Black Atlantic Research – took place at Liverpool Hope University at the end of June. It began a few days after a white gunman killed nine people inside the historic Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, in the U.S. state of North Carolina.
The murders, among numerous incidents of brutality against African Americans over the past year, sparked a sense of urgency at the conference as well as heightened the discussion about activism – and especially the part that writers, artists and scholars play in preserving and “activating” memory in the struggle for social justice and human rights.

“Artists, and by extension museums, have what some people have called a ‘burden of representation’, and they have to deal with that,” said James Smalls, a professor of art history and museum studies at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC).

“Many times, artists automatically are expected to speak on behalf of their ethnic group or community, and some have chosen to embrace that while others try to be exempt,” he added.

Claire Garcia, a professor at Colorado College, said that for a number of academics “there is no necessary link between scholarship and activism” in what are considered scholarly fields.

Such thinkers make the point that scholarship should be “theoretical” and “universal,” and not political or focused on “the specific plights of one group,” she said. However, this standpoint – “when it is disconnected from the embattled humanity” of some ethnic groups – can create further problems.

The concept of museums standing for “social justice” is controversial as well because the issue is seen differently in various parts of the world. The line between “objectifying and educating” also gives cause for debate.

Fleming said that National Museums Liverpool, for example, would not have put on the contentious show “Exhibit B” – which featured live Black performers in a “human zoo” installation; the work was apparently aimed at condemning racism and slavery but instead drew protests in London, Paris and other cities in 2014.

“Personally I loathe all that stuff, so my vote would be ‘no’ to anything similar,” Fleming told IPS. “And that’s not because it’s controversial and difficult but because it’s degrading and humiliating. There are all sorts of issues with it, and I’ve thought about that quite a lot.”

He and other scholars say that they are deeply conscious of who is doing the “story-telling” of history, and this is an issue that also affects museums.

Several participants at the CAAR conference criticised certain displays at the International Slavery Museum, wondering about the intended audience, and who had selected the exhibits, for instance.

A section that showed famous individuals of African descent seemed superficial in its glossy presentation of people such as American talk-show host Oprah Winfrey and well-known athletes and entertainers.

Fleming said that museums often face disapproval for both going too far and not going “far enough”. But taking a disinterested stand does not seem to be the answer, because “the world is full of ‘faux-neutral’ museums”, he said.

The most relevant and interesting museums can be those that have a “moral compass”, but they need help as they can “do very little by themselves,” Fleming told IPS. The institutions that he directs often work with non-governmental organisations that bring their own expertise and point of view to the exhibitions, he explained.

Apart from slavery, individual museums around the world have focused on the Holocaust, on apartheid, on genocide in countries such as Cambodia, and on the atrocities committed during dictatorships in regions such as Latin America.

“Some countries don’t want museums to change,” said Fleming. “But in Liverpool, we’re not just there for tourism.”

(IPS | 21 July 2015)
Photo: A visitor looking at a panel at the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool, England.
Credit: A.D. McKenzie/IPS
Civil Society has Vital Role to Play in Post-2015 Development Agenda

By Nora Happel

UNITED NATIONS (IPS) - “The action of the private sector can make or break the post-2015 development agenda,” Karmenu Vella, European Commissioner for Environment, Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, said in his opening remarks at a side event hosted in the context of a high-level political forum at the U.N. on July 8.

The event entitled “Involving civil society in the implementation of the post-2015 agenda” was organised by the European Economic and Social Committee, the Delegation of the European Union to the United Nations and the United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs.

It brought together EU and U.N. officials, civil society stakeholders and business as well as trade union representatives to discuss the impact of civil society in sustainable development policies and deliberate on measures to promote further active involvement of civil society.

As emphasised throughout the event, “organised civil society” has a key role to play in realising the post-2015 development agenda.

The term “organised civil society” refers to all the groups and organisations that are independent from government and in which citizens come together to work cooperatively to advance their common interests.

Panelists made clear that after having contributed to a large extent to the conceptualisation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), scheduled to be adopted in September 2015, the further role of civil society is to engage in the implementation process and take part in review and monitoring procedures.

Vella also pointed to the impact businesses can make through concepts such as social responsibility and green economy in improving resource-efficiency, providing funding for infrastructure and protecting biodiversity.

According to him, customers too have an essential role to play by “making informed decisions about their lifestyle and the products that they choose”. These actions are complemented by trade unions’ and NGO’s advocacy for social protection, fair working conditions and sustainable development, while civil society in large has an important function in “holding us accountable”.

UNEP Deputy Executive Director Ibrahim Thiaw drew particular attention to the fact that in many parts of the world, governments are lacking expertise and knowledge to successfully implement the SDG’s. By providing advocacy, science and knowledge, civil society organisations could make an important difference.

“What while civil society organisations have no policy-making authority and authority to make decisions at the national level, they have a very important role in providing science and advocating for integrating science in policy-making,” he said.

Presenting the findings of a recent survey on mechanisms of engagement with key stakeholders, CIVICUS U.N. representative Jeffery Huffines raised awareness about the need for member states and the U.N. to provide financial support for stakeholders from marginalized communities to participate in relevant meetings, continue to develop online video streaming to allow for remote participation, improve coordination between relevant stakeholders and reassess current mechanisms of engagement to make sure they are representative of all stakeholders and not dominated by large organisations from the global North.

At the ensuing debate session, scepticism was expressed about the willingness of businesses to forgo short-term profit “in order for the planet to be saved”. But panelists showed optimism that the business community is increasingly accepting and implementing sustainability as customers expect it and governments require it.

According to Norine Kennedy, Vice President for Environmental Affairs at the U.S. Council for International Business, more sustainable, less wasteful and more efficient economic activities will also prove more competitive. Responsible businesses will “not be a utopia but actually the world of the future,” she said.

(IPS | 8 July 2015)

Photo: Karmenu Vella, European Commissioner for Environment, Maritime Affairs and Fisheries
When a Kid Dreams of Becoming the President

By Kanya D’Almeida

UNITED NATIONS (IPS) - You may have heard of Global Citizenship Education (GCED), but unless you move in international development circles, chances are you’re not entirely sure what the acronym means.

Speaking at a seminar on this very issue at the United Nations headquarters on Jun. 15, Sofia García-García of SOS Children’s Villages, a care organisation striving to meet the needs of over 80,000 children in 133 countries worldwide, provided an excellent summary.

Recounting a recent project undertaken by the Global Movement for Children in Latin America and the Caribbean, of which Garcia’s organisation is a member, she explained what happened when 1,080 kids and adolescents from 10 Latin American countries were consulted about their own priorities for the U.N.’s post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

“SOS works with children without parental care, and they are usually children with very, very low self esteem,” García told a packed conference room Monday.

“But within 10 minutes of us explaining the initiative and saying, ‘We want to hear your voice, you are the agent of change’, children who didn’t even consider themselves as speakers were suddenly wanting to be the president of the country,”

The exercise concluded with the publication of ‘The World We Want’, an illustrated, child-friendly version of the 17 proposed SDGs.

“This is the real power of global citizenship education,” García-García asserted.

Backed by several missions including the Republic of Korea and the United States, and co-sponsored by civil society groups like CONCORD – an alliance of over 2,600 NGOs across Europe – as well as the 12-million member Soka Gakkai International (SGI) and the Inter Press Service news agency (IPS), the panel served as a knowledge platform to share some of the key components of GCED.

“Next to the right to life and the right to liberty should be the right to education,” stressed Usman Sarki, deputy permanent representative for Nigeria. “It is the key to all freedoms and the foundation of dignity: all other rights should be contingent on the right to education.”

But our current reality does not reflect his convictions. We are living in a world where 58 million children are out of school and a further 100 million children do not complete primary education, according to the latest Education for All global monitoring report published by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisations (UNESCO).

Add to this the fact that there are 168 million child labourers, as well as 200 million jobless adults, and the urgency of the situation becomes clear.

All told, some 781 million people globally cannot read or write, a staggering statistic in a world where not only basic literacy but also, increasingly, computer literacy, forms the fine line between a decent life or one of poverty.

However, GCED goes beyond the simple metrics of more bodies in the classroom. In short, the concept of global citizenship refers to a “sense of belonging to a broader community and common humanity,” according to UNESCO.

It aims to transform classroom pedagogy, create bonds of cultural understanding and civic consciousness and forge a global citizenry for the 21st century based on human rights, peace and equity. While advocacy is happening on a global scale, implementation of GCED will be local in nature, undertaken in accordance with countries’ education ministries and tailored to meet the specific needs of states, or communities.

GCED recognises that basic literacy alone is not sufficient to level the playing field in a world plagued with inequalities, where the wealth gap between the richest and poorest countries has risen from 35:1 during the colonial era to 80:1 today, and where the richest 85 people own more riches between them than 50 percent of the global population.

Rather, it is the quality of education that will close wealth gaps and ensure such elusive goals as peace, security and the curbing of violent extremism. Calling attention to the increasing number of people from the developed world heading for “theatres of war in the Middle East”, Nigerian Ambassador Sarki asked, “Can we really say these people are not educated? Many of them are. Indeed, masterminds of terrorist activity are highly educated people – the question is, what kind of education have they had? We can be educated, and remain narrow-minded,” he stated.

The concept of GCED dates back to 2012 when U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon launched the Global Education First Initiative, and after much advocacy in which the Republic of Korea has played a major role, the initiative has been incorporated into the Zero Draft outcome document for the post-2015 agenda, to be finalized during negotiations at the end of the month.

Already, scores of international and grassroots initiatives centered on GCED are springing to life, or bearing fruit.

For instance, global citizenship education is one of the key strategic areas in UNESCO’s 2014-2017 education programme, while groups like SOS Children’s Villages have put the concept at the front and centre of their work by undertaking unique forms of education in order to include some of the most vulnerable groups.

Garcia-García, SOS’s post-2015 advisor, told IPS that the organisation works very closely with families at risk of separation or with children who have lost parental care so, “for us, non-formal education is as essential as formal education”.

“There are lots of places to learn,” she told IPS on the sidelines of Monday’s event, “and the classroom is just one of them.”

This kind of thinking will be vital to extending the boons of GCED to the world’s indigenous people who number some 370 million and many of whom are locked in a struggle to preserve ancient forms of knowledge sharing, from local languages to oral histories.

With indigenous communities pushing hard for a place in the post-2015 agenda, global citizenship education could offer the out-of-the-box strategies needed to bring hitherto marginalized peoples into a more inclusive and sustainable framework.

(IPS | 15 June 2015)
Q&A: Better Students, Better Citizens, Better World: Education Is the Key to Peace

By Valentina Ieri

UNITED NATIONS (IPS) - In a world where high levels of social and religious intolerance, conflicts, violent extremism and environmental degradation are threatening justice and peace, the United Nations is trying to find ways to maintain world order and promote sustainable development.

This year, the drafting of the post-2015 U.N. agenda, which has set up the targets for the next 15 years of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), represents a turning point for achieving development worldwide.

Finding a solution to 21st century challenges requires the creation of a fresh, universally-based, inclusive and transformative paradigm. The key to this paradigm is Global Citizenship Education (GCED).

Great emphasis has been placed on the role of education since U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon launched the “Global Education First Initiative”, in 2012, which put GCED as one of its main principles.

Following the 2015 resolution adopted by the U.N. Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) on the necessity to conceptualise and implement policies concerning global citizenship education, and the adoption of the Incheon Declaration on the Future of Education adopted at the World Education Forum (May 19-22), hosted in Seoul, major steps forward have been made in relation to GCED.

Advocates say the next step is to include GCED within the education targets in the SDGs that will be ratified in September in New York.

A seminar to raise awareness and spread the concept of GCED will be held on Jun. 15, organised by the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Korea to the U.N., along with the collaboration of the Permanent Missions of the United States, Nigeria, Qatar, France, the UNESCO, international organisations and NGOs.

In an interview with IPS, the Permanent Deputy Representative of Korea, Choong-Hee Hahn, spoke about GCED and its relevance for building a more peaceful world.

Q: What is Global Citizenship Education?
A: Generally, education is defined in functional terms, such as access to schools and quality of education in preparation of a professional career. But the new framework of GCED should focus on orientation.
There are three main aspects that GCED should promote. Firstly, the “sense of being”, teaching students, since their early age, about what kind of citizens they should become. They should be sensitised about future challenges, such as climate change, intolerance and violent extremisms.

Secondly, the “sense of responsibility and privilege of being a global citizen.” GCED should include multicultural diversity and mutual respect, by understanding the real meaning of fundamental and human rights values, dignity and democracy.

Thirdly, “compassion and empathy”. The revolutionary aspect of GCED is its holistic approach to education, rather than advancing to next the level of education or job searching. This is the best approach to cope with our Century complexities.

Another important concept of GCED is inclusiveness. Hatred and violence come from a sense of isolation, and a lack interconnectedness. Teaching inclusiveness, embracing different social, political and economic aspects. In this way, people will feel respected and will play an active role in the society.

Q: Why is Korea leading GCED?
A: It is because of the rapid development Korea went through in the past decades. Thinking about the history of Korea, we experienced immense poverty. However, by investing in education, and through the promotion of democratic values we reached development.

Today, Korea is very multicultural, multiethnic and multi-religious, based on the respect of human rights. Christians, Muslims Confucians and Buddhists live cohesively together. We are a positive example of education, tolerance and peace. As a role model, we would like to contribute and raise awareness on GCED without bias nor prefixed prejudices.

Q: Why bringing GCED within the U.N. agenda post-2015 development agenda?
A: This is the right time to think about how and why the U.N. is pursuing the new SDGs. The U.N. first priorities are now dignity of people and the planet, along with justice and prosperity. These are value oriented goals and objectives. The U.N. agenda is based on three main pillars: peace and security, sustainable development, and human rights. I think all those issues are intertwined with education, and GCED is the solution to peace and security – by promoting tolerance and responsibility – sustainable development – through inclusiveness and equity – human rights – understanding the privilege of being a human being and democratic values.

Q: What is GCED methodology?
A: Global education should be based on the participation of multiple stakeholders. Not only teachers and students, but also worldwide social, economic, cultural experts, NGOs and youth groups.

GCED should be built on a methodological paradigm, not based on textbooks, but on discussions and participation of all students in the class. New audio-visual methods, and participatory discourses, through fieldwork and exchange programmes. We need a new system that revitalises the classrooms and contributes substantially to peace and security.

GCED is not about replicating the paradigm of “Enlightenment and Western” values. On the contrary, by focusing on inclusiveness, it aspires to find a world denominator common to developed and developing countries.

However, given that many children still have no access to education, GCED should mobilise funding and concrete means of implementations. GCED should also be participatory and content-sharing.

To do so, it is important to develop Information and Communication Technology (ICT) through the use of internet, computers, and mobile phones, even in the remotest areas of the planet, along with the support of the private sector. For instance, in Korea, we are leading several educational projects with private companies such as Samsung.

Q: What are the main challenges to GCED?
A: Unfortunately there are still huge financial gaps and inequalities among countries.

Recently, a proposal for a global fund for education was put forward, but it is not easy, as there are already many other funds, such as funds to finance development or the Green Climate Fund.

There is the Global Partnership for Education, the existing global fund which helps developing countries to get access to education for all.

However, we need more financial resources, improved capacity building, and more ICT equipment to deploy in developing countries.

An additional challenge is the fact that education is not yet perceived as a top priority in many government agendas. This is the real problem. As long as there are not enough investments by local authorities in national education, Global Education will be impossible to achieve. Therefore, it is fundamental the collaboration of the private sector in developing an ethical Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).

(IPS |14 June 2015)
Photo: Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon (right) and Amb. Choong-hee Han.
Credit UN Photo/ Mark Garten
UN Urged to Put Global Citizenship at Centre of Post-2015 Development Agenda

By Thalif Deen

UNITED NATIONS (IPS) - When Denmark hosted the World Summit on Social Development (WSSD) in March 1995, one of the conclusions of that international gathering in Copenhagen was to create a new social contract with “people at the centre of development.” But notwithstanding the shortcomings in its implementation over the last 20 years, the United Nations is now pursuing an identical goal with a new political twist: “global citizenship.”

Reaffirming the opening line of the U.N. Charter, which says “We the Peoples”, the United Nations is adding the finishing touches to its post-2015 development agenda – even as there are increasing demands from civil society organisations (CSOs) to focus on issues relating to people, including poverty, hunger, unemployment, urbanisation, education, nuclear disarmament, gender empowerment, population, human rights and the global environment.

Addressing a star-studded Global Citizen Festival in New York City’s Central Park last September, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon declared: “Our world needs more solar power and wind power. But I believe in an even stronger source of energy: People power.”

Speaking at the 20th anniversary of WSSD, Ambassador Oh Joon of the Republic of Korea and Vice President of the U.N.’s Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) said while one of the three major objectives of the Copenhagen Social Summit – poverty eradication – was incorporated into the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted in 2000, the other two – productive employment and social integration – were not.

An integrated approach advocated at the Social Summit to simultaneously pursue the three key objectives was left behind,” he told an ECOSOC meeting last week.

“There was a need to re-examine where the new United Nations development agendas would come from,” the Korean envoy said.

Economic growth in itself, while necessary, was not sufficient to reduce poverty and inequality, he said, stressing the need for strong social policies, as well as inclusive and sustainable development.

Similarly, there were many links among social, economic and environmental fields that must be effectively addressed, he added.

Meanwhile, the concept of global citizenship has taken on added importance, particularly on the eve of the adoption of the post-2015 development agenda which is expected to be approved at a summit meeting of world leaders in September.

Asked how relevant the concept was in the post-2015 context, Roberto Bissio, executive director of the Third World Institute, a non-profit research and advocacy organisation based in Uruguay, told IPS: “If by citizenship we mean rights, and in particular the right to bring governments to account, and decide how taxes are used, we are very far from global citizenship.”

In fact, he said, there is little talk of citizenship in the current discussions around the Financing for Development (FfD) conference in Addis Ababa in July and the September summit of world leaders on a new development agenda.

Instead, he said, there is a lot of attention being given to “multistakeholderism”.

The notion of “stakeholder”, as opposed to “shareholder,” was originally a way to make corporations more accountable to the people affected by their actions.

Now “multistakeholder governance” in the Internet or “partnerships” with the United Nations means that corporations will have a role in global governance, without necessarily becoming more accountable in the process, he pointed out.

“This means less rights for citizens, not more,” said Bissio, who also coordinates the secretariat of Social Watch, an international network of citizen organisations worldwide.

On the other hand, he said, if the FfD conference approves a U.N. mechanism for tax collaboration between countries to counter widespread tax evasion by multinational corporations, citizenship (including the elusive ‘global citizenship’ concept) may emerge strengthened.

Pointing out the successes of people-oriented policies, Eduardo Frei Ruiz-Tagle, former president of Chile, said when he was the leading his country in 1995 he had supported several initiatives to promote democracy and social justice.

Over the last 25 years, he said, Chile had succeeded in drastically reducing poverty to 7.8 per cent from 38.6 per cent, with extreme poverty reduced to 2.5 per cent from 13 per cent.

The WSSD, he said, was the largest meeting of heads of state that resulted in shaping a new model of development that would create progressive social equity that addressed imbalances around the world.

“The human being was placed at the centre of development, as reflected in the World Summit action plan,” he said.

Highlighting achievements resulting from implementing the plan, he said Chile had increased investments in social development and was, under current President Michelle Bachelet, continuing to do so in order to address inequality.

While Latin America had reduced poverty, it remained “more unequal” than other regions and currently, 28 per cent of its population of 167 million lived in poverty, with 71 million living in extreme poverty, he said.

But some of the pressing tasks, he said, included thinking about a new fiscal pact and tax reform that would improve income distribution in order to avoid “false” development. Corruption and institutional reform also needed to be addressed.

“As such, the World Social Summit remained as valid today as in 1995,” he said.

Going forward, combatting poverty and inequalities required an ethical foundation and a sustained effort.
At this crossroad, it was time that governments gave more impetus to that “moral movement”, the former Chilean president said. Juan Somavia, a former director-general of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and ex-Permanent Representative of Chile to the United Nations, told the ECOSOC meeting the yet-to-be-finalised “zero” draft of the new post-2015 agenda recovered the spirit and dynamism of the 1990s and was a good basis for negotiations.

“The document reflected a supremely ambitious vision, with its 17 goals and 69 indicators focused on a people-centred poverty-eradication sustainable development concept,” he noted. With regard to challenges, he said, policy support from the United Nations would be critical. Since the world had discussed the three elements of sustainable development but had not yet implemented them, the basic challenge ahead was to ensure integrated thinking and to shape methods for using it to clearly explain the types of interactions between the agenda’s three pillars that were needed to fulfil commitments, he declared.

That difficult task required an initiative from the U.N. secretariats in New York and Geneva, its Funds and Programmes and the multiple networks in regions in which the organisation operated, he said. Unless that process began immediately after the new agenda was adopted, the “goods” would not be delivered, Somavia warned. That initiative would also require the recognition of the balance between markets, the State, society and individuals. “In recent years, people’s confidence in the United Nations had dropped.”

Photo: A peace sign formed by people in Croatia.
Credit: Teophil/cc by 3.0
Unveiling the Mystery of Global Citizenship

By Jaya Ramachandran

BRUSSELS (IDN) - While mystery shrouds the concept of ‘global citizenship’ for wide sections of the general public, a growing number of civil society organisations, enlightened governments and the United Nations are undertaking concerted efforts to lift the veil of enigma.

“Global citizens can change the world,” proclaimed a group of non-governmental organisations during the European Development Days (EDD) in Brussels that hosts the European Commission, executive body of the 28-nation European Union (EU).

CONCORD Europe’s DEEEP project, initiated by the Development Awareness Raising and Education Forum and co-funded by the EU, joined hands with CIVICUS, Global Education Network (GENE), the North-South Centre and the European Association for Local Democracy (ALDA) to stage a debate on global citizenship on June 4.

The event sought to drive home that in a globalised and interdependent world, the promotion of global citizenship is essential for citizens to understand that their individual and collective actions have a global impact – and call upon them to engage in positive actions for their communities and the planet.

Global citizenship can be promoted in several ways – such as education, policy changes, campaigns and global citizens’ movements – by civil society organisations (CSOs), governments, municipalities and international organisations. At its core are the universal values of justice, democratic participation, diversity, empathy and global solidarity.

“The Sustainable Development Goals are an opportunity to put global citizenship at the heart of the global
DEEEP pointed out that it has since 2014 been lobbying for global citizenship education to be at the heart of the SDGs education targets. The SDGs proposal, which is now on the table, mentions Global Citizenship Education in the target 4.7.

Understanding and implementing global citizenship education was the subject of yet another debate during the EDD, a flagship of the European Development Year. It was organised by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) together with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

The two agencies with global expertise and experience, are striving to promote curricula and teaching practices that develop the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes necessary to establish and maintain peaceful, tolerant, inclusive, secure and sustainable societies that are the cornerstone of global citizenship.

Building on its 70-year experience in assisting countries to promote good quality education to all their citizens, UNESCO has been leading work on Global Citizenship Education (GCED) since the launch of the UN Secretary General’s Global Education First Initiative (GEFI) in September 2012 that made fostering global citizenship, June 4-5 were packed with events that focused specifically on global citizenship.

Though only two discussion sessions during European Development Days focussed specifically on global citizenship, June 4-5 were packed with events that focused specifically on global citizenship.

UNRWA’s Human Rights Education Programme Coordinator Caroline Pounterfrodt of UNESCO working joined Chris Castle of UNESCO and Ozlem Eskiokak in framing the debate based on UNESCO’s recent report on Global Citizenship Education: Preparing Learners for the challenges of the 21st century and UNRWA’s experience reaching human rights in the Near East.

At a separate event on June 5, Commissioner-General Pierre Krähenbühl underlined Palestinians’ situation in a statement at the UNRWA 65th anniversary high-level conference: “We speak today of over 5 million registered Palestine refugees in the region. That equates to the population of Norway or Singapore,” he said.

Setting forth education for global citizenship, he pointed out that Palestine refugees today face “an existential crisis on many fronts”. In Palestine, they are approaching 50 years of occupation. Being a Palestine refugee in Gaza today, means being a victim of a blockade that affects every aspect of one’s life and being dependent on food aid while being educated and wishing to be self-sufficient, he added.

“We are sometimes told that UNRWA perpetuates the status of refugeehood. The reality is that a child of an Afghan refugee in Peshawar is a refugee even 35 years later. There is one big difference however; the day that an Afghan family decides to go home there is an independent country called Afghanistan to go to. This is not the case for Palestine refugees,” Krähenbühl said.

“Our health and education standards remain among the highest in the region. 700 schools run by UNRWA with 4,000 health staff for an average of 3 M (million) people served,” Krähenbühl said.

He added: “UNRWA has invested in developing capacities and opportunities for Palestine refugees, against all odds. It has created a human capital that many countries in the world would today envy the Palestinians for. While Palestinians envy many others for having an independent state of their own.”

As Krähenbühl pointed out, reflecting on UNRWA that has turned 65 also means reviewing some of the outstanding achievements made over the decades with the support of hosts and donors and with the refugees themselves.

The UNRWA head contributed to understanding of the complicated situation, thus fostering global citizenship when he said that even the agency’s closest partners underestimate the fact that with their support, UNRWA has contributed to one of the most remarkable dynamics of human capital development in the Middle East.

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“Their isolation, exclusion and dispossession represent a time-bomb for the region, a denial of dignity and rights that must be addressed,” he added.

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[IDN-InDepthNews – 9 June 2015]

Photo credit: UNRWA
Conference Calls for Quality Education to Promote Global Citizenship

By Shin Mee

SEOUL (IDN) - In run-up to the UN High-Level Summit in September in New York, a milestone United Nations conference in South Korea has highlighted the need for a new vision for education, which it aims to realise by 2030 with a view to fostering global citizenship by inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all.

The Incheon Declaration emerging from the World Education Forum 2015 (WEF 2015) – organised by UNESCO, in close collaboration with other UN Agencies as co-conveners – has been welcomed by the global education community, including government ministers from more than 100 countries, non-governmental organizations and youth groups.

“This Declaration is a huge step forward,” said the Director-General of UNESCO, Irina Bokova closing the May 19-22 conference.

“It reflects our determination to ensure that all children and young people gain the knowledge and skills they need to live in dignity, to reach their potential and contribute to their societies as responsible global citizens. It encourages governments to provide learning opportunities through life, so that people can continue to grow and develop. It affirms that education is the key to global peace and sustainable development,”

The Declaration builds on the global Education for All (EFA) movement that was initiated in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990 and reiterated in Dakar, Senegal in 2000. EFA – and the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) on Education – resulted in significant progress, but many of its targets, including universal access to primary education, remain unfulfilled.

Presently, 58 million children remain out of school – most of them girls. In addition 250 million children are not learning basic skills, even though half of them have spent at least four years in school. The Incheon Declaration must finish the ambitious EFA and MDG agendas, according to observers.

“If this generation of children is to someday reduce the inequalities and injustices that afflict the world today, we must give all our children a fair chance to learn. This must be our collective vision and commitment,” said UNICEF Executive Director, Anthony Lake.

The Incheon Declaration will be implemented through the Education 2030 Framework for Action, a roadmap for governments to be adopted by the end of the year. It will provide guidance on effective legal and policy frameworks for education, based on the principles of accountability, transparency and participatory governance.

According to UNESCO sources, effective implementation of the Education 2030 Framework for Action will require strong regional coordination and rigorous monitoring and evaluation of the education agenda. It will also need more funding, especially for the countries furthest from providing inclusive, quality education.

The Incheon Declaration points out that the aspirations encompassed in the proposed SDG 4 cannot be realized without a significant and well-targeted increase in financing, particularly in those countries furthest from achieving quality education for all at all levels.

“We therefore are determined to increase public spending on education in accordance with country context, and urge adherence to the international and regional benchmarks of allocating efficiently at least 4 - 6% of Gross Domestic Product and/or at least 15 - 20% of total public expenditure to education,” says the Incheon Declaration.

Noting the importance of development cooperation in complementing investments by governments, the Declaration calls upon developed countries, traditional and emerging donors, middle income countries and international financing mechanisms to increase funding to education and to support the implementation of the agenda according to countries’ needs and priorities.

The Declaration refers to a critical issue when it stresses that “the fulfilment of all commitments related to official development assistance (ODA) is crucial, including the commitments by many developed countries to achieve the target of 0.7 per cent of gross national product (GNP) for ODA to developing countries”.

In accordance with their commitments, WEF 2015 urges developed countries that have not yet done so to make additional concrete efforts towards the target of 0.7 per cent of GNP for ODA to developing countries.

The global gathering also commits to increase support to the least developed countries.

The Incheon Declaration further recognizes the importance of unlocking all potential resources to support the right to education. It recommends improving aid effectiveness through better coordination and harmonization, and prioritizing financing and aid to neglected sub-sectors and low-income countries.

The fact that South Korea hosted the conference was far from a surprise. The country is one of the 20 members of UNESCO’s Education for All Steering Committee, has extended its global reach over the past few years by joining global education campaigns, including the UN’s Global Education First Initiative and Global Partnership for Education.

Ahead of the WEF From May 19 to 22 in Incheon, South Korea’s Vice Education Minister Kim Jae-choon stressed the importance of the gathering: "In the world, where everything is interrelated, those who can think and act globally will get more opportunities to succeed," adding: "Nurturing such talent is our vision for the next 15 years."

Having a global mindset did not mean that people should love their countries any less, but focusing too much on nationalistic education as a means of uniting people was perhaps a thing of the past, he told the Korean Times.

Emphasising that view, the WEF 2015’s Incheon Declaration says: “Our vision is to transform lives through education, recognizing the important role of education as a main driver of development and in achieving the other proposed SDGs (sustainable development goals)."
Gender equality

WEF 2015 also recognizes the importance of gender equality in achieving the right to education for all. “We are therefore committed to supporting gender-sensitive policies, planning and learning environments; mainstreaming gender issues in teacher training and curricula; and eliminating gender-based discrimination and violence in schools,” says the Declaration.

The Incheon Declaration clearly stresses the need for fostering global citizenship, when it notes “with serious concern that, today, a large proportion of the world’s out-of-school population lives in conflict-affected areas, and that crises, violence and attacks on education institutions, natural disasters and pandemics continue to disrupt education and development globally”.

WEF 2015 participants, therefore, commit to developing more inclusive, responsive and resilient education systems to meet the needs of children, youth and adults in these contexts, including internally displaced persons and refugees.

They highlight the need for education to be delivered in safe, supportive and secure learning environments free from violence. They recommend a sufficient crisis response, from emergency response through to recovery and rebuilding; better coordinated national, regional and global responses; and capacity development for comprehensive risk reduction and mitigation to ensure that education is maintained during situations of conflict, emergency, post-conflict and early recovery.

It also recommends significantly increasing support for education in humanitarian and protracted crises. “We welcome the Oslo Summit on Education for Development (July 2015) and call on the Financing for Development Conference in Addis Ababa to support the proposed SDG 4,” says the Declaration.

[IDN-InDepthNews – 28 May 2015]
By A. D. McKenzie

The Greek philosopher Plato is reported to have said: “Music is a moral law. It gives soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination, and charm and gaiety to life and to everything.” What could be more suited to foster global citizenship than jazz for peace and freedom?

PARIS (IPS) - Against the backdrop of civil unrest in Baltimore, Maryland, the fourth annual International Jazz Day was celebrated with events around the world and appeals for peace, unity and dialogue.

“Each of us is equal. All of us inhabit this place we call home,” said American jazz legend Herbie Hancock. “We must move mountains to find solutions to our incredible challenges.”

Although the organisers of the event held on Apr. 30 did not refer directly to the protests that have followed the funeral of Baltimore resident Freddie Gray, an African-American who died in police custody, Hancock told IPS in an exclusive interview that musicians were conscious of this and other cases.

“Every time those kinds of things happen, not just with African-Americans or people of African heritage – but with different groups, whether it’s women being slaughtered, children being abused, ethnic groups
International Jazz Day is Hancock’s brainchild, and it is presented each year by the United Nations’ cultural agency UNESCO in partnership with the U.S.-based Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz. The organisers say the day is aimed at encouraging and highlighting the “power of jazz as a force for freedom and creativity”. It is also meant to promote “intercultural dialogue through respect and understanding; uniting people from all corners of the globe,” says UNESCO.

In a sign of how significant the event has become since its launch in 2012, U.S. President Barack Obama and his wife Michelle will host the 2016 International Jazz Day and its signature event, the ‘All-Star Global Concert’, at the White House in Washington, D.C., Hancock announced.

“I spoke to Obama almost a year ago, at an event, and he said ‘let’s make it happen’. That wasn’t a promise because it was just in the moment, but he did make it happen, and the concert will be at the White House next year,” he told IPS.

After its beginnings in Paris three years ago, other cities which have played host to the global concert include Istanbul, Turkey, in 2013 and Osaka, Japan, last year.

The 2015 Global Host City was Paris once more, and jazz lovers were able to enjoy a day-long series of performances and educational programmes in different districts of the French capital. The presentations included workshops, master classes, discussions and jam sessions, in venues ranging from community centres to soup kitchens.

Coinciding with UNESCO’s on-going 70th anniversary celebration, the ‘All-Star Global Concert’ took place in a packed auditorium at the agency’s headquarters, with top United Nations and French officials among the audience, including U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and France’s Justice Minister Christiane Taubira who has long fought discrimination.

“Jazz has taught me much,” said Ban. “When things become difficult, I’ve learned that you just have to improvise.”

He and the multi-cultural audience then settled back to enjoy the show, with its line-up of 30 renowned artists. The concert kicked off with vocalist Al Jarreau warming up the crowd and moved to a stirring tribute by South African musician Hugh Masekela to his country’s late icon Nelson Mandela.

As Ban had remarked, the concert was like a “mini-UN”, as American pianists such as Hancock and John Beasley (the show’s musical director) joined with Brazilian vocalist Eliane Elias, Scottish singer Annie Lennox, Tunisian oud virtuoso Dhafer Youssef, French percussionist Mino Cinelu, Chinese teenage pianist A Bu, and a host of others to celebrate jazz and its influence.

Hancock said musicians and others were working for tolerance, mutual respect and global peace. “I’ve seen musicians from opposing sides unite to play the most beautiful music and tell the sweetest stories,” he said in his speech to the audience.

The ‘Who’s Who’ of jazz also included singer Dee Dee Bridgewater, who thanked France for opening doors and welcoming jazz musicians; saxophonist Wayne Shorter, who played alongside the young Washington, D.C.-born bassist Ben Williams and oud player Youssef for a world-premiere piece; and vocalists Dianne Reeves and Lennox (more known for rock), who drew cheers for their powerful renditions.

At the launch, UNESCO’s Director-General Irena Bokova said: “Jazz means dialogue, reaching out to others, bringing everyone on board. It means respecting the human rights and dignity of every woman and man, no matter their background. It means understanding others, letting them speak, listening in the spirit of respect.

“All this is why we join together to celebrate jazz; this music of freedom is a force for peace, and its messages have never been more vital than they are today, in times of turbulence,” she added.

Other countries that staged events to celebrate the day included South Africa, where organisers presented a series of workshops, seminars and performances with the theme of achieving change, and the United States, where award-winning artists gave concerts in New Orleans and other cities.

*(IPS | 2 May 2015)*

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Photo: Jazz legend Herbie Hancock, the brains behind International Jazz Day, an event that aims to encourage and highlight the “power of jazz as a force for freedom and creativity”.

Credit: A.D. McKenzie
From Slavery to Self Reliance: A Story of Dalit Women in South India

By Stella Paul

BELLARY, India (IPS) - HuligeAmma, a Dalit woman in her mid-forties, bends over a sewing machine, carefully running the needle over the hem of a shirt. Sitting nearby is Roopa, her 22-year-old daughter, who reads an amusing message on her cell phone and laughs heartily.

The pair leads a simple yet contented life – they subsist on half a dollar a day, stitch their own clothes and participate in schemes to educate their community in the Bellary district of the Southwest Indian state of Karnataka.

But not so very long ago, both women were slaves. They have fought an exhausting battle to get to where they are today, pushing against two evils that lurk in this mineral-rich state: the practice of sexual slavery in Hindu temples, and forced labour in the illegal mines that dot Bellary District, home to 25 percent of India’s iron ore reserves.

Finally free of the yoke of dual-slavery, they are determined to preserve their hard-won existence, humble though it may be.

Still, they will never forget the wretchedness that once defined their daily lives, nor the entrenched religious and economic systems in India that paved the way for their destitution and bondage.

“1 was 12 years old when my parents offered me to the Goddess Yellamma [worshipped in the Hindu pantheon as the ‘goddess of the fallen’], and told me I was now a ‘devadasi’,” HuligeAmma tells IPS.

“I had no idea what it meant. All I knew was that I would not marry a man because I now belonged to the Goddess.”

While these women once occupied a high status in society, the fall of Indian kingdoms to British rule rendered temples penniless and left many devadasis without the structures that had once supported them. Pushed into poverty but unable to find other work, bound as they were to the gods, devadasis in many states across India’s southern belt essentially became prostitutes, resulting in the government issuing a ban on the entire system of temple slavery in 1988.

Still, the practice continues and as women like HuligeAmma will testify, it remains as degrading and brutal as it was in the 1980s.

She tells IPS that as she grew older a stream of men would visit her in the night, demanding sexual favours. Powerless to refuse, she gave birth to five children by five different men – none of whom assumed any responsibility for her or the child.

After the last child was born, driven nearly mad with hunger and despair, HuligeAmma broke away from the temple and fled to Hospet, a town close to the World Heritage site of Hampi in northern Karnataka.

It did not take her long to find work in an open-cast mine, one of dozens of similar, illicit units that operated throughout the district from 2004 to 2011.

For six years, from dawn until dusk, HuligeAmma extracted iron ore by using a hammer to create holes in the open pit through which the iron could be ‘blasted’ out.

She was unaware at the time that this back-breaking labour constituted the nucleus of a massive illegal mining operation in Karnataka state, that saw the extraction and export of 29.2 million tonnes of iron ore between 2006 and 2011.

All she knew was that she and Roopa, who worked alongside her as a child labourer, earned nomore than 50 rupees apiece (about 0.7 dollars) each day.

One of hundreds of illegal open-pit iron ore mines in the Bellary District in India that operated with impunity until a 2011 ban put a stop to the practice.

**Credit: Stella Paul/IPS**

In a bid to crack down on the criminal trade, police often raided the mines and arrested the workers, who had to pay bribes of 200-300 rupees (roughly four to six dollars) to secure their release.

In a strange echo of the devadasi system, this cycle kept them indebted to the mine operators.

In 2009, when she could no longer tolerate the crushing workload or the constant sexual advances from fellow workers, contractors and truckers, who saw the former temple slave as ‘fair game’, HuligeAmma threw herself on the mercy of a local non-governmental organisation, Sakhi Trust, which has proved instrumental in lifting both her and her daughter out of the abyss.

Today all her children are back in school and Roopa works as a youth coordinator with Sakhi Trust. They live in Nagenhalli, a Dalit village where HuligeAmma works as a seamstress, teaching dressmaking skills to young girls in the community.

The story may have ended happily for HuligeAmma and Roopa, but for many of India’s roughly 200 million Dalits, there is no light at the end of the tunnel.

Once considered ‘untouchables’ in the Indian caste system, Dalits – literally, ‘the broken’ – are a diverse and divided group, encompassing everyone from so-called ‘casteless’ communities to other marginalised peoples.

Under this vast umbrella exists a further hierarchy, with some communities, like the Madiga Dalits (sometimes called ‘scavengers’), often discriminated against by their kin.

Historically, Madigas have made shoes, cleaned drains and skinned animals – tasks considered beneath the dignity of all other groups in Hindu society.

Most of the devadasis in South India hail from this community, according to Bhagya Lakshmi, social activist and director of the Sakhi Trust. In Karnataka alone, there are an estimated 23,000 temple slaves, of which over 90 percent are Dalit women.

Lakshmi, who has worked alongside the Madiga people for nearly two decades, tells IPS that Madiga women grow up knowing little else besides oppression and discrimination.
The devadasi system, she adds, is nothing more than institutionalised, caste-based violence, which sets Dalit women on a course that almost guarantees further exploitation, including unpaid labour or unequal wages.

For instance, even in an illegal mine, a non-Dalit worker gets between 350 and 400 rupees (between five and six dollars) a day, while a Dalit is paid no more than 100 rupees, reveals MinjAmma, a Madiga woman who worked in a mine for seven years.

Yet it is Dalit women who made up the bulk of the labourers entrapped in the massive iron trade.

“Walk into any Dalit home in this region and you will not meet a single woman or child who has never worked in a mine as a ‘coolie’ (labourer),” Manjula, a former mine-worker turned anti-slavery activist from the Mariyammanahalli village in Bellary District, tells IPS.

Herself the daughter and granddaughter of devadasis, who spent her childhood years working in a mine, Manjula believes the systems of forced labour and temple slavery are connected in a matrix of exploitation across India’s southern states, a linkage that is deepened further by the caste system.

She, like most official sources, is unclear on the exact number of Dalits forced into the iron ore extraction racket, but is confident that it ran into “several thousands”.

Annually, India accounts for seven percent of global iron ore production, and ranks fourth in terms of the quantity produced after Brazil, China and Australia.

Every year, India produces about 281 million tonnes of iron ore, according to a 2011 Supreme Court report. Karnataka is home to over 9,000 million tonnes of India’s total estimated reserves of 25.2 billion tonnes of iron ore, making it a crucial player in the country’s export industry.

Bellary District alone houses an estimated 1,000 million tonnes of iron ore reserves. Between April 2006 and July 2010, 228 unlicensed miners exported 29.2 million tonnes of iron ore, causing the state losses worth 16 million dollars.

With a population of 2.5 million people relying primarily on agriculture, fisheries and livestock farming for their livelihoods, Bellary District has suffered significant environmental impacts from illicit mining operations.

Groundwater supplies have been poisoned, with sources in and around mining areas showing high iron and manganese content, as well as an excessive concentration of fluoride – all of which are the enemies of farming families who live off the land.

Research suggests that 9.93 percent of the region’s 68,234 hectares of forests have been lost in the mining boom, while the dust generated through the processes of excavating, blasting and grading iron has coated vegetation in surrounding areas in a thick film of particulate matter, stifling photosynthesis.

Although the Supreme Court ordered the cessation of all unregistered mining activity in 2011, following an extensive report on the environmental, economic and social impacts, rich industrialists continue to flout the law.

Still, an official ban has made it easier to crack down on the practice. Today, from the ashes of two crumbling systems – unlawful mining operations and religiously sanctioned sexual abuse – some of India’s poorest women are pointing the way towards a sustainable future.

Their first order of business is to educate themselves and their children, secure alternative livelihoods and deal with the basic issue of sanitation – currently, there is just one toilet for every 90 people in the Bellary District.

Dalit women and their children, including young boys, are working together to end the system of ‘temple slavery’ in the Southwest Indian state of Karnataka. Credit: Stella Paul/IPS

The literacy rate among Dalit communities in South India has been found to be as low as 10 percent in some areas, but Madiga women are making a massive push to turn the tide. With the help of the Sakhi Trust, 600 Dalit girls who might have missed out on schooling altogether have been enrolled since 2011.

Today, Lakshmi Devi Harijana, hailing from the village of Danapura, has become the first Madiga woman in the region to teach in a college, while a further 25 women from her village have earned their university degrees.

To them, these changes are nothing short of revolutionary.

While some have chosen to travel the road of intellectual advancement, others are turning back to simple skills like sewing and animal husbandry.

BhagyaAmma, once an exploited temple slave who also worked in an illegal mine for several years, is today rearing two goats that she bought for the sum of 100 dollars.

She tells IPS she will sell them at the market during the holy festival of Eid al-Adha – a sacrificial feast for which a lamb is slaughtered and shared among family, neighbours and the poor – for 190 dollars.

It is a small profit, but she says it is enough for her basic needs.

Although the government promised the women of Bellary District close to 30 billion rupees (about 475 million dollars) for a rehabilitation programme to undo the damages of illegal mining, the official coffers remain empty.

“We have received applications from local women seeking funds to build individual toilets, but we have not received any money or any instructions regarding the mining rehabilitation fund,” Mohammed Muneer, commissioner of the Hospet Municipality in Bellary District, tells IPS.

Not content to wait around, the women are mobilising their own community-based, which allocates 15,000 rupees (about 230 dollars) on a rolling basis for families to build small toilets, so that women and children will not be at the mercy of sexual predators.

Also in the pipeline are biogas and rainwater harvesting facilities.

As Manjula says, “We want to build small models of economic sustainability. We don’t want to depend on anyone – not a single person, not even the government.”

(IPS | 21 April 2015)
By Naimul Haq

In Bangladesh, a country of 157 million people, 49 percent are women. A media survey has found that they are more often “seen” in illustrated sections of newspapers than “heard”. Majority of them do not have access to television or cannot read newspapers. Community radios are trying to rectify the situation. Momena Ferdousi, a 24-year-old student, hailing from the country’s north-western Chapai Nawabganj District, is one of Bangladesh’s up-and-coming radio professionals, who is determined to give voice to the voiceless, poor and illiterate women, as a first step towards sharing their concerns with the world at large.

DHAKA (IPS) - Judging by how often they make headlines, one might be tempted to believe that women in Bangladesh don’t play a major role in this country’s affairs.

A recent media monitoring survey by the non-governmental organisation Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha (BNPS) revealed that out of 3,361 news items studied over a two-month period, “Only 16 percent of newspaper stories, 14 percent of television news items, and 20 percent of radio news items considered women as subjects or interviewed them.” Fewer than eight percent of all the stories had women as the central focus. Of the few women who actually made an appearance on the TV screen, 97 percent were reading out the news, while just three percent fell into the category of ‘reporters’.

Only 0.03 percent of all bylined stories studied during that period carried a woman’s name. The monitoring report found that even though more women appeared in photographs than men, they were...
quoted far fewer times, proving the old proverb that, in this country of 157 million people, women are still “seen and not heard.”
While these statistics might seem daunting, women across the country who are not content to sit by and wait for the situation to change have taken matters into their own hands. They are doing so by getting on the airwaves and using the radio as a tool to raise the voices of women and bring rural issues into the light.
Women comprise 49 percent of Bangladesh’s population. Like the vast majority of people here they are concentrated in rural areas, where 111.2 million people – or 72 percent of the population – live.
Their distance from policy-making urban centres casts a double cloak of invisibility over women: according to data gleaned from the BNPS study, a mere 12 percent of newspaper articles, seven percent of TV news items and just five percent of radio stories focused on rural or remote areas – even though urban areas cover just eight percent of this vast country’s landmass, and host just 28 percent of the population.
The absence of women and women’s issues in the media is a dangerous trend in a country that ranked 142nd out of 187 states in the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP’s) most recent Gender Inequality Index (GII), making Bangladesh one of the worst performers in the Asia-Pacific region.
Yet, even this is not mentioned in the news: the BNPS study showed that less than one percent of over 3,000 news items surveyed made any mention of gender inequality, while only 11 news stories challenged prevailing gender stereotypes.
Given that Bangladesh has an extremely low literacy rate of 59 percent compared to the global average of 84.3 percent, according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the importance of radio cannot be underestimated.
Even in a nation where 24 percent of the population lives below the poverty line, radio is a widespread, relatively affordable means of plugging into the world, and is extremely popular among the millions of rural families that comprise the bulk of this country.

Momina Ferdousi, a 24-year-old student hailing from Bangladesh’s northwestern Chapai Nawabganj District, is one of the country’s up-and-coming radio professionals.
She is the senior programme producer for Radio Mahananda, a community radio station launched in 2011 that caters primarily to the thousands of farming families in this agricultural region that comprises part of the 7,780-square-km Barind Tract.
She tells IPS she would not be where she is today without the support and training she, and scores of other aspiring female radio workers, received from the Bangladesh NGOs Network for Radio and Communication (BNNRC).
Fellowships and capacity-building initiatives sponsored by BNNRC have resulted in a flood of women filling the posts of producers, anchors, newscasters, reporters and station managers in 14 regional community radio stations around the country.
“The road to my employment was challenging,” Ferdousi explains, “but BNNRC saw the potential in me and [other] female journalists and I believe we have made substantial changes by addressing gaps in women’s right to information.”
Miles away, the confident voice of Sharmi Sultana on Radio Pollikontho, broadcast in the northeastern district of Moulvibazar, reaches roughly 400,000 people spread over a 17-km radius.
With five hours of daily programming that focus largely on issues relevant to rural women, Radio Pollikontho has filled a huge gap in this community.
“It is an amazing feeling to conduct a programme, interact live with guests and respond to our audience’s requests to discuss health, women’s rights, social injustice, education and agriculture,” Sultana tells IPS.
“When we began we had only one programme on women’s issues, now we run five programmes weekly, exclusively dedicated to women.”
“Most of our audience are poor,” she explains, “and they either don’t have access to television or cannot read newspapers. So FM radio, available even on the cheapest mobile phone, has been very popular and the demand for interactive live programmes is increasing by the day.”
The difficulties facing women here in Bangladesh are legion.
Only 16.8 million women are employed in the formal sector, with the vast majority of them performing unpaid domestic labour on top of their duties in the farm or field.
A lack of financial independence makes them extremely vulnerable to domestic violence: a recent study by the deputy director of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) found that 87 percent of currently married women have experienced physical violence at the hands of their husbands, while 98 percent say they have been sexually ‘violated’ by their spouses at some point during marriage.
The survey also revealed that one-third of all married women faced ‘economic abuse’ – the forcible withholding of a partner’s financial assets for the purpose of maintaining financial dependence on the perpetrator of violence.
In 2011, 330 women were killed in dowry-related violence.
Other issues, like child marriage, also make pressing news bulletins for community radio stations directed at women: according to United Nations data, some 66 percent of Bangladeshi girls are married before their 18th birthday.
The situation is bleak, but experts say that as women become educated and aware of their rights, the tide will inevitably turn for the better.
BNNRC Chief Executive Officer A H M Bazlur Rahman, who pioneered rural radio broadcasting efforts around the country, tells IPS, “Issues like budget allocation, lack of appropriate sanitation, violence against women, fighting corruption, [and] education for girls are [often] neglected by policy makers. But if we can give women a voice, these problems [will] gradually disappear.”
It remains to be seen whether or not more women’s voices on the air will uplift the half of Bangladesh’s population in need of empowerment. But every time a woman’s voice crackles to life on a radio show, it means one more woman out there is hearing her story, learning her rights and moving closer to equality.
(IPS | 8 April 2015)
Graduation ceremony for Soka University of America's Class of 2007
(Aliso Viejo, California, May 2007)
Global Citizens Festival 2014, Central Park, NYC. Pictured l to r, Global Citizen Project Co-founder Hugh Evans; World Bank President Jim Young Kim, actor Hugh Jackman, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and the group No Doubt. UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe