

Sustainable Development Observer Issue 4 December 2021

GLOBAL HEALTH CRISIS



Issue 4 – December 2021
Bringing You Stories and Issues Relevant To Achieving The SDGs in The Post-COVID Era

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Cover Photos courtesy World Health Organisation (WHO)

FROM THE EDITOR

Welcome to the 4th issue of Sustainable Development Observer bringing you news and views on sustainable development goals mainly from the perspective of the Global South.

This month we focus on global health crisis that has been exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and pharmaceutical industry's greed – at the cost of peoples' health. While the world's media has gone berserk about a new "Omicron" variant of the COVID virus, the World Trade Organisation has quietly postponed a ministerial conference that had as its main agenda item, an Indian and South African initiative supported by over 100 countries to waive patents on COVID vaccines and other medical testing systems and equipment. Meanwhile, Pfizer – which has made billions of dollars out of the pandemic – has gone on a propaganda offensive to sell its "COVID booster shots" even to children as young as 5 years! Any questioning of this is labeled a "conspiracy theory" by the world's so-called "mainstream media".

Meanwhile, the World Health Organisation has published a report that argues for less than a dollar a year per person of investments in prevention and treatment for non-communicable diseases by most low to lower-middle income countries, so that close to 7 million deaths could be prevented by 2030. Yet, during the pandemic many countries have increased their military spending to build or purchase sophisticated weapons systems that were absolutely useless in preventing the spread of COVID-19 and saving of lives. In a future issue of Sustainable Development Observer, we hope to do a more detailed analysis of this great myth of "national defense" spending.

We raise awareness in this issue on how destruction to education systems during the pandemic has drawn attention to why higher education should not be seen as a privilege – and why education funding should be seen as development funding not only at primary and secondary levels, but also at university level.

Our special feature article is focusing on the new Laos-China rail link opened this month as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). We present this as an SDG issue where the rail line should be looked at in the broader context of development policies where livelihood opportunities and planning need to be looked at as part of such infrastructure development. Thus, borrowing for such projects should not be a "debt trap" if proper sustainable development strategies are adopted to benefit from such projects.

Dr Kalinga Seneviratne – Editor



What is the future if my child becomes sick? (Photo Credit: WHO)

One Dollar Could Save 7 million Lives in Low and Lower-Middle Income Countries

By Jaya Ramachandran

GENEVA (IDN): Close to seven million deaths could be prevented by 2030, if low and lower-middle income countries were to make an additional investment of less than a dollar per person per year in the prevention and treatment of noncommunicable diseases (NCDs), according to a new World Health Organization report. NCDs include heart disease, diabetes, cancer, and respiratory disease.

These currently cause seven out of every ten deaths around the world. 85% of premature deaths (between ages 30-69) from NCDs occur in low- and middle-income countries, making them a huge health and socioeconomic burden. But their impact on lower income countries is often underestimated.

The report emphasizes the urgency of investing in NCD prevention and management given that the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted how many of these diseases can worsen outcomes for COVID-19.

By investing in the 16 recommended Best Buy policies, countries will not only protect people from NCDs, but also reduce the impact of infectious diseases like COVID-19 in the future, adds the report.

We welcome feedback from readers, along with comments on SDG issues for possible publication. Please email to: kalingasen@gmail.com

Saving lives, spending less: the case for investing in noncommunicable diseases sets out a path on which countries can follow to deliver the next generation a better and healthier world. The impact of COVID-19 on people living with cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, cancer and lung diseases shows that it's more important than ever to prioritize the investment of prevention and management of NCDs," says Dr Bente Mikkelsen, Director for NCDs at WHO.

The report says, the vast majority of those deaths caused by noncommunicable diseases can be prevented using WHO's tried and tested NCD 'Best Buy' interventions. These include cost effective measures to reduce tobacco use and harmful use of alcohol, improve diets, increase physical activity, reduce risks from cardiovascular diseases and diabetes, and prevent cervical cancer.



Download Report from - <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240041059>

In *Saving lives, spending less: the case for investing in noncommunicable diseases*, WHO focuses on 76 low- and lower-middle-income countries. The report explains the NCD Best Buys and shows how every dollar invested in scaling up Best Buy actions in these countries could generate a return of up to USD 7—potentially USD 230 billion by 2030.

“With the right strategic investments, countries that bear a significant amount of the NCD burden can change their disease trajectory and deliver significant health and economic gains for their citizens.” says WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. “In a world filled with uncertainty, one thing we can be certain of is that without action, NCDs will continue to be a significant threat to global health. Investing in these evidence-based policies is an investment in a healthy future,” adds WHO Chief

“Noncommunicable diseases take a terrible health and economic toll, especially on countries that can least afford it” says WHO Global Ambassador for NCDs and Injuries Michael R. Bloomberg. “We know the prevention measures that work best, and hopefully this new report leads more governments to take the smart, cost-effective actions that can help save millions of lives around the world.”

Best Buy actions include increasing health taxes, restrictions on marketing and sales of harmful products, information and education, and vaccination. They also include actions connected to managing metabolic risk factors, such as hypertension and diabetes, in order to prevent more severe disease or complications.

The interventions are all relatively inexpensive and require little capital investment, but could help avoid much of the high cost of treatment in future. The report also indicates that while each of the interventions can be implemented individually, the effects are stronger and produce a greater return on investment when introduced together. With marginalized groups often at greater risk from the physical and financial impact of NCDs, the interventions may also help to reduce health and economic inequalities. [IDN-InDepthNews – 13 December 2021]

Arms Sales of Top 100 Arms Companies Continue To Grow Amid Pandemic

Stockholm, 6 December 2021: Sales of arms and military services by the industry's 100 largest companies totalled \$531 billion in 2020—an increase of 1.3 per cent in real terms compared with the previous year. This is according to new data released today by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). The arms sales of the Top 100 arms companies in 2020 were 17 per cent higher than in 2015—the first year for which SIPRI included data on Chinese firms. This marked the sixth consecutive year of growth in arms sales by the Top 100. Arms sales increased even as the global economy contracted by 3.1 per cent during the first year of the pandemic.

Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) - link to article - <https://sipri.org/media/press-release/2021/business-usual-arms-sales-sipri-top-100-arms-companies-continue-grow-amid-pandemic>

The Global Pandemic Disrupts Health Services Around the World

By Jaya Ramachandran

GENEVA (IDN): The global pandemic is likely to halt two decades of global progress towards Universal Health Coverage, according to two complementary reports compiled by the World Health Organization and the World Bank. The organizations also reveal in two reports launched on Universal Health Coverage Day that more than half a billion people are being pushed into extreme poverty because they have to pay for health services out of their own pockets.

The WHO/World Bank reports, published on December 12, also warn that financial hardship is likely to become more intense as poverty grows, incomes fall, and governments face tighter fiscal constraints.

"Even before the COVID-19 pandemic struck, almost 1 billion people were spending more than 10 per cent of their household budget on health," said Juan Pablo Uribe, Global Director for Health, Nutrition and Population, World Bank. "This is not acceptable, especially since the poorest people are hit hardest. Within a constrained fiscal space, governments will have to make tough choices to protect and increase health budgets," he added.

The two reports highlight the devastating impact of COVID-19 on people's ability to obtain health care and pay for it. In 2020, the pandemic disrupted health services and stretched countries' health systems beyond their limits. As a result, for example, immunization coverage dropped for the first time in ten years, and deaths from TB and malaria increased.

According to reports, the pandemic also triggered the worst economic crisis since the 1930s, making it increasingly difficult for people to pay for care. Even before the pandemic, half a billion people were being pushed (or pushed still further) into extreme poverty because of payments they made for health care. That number is now expected to be considerably higher.

"There is no time to spare," said WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. "All governments must immediately resume and accelerate efforts to ensure every one of their citizens can access health services without fear of the financial consequences. This means strengthening public spending on health and social support, and increasing their focus on primary health care systems that can provide essential care close to home."



A healthcare worker prepares a COVID-19 vaccine at a hospital in Mogadishu, Somalia (Photo Credit: UNICEF/Ismail Taxta)

UN Secretary-General's message on Universal Health Coverage Day

As we enter the third year of the COVID-19 pandemic, we must urgently strengthen our health systems to ensure they are equitable, resilient and capable of meeting everyone's needs, including for their mental health.

COVID-19 has reached nearly every part of the world, but health coverage still has not. The shockwaves of this health emergency are hitting hardest those countries that lack health systems capable of providing quality, affordable care for all.

If we are to reach our goal of achieving universal health coverage by 2030, we must commit to investing in and scaling up proven solutions. This means making more and smarter investments in the foundations of health systems, with an emphasis on primary health care, essential services and marginalized populations.

The best insurance for resilient economies and communities, as well as pandemic preparedness for the future is strengthening health systems before a crisis arrives. The unequal distribution of COVID-19 vaccines in the past year has been a global moral failure. We must learn from this experience. The pandemic will not end for any country until it ends for every country.

On this Universal Health Coverage Day, let us join the commitment to end the COVID-19 pandemic and build a healthier, safer future for all by investing in health systems that leave no one behind.

Source: United Nations

He added: "Prior to the pandemic, many countries had made progress. But it was not robust enough. This time we must build health systems that are strong enough to withstand shocks, such as the next pandemic and stay on course towards universal health coverage."

In the first two decades of this century, many governments had made progress on service coverage. In 2019, prior to the pandemic, 68 per cent of the world's population was covered by essential health services, such as pre-and post-natal care and reproductive health services; immunization services; treatment for diseases like HIV, TB and malaria; and services to diagnose and treat noncommunicable diseases like cancer, heart conditions, and diabetes.

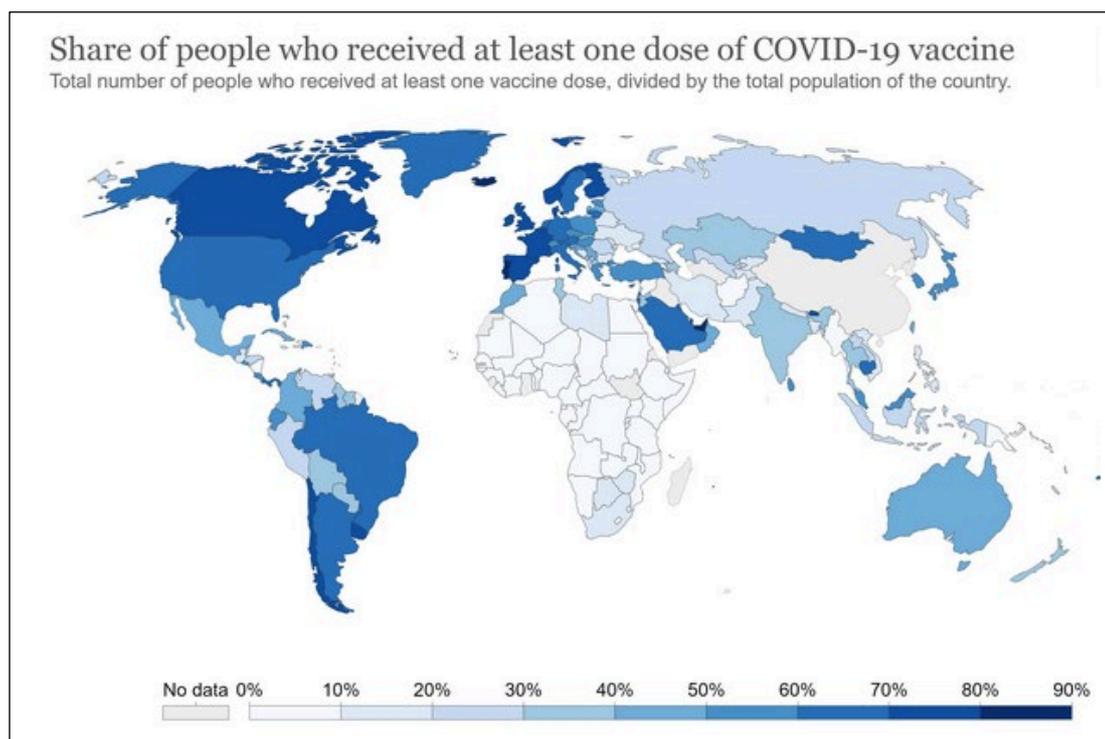
But they had not made such advances in ensuring affordability. As a result, the poorest groups and those living in rural areas are the least able to obtain health services, and the least likely to be able to cope with the consequences of paying for them.

Up to 90 per cent of all households incurring impoverishing out-of-pocket health spending are already at or below the poverty line—underscoring the need to exempt poor people from out-of-pocket health spending, backing such measures with health financing policies that enable good intentions to be realized in practice.

Besides the prioritizing of services for poor and vulnerable populations, supported through targeted public spending and policies that protect individuals from financial hardship, it will also be crucial to improve the collection, timeliness and disaggregation of data on access, service coverage, out-of-pocket health spending and total expenditure. Only when countries have an accurate picture of the way that their health system is performing, can they effectively target action to improve the way it meets the needs of all people.

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Bank Group has deployed over \$157 billion to fight the health, economic, and social impacts of the pandemic, the fastest and largest crisis response in its history. The financing is helping more than 100 countries strengthen pandemic preparedness, protect the poor and jobs, and jump start a climate-friendly recovery.

The Bank is also supporting over 60 low- and middle-income countries more than half of which are in Africa, with the purchase and deployment of COVID-19 vaccines, and is making available \$20 billion in financing for this purpose until the end of 2022. [IDN-InDepthNews – 12 December 2021] (SDG 3)



Source: World In Data updated to 28 August 2021

Call for A New Deal for Development to Bridge Vaccine Divide

By Jaya Ramachandaran

PARIS (IDN): Ministers and high-level representatives from 55 developed and developing countries have proposed a New Deal for Development and stressed the urgency of bridging the vaccine divide and strengthening financing capacities in developing economies. They have called for greater international support for developing countries on the occasion of the Seventh High-level Meeting of the OECD Development Centre under the heading “Accelerating a just recovery for all” on 6 December.

They are of the view that a New Deal for Development, based on solidarity and shared responsibility, could improve access to vaccines and mobilise international and domestic resources at a much larger scale. It would also ensure the crisis becomes an opportunity to reorient development models towards greater resilience, inclusion, equity and environmental sustainability.

The logic behind these remarks is that almost two years since the COVID 19 pandemic was declared, prospects for developing countries remain highly uncertain. Low vaccination rates and limited fiscal resources, amid the emergence of new variants and growing indebtedness, are hampering the efforts of policy makers to spur an economic recovery.

OECD Secretary General Mathias Cormann welcomed officials from the OECD Development Centre’s 55 member countries, international organisations and civil society representatives.

The OECD Development Centre meeting was co-chaired by Costa Rica and Togo. “We often hear that ‘we are all in it together’ but we are not *really together* in dealing with the pandemic. As of today, only 7.3% of the African population is fully-vaccinated and the cost of accessing much-needed financial resources remains too high,” said Victoire Dogbe, Prime Minister of Togo.

Andres Valenciano, Minister of Commerce of Costa Rica, emphasised the importance of trade, industry and innovation to overcome the pandemic, saying “We need well-functioning supply-chains and to refrain from export bans”. Beyond the immediate response, he added, “More needs to be done to invest and support research and industrial development in developing countries.”

Ministers commended multilateral efforts to distribute vaccines, particularly the work of COVAX, and welcomed the aspiration of countries donating one dose of vaccine for every dose administered at home (“one to one, everyone”). However, with supply pressures now easing, the meeting also underlined the importance of overcoming barriers to administering vaccines, including logistical challenges and vaccine hesitancy. Ministers also stressed the need to start preparing collectively for future pandemics.

Many developing countries could not respond to the pandemic on the same scale as advanced economies due to stagnating public revenues, growing debt levels and higher costs of borrowing. They are struggling to meet the ongoing costs of the pandemic, let alone invest in a recovery.

Ministers welcomed the historic general allocation of IMF Special Drawing Rights (SDR), equivalent to USD 650 billion, to boost global liquidity. They also encouraged countries with strong external positions to channel a share of their SDRs to help low-income and vulnerable middle-income countries finance the recovery.

Ministers and high-level officials called for those challenges to be addressed in a sustainable manner through strengthening resource mobilisation and public investment to enhance healthcare and social protection systems in developing countries, particularly for the most vulnerable groups - women and youth - including in the informal sector.

They also wants enhancing developing countries’ capacities to produce, distribute and utilise tests, medical supplies, treatments, and vaccines to ensure long-term resilience. Making use of existing flexibilities in the international intellectual property (IP) protection frameworks, including through partnerships for voluntary licensing of IP and technology transfer on mutually agreed terms.

In support of these objectives, Ministers welcomed the Centre's work and partnerships with institutions in Asia, Africa and Latin America. In particular, they encouraged the Centre to explore how developing countries could leverage the medical-industrial complex for industrialisation, notably through the OECD Initiative for Policy Dialogue on Global Value Chains, Production Transformation and Development [IDN-InDepthNews – 06 December 2021] (SDGs 3, 10 and 17)



Study volunteer receives inoculation at Redemption Hospital in Monrovia on the opening day in Liberia of PREVAC, a Phase 2 Ebola vaccine trial in West Africa (Photo Credit: NIAID)

Development Community Calls For Universal Vaccine Access

By UNDP

SAL | Cabo Verde (IDN) — Cabo Verde President José Maria Neves on December 2 joined the development community in calling for urgent universal vaccine access as a way to mitigate the impact of Omicron and other variants of the Covid-19 virus.

The World Health Organization on December 3 categorized Omicron as a Covid-19 “variant of concern”, signifying that it could be more contagious than other known mutations.

Neves told participants at the 2021 African Economic Conference that, although the world may have to live with Covid-19 for a few years, “we must act to manufacture our own vaccine and medicines to face this and other pandemics to come. We must find innovative mechanisms for financing and managing sustainable development, otherwise, we will disappoint young Africans”.

“The fight against the Covid-19 pandemic, besides being internal to each country, is at the same time a global fight, which requires global collaborative solutions. Everyone wins if the less developed countries have the necessary conditions to overcome this serious health, economic and social crisis and to leverage their sustainable development,” Neves said.

The 16th edition of the African Economic Conference is being held in a hybrid format in Sal, Cabo Verde, and online. It brings together a wide range of stakeholders, including policymakers, development institutions, the private sector, and researchers, to discuss ways to sustainably grow the continent's development funding sources.

Rui Figueiredo Soares, Cabo Verde Foreign Affairs Minister, observed with concern the current pandemic situation. “It is hitting all countries without exception, hence this conference organized with the support of the African Development Bank, the United Nations Development Programme, and the Economic Commission for Africa, could not have come at a better time.”

In a video message, Amina Mohammed, UN Deputy Secretary-General, stated that vaccine inequality could cost African countries billions of dollars. “Africa cannot recover from the pandemic alone, we need global solidarity,” she said.

Antonio Pedro, Deputy Executive Secretary at the Economic Commission for Africa, warned: “Failure to address the pandemic through universal access to vaccines will spawn more resilient and potent variants, threatening the global effort to fight the virus. The recent emergence of the Omicron variant of the Covid-19 virus illustrates my point.”

He attributed the emergence of the Omicron variant to “an uncoordinated global response to the pandemic”. “The possibility of new and more virulent variants, coupled with imminent climate shocks, calls for a more coordinated global response to the pandemic, backed by bold and innovative financing mechanisms,” Pedro added.

UN Under-Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme, Achim Steiner, told participants: “We need urgent cooperation from vaccine manufacturers and vaccine-producing countries and countries with high vaccination rates to tackle this acute vaccine supply shortage. Doing so will help to open up economic and social opportunities across the continent, boosting GDP and driving forward economic recovery.”

He added: “We are seeing...worrying signs of an uneven global economic recovery...Countries across Africa need new access to finance and debt relief measures, innovative financing solutions as well as

more tailored support to transition to a green economy as well as the potential to leverage digital technology to address acute development challenges.”

Kevin Urama, Acting Chief Economist and Vice President, Economic Governance and Knowledge Management, at the African Development Bank, stressed how the pandemic continued to have a huge socio-economic impact on Africa. He said the Bank stood ready to support African countries as they rebuild their economies. “This has heightened the need for transformative domestic reforms. Challenges to Africa’s financing development must be tackled collectively,” he said. [IDN-InDepthNews – 12 December 2021] (SDGs 3 and 17)

Omicron Outbreak: Scientists and Leaders Call for Collaboration with Africa



By Reinhard Jacobsen

BRUSSELS (IDN) — International scientists and leaders have urged a "global response of collaboration with Africa on COVID-19 following Omicron outbreak". Over a hundred academics and leaders from Europe, Africa, the US among others say in a joint letter to the European Commission and the World Health Organization that they are "concerned with the lack of action for vaccination in Africa and solidarity with Africa".

There is no way that isolation of Africa could be the solution to this problem, says the letter. "We ask that the response is based on science."

The letter of November 29 is addressed to Josep Borrell Fontelles, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and the WHO Director General, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

"The COVID-19 Variant of Concern, Omicron, reported by the South African government on November 24, must result in a reset of the global response to curb the pandemic," they note and stress: "*The science is absolutely clear: until everyone is vaccinated no one is safe*".

While 63% of people in high-income countries are fully vaccinated, just 1.4% of people in low-income countries are fully vaccinated (Amnesty International, quoting Our World in Data, 21.10.2021).

The vaccine inequality is shocking. Rich countries have been buying most of the world’s supplies without any strategy to fulfil the needs of low-income countries. The emergence of Omicron points to the need for global solidarity- as a moral imperative as well as out of sheer self-interest.

"A global strategy to fight the pandemic must include a plan to protect Africa", says the letter, adds: "New variants of Concern will continue to emerge and are likely to become increasingly dangerous in the absence of such a strategy." The letter adds: "Leadership is required in order to act now, and this should include

1. Financial and technical support for the establishment of vaccine production sites in Africa;
2. An immediate plan to transfer vaccines to Africa to start widespread vaccination programmes;
3. Assistance in wide-spread vaccination campaigns and for building trust in the effectiveness on vaccinations.

[IDN-InDepthNews – 29 November 2021] (SDGs 3, 10 and 17)

How Russia and Four Other BRICS Countries Are Dealing With COVID-19

By Kester Kenn Klomegah

MOSCOW/PRETORIA (IDN): On December 4, Russian President Vladimir Putin held a telephone conversation with the South African President Cyril Ramaphosa. According to the official Kremlin transcript, which hardly gives detailed information, “the presidents agreed to join efforts in fighting the coronavirus pandemic, in particular in view of the newly identified Omicron strain, and further discussed interaction within BRICS and trade and economic cooperation”.



Photo Credit: CGTN

The conversation took place against the backdrop of the current entry restrictions on travellers from southern African countries, due to the spread of a new COVID-19 variant (new B.1.1.529 variant) to the United States, Europe and Asia. A few African countries have also imposed similar restrictions on entry into their territories. The southern African countries include Lesotho, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Namibia and Eswatini.

Russia and South Africa, which later joined in 2011, are both members of the BRICS, and since the outbreak of the coronavirus in December 2020, have discussed some aspects as well as the prospects for collaborative work in fighting the disease.

Russia and South Africa previously proposed localizing production of Russian vaccines, but the key setback was that the vaccines were yet to be approved by the World Health Organization. As a result, there were neither concrete practical results nor effective collaboration between the two countries.

In contrast, China has made huge contributions to South Africa and many other African countries. It has further, at the November Ministerial Conference (FOCAC), authoritatively pledged supply of one billion vaccines to Africa.

Within BRICS—Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa—the coronavirus has indeed affected them. China, with the highest 1.5 billion population, has at least, managed to keep Covid-19 under control. Russia with a population of about 145 million is itself struggling to control the spread of the virus. On the other hand, South Africa with a population of some 60 million, has the largest number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in Africa, but the lowest among the BRICS countries.

Among the five BRICS countries, China and India lead in the pursuit of economic spheres of influence worldwide. Chinese President Xi Jinping, delivering a speech via video link at the opening of the World Health Assembly, pledged US\$2 billion to to combat COVID-19.

Local Russian media such as *Izvestia* has reported that the BRICS expressed commitment and preparedness to help South Africa to study the new Omicron coronavirus variant and fight it during the BRICS International Forum held early December.

President of BRICS International Forum, Purnima Anand, told *Izvestia* that Russia, India, China, and Brazil are now discussing ways to deliver aid to South Africa.

BRICS members are ready to support South Africa on all matters regarding the new variant, be it research or medical supplies, she told the newspaper, noting that it is important to stop Omicron before it is too late. In particular, India has put together a shipment of medical equipment and its Covishield vaccine for South Africa if these are needed.

Further, Virologist Alexey Agranovsky told *Izvestia* that it could take three months to a year to determine how dangerous Omicron is. “We do not yet know whether Omicron can supplant the Delta strain, although theoretically this scenario cannot be ruled out. Omicron has not been studied enough to suggest that it is more easily tolerated than other variants. With 10 or 100 case histories tracked, there’s sketchy information, so it is impossible to talk about anything seriously,” he emphasized.

Over these years, the BRICS has wanted to expand cooperation in the fight against infections and engage in the joint production and use of vaccines. Cooperation on countering infectious diseases has long been a priority for BRICS. For instance, the final declaration of the 2015 BRICS summit in Ufa, Russia, contains instructions by the leaders to work on managing the risk of Covid-19 outbreaks.

In fact, the joint declaration stated: “We commend the efforts made by the BRICS countries to contribute to enhanced international cooperation to support the efforts of countries to achieve their health goals, including the implementation of universal and equitable access to health services, and ensure affordable, good-quality service delivery while taking into account different national circumstances, policies, priorities and capabilities.”

During the discussions at the heads of state level and ministerial levels, the countries only agreed to continue providing mutual support in activities to prevent and treat the novel coronavirus infection COVID-19, as well as to create favourable conditions for the supply of deliveries of medications and diagnostic materials, immune-biological preparations, and medical equipment.

There were also talks on efforts to strengthen international institutions, joint efforts to combat new challenges and threats, including the COVID-19 pandemic, and cooperation between the five states at multilateral fora. In the context of the current epidemiological situation, the BRICS has often expressed solidarity and hope to improve the healthcare systems.

India currently holds the 13th BRICS Chairmanship, which ends in December, and has to pass on to China for the 14th BRICS directorship starting January 2022. The five BRICS countries together represent over 3.1 billion people, or about 40 per cent of the world population. By and large, the coronavirus pandemic has taken a huge toll in Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) [IDN-InDepthNews – 13 December 2021]

WTO Ministerial Meeting Postponed – Shows No Concern For Vaccine Divide

Geneva, 29 November 2021: The World Trade Organization (WTO) TRIPS Council which was due to meet today has indefinite postponement the 12th Ministerial Conference, giving the reason as the emergence of the highly transmissible strain of the COVID-19 virus along with changes in border rules for Switzerland.

Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders (MSF) in a press statement deplored the “dogmatic opposition to the landmark TRIPS Waiver proposal” to temporarily waive intellectual property (IP) rights on COVID-19 medical products “by a group of high-income countries” including the European Union (EU), the United Kingdom and Switzerland.

“With the COVID-19 pandemic showing no signs of abating, including in regions with unfettered access to COVID-19 medical tools and high vaccination rates, as in Europe, it is clear that prioritizing access to COVID-19 medical tools, including tests, treatments and vaccines for everyone, everywhere is essential” said Shailly Gupta, Communication Advisor of MSF .

“Recent emergence of another new, more transmissible variant is a telling example of how this virus continues to mutate particularly in the absence of equitable access to the right COVID-19 medical tools to deal with it,” said Candice Sehoma, South Africa Advocacy Officer, MSF Access Campaign. “With millions of lives at stake, the world can’t afford to waste any more time. We call on countries opposing and diluting this waiver to today halt the stalling tactics and take urgent measures to adopt a comprehensive waiver for facilitating more diversified and broader production and supply of COVID-19 vaccines, therapeutics and diagnostics and other health technologies. The waiver is needed now more than ever.”

In the 14 months since India and South Africa first proposed the landmark TRIPS Waiver proposal in an effort to increase people’s access to COVID-19 medical tools, over 4 million people have lost their lives to COVID-19. Over 100 nations have come together to support the TRIPS Waiver.

Source: relief web



Campus students in Asia (right) and African students calling for “emancipating our minds” (left) [Photo Credit: WAHED (right) and the conversation.com (left)]

Universities Need to Be More Accessible Instead of a Privilege

By Kalinga Seneviratne

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

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

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

The five-session online event included speakers from Europe, North America, South America, Africa, and Asia, with a majority of the speakers female, a statement by itself. Many of the speakers pointed out that HE is still a privilege in both the Global North and the Global South with children of those who have already got degrees more likely to go to university. With the governments not giving priority to funding public universities, many families from lower socioeconomic backgrounds do not even consider a university education.

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

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

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

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

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

The report's focus is a change from the traditional arguments based on ethnic or religious minorities. It is on socio-economically disadvantaged families and economically marginalized communities who could be within majority ethnic or religious communities. Thus, this issue also addresses SDG 10 which is 'Reduced Inequalities' in society.

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

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

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

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

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

Dr Hilligje van't Land, Secretary-General, International Association of Universities believes that equitable access to universities is a primary requirement of development. She pointed out that funding a good public school system is essential to a successful HE system. "A well-educated citizenry is a requirement to build the foundation of social equity (in the society)" and thus who will go to university in 2030 will depend on "the quality of the education available to them (from childhood)".

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

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

In Bulgaria according to Dr Ivana Radonova of the Ministry of Education and Science, they introduced a contract system between students and employers. "Company will get a graduate who knows the company's requirements, (while) universities would know what the companies' requirements are," explained Dr Radonova. The state also guarantees loans to students in need and pays them off if they find difficulty in servicing the debts after graduation.

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

In Malaysia where a high percentage of young people go for some form of HE, the government has a vision 2030 strategy to develop human resources for the sector. "We are introducing lifelong learning for non-traditional learners along with flexible pathways of learning," explained Prof Wan Zuhainis binte Saad, Director of Academic Excellence Division, Department of Higher Education.

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

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

Even in North America, university funding may need to be considered as a development issue. Brown pointed out that in the US, about 36 million drop out of university each year. "We need to understand our students' needs and design courses to suit them," he pointed out. This may include evening courses, financial aid, and daycare for children as mature-age students and life-long learning takes shape. He noted that about 90 million working adults in the US have never considered HE because it's too expensive for them.

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

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

Pandemic Exacerbates Old Inequalities in Higher Education Worldwide

The 3rd World Access to Higher Education Day (WAHED), held on 17 November, was marked by more than 30 events across 25 countries, including six online conferences involving over 2,000 delegates held in association with *University World News (UWN)*, with a strong focus on the impact of COVID-19 on equity. Following are links to some of the stories run by *UWN*.

*** COVID rise in university dropouts is urgent wake-up call**

Higher education can lead the way as we recover from the pandemic. But first it must rethink, reinvent and adapt to better serve our citizens, communities and economies. Even before the pandemic, post-secondary education was under attack for its cost, the way it contributes to increasing societal divides and racial inequality and its values writes Dr Courtney Brown of Lumina Foundation, USA. (Link to article: <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20211122074820407>)

*** We need a global approach to reduce higher education inequality**

Reducing inequalities in access and success in higher education was always going to be slow work, but what data we have shows that glacial progress is being made and may be imperiled by COVID-19. It is time to accept that a new approach is needed that sees this as a genuinely global rather than national problem, if the work that is happening to address such inequalities – which may be growing – is going to bear fruit argues Professor Graeme Atherton
(Link: <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20211111051059106>)

*** Weighing up the Good and Bad news on widening Higher Education access**

The good news is equity and inclusion are becoming a higher priority for governments around the world, according to a variety of surveys and new data presented at WAHED 2021, but the bad news is that the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the education of all children and students and threatens to reverse the recent progress in higher education.

(Link to article: <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20211120081505355>)



Collage of Crafts (left) and Sohibdavlat Qalandarkhonova (right).

Tajikistan: Young Girl Out to Save The Community from Pollution

By Sharofat Shafieva

KHOROG, Tajikistan (IDN): The city of Khorog is generally clean, but it has a problem with waste management. Residents leave their garbage on the streets and especially in public places. The central market is one of the places where there is a large garbage dump.

“Passing by garbage is very unpleasant. No matter how much the administration cleans the garbage, it still collects in one day. It is especially terrible in summer when a very bad smell appears,” notes Shafoat Jafoeva a regular visitor to the market. “The waste mostly belongs to the merchants, and it would be good if the sellers of the market find a better way to manage their waste”, she adds.

A young girl of 12 years Sohibdavlat Qalandarkhonova is passionate about the environment, and she would like to help the community to appreciate the value of tackling, environmental issues taking responsibility themselves. She is also interested in crafts and recycling waste into products that can be used in everyday living.

Sohibdavlat is a 6th-grade student of the Aga Khan Lyceum here in Khorog. She became passionate about science lessons and takes extra curriculum classes on science at school. During the classes, she studies not only theory but conducts experiments as well.

“Our school has opened a mixed lab program project where we can study science. I started going to these classes and it was very interesting to me as we did various experiments. I would also make different products with hot glue, this was my favourite thing,” Sohibdavlat told IDN.

The young activist use materials such as glass, paper, cardboard, metal, textiles, batteries, as recycled products. It is in the research on recycled products that Sohibdavlat got familiar with the issue called *climate change*.

“A few years ago, a mudflow washed away a whole village in our region. I remember we had no light, and everyone said that the mudflow blocked the river road and the river could flood other villages and even Khorog,” recalls Sohibdavlat about her harrowing experience that woke her up to the dangers of climate change. “Later, I learned from adults that our climate is getting hot, then that the emission of gases in to the atmosphere is getting bigger. Ice in our mountains melts due to high temperatures and forms a mudflow.”

Knowing more about the consequence of climate change and the problems that may arise in the future, she began to worry about the environment in her city. Sohibdavlat’s first idea was that she should stop polluting the environment by throwing garbage into the river and other places. Moreover, she wanted to raise awareness among her classmates as well.

During the extra classes on science, she made different crafts. Her mentor told her about *eco-activism* and advised her to use plastic bottles instead of wasting paper while she is doing crafts. From this, the idea of *eco-friendly* campaign among children was born, on which Sohibdavlrat and her mentor began to work.

"Creativity is one of the important tools in the methodology of teaching science to children. Scientific theories may seem complicated to children, and they quickly lose interest. We made different products from plastic bottles and in the process of work I told Sohibdavlrat that using bottles reduces the plastic garbage. And if you want to reduce even more the release of garbage into the environment, you can become an eco-activist. She liked the idea and we decided to create a project," said her mentor, who prefers to remain anonymous.

Sohibdavlrat's products will be demonstrated at the presentation of the project.

Using large plastic bottles, Sohibdavlrat makes pencil cases. "To make such a pencil case, you need a zipper, a plastic bottle, and a knitting thread. Such a pencil case turns out to be very beautiful and creative. The zipper can be glued with hot glue," she explains.

In addition to the pencil case, she makes many other products. These can be both ordinary toys and household products. She made piggy banks out of boxes of Pringles chips.

Sohibdavlrat try very hard to have little waste from the bottles that she uses. Very often, a lot of plastic bottle caps accumulate. Sorting them by size, she painted them red and green and made flowers. Such flowers look very cute in the decor for any interior.

Sohibdavlrat's mother loves to plant flowers. Almost every year she buys small seedlings and plants new flowers. Almost all the flowerpots that are sold in her city are made of plastic. To reduce the double use of plastics, she decided to make pots for small seedlings.

Sohibdavlrat explains how she makes flowerpots from waste: "To make a flowerpot, I take a large coke bottle and cut it into two parts. To make the halves of the bottle stand flat, I cut triangles around the edges. Next, playing with colours, I paint the bottle and let the paint dry. After that, the pot is ready for use. For its manufacture, only paints are needed. I use oil paints. After it is dry, I cover the colour with varnish".

Almost every month, Sohibdavlrat's younger brother and his peers buy from 15 to 20 discs of cartoons. After one viewing, these discs become unnecessary. Many people throw them in the trash.

"There is a lot of garbage in the form of discs among my brother's peers. I took these discs and together with my tutor we made an organizer for stationery and brushes. My tutor helped me knit shapes with thread and sew them. To make the organizer look more beautiful, flowers and beads were glued on it, which were also taken from unnecessary clothes", explained Sohibdavlrat (see picture below right)

Sohibdavlrat is getting ready to make her campaign and the products that she makes public through an exhibition at her school titled *Let Save Our Khorog from Pollution*. Some of the products can be put up for sale and money will go for environmental conservation, or to the budget of the environmental club that she would like to create.



Her tutor would like to encourage other students to join the environment campaign. "Join the campaign if you want to protect the planet from pollution and support such small, talented future leaders as Sohibdavlrat," says her tutor. [IDN-InDepthNews – 26 November 2021] (SDG 13)

* *Sharofat Shafieva is a communication and media student at the University of Central Asia in Naryn, Kyrgyzstan.*



A 'derelict' vessel in Suva Bay. (Photo Credit: Josefa Babitu)

Fiji: Sunken Suva Harbour Wrecks Pose Environmental and Safety Hazard

By Josefa Babitu

Suva (IDN/Wansolwara): Instead of a safe haven for ships, the famous Suva Bay has become a graveyard for derelict vessels, which pose a major risk to shipping and marine habitat. And there are growing concerns over

the impact of derelict vessels on the environment and the safety of ships that sail in.

According to the Clear Seas Centre, a research centre in marine shipping in Canada, abandoned ships can harm tourism and fisheries, damage infrastructure, interfere with navigation and pose safety risks to people. Oil and other toxic chemicals in the wrecks become a source of marine debris which endanger marine life.

Before his untimely death recently, Captain John Smith, a local environment advocate and professional diver who has scaled the extent of the pollution at the Suva harbour, said there were about 30 shipwrecks at the bottom of Suva harbour/bay. "Unfortunately, the owners have just abandoned them and left it for the Ports Authority to clean up," he had said.

A few have been removed but it's a slow process because it is an expensive, technical exercise and money is the problem. While sunken vessels have become a fish haven and act as an artificial reef, Capt Smith had said they were a hazard to navigation.

The Fiji Ports Corporation Limited (FPCL) is responsible for keeping the harbour clean. The corporation's communications officer, Sarah Chung, said derelict vessels were a long-standing problem that needed to be resolved.

She also said their enforcement teams had implemented a procedure for ongoing assessment and monthly reporting of wrecks and derelict vessels for the port boundaries in Suva. "FPCL has taken proactive measures to respond to oil spills or other pollution incidents such as illegal dumping of garbage from ships and have ensured that all vessels in port boundaries are adhering to Sea Port Management Act 2005 and relevant other laws of Fiji," she said.

FPCL has issued a significant number of removal orders and is currently pursuing legal action on known owners of derelict vessels. During Parliament's June sitting, Attorney-General and Minister for Economy Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum said the corporation would serve removal orders to Sea Quest Fiji Limited, Pacific Building Solutions and Cruz Holdings Limited, whose vessels were left idle at the harbour. A total of 11 vessels are expected to be removed from the harbour.

"In the past number of years, there has been not much work in respect to the derelict ship removal and there has been a huge focus on that," Mr Sayed-Khaiyum said. He revealed that derelict vessels were crowding the harbour and had killed fragile reefs and sensitive marine ecosystems that people depended on for food.

Sea Quest Ltd owns eight of the 11 derelict vessels in the harbour. "It is unfortunate that our vessels have been labelled with the term derelict. We have always placed a value on our vessels and continue to do so," the company's general manager, Wahid Ali, said. "We did determine one vessel to be beyond economic repair and we did get permission from Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji (MSAF) to scuttle one vessel this was done in 2019".

"Overall risk mitigation is being continuously addressed and we have engineers visiting the vessels regularly to upkeep and run required machinery which is all part of our contingency planning," added Ali. He said the company was pursuing interest from parties in the region to repurpose some vessels in the cargo industry, however, the COVID-19 pandemic put plans on hold.

Between 2015 and 2016, FPCL spent more than F\$305,000 (USD 144,000) in removing two derelict vessels from the Suva harbour, the *MV Tovuto* and the *MV Sea Love*.

Most companies are expected to be insured, and the insurance companies are expected to meet the cost, yet the Suva harbour area remains littered with sunken vessels, with slow progress to clear them.

Permanent Secretary for the Environment Ministry Joshua Wycliffe said the ministry would take action if companies failed to co-operate. "We also work with the infrastructure industry and are able to provide support to the companies that have actually had a mishap or the accident, and, and we ensure that those spillages are cleaned by the company that is responsible," he said in an interview with *Wansolwara*. [IDN-InDepthNews – 05 December 2021] (SDG 13)

** Josefa Babitu is a final year journalism student at the University of the South Pacific (USP) in Suva, Fiji Islands. This article was moved in association with the USP's students newspaper Wansolwara.*

Challenges Of Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) In The Post-COVID Era Viewpoints from IDN Cast



Soil salinization and sodification are among the most important problems at a global level for agricultural production, food sustainability in arid and semi-arid regions (Photo Credit: International Rice Research Institute)

Food Systems Transformation Must Be Grounded in Healthy Soil

Viewpoint by Leigh Ann Winowiecki, Research Theme Leader, Soil and Land Health, World Agroforestry (ICRAF)

LONDON (IDN): A world without healthy soil is a world in which little grows. Yet, for those who live in the roughly 25 to 40 per cent of the Earth's surface that is degraded, this is what the future could hold.

Healthy soil stands at the centre of all our pressing global challenges and will be crucial in achieving the aims of the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, launched in June this year.

Yet, healthy soil will also play an equally significant role in achieving the world's climate goals in the wake of COP26 - given the Summit's progress on agriculture-related issues. This not only includes soil's significant potential to store carbon, but also the capacity of soil to mitigate the worst impacts of climate change, including drought, degradation, and desertification, on land worldwide.

Healthy soil, and the research and partnerships needed to achieve this, is not just key in responding to the land degradation and other challenges brought about by climate change but will also be central in seizing upon the momentum of the UN Food Systems Summit and building a healthy and resilient future food system.

Increasingly, the importance of food systems that provide healthy and nutritious food with benefits for people and the planet are being recognized around the world, yet in order to scale ecosystem restoration in general and healthy soil practices, specifically, we need to overcome a series of barriers.

First of all, we need multistakeholder action around the scaling of soil health practices, integrating science, policy and practice.

This includes, for instance, the Coalition of Action 4 Soil Health (CA4SH), launched at this year's UN Food Systems Summit, which brings together the research community, Member States, private sector, farmers' and development organisations who understand that to achieve food systems transformation, we must start with healthy soil.

The main objective of the Coalition is to improve soil health globally by addressing the implementation, monitoring, policy, public and private investment barriers that constrain farmers from adopting and scaling up healthy soil practices.

Coalition of Action 4 Soil Health

Establish a multi-stakeholder coalition to facilitate the adoption and scaling of restoration practices that improve soil health in productive landscapes through investment and policy action. Specifically, value-added proposition of CA4SH is to develop global coordinating and operating mechanisms and processes (including tools for monitoring outcomes across different scales) to guide and catalyze public and market-based private sector investments in soil health as a foundational and proactive response for addressing food and nutrition security, climate change, socioeconomic returns and growth, productivity, and rural livelihoods), biodiversity, climate and nature.

Link to website: <https://foodsystems.community/global-soil-hub/>

Secondly, we must also adopt a holistic approach to soil health research to ensure that the impact of this research is realized on the ground. This includes working not only with international partners, but also directly with farmers and their local communities and the challenges they face.

For example, the Regreening Africa project, led by World Agroforestry (ICRAF), and in partnership with several international development and local organizations, aims to restore 1 million hectares of land and improve the livelihoods of 500,000 households across the continent, turning arid land and soils into green and productive farms.

Likewise, we must also support the adoption of soil health monitoring technology around the world, particularly in areas experiencing land degradation, as vital tools to building resilient and sustainable food systems amidst the challenges of climate change.

Technologies like soil spectroscopy, which have been funded by the CGIAR Research Program on Water, Land and Ecosystems (WLE) and use infrared light on soil samples to provide timely, affordable and accurate assessments of their properties, are revolutionizing soil science, and its impact in the field.

In particular, this technology reduces the cost of soil analysis and enables landscape-scale assessments of soil and land health, for example, through the Land Degradation Surveillance Framework (LDSF), which has been implemented in over 40 countries across the tropics, and most recently in Rwanda.

Finally, we must also ensure that the vast benefits and positive impacts of these technologies are then made accessible to the farmers and local governments who need the data they can provide the most.

Online dashboards, the likes of which have already been developed for Makueni County in Kenya, with support from WLE, can provide invaluable overviews of local soil health data – including erosion, acidity, and more – which may mean the difference between a productive or unproductive harvest for a smallholder farmer.

Ahead of this year's World Soil Day, it's clear that soil health research can help to address the growing climate challenges, such as desertification and land degradation, that make access to food more uncertain and unstable for many.

After all, just as all life depends on water and oxygen, the life of our food systems cannot overlook the critical importance of healthy soil. [IDN-InDepthNews – 01 December 2021]



Hallmark of our Civilisation - Plastic Pollution (Photo Credit: UNEP)

Faith, Nature and the Climate Crisis: An Evaluation

Viewpoint by Fazlun Khalid

BIRMINGHAM, UK (IDN): As the post-colonial world emerged in the middle of the last century it left in its wake a host of dismembered traditional societies which for millennia had faith as their anchor and embraced the natural world as the source of life.

The transition to the new world order was in a sense seamless as the ruling powers offloaded their territories creating secular nation-states in their own image. The emerging states were left with institutions defined by the departing powers the most important of which was the central bank whose ability to create money out of thin air sustained the model with debt.

Thus, was created the umbilical cord that tethered each new state to the departing power and ultimately to the evolving global system.

The mid-20th century world was unrecognisable from the world Iberian sailors opened up in the closing years of the 15th century. This period witnessed the unfolding of one of the major episodic events in human history resulting in the emergence of a new paradigm in which faith communities no longer held sway.

It had taken a mere 500 years, a minuscule amount of time measured against the evolution of the human story, to destroy what faith communities and traditional societies had nurtured for millennia.

This left them all adrift and as one thinker pronounced, caused a psychological shift in allegiance in this period from the divine to the human. This process objectified nature to the extent that the sources of life were turned into resources for plunder.

We worry about the decline of biological diversity but it is easy to see now that the root of this was the destruction of the cultural diversity that protected the sources of life, flora and fauna, in their own spaces and in their own time.

This is not to say that past societies were always benevolent towards nature and the fact does remain that when they inevitably collapsed the sands covered their traces and the forests grew over them: they were biodegradable.

But not so the civilisation we live in today. It is conceivable that archaeologists of the future may not only have to contend with ubiquitous plastic and poisonous chemicals but may need to wear radiation suits in order to explore the debris we have left behind.

As we struggle to make sense of the numerous enormities we have foisted on mother Earth, it is becoming evident that they are in fact direct consequences of processes emerging from the evolution of modernity.

As we chase after progress and development, not only are we destroying Earth's systems but in the process harming ourselves by ingesting toxic chemicals into our bodily systems that did not exist at the time of our grandparents.

This adds up to a new reality - that we now live in a global village viewing existence as a linear continuum of economic progress going right against the grain of the natural world.

Geologists have proposed that we now live in the Anthropocene - the age of the human reflecting the fact that we are now a force of nature. It is suggested by some that this epoch began in the mid- 20th century with the emergence of nuclear energy, disposable plastics and the human population boom.

Others point their fingers at the industrial revolution. In my view however, it began with the creation of the Bank of England in 1694. It institutionalized the processes of creating money out of thin air and lending it for a fee (usury/interest) a practice that is strictly forbidden in Islamic teachings.

This provides the convenient illusion that there is more wealth to be had than actually exists in the natural world, a proposition reducing the money we use today to the nature of a virus. This is called "Capitalism" projecting the idea of abundance for all seen by many as a serious diversion from reality.

The Global footprint network informs us that "Earth Overshoot Day" 2021 fell on July 29. We are thus living in borrowed time and for the rest of 2021 will be helping ourselves to the depleting stocks of Earth's resources, the lions share being sucked up by the richest countries of the world.

This reminds us quite clearly what the Club of Rome demonstrated to us in *limits to growth* way back in 1972. Looked at from this perspective sustainable development needs to be rethought because in order for the less well-off to meet their needs without a consequent negative impact on Earth systems, those who already have more than enough should accept considerably less. There is some balancing to be done here which is to remind the well-off of their obligations so policy makers please note. Or is Wall Street too hot to handle?

Predictably there were serious divisions in the COP 26 process which recently concluded in Glasgow. The term "game changer" on the one hand was used by a politician to proclaim success and on the other by a scientist to pronounce failure.

Whilst numerous NGOs and FBOs (Faith Based Organisations) were demonstrating palpable enthusiasm for change the oil lobby and big business kept quietly working away at the delegates to keep things as they are.

The picture this conjures up in my mind is that of an ever enlarging hole being dug out by huge bulldozers driven by the banks and big business whilst a host of people try to fill it up with little buckets.

Traditional and indigenous communities lived in a manner that was integral to nature and in the absence of scripture the natural world itself was the text. Eastern traditions also had a close affinity with nature, and it was looked upon as a gift from the Creator by all three Abrahamic faiths. All spiritual traditions teach us mindfulness, caring and sharing.

However, in today's world greed has been institutionalised and it is now known as consumerism. Our rituals are incomplete without going shopping. We are now seamlessly becoming green consumers, hooked into social media and trapped by the mobile phone heralding the consolidation of techno civilisation much to the delight of big business.

This is where we hit the buffers of biodiversity. Where will we continue to find the rare earth, the cobalt and the lithium that are going to give us high efficiency batteries that will drive our civilisation? And where are we going to dump these batteries by the ton when they are exhausted?

It is time now to elevate our level of consciousness to another level of reality. There is a space between optimism and pessimism which we need to populate. This is called "realism" and in a sense it reflects the thoughts of Prophet Muhammed when he told his followers to plant the seeds in their hands even if they thought the world was coming to an end the next day.

What and where are the seeds of hope we must plant today? How can we create a green civilisation and avoid falling into the trap of green consumerism?

How can faith communities trigger changes in a system which is dominant and all pervasive and not of their own making? Their belated re-entry into the affairs of the world was heralded by the *Assisi Declaration - Messages on Humanity and Nature from Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism*, which came out in 1986.

This was the brainchild of the late Prince Philip when he was president of WWF international. It triggered many faith-based initiatives while the next major event in this area of concern was Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si* which emerged in 2015.

Currently Muslims scholars are putting together *Al Mizan - A Covenant for the Earth* which is an encapsulation of Islamic perspectives on the environment which is projected to be published in 2022. There are Hindu and Buddhist Versions to follow thanks to the initiatives taken by the Faith for Earth division at UNEP.

Whilst science figured prominently in the COP 26 negotiations the underlying agenda in the give and take process was economics. All the participating nations had their own individual economic agendas which invariably involved growth and which they were hardly likely to give up.

And growth actually means taxing Earth resources which goes contrary to any collective agreement COP 26 ultimately conjures. There are lessons to learn for all of us from this and what we need is a strong lobby that would inject the idea of degrowth into future COP processes.

It is still not too late to take this fork in the road so will faith-based organisations lead the way before our present trajectory brings planet Earth to its knees? [IDN-InDepthNews – 09 December 2021]

* *Fazlun Khalid is Founder of the Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences and the author of "Signs on the Earth - Islam Modernity and the Climate Crisis" published in 2019.*



Young climate activists take part in demonstrations at the COP26 Climate Conference in Glasgow, Scotland. (Photo Credit: UN News/Laura Quiñones)

Policy Making Should Be the Final Destination for All Young Climate Activists and Their Peers

Viewpoint by Simone Galimberti

Kathmandu (IDN): As forecasted by many, the Glasgow Summit has been, eventually, a flop on most counts. If we want to make a real effort and try to see the final agreement from a more optimistic perspective, certainly there was some progress but neither of the nature that many were hoping for nor what planet earth is demanding.

No matter the level of public pressure exerted on the policy makers, ultimately it was impossible to strike a comprehensive deal that would, on one hand, raise the financial support for developing nations, including the much-talked issue of loss & damage and on the other hand, pave the way for a more drastic coal phase out.

Young climate activists have been dominating the scene and despite their bold voices and courageous efforts, they were unable to get what they wanted, a far-sighted, historical deal.

While there is no doubt that their strategies have been successful in creating public awareness and overall raising the stakes, ultimately the fate of the deal was signed by the official representatives of the member nations to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

In the weeks, months and years ahead, we expect the same energy and ingenuity so far shown by these young leaders to be able to keep up with the needed pressure because is the only way to ensure political leaders from around the world won't divert their focus and remain committed on more ambitious targets.

At the same time there is the risk that the same tactics might not be enough to bring the desired change. We need to muster a collective effort to broaden up the spheres of activism, popularizing it and enabling the masses of apathetic youth, the vast majority of them, those millions of young citizens who are still not on board in terms of climate action, to join the cause.

The young activists at the core of the limelight at Glasgow and earlier on, played the indispensable role of setting the pathway forward, making noise and ridiculing the politicians for their failures and overall lack of leadership.

Yet keeping the pressure up on the world stage is not going to be enough: we need to make the fight against climate change more inclusive and more participatory.

The overall goal would be to create an army of engaged young citizens able to join not only the cause of climate action but hopefully also other related issues because, "connecting the dots" among the various unfolding crises, is going to be paramount.

First it is now indispensable to go back to the grassroots and win over those disengaged youth that so far have not been showing any interest in climate change nor for any other major cause.

Second, we need to ease the youth's way towards real policy making.

Shouting, picketing, and staging protests easily grab the headlines but, while these actions are essentials and must continue, at the same time other forms of engagement must be also pursued.

After all, one thing is to lead a march, speak on the microphone at the most important global events but it is another's to find the way to engage those who stay behind.

The so-called followers need to step up and find their venue to exercise their leaderships, something that can be done in multi-fold ways.

Small actions undertaken by those youth who never ever would join a protest march, do also count and with that, the awareness and lobbying they might make locally and far from the limelight.

For example, the vast and promising field of education for sustainable development holds potential.

This is an area being promoted by UNESCO that can connect issues like climate change, biodiversity, human rights and civic engagement, is where action could be stepped up and get mainstreamed in the system.

Similarly, and aligned to it, volunteering is one of the best ways to link a cause with practical work on the ground, doing it in a way that does not replace the duty holders but instead complement their work while prompting them to do more and better.

Moreover, let's not forget that climate action, while an issue on its own standing, has real implications on all the fronts, including gender and the overall inequality agenda.

You might have a young male interested on gender equality and empowerment that from now onwards will find ways to link his passion with the impact that climate change can have on genders' power relations.

At the same time, you can find a young woman activist focused on education, devising new teaching and extracurricular activities that can improve the quality of local education while also talking about environment's preservation and new behaviours that must be embraced by children if we want to have a much greener future.

It is ultimately about harnessing civic engagement as an antidote against the multiple crises we are experiencing.

When I do hear the Secretary General of the United Nations talking about a "New Social Contract", I do imagine better relations between authorities and citizens, an enhanced partnership through more and better civic participation.

We have an entire spectrum of actions, from street protests to appearances to key talk shows but we should not discount the role played by others.

From the simplest commitment to share on a social media's feed news on key social issues or, stepping up from this, writing an opinion piece or organize local awareness programs, involving a local school in discussing the implications of climate change and other issues.

I am sure that many prominent young activists at the center of the global debate on climate action are already doing so and they should be appreciated and supported for being able to bring climate action at the center of global discussions.

At the same time, it's really paramount to enlarge this "circle" of activists in massive way and sketch out a diversified array of tactics that can propel millions of inactive youth into action.

The ultimate goal should not be just enhancing advocacy and awareness making to reach the goal. We need to go beyond that. It should not be even the promotion of volunteerism per se as one of the best tools to solve problems on the ground, the final goal.

The overarching goal of this civic journey through national and local efforts should be finding ways for youth to enter in the political arena. This is the only way that change can be brought about.

A discussion should be initiated about the meanings and implications of more youth joining politics and the different forms such new dynamism might take because "doing" politics does not necessarily mean joining a political party though, so far, this is the supposed to be the "mainstreamed" way.

There is an urgent need to rethink the spheres and meaning of policy making, turning it more accessible and inclusive.

Localizing the SDGs should all about such effort and I do hope that talks on a New Social Contract might help finding new ways of enabling more people, especially the youth, to turn themselves into policy making rather than just mere spectators of decisions that, no matters their slogans and protests, are being taken by others. [IDN-InDepthNews – 20 November 2021]

** Simone Galimberti is the Co-Founder of ENGAGE, a not-for-profit NGO based in Nepal. He writes on volunteerism, social inclusion, youth development and regional integration as an engine to improve people's lives.*

Youth-led political party aims to get more young people to vote in elections

16 June 2021: A Youth-only political party launched its campaign for the October local government elections. In South Africa's last major election in 2019, young voters had the lowest voter turnout than any other demographic. Voter apathy by young people also fuelled by disillusionment with the country's political system. At the launch of this year's municipal elections, Electoral Commission of South Africa chair Glen Mashinini said that out of the 15 million eligible voters who are yet to register, about two-thirds were under the age of 30. The youth-led political party launched its campaign for the October local government elections.

Source (listen to interview with one of the leaders): <https://www.702.co.za/articles/419393/youth-led-political-party-aims-to-get-more-young-people-to-vote-in-elections>

Malawi Farmers Receive Cash in one of the Largest Insurance Payouts in Africa

After drought and pests destroyed crops during the 2020-2021 farming season, nearly 65,000 farming households in Malawi have received cash payouts from an agricultural insurance programme of the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP). This is one of the largest crop index insurance payouts ever on the African continent, amounting to US\$2.4 million.

“Most farmers in Malawi rely on rain-fed agriculture but with the surging effects of climate change, livelihoods are cyclically disrupted, and this fuels hunger,” said Lobin C. Lowe, the Minister of Agriculture, present at the launch of the crop insurance payouts. “Scaling up crop insurance can enhance people’s capacity to anticipate and withstand shocks and mitigate their effects in the long run.”



Buying grain at a food market in Malawi (Photo Credit: WFP/Badre Bahaji)

The Government of Malawi and a coalition of partners are empowering farming communities to manage their climate risks and reduce impacts of climate-related hazards. This initiative has been implemented in Malawi since 2015. WFP coordinates with technical departments from the Government of Malawi at central and district level and with the financial support of several development partners from abroad.

WFP provides farmers with the option of crop insurance to safeguard their livelihoods in times of shock. Farmers either pay for a premium or work for 14 days (over six months during the off-season) to create assets that reduce their vulnerability to hazards over time. This (and/or a contribution in cash from participants) pays for their crop insurance coverage, which triggers a pay-out in the event of a shock.

In a good season, even when no pay-out is triggered, farmers are still improving their capacity to cope with weather shocks as a result of the assets created. In the event of a bad season (low yield) a pay-out is triggered, allowing farmers to purchase food or invest in alternative livelihoods despite the reduced harvest.

In 2021, the insurance pay-out will benefit more than 57,000 farmers across the districts of Balaka, Blantyre, Chikwawa, Machinga, Mangochi, Nsanje, Phalombe. It will compensate farmers for yield loss of maize, beans, sorghum, rice, groundnuts, cotton and pigeon peas.

Protecting farmers’ investments with insurance means that when a shock hits, compensation for losses prevents farmers from resorting to desperate measures, such as selling their livestock or taking their children out of school..

“With the changing climate, farming can be an uncertain business in Malawi, especially for smallholder farmers. The recent drought saw farmers who usually harvest up to 15 bags of 50kg of maize now harvest only one bag,” says Paul Turnbull, WFP Malawi Country Director and Representative. “The payouts are a springboard for farmers to continue their efforts in adapting to increased weather-related shocks and fighting food insecurity and poverty.”

In recent years, Malawi has experienced a rise in the frequency, intensity and unpredictability of climate shocks, perpetuating a cycle of food and nutrition insecurity.

At the COP26 climate talks in Glasgow, WFP advocated for better risk management systems and funding for governments to help climate change adaptation efforts.

Source: WFP/Africa Renewal

Dirty Coal to Replace Africa's 'Fancy Blue Diamond'

By Lisa Vives

New York/Gaborone (IDN): There may be a lump of coal in Botswana's Christmas stocking if the southern African country goes through with plans to wind down its famed diamond industry and replace it with unsustainable dirty coal.



African Diamonds (Photo Credit: Swamibu/Creative Commons, Wikimedia)

President Mokgweetsi Masisi, at the Investing in African Mining Indaba, unveiled the country's new direction acknowledging an abysmal year for the diamond market which hurt government revenue. It is "more imperative than ever", he said, "to diversify into other commodities and curb the nation's overdependence on precious stones".

The initiative comes as the American Museum of Natural History unveils an exhibition of the latest large 'fancy blue diamond' extracted from Botswana's open-pit Orapa mine.

Currently, India's Jindal Steel & Power Limited is finalizing plans to construct a coal mine in Botswana's southeastern Mmamabula coalfields in 2022, aiming to supply the export market and a planned coal power plant, a company official told the Reuters news service.

The Indian industrial giant aims for the mine to produce 4.5 million tons of coal per year.

"Work will start next year and develop in phases over two to three years. Regional demand is increasing, and the South African market has appetite for Botswana coal," Jindal Botswana country head Neeraj Saxena told Reuters.

At the COP26 climate conference, Botswana signed on to a global commitment to reduce the use of coal, but opted out of a pledge to stop issuing new coal mining licenses.

The coal plant is its only currently planned fossil fuel-based power project.

Lefoko Moagi, Minister of Mineral Resources, Green Technology & Energy Security, said the aim is to reduce Botswana's dependence for electricity on neighboring countries South Africa and Mozambique, and, potentially, become a net exporter of energy.

Demand for electricity often exceeds supply, which results in load shedding, the use of back-up diesel power plants plus electricity imports through the Southern African Power Pool.

However, the country's power plants are not efficient, and it currently imports — mainly from Namibia and South Africa — more than 50% of its needs, draining government coffers.

Moagi said the plan aims to generate sustainable jobs and increase foreign direct investment, stressing that "all the IRP projects will be procured on independent power producer basis using open international competitive bidding".

This is not the first surprising move by the Botswana government toward a controversial initiative opposed by environmentalists. In 2015 it was learned that Botswana had authorized fracking in Kgalagadi National Park - one of Africa's largest and wildest conservation areas in Africa.

The Ministry of Environment, Wildlife and Tourism later denied the reports. But as of 2016 Karoo Energy has full control of Tamboran Botswana and pledged to progress with petroleum exploration licenses. [IDN-InDepthNews - 30 November 2021]

Indian farmers' protests anniversary: Three Farm Laws' repeal welcome but fight for accountability goes on



Farmers Protests in India (Photo Credit: Randeep Maddoke/ Wikimedia Commons)

As Indian farmers marked the first anniversary of their massive and courageous protests near New Delhi against the controversial three farm laws, PAN Asia Pacific (PANAP) expressed their solidarity with the relentless struggle against government policies that seek to monopolize the food system and deprive farmers of their income and livelihood.

Enacted in September 2020, of the Three Farm Laws - the Farmer's Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act (FPTC), the Farmers Empowerment and Protection Agreement of Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, and the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act (ECA) - brought Indian farming under neoliberal policies, with agricultural produce subjected to the market outcomes decided by large agribusinesses, effectively raising food prices while lowering farmers' incomes, creating exploitative working conditions, and sanctioning corporate hoarding.

Their bravery and sacrifice did not go to waste as Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently announced that his government would repeal the Three Farm Laws enacted in September 2020. This development is a victory for the Indian farmers and their supporters from around the world, It is noted that Prime Minister Modi's announcement of the repeal has come at a time of heightened political tension. As assembly elections in the rural-dominated Uttar Pradesh and Punjab states draw near, a political agenda may very well be behind Modi backpedaling on the contentious farm laws.

Thus, PANAP unite with the Indian farmers and their movements in remaining vigilant amid the upcoming elections and the government's promise of withdrawing the farm laws in an apparent attempt to fix its already severely damaged political legitimacy.

Source: Press Statement by Sarojeni Rengam, Executive Director, PANAP

China axes Guangzhou officials for destroying thousands of Banyan Trees

Guangzhou, 13 Dec: Ten officials in the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou, including its deputy mayor, have been axed or disciplined for chopping down thousands of the city's banyan trees. Chinese state media reported on Monday that more than 4,000 mature trees were felled in the city, the capital of Guangdong province, despite community opposition to the destruction.



Banyan Tree (Photo Credit: Wikimedia Commons)

The Central Commission for Discipline Inspection - the Communist Party's watchdog - said the act "has caused grave negative impacts and irreparable losses, and it was a serious mistake ... a profound lesson should be learned", according to official news agency Xinhua.

The disciplinary agency said the removal of the trees had "destroyed the natural ecological environment and historical and cultural features of the city, and damaged the people's beautiful memories and hurt their feelings for the city deeply". The banyan is native to southern China and is widely planted in cities like Guangzhou and Fuzhou, because of the shade it provides.

Source: South China Morning Post -

https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3159511/china-axes-guangzhou-officials-destroying-thousands-banyan?module=lead_hero_story&pgtype=homepage

Kazakhstan: Polluters brace for sting of carbon tax

Almaty, 8 Dec: Beginning next year, Kazakhstan will undertake more sustained measures to constrain the amount of carbon dioxide emitted into the atmosphere by industrial enterprises.

Business newspaper Kursiv reported on December 6 that one measure envisioned by the government will be to reduce the threshold of permitted emissions for affected companies from the current level of 169 million tons of CO₂ equivalent, or tCO₂e, to 125 million tCO₂e.

The change is expected to raise the costs for polluters from around \$2 million to \$44 million, Kursiv reported, citing an Environmental Ministry plan for 2022-2025. Where companies produce more CO₂ than their quota allows, they may purchase the excess on local exchanges or purchase them directly from other companies falling short of their quota.

Source: erasianet - <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-polluters-brace-for-sting-of-carbon-tax>

Indonesia's polluted Citarum river gets a clean up - but for how long?



A section of Indonesia's Citarum River
(Photo Credit: CNA)

Bandung, Indonesia, 11 Dec: As Rahmat Sutrisno descended the slope of the Citarum riverbank, he could not help but grin. For decades, the 71-year-old had been patrolling the river which was once dubbed as one of the most polluted watercourses in the world.

Along with other activists from the River Quality Preservation People's Network, Sutrisno used to collect evidence against the many textile factories dotting his village, located in the outskirts of Indonesia's third largest city, Bandung.

A 2013 study by Green Cross Switzerland and Blacksmith Institute named Citarum as one of the top 10 worst polluted sites in the world.

But things started to change gradually since the Indonesian government began to clean up the Citarum in 2018 by clamping down on factories which violated environmental laws and relocating illegal settlements which disposed of solid waste, detergents and faeces into the river and its tributaries.

Today, there are spots where the water is safe enough to swim. Scavengers who once hunted for plastic cups and bottles became fishermen instead.

Source: Channel News Asia – for full story via the link <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/indonesia-citarum-river-world-most-polluted-bandung-2361061>

Indigenous forest dwellers in Bangladesh fear losing ancestral land

The indigenous communities living in Bangladesh's Madhupur Forest are at risk of eviction from the land they have called home for generations reports Third World Network's Rafiqul Islam.

WHEN the Bangladesh Forest Department felled Basanti Rema's banana orchard, Rema, a Garo indigenous forest dweller of Madhupur Forest, felt she was living a nightmare.

Rema, from Pegmari village in Madhupur, Tangail district, had cultivated the banana plants on half an acre in the Madhupur Forest. But the Forest Department claimed that the land on which the bananas were cultivated belonged to the department.

Rema's story is not an unusual one as in the past the Garo and other indigenous minorities have been evicted from their ancestral land because of a lack of land rights.

In a gazette notification from 15 February 2016, the Ministry of Environment and Forests declared the land of Madhupur Forest as a forest reserve under Section 20 of the Forest Act 1927.

Source: Third World Network – read full story via the link <https://www.twn.my/title2/resurgence/2021/348/eco1.htm>

Uzbekistan: Female tech entrepreneur cuts out the middleman

Tashkent, 13 Dec: A grape plantation in the rolling hills outside Uzbekistan’s capital may seem an unlikely spot to find a tech entrepreneur going about her business. But Dildora Atadjanova, cellphone in hand, is on a mission to extoll the virtues of technology to farmers.



Atadjanova introduces the App to Uzbek farmers in the field (Photo Credit: Joanna Lillis, eurasianet)

Atadjanova’s brainchild is simple but ingenious. Dalatek is a web-based platform that connects farmers with exporters and other buyers such as restaurateurs, elbowing out the middleman whose cut reduces the already slim profits for those growing produce.

The developers made the service available as a bot because farmers “are all using Telegram,” Atadjanova told Eurasianet in fluent English in an interview in her slick office in Tashkent. “Farmers upload what they have, and exporters can see and contact the farmer.”

Source: eurasianet – for full story <https://eurasianet.org/uzbekistan-female-tech-entrepreneur-cuts-out-the-middleman>

Sri Lanka’s Organic Farming Policy To Continue, Says Minister



Sri Lankan farmer with his tractor
(Photo Credit: Kalinra Seneviratne)

Colombo. 18 Dec: Sri Lanka’s government facing mounting opposition to a new organic farming policy is determinedly continuing with the policy. State Minister Shasheendra Rajapaksa said that over 8 million litres of organic liquid fertilizer and 300,000 tonnes of organic fertilizer have been distributed among farmers.

The State Minister was speaking at the Presidential Task Force on Green Socio-Economic Solutions to Climate Change at the Environment Ministry on Dec 17th. It was highlighted at the meeting that the demand for fertilizers has increased leading to quality problems. “However, the Organic Farming Programme will continue,” the State Minister said.

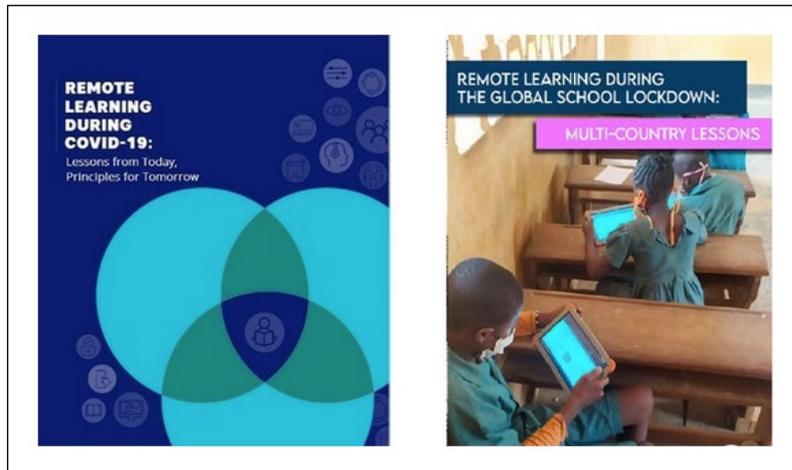
Agriculture State Minister Duminda Dissanayake also said that the Ministry already has identified 85 personnel to produce organic fertilizer around the country. Environment Minister Mahinda Amaraweera said that the Cabinet has also decided to grant permission for coconut cultivation in all paddy lands that cannot be cultivated,

“As there is a shortage of coconut saplings in the country, a circular will be issued soon to allow each Divisional Secretariat to start coconut nurseries,” the Minister said.

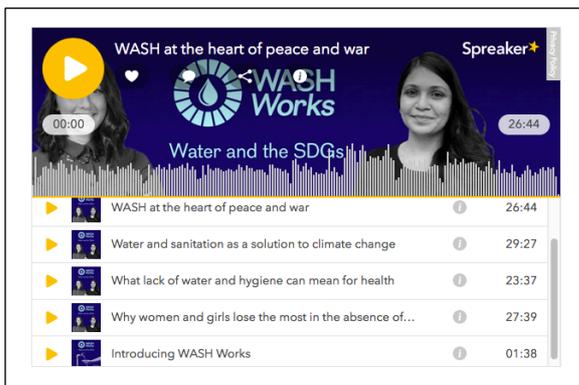
Amaraweera said that the Finance Minister has requested all Ministries to extend support to carry out this programme under the Plantations Ministry.

Source: Daily News

Challenges Of Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) In The Post-COVID Era
Recent Reports from International and Regional Think Tanks on SDG Issues

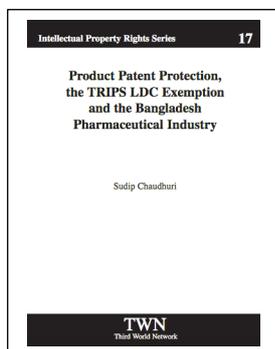


The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted education in over 150 countries and affected 1.6 billion students. In response, many countries implemented some form of remote learning. The education response during the early phase of COVID-19 focused on implementing remote learning modalities as an emergency response. These were intended to reach all students but were not always successful. As the pandemic has evolved, so too have education responses. Schools are now partially or fully open in many jurisdictions. A complete understanding of the short-, medium- and long-term implications of this crisis is still forming. The twin reports analyze how this crisis has amplified inequalities and also document a unique opportunity to reimagine the traditional model of school-based learning. The Report could be downloaded from this link - <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/edutech/brief/how-countries-are-using-edtech-to-support-remote-learning-during-the-covid-19-pandemic>



The COVID-19 pandemic has shone a spotlight on the fact that billions of people lack access to clean drinking water and sanitation services — critical to prevent and contain diseases. In this series of “WASH Works” podcasts Devex explore the many ways in which water, sanitation and hygiene efforts intersect with other development challenges, specifically in low- and middle-income countries.

Link to listen to podcasts - <https://pages.devex.com/wash-works.html>



As a least developed country, Bangladesh is currently exempted from the requirements under the WTO's TRIPS agreement to grant patent protection for pharmaceutical products. Consequently, there is scope for the country's pharmaceutical industry to manufacture and sell medicines whose production would otherwise be controlled by a patent-holding firm. This report finds that this opportunity has been made use of, to positive effect with the market for several new pharmaceuticals in Bangladesh is more competitive and the medicines more affordable. Link to download report - <https://www.twn.my/title2/IPR/pdf/ipr17.pdf>

Waive IP Rights & Save Lives

By Srividhya Ragavan

In October of 2020, when India and South Africa proposed a waiver from certain provisions of the TRIPS agreement, it was meant to increase local manufacturing capacity in these countries. The waiver was proposed as a tool to kick-start prevention, containment and treatment of COVID-19. While there is an imminent need to meet a growing supply-demand gap for all medical products, COVID-19 related products are urgently required in poorer nations to contain the pandemic. The waiver has an additional role to play in the larger trade schema. In enabling vaccination of populations across the globe, the waiver would be critical to normalize global trade. The paper captures the benefits of the waiver and compares it with the existing flexibilities under the trade regime, being compulsory licensing. Download paper from - <https://www.southcentre.int/southviews-no-231-29-november-2021/#more-18247>

Potential Claims related to IP and Public Health in Investment Agreements: COVID-19, the Proposed TRIPS Waiver and Beyond

By Cynthia Ho

An under-examined issue during the COVID-19 crisis is the potential liability of countries under investment agreements for taking steps to mitigate COVID issues. This Policy Brief provides an overview of how countries may be liable to companies for taking domestic action to protect public health, including pre-COVID claims related to Intellectual Property (IP), as well as possible claims because of COVID emergency measures, including claims that could result if the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) Waiver was adopted. The current COVID-19 crisis opens the opportunity to consider and reevaluate the unnecessary threat of international agreements that allow for investment claims and potentially consider their termination. Download paper from - <https://www.southcentre.int/investment-policy-brief-no-24-9-december-2021/#more-18252>

The Doha Ministerial Declaration on TRIPS and Public Health on its Twentieth Anniversary

By Nirmalya Syam, Viviana Munoz, Carlos M. Correa and Vitor Ido

This Policy Brief reviews the role of the Doha Declaration on TRIPS and Public Health in the twenty years since its adoption. It finds that the Doha Declaration has contributed to advance the use of the TRIPS flexibilities to promote public health and should be considered an important subsequent agreement to the TRIPS Agreement, despite the continuing challenges for WTO members to implement the TRIPS flexibilities in full. This brief also analyses the extent to which the Paragraph 6 System that became an amendment of the TRIPS Agreement as a new article 31 bis, pursuant to the Doha Declaration, has facilitated access to medicines and vaccines for countries with none or insufficient pharmaceutical manufacturing capacity. It finds that the system to date has not lived up to its promise. The Policy Brief recommends that WTO members assess and identify the challenges for the full use of the TRIPS flexibilities to promote public health, and advances that supplementary tools will need to be designed to never again allow such inequity in access to life saving vaccines and treatments as in the present COVID-19 pandemic. Download paper from - https://www.southcentre.int/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/PB107_The-Doha-Ministerial-Declaration-on-TRIPS-and-Public-Health-on-its-Twentieth-Anniversary_EN.pdf

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

By Kalinga Seneviratne

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



A new China-built high-speed train arrives in Laos (Photo Credit: Wikipedia)

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

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

The new rail line starts from the Laos capital Vientiane and goes up to Boten on the northern border with China. It is then linked to the Chinese rail system across the border at Mohan. The first two freight trains have crossed the border both ways already transporting goods worth \$3 million. The border is still closed for human traffic due to the pandemic.

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

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

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

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

Her hometown has traded with Chinese across the border for a long time. "The Laos-China railway has given me a stable job, and at the national level," she told Xinhua, predicting that it will drive all-

around development of the country, and help her hometown of Muangxay by facilitating the importation of their products to China.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“From Japan’s *Partnership for Quality Infrastructure*, the United States’ *Build Back Better World* to Europe’s recently unveiled *Global Gateway* shows how Beijing’s drive is forcing rivals to compete” argues Pitlo. “But with the exception of Japan, these new endeavours have yet to manifest in terms of projects in the pipeline. Until then, China’s belt and road will continue to find strong resonance among regional countries” {IDN-InDepthNews – 16 December 2021] (SDGs 9 and 17)

Sustainable Development Observer is a product of INPS Southeast Asia
in association with IDN-In Depth News

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