Terror stalks West Africa
The African continent is mostly reported as a land of poverty, civil strife and endless lines of begging hands. Problems facing the continent are portrayed and communicated mostly by foreign eyes through the monopoly-controlled news media.

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Editor-in-Chief: Yao Graham
Editor: Cornelius Adedze
Design: David Roy Quashie

EDITORIAL, SUBSCRIPTION AND ADVERTISING:

TWN-Africa
P. O. Box 19452
Accra-North
Ghana, West Africa
Tel: (233) 302 511189/503669/500419
Fax: (233) 302 511188
Email: africanagenda@twnafrica.org
Website: www.twnafrica.org

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West African countries are getting jittery as terrorist strikes hitherto limited to the fringes of the Sahelian regions get closer and closer to their borders.

Civil wars and rebellions in the region (Liberia, Sierra Leone, Senegal, Guinea Bissau, Côte D’Ivoire) they may have gotten used to but suicide bombers, attacking and killing people in churches are new experiences.

Tens of thousands of both internally displayed peoples and others fleeing across international borders to safer grounds have become the lot of the people in the communities in the Sahel region.

“We’re at the centre of a storm affecting all the Sahel, from Burkina Faso to Mali, Nigeria, Chad and Libya,” Niger’s minister of defence, Kalla Moutari is reported to have said recently. A storm which has also led to rises in fatalities and displacement of peoples across regions and national frontiers.

According to Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) reported fatalities from attacks on civilians alone in Niger between November 2018 and March 2019 rose by a staggering 500 percent. Mali and Burkina Faso recorded 300 percent and 7,000 percent respectively. Displacement in some reports put the internally displaced in some regions of Niger at 20,000 and rising probably to 100,000 by end 2019. With all these countries sharing borders with coastal states, apart from the threat from terrorists at their doorsteps, the flow of refugees into them looms large.

Nigeria’s continuous trouble with Boko Haram in its North East region...
started 10 years ago. The result? Some 11,000 killed, thousands kidnapped including the much-publicized Chibok school girls, and a reported 2.2 million internally displaced people. On 13 March 2016, three gunmen opened fire at a beach resort in Grand-Bassam, Cote D’Ivoire, killing at least 19 people and injuring 33 others in an attack claimed by Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, AQIM. That together with the kidnap of French, American and Japanese citizens from a National Park, in northern Benin and a Catholic priest from northern Togo, by terrorists rang alarm bells in southern coastal belts of West Africa. Ghana recently, arrested a man with a gun at a church close to its northern border with Burkina Faso, a country that is becoming notorious for attacks on its churches.

Commenting on the situation recently, Dr Festus Aubyn, a Research Fellow at the Faculty of Academic Affairs and Research at Kofi Annan International Peace Training Centre, KAIPTC, Accra, Ghana, noted that:

“The borders of Mali, Chad and Burkina Faso since 2017 have been under attack and it’s spreading down to Ghana. There have been reports that terrorist groups want to take access of 70 per cent of Burkina Faso and there have been alliances and emergence of terrorists groups to get access to the coastal areas so we need to act quickly,” he cautioned.

The deteriorating situation was acknowledged last year by then, President of the Security Council, Stephen Hickey (UK) when he called for adequate resources for the United Nations Office for West Africa (UNOWAS) to carry out preventive measures to abort the increasing terrorism and transnational organized crime in West Africa.

“The Security Council underlines the need for a more integrated, cross pillar approach across the development, humanitarian, and peace and security nexus, including to address root causes of crises, prevent further tensions and violence, tackle exclusion and poverty, strengthen resilience of institutions and communities, promote good governance and build peaceful, just and inclusive societies.” Mr. Hickey concluded in his address.

The West African countries are hard-pressed to handle the looming danger not least because they are overwhelmed, overtaken by events and basically do not have the means to confront the situation. This includes the human resource, intelligence gathering, and military equipment among others. The military and police strength of the countries are underwhelming. For a population of 28 million, Ghana has 15,500 soldiers, Cote d’Ivoire, with a population of 26 million has 25,500, Niger with a population of 19 million has 5,300 soldiers. Mali, caught, right in the eye of terror, and a population of 18 million has a total of 10,000 soldiers. (Source: Global Fire Power). All these make 0.1 percent of their total populations and the situation is no better with the police. None of the countries meet the UN recommended police to population ratio of 225:100,000. Ghana’s is 83:100,000, Nigeria, 187:100,000, Niger, 41:100,000 and Togo 55:100,000. With porous borders and inadequate equipment, the challenge of containing or ‘crushing’ the terrorist groups could not be more daunting. Regional leaders have called out to the rest of the world for help to contain the alarming situation and there have been some responses.

German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, during her May tour of the region, pledged, €60m to the G5 Sahel force of 5,000 formed by the 5 Sahelian countries in 2014 but still not operation-al due to financial and logistic challenges. Additionally, she pledged €35m to Niger and a further €20m to Burkina Faso.

Inter-state cooperation between West African countries is another major obstacle even as they all belong to ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) and have signed on to security and cooperation protocols to that effect. Such protocols as the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework, ECPF, supported by the ECOWAS Political Declaration and Common Position Against Terrorism, in addition to those of the AU. ECOWAS put its ECPF, under the Political Affairs Directorate putting an otherwise emergency into a log jam of bureaucracy in addition to it
being underfunded as financial commitment from ECOWAS states has not been forthcoming. Largely supported by donor funding, the ECPF, is a very critical arm that could help in the fight against terrorism in the region through its early warning system.

The situation is further muddied by the multiplicity of foreign governments and agencies ‘fighting’ terrorism in West Africa. The foreign forces in the fray include, the US, French, the EU forces, and local joint forces like the Multinational Joint Task Force, MNJTF, the FC-G5S, among others. At the other end is the UN whose presence is somewhat undermined by the fact that, it was not, as is usual in such cases, preceded by a peace accord, and thus the mandate of engaging in fighting terrorists is embroiled in challenges worst of all sometimes with the army of the country it finds itself Mali being an example. Sharing intelligence among the foreign forces themselves is one major hurdle.

The ECOWAS Political and Common Position Against Terrorism’s call for countries to “strengthen cooperation, synergies and joint endeavours in the areas of intelligence gathering and sharing, investigation, prosecution and law enforcement in the prevention and combating of terrorism” but this is becoming increasingly challenging to observe.

Worse still specific actions to be taken since the ECOWAS declaration in Yamoussoukro, Cote D’Ivoire on February 28, 2013, that includes:

- an ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Coordination Unit;
- an ECOWAS Arrest Warrant;
- an ECOWAS Black List of Terrorist and Criminal Networks, in order to facilitate coordination and information-sharing among Member States and
d) a sub-regional Counter-Terrorism Training Centre
are yet to see the light of day.

Meanwhile, at a recent ECOWAS Heads of State Summit in Abuja, the leaders congratulated the much touted “Accra Initiative,” aimed to promote joint operational co-operation in the fight against terrorism by Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Mali, Niger and Togo. However, host President Muhammadu Buhari called upon other heads of state “to act collectively in order to end the menace by adopting a common strategy both at the national and regional levels.” Other steps ECOWAS intends to take includewwww an extraordinary summit on September 14, in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso to “better coordinate the fight against terrorism” it says.

Another major challenge is the number of terrorist and armed groups and how they keep mutating from one form to the other. Currently one can speak of such groups as AQIM, Ansarul Islam, Boko Haram (which has fragment- ed into two groups, Islamic State, West Africa Province, the other one), Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), Ansar Dine, Janaat Nosrat al-Islam wal Mou- slimin (JNIM), among others. Fighting or engaging them in any meaningful way is problematic even as the countries
themselves and their foreign supporters are not unanimous in their approach to solving the problem.

As the search for military and political solution to the terror in West Africa continues others think a change in the socio-economic condition of especially the youth who are the recruits into the terrorist groups and organized crime gangs would be a better solution. World Bank unemployment figures show that 60 percent of the unemployed of Africa are the youth (15-24). 70 percent of Africa’s workers are the ‘working poor’ and 80 percent of those are the youth, according to an ILO report. The need to put the youth to work, decent work with decent remuneration to prevent them from joining terrorist groups and organized transnational crime cannot be more urgent than now. Poverty in the region is put at 43 percent according to West Africa Economic Outlook 2018 report by the African Development Bank and rising inequality and “acute unemployment and precarity affected the largest and most vulnerable population segments—young people, women and rural populations”. Unfortunately, these are the people and areas largely to be victims and perpetrators of attacks.

President Issoufou Mahamadou, of the Republic of Niger and Chair of the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government, bemoaned the fact that terrorism has become a “threat to peace, security and stability of the region, threat to democratic institutions and economic development”. He added that, “The threat of terrorist and criminal organizations has taken on a strategic dimension because it aims more or less at challenging the existence of our States and territories in their current forms”. In the effort to bolster their coordinated efforts at fighting the “rising insecurity” in the West African sub-region, the leaders have announced a one-billion dollar pledge over the 5-year period, 2020-2024. To be paid into a common fund by the countries, the money is to help reinforce the operations of the individual countries under attack and joint military operations. In addition to this, ECOWAS intends to ask the World Bank and the IMF to “consider security expenditure as investment”.

Mindful of the possible causes of the attacks and insecurity, Burkina Faso President Roch Marc Christian Kabore reminded his colleague heads of state that “both sustainable economies and military operations are needed to fight terrorism in the long run”.

“To overcome terrorism in the Sahel, the operationalization of the strategy for the development and security of the G5 Sahel countries is extremely imperative and urgent. Therefore, the building of transport, energy, water and telecommunications infrastructure will help sustainable social and economic development,” he added.

In furtherance of socio-economic development, the African Development Bank, has proposed a new initiative “Desert to Power”, a10,000 MW of solar-generated electricity to provide electricity to 250 million people across 11 countries: Burkina Faso, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Sudan, Djibouti, Senegal and Chad and is in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, the Paris Climate Agreement and the Renewable Energy Initiative for Africa.

“The energy deficit is a hindrance to the development of our states,” Kabore said. “Energy production costs should be cheaper, accessible to people, and have an impact in sectors such as agriculture, health, education and security.”

A recent report by the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding, WANEP, Violent Extremism and Terrorism in West Africa, warns of the creeping “southward spread” of terror with significant implications for the coastal states. “Weak state capacity in the provision of jobs, basic social services”, WANEP says is a major contributor to the violent extremism and radicalization of the unemployed, under-employed youth of the region. The state, the report emphasizes, must prevent the alarming situation by “providing tangible services that are the responsibility of the state” to its population.

The need to link poverty, unemployment, inadequate social infrastructure and services to the growing insecurity and acts of violence and terror across the sub-region has become increasingly clear to the region’s leaders hence the resolve to confront the issues from both the socio-economic and security angles. The search for a solution to the problem may be near provided the double-edged approach, a combination of soft and hard power are sustained in equal measure. However, there are no clear development plans from the individual states nor the sub-regional grouping ECOWAS to tackle the terror menace apart from the tentative military ones which have failed so far and which ironically, they plan to scale up via the 5-year 1billion dollar pledge.

* Cornelius Adedze is Editor, TWN-Africa
On January 15, 2016, at around 7:00 p.m., a group of three unidentified men, equipped with automatic weapons, opened fire on the terrace of Le Cappuccino, a restaurant in Ouagadougou, frequented by many Westerners. Burkina Faso had never experienced a terrorist attack of this magnitude. Not long after that the Splendid Hotel which is in front of Le Cappuccino, was on fire.

Fifty men, Burkinabe and French, took part in the assault on the Splendid Hotel and Le Cappuccino. In total, the attack killed 30 people, all of them dead outside, Le Cappuccino. The attack inside the Splendid injured several people, but none was killed. This was the beginning of a story of terrorist attacks that will haunt Burkina Faso for years.

On August 13, 2017, a year and a half later, the nightmare started again a few hundred meters from the Cappuccino and Splendid Hotel. This time, it was the Hallal Aziz Istanbul café and restaurant, located on the main avenue of the capital, targeted by two terrorists who came by motorbikes, fired on the seated customers, killing 19 people and injuring about 20 others. Nobody has claimed responsibility for the attacks since then.

Earlier in January 2017, unidentified gunmen killed an imam in the rural commune of Tongomayel, and teachers were ordered to leave their posts.

February 2017, a cache of terrorist...
weapons was discovered in northern Burkina Faso.

A month later, two people, including the headmaster of Kourfayel Primary School, were shot dead by unidentified gunmen, and a school in Baraboulé in Soum burned down.

In response to all these, Operation Panga, a joint cross-border military operation between the armed forces of Mali, Burkina Faso and France (Barkhane), took place from 27 March to 10 April 2017 to combat armed terrorist groups. More than 1,200 men, 200 vehicles and a dozen helicopters, Mirage 2000 fighter-bombers and Reaper drones conducted checks, control and excavation operations, village after village, for more than two weeks in a 2,500 km² in the Fhero forest, a cross-border area between Burkina Faso and Mali. It is this area that serves as a rear base for terrorists in northern Burkina Faso.

The result of the operation? Two terrorists killed, eight others captured as well as a dozen suspects handed over to the Burkinabe authorities, and two civil servants captured by unidentified armed men were rescued.

The operation did not scare the terrorists as of the 13 regions of Burkina Faso, 7 will from then on experience the daily attacks of the terrorists. Among these are the Eastern Region, the Central East, the Boucle du Mouhoun, the Hauts Bassins, the Northern region, the Central North, the Sahel and the Cascades.

On Friday, March 2, 2018, attacks targeted the French embassy in Ouagadougou, the capital, as well as the army. The government reported eight dead among Burkinabe forces with more than 80 wounded.

On 19 August 2018, the army reported that “the military detachment of Koutougou, Soum Province, in the Sahel region, had been the target of a major attack perpetrated by armed terrorist groups” in which more than a dozen soldiers were killed and several wounded.

As a result of the continuous killings of both the military and civilians in the villages of Burkina Faso, the terrorists have managed to put a wedge between the communities which now distrust each other.

Since January 1, 2019, five days after the attack on Toeni that killed 10 of the security forces, a state of emergency was declared by presidential decree for several parts of the country.

The extension of the state of emergency, after the initial six months, was duly done by Parliament on July 11, 2019, for a further six months, to allow the operations of the security forces to continue unabated.

On February 3, 2019, the Burkinabe army in a counterattack, engaged the terrorists in battles in KAIN, Yatenga province, North region, BANH, Lorum province, North region and BOMBORO, Kossi province, Boucle du Mouhoun region. In a communiqué after the operations on national television (RTB), the army commander disclosed that the combined 3 operations allowed the defence and security forces to kill 146 jihadists. The army chief called on the people to collaborate with the army to help them secure the entire nation.

On May 12, 2019, Catholic priest Simon Yampa and five of his parishioners were killed during mass celebration in Dablo by unidentified gunmen. President Roch Marc Christian Kabore cautioned the people not to fall for the attempts by the terrorists to play the ethnic card and divide the Burkinabe: “First they have tried to set ethnic groups against each other. Then, now, it is the religious communities. By all means, the enemy will try to push us towards chaos. By all means, standing up, as one man, I invite you, my compatriots to remain united and supportive, as our ancestors have always lived together as one people. We will not sink. We must make this fight against terrorism a collective and individual struggle at all times”.

Opposition leader, Zephirin Diabré in support of the President also said, “The new tactic of our common enemy is to divide us, to oppose us and fight us better. So it is up to us to avoid this trap by working to reinforce the legendary tolerance and active solidarity that has always characterized the relations between all the religious denominations in our country.”

On the same day, four Catholic faithful, were killed in the afternoon on their return from a procession with the statue of the Virgin Mary in Zimtenga Commune, Bam province, North Central region. According to Emile Bayala, the director of communications of the Northern region, upon the return of the worshipers, they were intercepted by unidentified gunmen who shot and killed four adults, spared the children and completely destroyed the statue of the Virgin Mary.

Reacting to the tragedies Cardinal Phillippe Ouédrago, Archbishop of Ouagadougou called on the citizenry to remain united, “One finger does not pick up the flour. It is together and in synergy
that we will overcome. The people will win. “The Lord is here with us, we will win. “

The information gathered was focused on Ouahigouya and Ouagadougou. Tiabéwal, Guingui, Daybara, Somme, matenga and villages of Kain, Sounam,- and witnesses of the events in the territories. The investigations in the localities and lists of victims, relatives of victims helped to 65 victims. An MBDHP President, Chrysogone Zougmoré, added that there is strong evidence that there was no fighting between elements of the security forces and the alleged terrorists. Some of the bullets collected, were near the victims’ houses.

Extrajudicial killings

The army’s operations have not gone without accusations of extrajudicial killings by civil society groups. On March 14, 2019, The Burkina Movement for Human and Peoples’ Rights (MBDHP) revealed in a survey carried out following the 146 alleged terrorists killed last February by the security forces that extrajudicial executions of civilian populations (men and women) took place in Kain and surrounding villages.

There were 60 victims who were thus summarily executed in cold blood in the localities of Kain, Sunam, Tiabéwal, Guingui, Daybara, and Somme according to MBDHP President, Chrysogone Zougmoré.

According to Zougmoré, during the month of February and the first week of March, the investigative team carried out investigations in the localities and listened to 65 victims, relatives of victims and witnesses of the events in the communes and villages of Kain, Sunam, Tiabéwal, Guingui, Daybara, Somme, Ouahigouya and Ouagadougou.

“The information gathered was cross-checked with various sources,” said Zougmoré, who added that there is strong evidence that there was no fighting between elements of the security forces and the alleged terrorists. Some of the bullets collected, were near the victims’ houses.

The human rights organization has therefore condemned the practice of extrajudicial executions, which paves the way for all possible abuses, ranging from settling scores to planned and targeted killings on a large scale.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) also claims in a 63-page report published on March 22, 2019, that Burkina Faso’s security forces have summarily executed more than 115 civilians since the middle of last year during operations against armed Islamists, who killed more than 40 people under the same conditions.

The organization reports that it collected information on “the execution by the Burkina security forces of more than 115 men accused of supporting or harboring armed Islamists”, as well as the execution by jihadists of 42 people that they suspected of cooperating with the government.

All these notwithstanding, Burkina Faso has seen a sharp upsurge in Islamist attacks over the last three months as ji-

hadist organizations seek to expand their influence in the Sahel.

These accusations and the increase in terrorists attacks have not stopped the security forces from carrying out their operations though. After Operation Otapuanu (‘Thunder’ in Gulmacéma language), from March 7 to April 12, which the army described as very successful in the eastern and central-eastern regions, the armed forces launched a new operation called Ndofou (‘Uprooting’ in fulfulde language)in the Sahel and the Northern regions. Operation Otapuanu had enabled the security forces to capture hundreds of terrorists including the influential Diallo Oumarou, alias Diaw Oumarou. Seven members of the security forces elements died during the operation.

Internally displaced people

Apart from the disruption of their lives that comes with insecurity, fear and loss of livelihoods, running away from the constant danger under which they live has led to many internally displaced peoples. On October 1, 2019, the Haut Commissaire of Bam province, Ambrose Ouédraogo said that the city of Kongoussi had taken in between 17,000 and 19,000 displaced people in the 72 hours following the latest deadly attacks in the municipalities of Zimtenga and Bourzanga. He was speaking on the sidelines of a crisis meeting of the Provincial Emergency Relief Committee (COPROSUR) to review the humanitarian situation of the displaced and propose a response.

The mayor of the municipality of Zimtenga, Salifou Macaire Ouédraogo, corroborated the report by saying that people from 30 villages out of 41 in the municipality have moved to Kongoussi, abandoning their villages.

Burkina Faso is faced with an overwhelming tragic situation which seems endless. Lives needlessly being lost, livelihoods disrupted, perpetual fear among the people and scarce resources that should go towards the provision of development infrastructure for the people being expended on securing the country by fighting terror.

* Arsene Kabore is a journalist based in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso
In a world where 1 billion people depend on fish for protein every day, curbing the loss of 33% of global fish stocks to overexploitation is an urgent task, experts said at the first-ever UN Trade Forum in Geneva, Switzerland.

This as the most intense – and critical – round of negotiations on fisheries subsidies continues in the World Trade Organization (WTO) this month.

The discussions to end certain fisheries subsidies – government support schemes for the fisheries sector – that contribute to illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, overfishing and overcapacity have been 20 years in the making and are yet to be finalized.

As WTO members try to fast-track the fisheries negotiations this week, time is of the essence and ambition is key. Just any deal will not do.

Commonwealth Secretary-General, Patricia Scotland, opened the Third Oceans Forum, held as part of the UN Trade Forum, saying urgent action is needed given the unfair and damaging impacts of harmful fisheries subsidies.

Despite a clear decline in certain fish populations, many fisheries subsidies still promote illegal fishing, overfishing and overcapacity. Their removal is a priority, says experts at a UN Trade forum.

Fishing in West African waters
and IUU fishing.

“Our ocean is truly our common wealth. We must protect its life and bounty to be enjoyed inclusively and sustainably for the good of all people and for the healthy symbiosis of our planet,” Ms. Scotland said.

The WTO is tasked by the United Nations as the implementing agency for Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 14.6, which aims to prohibit certain forms of fisheries subsidies that contribute to overcapacity and overfishing by 2020.

Governments need to successfully conclude the negotiations sooner rather than later to help deliver this key target, which affects the overall deliverability of SDG14, attendees at the forum heard. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), 33% of the world’s fish resources are overfished. About 60% are fished at maximum biologically sustainable levels.

“The case for disciplining fisheries subsidies is obvious,” said Roberto Zapata, former chair of the WTO Rules Committee in charge of the fish subsidies negotiations.

However, he acknowledged that the discussions are filled not only with political sensitivities, but also with technicalities that are complex to achieve in a balanced manner.

**Catch 22**

For instance, while there is a potential “triple win” in the negotiations – to deliver benefits for trade, development and environment – there is also inherent friction between these objectives.

Also, the issue poses a challenge within the WTO’s negotiating agenda, which traditionally focuses on trade rules, but must now grapple with sustainable development, while raising technical fisheries issues that are outside the normal scope of the WTO’s trade-focused agenda.

Mr. Zapata noted that despite these difficulties, steady progress had been made in the negotiations, despite the temptation, at times, to slide back.

“They cannot afford the luxury of losing the momentum,” Mr. Zapata said, and urged the negotiators to now accelerate the pace of discussions, mindful that the progress to date has been long and slow.

“We should not fall under the trap that any deal at a low price will suffice the purpose of sustainability. A final outcome will need to represent an actual strengthening of existing WTO rules on subsidies in the way that they have a positive effect on sustainability of oceans.”

**At the negotiating table**

Fisheries subsidies give already powerful industrial fleets greater advantage over small-scale artisanal fishers. It is estimated that 85% of governments’ fisheries subsidies go to these larger fleets, leaving the rest at risk, 2017 research in Marine Policy showed.

In addition, these subsidies can inadvertently promote IUU fishing, and overfishing.

The negotiations aim to balance the scales by seeking to eliminate the subsidies that contribute to IUU fishing; affect overfished stocks; and contribute to overfishing and overcapacity. The negotiations also handle a compendium of cross-cutting issues.

Mr. Zapata underscored that a successful outcome would consider “ambition, sustainability, flexibility and transparency”.

“Sustainability entails a sufficient, credible level of ambition, while avoiding the WTO going too deep into fisheries management,” he said. “Flexibility would allow for priority areas for subsidization that will not undercut sustainability and development.”

“Finally, transparency and information would create a necessary balance for deference to national realities.”

He added that while the overfishing and overcapacity pillar is lagging, new ideas are being presented.

**Urgent action needed**

“We may think of the ocean as the last existing frontier, but it’s not. We don’t have an endless frontier. We have to create prosperity within the within limits of our planet,” said Steven Stone, chief of the resources and markets at UN Environment.

Harmful fisheries subsidies make it difficult to achieve this, he said at the forum.

Mr. Stone said an all hands-on deck approach was needed to protect life below water, saying a change in trade policies can play a decisive role in making economic activities more sustainable and ensure healthy oceans.

Climate change will lead to significant changes in the availability and trade of fish products, economically affecting countries most dependent on the sector, warned Vera Agostini deputy director of fisheries at FAO.

The stability of seafood supply is changing, therefore the millions of people who make a living from the world’s oceans will need to diversify their livelihoods.

Ms. Agostini said the impacts of climate change on the fisheries and aquaculture sector will be determined by its ability to adapt. “We are at a difficult point and we have to adapt to actual climate challenges,” she said.

“While our failure to adapt can be expected to result in huge losses and high risks, adaptation is not a zero-sum game. Indeed, successful adaption can result in an increase in profits,” she emphasized.

According to UNCTAD Deputy Secretary-General Isabel Durant, “Public resources need to be shifted from harmful subsidies to the constructive implementation of SDGs 14 and 13.”

To support countries in their transition to sustainable ocean economies, and to align their trade policies with overall sustainable development considerations, UNCTAD, UN Environment and FAO have crafted an inter-agency action plan.

The plan is currently the only comprehensive proposal to assist countries implement new WTO rules on fisheries subsidies and deliver on trade-related ocean targets under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Requiring US$8.3 million to implement, the plan underscores multidisciplinary and coordinated efforts due to the complexity of multilateral rules on the law of the sea, fisheries and trade. Improvement in global fisheries management can bring additional economic gains estimated at US$83 billion, according to the World Bank.
Privatization solution worse than problem

In order to make the case for privatizing state-owned enterprises, their real problems were often exaggerated in order to make the case for privatization from the 1980s, argues *Jomo Kwame Sundaram.*

Privatization has not provided the miracle cure for the problems (especially inefficiencies) associated with the public sector. The public interest has rarely been well served by private interests taking over from the public sector. Growing concern over the mixed consequences of privatization has spawned research worldwide.

Adverse economic consequences

Both Bretton Woods institutions have long been aware of the adverse impacts of privatization. For example, IMF research acknowledged that privatization “can lead to job losses, wage cuts and higher prices for consumers”. Similarly, World Bank research on Argentina, Bangladesh, Chile, Ghana, Malaysia, Mexico, Sri Lanka and Turkey found huge job losses when big SOEs were privatized. In the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Chile, Sweden, Russia, Poland, Ukraine, Bulgaria, China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, the Philippines, South Korea, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh in 1999-2004, privatization more adversely affected women workers. IMF and World Bank safety net or compensation proposals were either too costly for the public treasury or too administratively burdensome.

Diverting private capital from productive new investments to buy over existing state-held assets has actually slowed, rather than accelerated economic growth. This significantly diverts funding from productive new investments, augmenting economic capacities, to instead buy over already existing assets. Instead of contributing to growth, this simply changes asset ownership.
Listing privatized SOEs on the stock market subjects them to short-term managerial considerations, typically to maximize quarterly firm earnings, thus discouraging productive new investments for the longer term. This short-termist focus tends to marginalize the long-term interests of the enterprise and the nation. Thus, stock market listing implies the introduction, perpetuation and promotion of a short-termist culture. This is often inimical to the interests of corporate and national development more generally, and improving economic welfare more broadly.

Private ownership not in public interest

Both evenly distributed as well as concentrated share ownership undermine the corporate performance of the privatized enterprise, whereas SOE ownership could overcome such collective action problems. Where the population has equal shares following privatization, such as after ‘voucher privatization’, no one has any particular interest in ensuring the privatized company is run well, worsening governance problems.

Thus, public pressure to ensure equitable share ownership may inadvertently undermine corporate performance. As shareholders only have small equity stakes, they are unlikely to incur the high costs of monitoring management and corporate performance. Thus, nobody has an incentive to take much interest in improving the corporate operations.

This ‘collective action’ problem exacerbates the ‘principal-agent’ problem as no one has enough shareholder clout to require improvements to the management of the privatized enterprise due to everyone having equal shares and hence modest stakes. Conversely, concentrated share ownership undermines corporate performance for other reasons.

Fiscal challenge

Privatization may postpone a fiscal crisis by temporarily reducing fiscal deficits with additional ‘one-off’ revenues from selling public assets. However, in the long-term, the public sector would lose income from profitable SOEs and be stuck with financing and subsidizing unprofitable ones. More resources would also be needed to finance government obligations previously cross-subsidized by SOE revenue streams.

As experience shows, the fiscal crisis may even deepen if new owners of profitable SOEs avoid paying taxes with creative accounting or due to the typically generous terms of privatization. For example, Sydney Airport paid no tax in the first decade after it was privatized even though it earned almost A$8 billion; instead, it received tax benefits of almost A$400 million!

Typically, investments in SOEs do not show up as government development expenditure or debt. Instead, they are hidden away as government-guaranteed debt, which accrue as ‘contingent liabilities’. Thus, the government remains ultimately responsible. Problems arise when government ministers force SOEs to undertake projects, make investments, or buy overpriced equipment or services, especially when not even needed.

Adverse public welfare impacts

Privatization tends to stoke inequality. Due to the macroeconomic consequences of privatization, reduced investments in the real economy would mean less job growth, stagnant wages, or both.

Private ownership not in public interest

“Privatization tends to stoke inequality. Due to the macroeconomic consequences of privatization, reduced investments in the real economy would mean less job growth, stagnant wages, or both.”

Privatization gives priority to profit maximization, typically at the expense of social welfare, equity and the public interest. In most instances, such priorities tend to reduce jobs, overtime work opportunities and real wages for employees besides imposing higher user fees or charges on customers or consumers. Thus, privatization, tends to adversely affect the interests of public sector employees and the public, especially poorer consumers.

Short-termist developmentalism?

Investments by the new private owners are typically focused on maximizing short-term profits, and may therefore be minimized. Profit-maximizing commercial or ‘economic’ costing has generated various problems, often causing services and utilities, such as water and electricity, to become more inferior or expensive.

Without subsidies, privatized companies typically increase living costs, e.g., for water supply and electricity, especially in poorer, rural and more remote areas. Thankfully, technological change has reduced many telecommunication charges, which would otherwise have been much higher due to privatization.

Privatization was supposed to lead to fair competition, but private owners have an interest in retaining SOEs’ privileges. Hence, there has been concern about: (i) formal and informal collusion, including cartel-like agreements; (ii) privileged bidding for procurement contracts and other such opportunities; and (iii) some interested parties enjoying special influence and other privileges.

Costs of living have undoubtedly increased for all. Privatization has often resulted in dualistic provision of inferior services for the poor, and superior services for those who can afford more.

The implications of dual provision vary greatly, and may well be appreciated by those who can afford costlier, but better, privatized services, especially as many resented cross-subsidization of services to the needy.

*Jomo Kwame Sundaram, a former economics professor, was United Nations Assistant Secretary-General for Economic Development, and received the Wassily Leontief Prize for Advancing the Frontiers of Economic Thought.
The truth is not enough for Gambia’s regime victims

Victims of human rights abuses under former Gambian president Yahya Jammeh are questioning whether they will ever get justice, after at least four members of a notorious hit squad were freed despite having confessed to jointly killing more than 50 people, reports *Louise Hunt.*

The hit squad members, known as the Junglers, appeared before Gambia’s Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission (TRRC) at the end of July. Immaculately dressed in their green Gambian army camouflage uniforms and berets, they gave first-hand accounts of their involvement in some of the most high-profile extra-judicial killings of Jammeh’s 22-year rule.

Incidents included the gunning down of prominent journalist and regime critic Deyda Hydara in December 2004; the massacre in 2005 of around 56 West African migrants mistaken for mercenaries; the assassination of Jammeh’s cousin, Haruna Jammeh; and the murder and dismemberment of Alhagie Ceesay and Ebou Jobe, two American-Gambian citizens who had returned to Gambia to start a business but who disappeared in 2013.

Jammeh’s reign was characterised by enforced disappearances, extrajudicial...
executions, and torture of perceived opponents, according to Human Rights Watch. Despite a population of only two million, Gambians have featured heavily among those trying to migrate to Europe – a consequence of both repression and a lack of opportunities at home.

For the families of the victims, hearing the testimonies of the alleged perpetrators has been a painful but pivotal moment as the three-year anniversary of Jammeh’s overthrow approaches, and as pressure to deliver positive change grows on Jammeh’s successor, Adama Barrow.

“I knew well before that my father was killed, but the way he was killed and the people who did it, that was the main thing I wanted to know,” said Ebrima Jammeh, who watched the testimonies on YouTube from his home in Scotland.

His father, Haruna Jammeh, an older cousin of the former president, had been strangled to death by at least two of the Junglers who testified.

“The government has said from the outset that prosecutions would have to wait the scheduled two years until the Truth Commission had completed its work. The Commission will then make recommendations for reconciliations and prosecutions in a final report.”

After hearing all these confessions, we feel betrayed.”

The victims’ families were astounded by the releases, which came just two weeks after the hearings. Some only found out about them on TV.

“The Junglers had just confessed to gruesome murders. We were angry and shocked that they would walk free. After hearing all these confessions, we feel betrayed,” said Baba Hydara, Deyda Hydara’s son, who has followed in his father’s footsteps as a newspaper editor.

“All along the government is saying the TRRC is victim-led, but we were not consulted. We all appealed the decision, but in vain – the attorney general had already made his decision.”

Tambadou also appeared to have made the decision without consulting TRRC Executive Secretary Baba Galleh Jallow, according to members of the Gambia Center for Victims of Human Rights Violations who met Jallow afterwards to discuss their concerns. If true, this would ring alarm bells over the independence and impartiality of the process.

Tambadou justified the release by saying it was unlawful to keep the Junglers in detention for more than two years without charge. But others argue they could have been kept in custody on lesser charges.

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Killers walk free

What the victims’ families didn’t know at the time was that the justice minister and attorney general, Abubacarr Tambadou, had struck a deal with the Junglers, freeing them from military detention on condition they cooperated with the truth commission.

Malick Jatta, Omar Jallow, Amadou Badgie, and Pa Ousman Sanneh were released in August. Two more Junglers remain in custody, one of whom is believed not to be cooperating with the authorities.

Ex-Gambian leader, Yahya Jammeh
“We cannot therefore pre-empt the work of the TRRC by taking action against anyone at this stage,” Tambadou said in a press conference, adding that he understood this would be a “bitter pill to swallow” for victims and their families.

But he was also in a bind because other alleged perpetrators had been freed from state custody after testifying at the truth commission.

Although he agreed the Junglers were a “special category of perpetrator”, Tambadou argued that treating them differently could disincentivise those in a similar position from telling the truth.

The strategy could pay off in the end, as the Junglers’ testimonies have already yielded crucial evidence about the chain of command that has shown that orders to kill came directly from Jammeh himself. Their cooperation with the Truth Commission could eventually lead to his extradition from exile in Equatorial Guinea and a trial.

The flipside is that victims, especially those whose cases are directly implicated in the Junglers’ release, are viewing the Truth Commission with deepening cynicism and mistrust. They question whether the commission is focusing too much on high-profile confessions at the expense of victims’ rights.

“It is not about showing how ‘successful’ the TRRC is by having perpetrators testify, it is about justice,” said Nana Jo Ndow, whose father was disappeared in 2013. One of four released Junglers, Omar Jallow, has been implicated in his murder.

‘Selective justice’

Ndow believes there is a lack of political will to tackle investigations into the Junglers’ crimes. “The release of the Junglers is a clear case of selective justice and the latest in a long series of delaying tactics by the government,” she said, pointing to inconsistencies in the government’s transitional justice approach.

Tambadou has stated on several occasions that Gambia doesn’t have the judicial capacity to put the Junglers on trial.

However, since the hearings began, three people who appeared before the TRRC have been charged with murder, including Yankuba Touray, who was part of Jammeh’s military junta.

The Junglers’ shocking revelations and subsequent release has sparked a broader public debate about Gambia’s transitional justice approach.

“I don’t think the government had envisaged the truth to come out so blatantly and so gruesomely,” said Salieu Taal, president of the Gambia Bar Association. “The public are also putting pressure on the government for justice to happen now.”

Many Gambians feel that Barrow’s government has not managed to disen-
UN expert links financial institutions’ austerity push to human rights impacts

A UN independent expert maintained that austerity measures imposed by international financial institutions have negative human rights impact in a number of countries,

*Gino Brunswijck.*

Earlier, the UN Independent Expert on Foreign Debt and Human Rights, Juan Pablo Bohoslavsky, released a report on the role of International Financial Institutions (IFIs) in imposing economic reforms that violate human rights. In particular, the report highlights how widespread promotion of austerity measures has had an adverse effect on human rights impacts in a number of countries. The document is due to be presented to the UN General Assembly in October.

In line with Eurodad findings, the Independent Expert questions the basic assumptions used to justify the introduction of austerity measures. Rather than contributing to economic growth, they tend to aggravate economic recession, worsening debt ratios and inequality. The IFIs widely prescribe such policies through lending and attached conditionals, surveillance, and technical assistance.
In his report, Bohoslavsky cites Eurodad research demonstrating that 23 out of 26 IMF (International Monetary Fund) loan programmes agreed in 2016-2017 required recipient countries to implement belt-tightening measures, including cuts to public sector employee levels and pay, regressive tax reforms, spending cuts, targeting of social protection, privatisation of state-owned enterprises and subsidy reduction. All of which result in a “series of negative human rights impacts” and a disproportionate impact on women.

In addition, the World Bank (WB) is very influential in shaping economic policies and institutions in recipient countries. Referring to Eurodad research, Bohoslavsky’s report highlights the role of the WB’s conditional Development Policy Financing in promoting regulatory reforms that pave the way for increased private sector participation, which is in line with the WB’s Maximizing Finance for Development approach. However, as there are no systematic human rights impact assessments (HRIAs), these reforms can undermine states’ obligations under international human rights law: “Shifting the provision of essential services to profit-driven corporations can negatively impact human rights and the viability of the public sector.”

Confirming Eurodad’s long standing position, the report explains that IFI conditionality undermines genuine democratic ownership of development policies: “Because of the usual circumstances in which States find themselves when seeking assistance from international financial institutions, conditionality is often imposed and are not necessarily negotiated with borrower States, not to mention their populations, who are even less involved in the associated consultations, discussions or negotiations.”

The Independent Expert establishes that IFIs can be held responsible, if they are found to be complicit in imposing or prescribing harmful economic reforms through policy advice and conditional lending. This responsibility has legal consequences: harmful reforms must be halted immediately, safeguards put in place to prevent any repetition and suitable compensation offered for losses suffered as a consequence.

In his report, the UN Independent Expert stresses that HRIAs have to be used counteract the harm caused by such IFI practices. In fact, independent, gender-sensitive HRIAs should become integral to every stage of the economic policy planning cycle. In other words, their findings should inform the design of such policies and guide any consequent reform decisions. They should also be used as a reference when reforms are implemented and evaluated on afterwards. In essence, both ex ante and ex post HRIA should be an integral part of the economic policy planning cycle and decision-making, negotiation processes and official working methods between IFIs and borrowers.

But even prior to a country being in a position of debt distress, and consequently being subject to emergency lending, such HRIAs could be important. Currently, the IMF and WB assess the sustainability of impoverished countries’ debt burdens using purely economic factors. This must change. Instead, the impact of debt on a country’s ability to finance internationally agreed development goals and to meet their human rights obligations must be taken into consideration. In practical terms, this means systematically implementing gender-sensitive HRIAs when conducting debt sustainability analyses and then ensuring the findings are used to support more timely triggering of debt restructuring or debt relief operations, as well as guiding related decision-making (e.g. on the revision of repayment terms).

Additionally, the unequal relationship between borrowers and IFIs, compounded by weak consultation of affected populations, is not a solid foundation to guarantee democratically-owned economic policies. Policy-making, which is informed by HRIAs and broad-based civic consultations, has a greater potential to generate positive rights-based development outcomes.

* Gino Brunswijk is Senior Policy and Advocacy Officer at Eurodad.

This is from Third World Network Features. The full report can be accessed at: https://undocs.org/A/74/178
Why do people attack foreigners living in South Africa?: Asking ordinary South Africans

We reproduce a 2018 study that seeks answers to the recurring xenophobia in South Africa.

A new study from the Human Sciences Research Council contributes to public debate on anti-immigrant violence by looking at the opinions of ordinary South Africans. Using public opinion data, *Dr Steven Gordon* looks at which explanations for anti-immigrant violence are most popular amongst the country’s adult population. By understanding how the public views this important question, we can better comprehend which xenophobia prevention mechanisms would be most acceptable to the general population.

The South African Constitution is regarded as one of the most progressive in the world. One of its central features is the recognition of the right of all citizens to certain socio-economic rights including basic housing, healthcare, education, food, water, and social security. Including socio-economic rights in the Constitution has direct, practical implications for government, which is expected to fulfil these rights through concrete action. It is crucial that government’s progress in delivering on these expectations is monitored.

The HSRC’s South African Social Attitude Survey (SASAS) series is a useful tool to measure the extent to which South Africans are satisfied with their socio-economic circumstances, but the series does not measure the extent to which government has complied with its obligation to progressively realise socio-economic rights. Such a measurement would require insight into the
“Anti-immigrant violence is one of the major problems facing South Africa. This type of hate crime discourages long-term integration of international migrants and acts as a barrier to otherwise economically beneficial population movement. It also sours the country’s international relationships on the African continent.”

Antonina budget and what portion of the budget the state dedicates to socio-economic goods. However, how South Africans perceive their circumstances matter and it provides valuable insight into how government has fared in providing basic goods such as water, sanitation, housing and electricity.

Anti-immigrant violence is one of the major problems facing South Africa. This type of hate crime discourages long-term integration of international migrants and acts as a barrier to otherwise economically beneficial population movement. It also sours the country’s international relationships on the African continent.

Relations between South Africa and Nigeria (one of the region’s largest economies) have, for example, deteriorated because of recent episodes of anti-immigrant attacks. Since the early 1990s, state officials, legislators and policymakers in South Africa have debated the causes of anti-immigrant violence. There are a thousand different opinions on what causes such hostility and some politicians (like former President Jacob Zuma) have even suggested that this problem does not exist.

Getting an unbiased survey answer

Data from the South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) 2017 was used for this study. A repeated cross-sectional survey series, SASAS is specially designed to be nationally representative of all persons 16 years and older in the country. Survey teams visited households in all nine provinces and the sample size was 3,098. Fieldworkers informed respondents that they were going to be asked: “some questions about people from other countries coming to live in South Africa”. Respondents were then asked the following: “There are many opinions about why people take violent action against foreigners living in South Africa. Please tell me the MAIN REASON why you think this happens.” This question was open-ended which allowed respondents to answer in their own words. This encouraged respondents to give an unbiased answer.

The response

Using SASAS, I identified main causes of xenophobic violence given by the public. These explanations are depicted in Table 1 across economic groups. Here, I use the well-known Living Standard Measure: Low (1-4), Medium (5-6) and High (7-10). Almost every person interviewed was able to offer an explanation.

The financial explanation

The most popular explanation given for attacks against international migrants concerned the negative financial effect that immigrants had on South African society. About a third (30%) of the public identified the labour market threat posed by foreigners as the main reason for anti-immigrant violence. The other main economic causes identified by the general public were: (i) the unfair business practices of foreign-owned shops and small businesses; and (ii) immigrants use up resources (such as housing). It is interesting to note that poor people were not more likely to give economic reasons than the wealthy.

Criminal activity

The criminal threat posed by international immigrants was the second most frequently mentioned cause of anti-immigrant violence. Almost a third (30%) of the adult population said that the violence occurred because communities were responding to the criminal activities of international migrants. Many people attributed the violence to foreigners’ involvement in illegal drug trafficking specifically. Poor people were found to be particularly likely to give illicit drug trading by foreigners as a main cause. About 5% of adults identified other threats from foreigners as the main reason for the attacks. These threats included disease, sexual exploitation of women and children as well as a general sense that immigrants wanted to ‘take over the country’.
Jealousy

Overall, 70% of the general public identified the threat posed by immigrants as the main explanation for anti-immigrant violence in South Africa. Looking at the minority that named a non-threat explanation for the violence, we found that few identified individual prejudice or misinformation spread about international migrants as a reason for anti-immigrant violence. Remarkably, the most frequent non-threat explanation for violence was jealousy. Approximately 10% of the population told fieldworkers that envy of the success or ingenuity of foreigners had caused this kind of hate crime. People who responded in this way tended to tell fieldworkers that South Africans were lazy when compared to international migrants.

Conclusion

Most South Africans have a strong opinion about why anti-immigrant violence occurs in the country. Reviewing the responses given to fieldworkers, it is apparent that the majority of reasons provided by the general population concern the harmful conduct of international migrants. There is no evidence to support the belief that South Africa’s international migrant community is, however, a significant cause of crime or unemployment in the country. Indeed, as former President Jacob Zuma has himself acknowledged, many in the migrant community “contribute to the economy of the country positively”. Current Minister of Home Affairs Malusi Gigaba has himself said that it is wrong to claim that all foreigners are drug dealers or human traffickers.

If a progressive solution to anti-immigrant violence is to be found, then there is a need to persuade the general population to support a different interpretation of the causes of anti-immigrant violence. Only with public support can anti-xenophobia advocates end hate crime against immigrants in South Africa. Government and activists need to change the way ordinary people think about this type of hate crime.

* Culled from HSRC Review of September 2018. Steven Gordon is a Senior Research Specialist at Human Science Council of South Africa.
As has now been widely reported, the Amazon rainforest is on fire due to a mixture of fires started for land clearance and the effects of climate change. People start fires to clear out rainforest so as to use the land for other purposes, such as cattle ranching and farming. It’s a crime against the rainforest, but also against the indigenous people who live there and whose land it arguably is.

Destruction of the Amazon is not new – it’s been happening for decades. But this time the scale is different, with the fires are being furthered by a fascist government. However, it’s important to understand that the burning of the Amazon is not actually exceptional; it’s just a spectacular example of the normal way that humans dominate, plunder and destroy Nature all around the world.

As Capra and Mattei set out in their book The Ecology of Law, our politics, economics, law and culture have long...
been based on the idea that humans are the only thing that matter. We see ourselves as separate from the rest of Nature, defining it as our environment instead of anything in its own right. Humans are the near-exclusive focus of our politics and economics, and when we measure success, we focus on reductionist metrics like GDP while ignoring anything like sustainability.

In our legal systems, the fundamental unit is the individual rights-bearer, based on an understanding of our society as made up of atomised individuals. We do not recognise that in reality, human life and freedom is that of individual humans who are interconnected with each other and the world around us. Instead of atomised individuals, our law and general worldview should instead include the network of relationships within which we live.

Our environment provides us with the conditions to live, such as clean air and water, arable soil and temperatures suitable for human life. Even leaving aside the idea that Nature has moral value and is worthy of respect, our legal and economic systems fail to protect the conditions which we need to survive.

We view aspects of Nature as ‘natural resources’ or ‘natural capital’. Legally, they are just things which are ours for the taking, save for the occasional exception of a protected species or national park. Land, ecosystems and animals all fall within the scope of property law, the starting point of which is finders keepers. Anything in existence is a res nullius, unowned until the first person claims it. This finders keepers approach to owning Nature it isn’t just about humans dominating Nature; it’s also humans dominating other humans. Indigenous people, many of whom have long lived in harmony with Nature, have been and continue to be forced off their land in the Amazon and the world over.

Ownership is near-absolute. The object, whether it’s your bike or a forest, has no rights of its own, and the owner can essentially treat it however they see fit. Rainforests do not have any right to exist, any right to be left alone to simply be rainforests. Landowners do not have any significant responsibilities to the land, to the rest of Nature, or to other people: the land is yours to do as you wish with.

When our international legal system developed during the colonial period, it distinguished between civilised nations and barbarians. Civilised nations arrived in places where ‘uncivilised’ people lived and claimed the land of indigenous people who lived there, justifying that it was for their benefit, that they weren’t fit to own things, and that they didn’t even have a system of ownership anyway, and therefore it was unowned property ready to be claimed by a coloniser. Our legal systems and approach to ownership were forced upon indigenous people as we colonised the world, and these land grabs continue to happen.

Ownership, the idea that a rich individual, a corporation or even a nation state can own land, is never really justified. It’s just treated as a fact of life, something which liberal philosophers deduced as being morally justified and a fundamental human right simply because they
saw people do it. While there are some limitations, such as environmental regulations and the need for planning permission, these still come from the starting point of humans owning Nature and take little account of safe ecological limits; legally, Nature does not have rights to protect itself.

As the Supreme Court recognised in allowing an individual person to challenge a Government decision out of concern for the natural environment, ‘the osprey has no means of taking this step itself’, ruling that an individual person could bring a judicial review out of concern for the natural environment.

The burning of the Amazon is not exceptional; humans have been plundering, subjecting and abusing land throughout the whole modern period, with activities like deforestation, mining and repurposing huge swathes of land for human agriculture entirely normal.

**This is killing us**

The notion that we share this planet with the rest of Nature, or even that we ought, perhaps, to limit the scale of ecological destruction such that human life on this planet can be sustained, is entirely absent. The relationship between humans and the rest of Nature is one of subjugation, domination and plunder, when we need it to be one of harmony and regeneration.

Over the last century there has been paradigm shift in many scientific domains, described by Capra and Mattei as ‘from seeing the world as a machine to understanding it as a network… from a mechanistic to a holistic and ecological worldview’ (*The Ecology of Law*, p xxi). While the body is now understood as a whole system, and we recognise that ecosystems are interconnected and that there are planetary systems which sustain life, our law, economics and politics lag far behind.

For human life to survive, this needs urgently addressing; our law, economics and politics should protect the conditions for continued human life on this planet.

There are emerging movements which have recognised this. Kate Raworth’s Doughnut Economics is an approach to economics which places human activity within planetary boundaries, and the UN’s Harmony with Nature programme recognises ‘a need to devise a more sustainable model for production, consumption and the economy as a whole’ which is ‘based on a non-anthropocentric relationship with Nature’.

In legal thinking, Earth Jurisprudence and the Rights for Nature movement, which this article is based on, have long recognised the need to change our legal systems to ensure a harmonious relationship with Nature. It argues that Nature should be given legal protection with rights, spoken for via human representatives, to be able to exist, persist and regenerate their vital cycles. This would include a new form of “ownership” which we don’t yet have the language for, in which Nature would effectively own itself, and law would ensure that the relationship between humans and the rest of Nature is just.

This thinking has received some traction around the world, with some rivers (and their ecosystems) being given legal status, and a handful of Latin American countries giving recognition to rights of nature, such as in Ecuador’s constitution or the Bolivian legal system. Yet there’s a long way to go with raising awareness of these ideas, overcoming the inertia of persuading people of the need for a radically different approach, and then transitioning to legal systems which are based on interconnection and ecological principles.

Our response to the burning of the Amazon cannot simply be about protecting the Amazon from being torched under a fascist regime. Instead, we must recognise that it is just the norm within our legal and economic systems, and that these need addressing urgently. Humans should be legally required to live sustainably, in the same way that States, Governments and public bodies (though not corporations) are required to respect human rights in all they do. We should do this not because of some hippy idea of loving nature, much as I do, but because our survival depends on it.”

“Our response to the burning of the Amazon cannot simply be about protecting the Amazon from being torched under a fascist regime. Instead, we must recognise that it is just the norm within our legal and economic systems, and that these need addressing urgently. Humans should be legally required to live sustainably, in the same way that States, Governments and public bodies (though not corporations) are required to respect human rights in all they do. We should do this not because of some hippy idea of loving nature, much as I do, but because our survival depends on it.”

* Alex May is a writer, activist and legal theorist who works in politics. He can be found at www.alexmay.co.uk. The article is reproduced from Third World Network Features.
Suddenly, the world’s biggest trade agreement won’t allow corporations to sue governments

The biggest barrier to many countries signing up to the world’s biggest trading bloc appears to have been removed, writes *Pat Ranald*.

The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership has been touted as the best hope for keeping world trade flowing after the attacks on the World Trade Organisation. The WTO isn’t dead yet, but in a two-pronged attack, US President Donald Trump has been flouting the spirit if not the letter of its rules by on one hand imposing tariffs on China and other countries, and on the other blocking appointments to its appellate body. The latter means that after December the appellate body will no longer have enough members to hear new cases.

Although nothing like a proper replacement for the WTO (it would have 16 member nations instead of the WTO’s 164) the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) is being talked about as a backstop. The 16 RCEP members account for almost half the world’s population; among them China, India, Japan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, Australia, and New Zealand.

The RCEP negotiations have dragged on since 2012, in part because of what had been seen as a near intractable sticking point: so-called investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS) procedures.
**ISDS was one of worst parts of the RCEP**

The World Trade Organisation doesn’t have ISDS. In the WTO, governments can take action against governments under WTO rules but corporations can’t sue governments.

ISDS provisions, present in many one-on-one or regional trade deals, allow foreign corporations (but not local corporations) to take on governments.

When the Philip Morris tobacco company lost its case against the Australian government over plain packaging laws in Australia’s High Court, it was able to have a second go in an international tribunal using the ISDS provisions of an Australia-Hong Kong investment treaty. This right would not have been available to an Australian company.

Although Australia successfully had the case thrown out, it took it seven years and cost A$24 million. Australia recovered only A$12 million from Philip Morris.

ISDS provisions were developed in the post-colonial period after World War II to compensate international investors for the direct expropriation or taking of property by governments. But over the past 20 years they expanded to include “indirect” expropriation, “minimum standard of treatment” and “legitimate expectations”, which do not involve taking of physical property and do not exist in many national legal systems.

Because the cases are very costly, they are mostly used by large global companies that already have enormous market power, including tobacco, pharmaceutical, agribusiness, mining and energy companies.

There are now 942 known ISDS cases, with increasing numbers against health and environment laws, including laws to address climate change.

**The tide is turning against it**

Legal experts like former High Court Chief Justice Robert French have noted they are conducted by temporary tribunals often presided over by practising advocates who can represent a corporation or government in one case and then sit on a tribunal the next, calling into question their independence. The decisions need not make use of precedents and have no appeals, meaning they need not be consistent.

Both the United States and European Union are moving against ISDS provisions. In January the 28 EU member states decided to terminate ISDS arrangements between themselves.

The EU is not including ISDS in any of its current negotiations, including those for a EU-Australia free trade agreement.

In the longer term, Europe is pursuing a controversial proposal for a permanent Multilateral Investment Court, which would once again allow foreign investors to sue sovereign governments but would address procedural concerns about temporary tribunals. It hasn’t yet gained support from the US, Japan, Australia or other key players, so is not likely to be implemented soon.

The US and Canada have excluded ISDS from their part of the new North America Free Trade Agreement, known as the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement.

Two institutions that oversee ISDS cases, the United Nations Commission on International Trade Law and the World Bank International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes, are conducting reviews of the system.

**It looks as if the RCEP will be free of it**

Australia is notoriously tight-lipped about international trade negotiations. But late last week Malaysia’s trade minister Datuk Darell Leiking revealed that Malaysia and each of the other 15 parties to the RCEP negotiations had agreed to exclude ISDS provisions from the deal.

Malaysia, India, Indonesia and New Zealand are all officially opposed to ISDS provisions, but this is the first public sign that all the RCEP countries have agreed to exclude it.

“Once the agreement is in force, which is within two years, the member states will re-look into it and see whether or not we are going to have the ISDS. But it must be an agreement made by all countries,” he is quoted as saying. “For now, there is no ISDS.”

Opposition to ISDS is growing. The Australian government’s apparent agreement to remove ISDS provisions from the RCEP raises questions about why it is continuing to pursue such provisions in the Indonesian and Hong Kong trade deals currently being reviewed by the parliament’s joint standing committee on treaties.

It also raises the question of whether Labor, the Greens and the Centre Alliance, each of which has has policies opposing ISDS, will support the agreements when committee reports on them in mid-October.

**But problems remain**

Defeating ISDS in the RCEP will be a victory for social movements and governments concerned to retain public interest regulation.

But other problematic proposals remain on the RCEP agenda.

These include longer monopolies for medicines that would delay the availability of cheaper medicines and would have the worst impacts in developing countries.

It remains to be seen whether this and other sticking points can be resolved and the negotiations completed by their current target date of the end of 2019.

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* Pat Ranald is Research fellow, University of Sydney. The article is reproduced from The Conversation.
Right-wing politicians fear “Invasion” of Europe & US by migrants and refugees

The United Nations commemorated its annual World Day of Migrants and Refugees (WDMR) on September 29 — this time amidst rising anti-immigrant rhetoric and widespread xenophobia, writes *Thalif Deen.*

The right-wing populist attacks have come mostly from politicians and political leaders primarily in Europe, the United States and Australia.

“Those who do not put clear limits on migration will soon start to feel like strangers in their own land,” Austria’s former Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, was quoted as saying.

Hungary’s hard-right Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who has proclaimed his intention to protect Europe from “a Muslim invasion” says “in the world today, there are basically two types of leaders: globalists and patriots” — a sentiment strongly asserted by US President Donald Trump at the UN General Assembly September 24.

And as a follow-up, the Trump administration announced September 26 that the US will accept only about 18,000 refugees, out of an anticipated 368,000 claims, in 2020: down from the current limit of 30,000 and a fraction of the 110,000 the Obama administration allowed in 2016.

“At the core of the Trump administration’s foreign policy is a commitment to make decisions made on reality, not wishes, and to drive optional outcomes based on concrete facts”, the US State Department said in its official announcement last week.

In France, and in several other European countries, there are fears of a
“grand replacement” of the country’s original “white population” with newer arrivals, mostly from conflict ridden nations in Africa and the Middle East.

These fears have been vociferously reinforced by hard right politicians not only in the US, Hungary and Austria but also in Italy, UK, Poland, France, Sweden and Australia.

Germany was the only country in Europe to admit about one million refugees by the end of 2018, a decision that had heavy political costs for Chancellor Angela Merkel.

In a report released September 19, the United Nations said the number of international migrants globally reached an estimated 272 million in 2019, an increase of 51 million since 2010.

Currently, international migrants comprise 3.5 per cent of the global population, compared to 2.8 per cent in the year 2000.

According to the report, titled International Migrant Stock 2019, a data-set released by the Population Division of the UN’s Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), in 2019, regionally, Europe hosts the largest number of international migrants (82 million), followed by Northern America (59 million) and Northern Africa and Western Asia (49 million).

At the country level, about half of all international migrants reside in just 10 countries, with the United States of America hosting the largest number of international migrants (51 million), equal to about 19 per cent of the world’s total.

Germany and Saudi Arabia host the second and third largest numbers of migrants (13 million each), followed by the Russian Federation (12 million), the United Kingdom (10 million), the United Arab Emirates (9 million), France, Canada and Australia (around 8 million each) and Italy (6 million).

Meanwhile the UN’s International Organization for Migration (IOM) says so far this year, over 63,000 migrants and refugees have entered Europe by sea—almost 30,000, or almost half of the yearly total number of people have arrived in the past nine weeks.

About four out of five migrants or refugees enter Europe through Greece or Spain, with others arriving mostly in Italy, Malta or Cyprus.

The IOM has also launched five campaigns to prevent the risks of irregular migration and to encourage informed decision-making among young Central American migrants.

The campaigns are taking place in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua.

Brandon Wu, Director of Policy and Campaigns at ActionAid USA, told IPS: “Certainly, we expect migration trends to continue increasing.”

Instead of addressing the root causes of migration, he pointed out, governments are largely ignoring them.

“We are not investing in solutions to the climate crisis, either in terms of reducing emissions or supporting communities to adapt to climate impacts. We are not investing in food security or to support rural livelihoods”, he noted.

Wu said governments like the U.S. are not changing harmful foreign policies that are driving conflict and persecution. “A deterrent strategy of persecuting migrants after they have already left their homes can only go so far – to reverse the trend of increasing migration, we have to address the reasons that people move, and no governments are truly tackling these issues at the right scale,” he declared.

He said the strategy used by Europe and U.S. to expand its borders outwards for the purposes of keeping migrants at arms’ length is fundamentally flawed.

“It’s a temporary solution at best, especially in the case of the U.S. which is now relying on terribly politically unstable countries like Honduras or El Salvador to absorb asylum seekers.”

The policy solutions that would actually best serve to protect the rights of migrants would be a combination of welcoming them into recipient countries and providing them the same social services afforded to citizens, and shifting policies (including foreign policy, foreign assistance, climate policy and more) to address the reasons why people are migrating in the first place, declared Wu.

Singling out the vulnerabilities of women in the refugee crisis, Jacqui Hunt, Director of Equality Now’s Europe and Eurasia Office, told IPS pre-existing sex inequalities mean that women and girls already face multifaceted disadvantages and this is compounded by other factors such as poverty, ethnic or cultural background, disability, and age.

Women generally have fewer assets to rely upon, lower levels of education, and are often absent from decision-making.

Also compounding their vulnerability are legal inequalities such as sex discriminatory citizenship rights, said Hunt, who has spearheaded several of Equality Now’s successful campaigns, including for the creation of a UN Working Group to focus on ending discrimination against women in law and in practice.

When people flee from conflict or natural disasters, they lose their home, livelihood and social network. Families that previously might have been able to afford to feed and educate several children may resort to marrying off their daughters in exchange for a dowry or simply because it means there is one less person to provide for, she pointed out.

Hunt said refugees and asylum seekers are often forced to live in impoverished and desperate conditions with limited choices, placing women and girls at greater risk of sexual assault, exploitation and trafficking.

“The international community needs to address the underlying sex discrimination faced by women and girls and how this also has a disproportionate impact on women and girls’ migration. It should position this dimension at the centre of policy discussions and implementation.”

This, she said, requires a gender responsive approach that involves women in all levels of decision making. Governments must strengthen their commitments to take action and be held accountable for their commitments and legal protections.

The Sustainable Development Goals and other international standards and objectives can help guide the way, she declared.

* Thalif Deen, writes for the IPS from the UN, New York.
Latin America and the US: the chains of indebtedness

Relations between the US and Latin America are explosive. It will be up to the countries of the region to break the chains that subject them to the policies of indebtedness argues *Marco A. Gandásegui.*

Like a wounded beast, the US government is hitting out in all directions. Simultaneously, it launches its attacks against China and Iran. The fury is also directed at their allies. The Latin American countries are those that have suffered the most from the bravo of the wounded beast. Cuba has been blockaded by the US for 60 years. Venezuela has just become the object of an ‘embargo’ (blockade) that aims to suffocate the Bolivarian people. But the other Latin American countries are also under attack.

The weapon most used by the US is the economic one. The first country to fall under the clutches of US banks was Haiti more than 200 years ago. When the Caribbean country became independent from France, it sought help in Washington but the slave-owning governments turned their backs on it. The ex-colony that exported sugar was blocked and subjected to an embargo by France and the United States. From being the richest country in the Americas at the dawn of the industrial revolution, Haiti became, to this day, one of the poorest countries in the world.

The same thing happened to Argentina. From the most prosperous country at the beginning of the 20th century, today it has become the most indebted. The stores are empty and Argentine families go hungry in a country that recently fed the world. Loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) are sinking it deeper and deeper every day.

The Andean countries are in a crisis that seems to have no solution. Chile only exports copper and is dependent on international prices. Its health, education and social security systems have gone bankrupt, farmers see no future and the indigenous (Mapuche) population is repressed in order to dispossess them of their lands.

Peru is the richest country in minerals in the region, but corruption has put its latest president in jail. The current president wants to move the elections forward to get out quickly of what he feels is a trap. Moreover, he has to deal with the Lima Group created by the United States to conspire against the Bolivarian government of Venezuela.

Ecuador became lost in the US-generated labyrinth that is also turning the Galapagos Islands into a military base. Colombia is the saddest case in Latin America. Invaded by the US, forced into debt to buy billions of dollars in combat weapons and organized to produce cocaine for the US market.

The largest country – Brazil – is going through a moment of uncertainty with a corrupt government that depends on the support of the exporting land-owning oligarchy, the US Embassy and a nationalist military caste. It is an explosive combination that represses the urban poor, peasants and indigenous peoples.

The exceptions in this gloomy picture of South America are Bolivia and Uruguay. Bolivia has a national development plan that exploits its natural resources and invests in the education and health of its population. Uruguay has a democracy that the US wants to destroy – without success – in order to submit it to its policies of indebtedness.

Mexico and Central America have been the object of experiments of all kinds by US corporations. The US-Mexico Trade Agreement (NAFTA) destroyed the Aztec country’s agriculture and forced the most impoverished sectors to migrate to the northern country where they are exploited by large agricultural estates for wretched wages. Having exhausted the Mexican labour force (mostly of indigenous extraction), it is now uprooting Central Americans from their countries of the so-called Northern Triangle. Meanwhile, it has destroyed the political and social institutions of Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras. The US accuses Mexico and Nicaragua, which are resisting the White House offensive, of being potentially dangerous countries for US national security.

Puerto Rico, a US colonial aberration, subject to a Management Board, should take advantage of this political juncture to negotiate its independence. Panama has been trying to negotiate a trade agreement with China since 2017, but Washington positioned itself in front of the Canal with a gunboat. Panama’s negotiating capacity is being tested.

Relations between the United States and Latin America are explosive. Everything indicates that the crisis of hegemony that the United States is going through does not allow it to maneuver to change course. It will be up to the countries of the region to break the chains that subject them to the policies of indebtedness.

* Marco A. Gandásegui is a professor of Sociology at the University of Panama and an associate researcher at CELA. The article is reproduced from Latin America in Movement, 10/09/2019.
Drought in the Sahel worsens

Drought is taking its toll on agriculture in the Sahel region of West Africa even as insecurity resulting from terrorist strikes has brought the population to its knees. It is a double agony for the largely pastoralist populations who now only live on memories of a better past, writes *Issa Sikiti da Silva.*

Abdoulaye proudly displays an album showing photos of him and his family during happier times when they all lived together in their home in northern Mali.

Today, these memories seem distant and painful.

“We lived happily as a big family before the war and ate and drank as much as we could by growing crops and raising livestock,” he tells IPS.

“Then the war broke out and our lives changed forever, pushing us southwards, finally settling in the region of Mopti. Then we went back home in 2013 when the situation stabilised.” Abdoulaye explains. In 2012, various groups of Tuareg rebels grouped together to form and administer a new northern state called Azawad.

The civil strife that resulted drove many from their homes, with communities often fleeing with their livestock, only to compete for scarce natural resources in vulnerable host communities, according to the United Nations.

In Mali, three-quarters of the population rely on agriculture for their food and income, and most are subsistence farmers, growing rain-fed crops on small plots of land, according to the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the UN. After the security situation began to improve in 2013, many returned home to rebuild their lives and livelihoods. But soon it was the turn of the expanding Sahara Desert, drought and land degradation that became the next driver of their displacement.

“As time went by, the land became useless and we found ourselves having no more land to work on. Nothing would come out that could feed us, and our livestock kept dying due the lack of water and grass to eat,” Abdoulaye recalls. “Drought across the Sahel region, followed by conflict in northern Mali, caused a major slump in the country’s agricultural production, reducing household assets and leaving many of Mali’s poor even more vulnerable,” FAO says.

“We used to move up and down with our livestock, looking for water and grass, but most of the time we found none. Life was unliveable. The Sahara is coming down, very fast,” Abdoulaye says emotionally. In the end, Abdoulaye’s family had to leave their home and broke up; Abdoulaye and his brother Ousmane heading to Benin’s commercial capital.
Cotonou in 2015, after a brief stint in Burkina Faso, as the rest of their family headed for Mali’s capital, Bamako.

Creeping desertification

The UN says that nearly 98 percent of Mali is threatened with creeping desertification, as a result of nature and human activity.

Besides, the Sahara Desert keeps expanding southward at a rate of 48 km a year, further degrading the land and eradicating the already scarce livelihoods of populations, Reuters reported. The Sahara, an area of 3.5 million square miles, is the largest “hot” desert in the world and home to some 70 species of mammals, 90 species of resident birds and 100 species of reptiles, according to Desert USA. And it is expanding, its size is registered at 10 percent larger than a century ago, Live Science reported. The Sahel, the area between the Sahara in the north and the Sudanian Savanna in the south, is the region where temperatures are rising faster than anywhere else on Earth.

The cost of land degradation is currently estimated at about $490bn per year, much higher than the cost of action to prevent it, according to UNCCD recent studies on the economics of land desertification, land degradation and drought. Roughly 40 percent of the world’s degraded land is found in areas with the highest incidence of poverty and directly impacts the health and livelihoods of an estimated 1.5 billion people, according to the UN. In a country where six million tonnes of wood is used per year, reports say that Malians are mercilessly smashing their already-fragile landscape, bringing down 4,000 square kilometres of tree cover each year in search for timber and fuel.

Lack of rain has also been making matters worse, especially for the cotton industry, of which the country remains the continent’s largest producer, with 750,000 tonnes produced in the 2018 to 2019 agriculture season. Environmentalists believe Mali’s average rainfall has dropped by 30 percent since 1998 with droughts becoming longer and more frequent.

Conflict for resources

Paul Melly, Chatham House Africa consultant, tells IPS that desertification reduces the scope for agriculture and pastoralism to remain viable.

“And of course, that may lead a few disenchanted members of the population, particularly young men, to be attracted by alternative livelihood options, including the money that can be offered by trafficking gangs or terrorist groups,” he says. Ousmane echoes Melly’s sentiments, saying: “The temptation is too much when you live in desertification-hit areas because you don’t get enough food to eat and water to drink.

“That’s where the bad guys start showing up on your door [step] to tell you that if you join them, you will get plenty food, water and pocket money. The solution is to run away, as far as you can to avoid falling into that trap.”

Consequently, Ousmane and Abdoulaye sold the few remaining animals the family had so they could leave the country. In Burkina Faso they hoped to find work in farming. However, they
were not always welcomed.

“We could feel the resentment from locals, so I told my brother we should leave before it gets ugly because there were already some tensions between local communities over what appeared to be land resources,” he says. Chatham House’s Melly confirms this: “There is no doubt that the overall context, of increasing pressure on fragile and sometimes degrading natural resources, is a contributory factor to the overall pressures in the region and, thus, potentially, to tension.”

Like elsewhere on the continent, severe environmental degradation appears to be among the root causes of inter-ethnic conflicts. Using the Darfur region as a case study, the Worldwatch Institute says: “To a considerable extent, the conflict is the result of a slow-onset disaster – creeping desertification and severe droughts that have led to food insecurity and sporadic famine, as well as growing competition for land and water.”

What is being done?

Projects such as the UN Convention to Combat Desertification’s Land Degradation Neutrality project aimed at preventing and/or reversing land degradation are some of the interventions to stop the growing desert. *Another large project that aims to wrestle back the land swallowed by The Sahara is the Great Green Wall (GGW), an eight-billion-dollar project launched by the African Union (AU) with the blessing of the UNCCD, and the backing of organisations such as the World Bank, the European Union and FAO.

Since its launch in 2007, major progress has been made in restoring the fertility of Sahelian lands. Nearly 120 communities in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger have been involved in a green belt project that resulted in the restoration of more than 2,500 hectares of degraded and drylands, according to the UNCCD. More than two million seeds and seedlings have also been planted from 50 native species of trees. But there remain gaps and many in Mali still remain affected. Community leader Hassan Badarou spent several years teaching Islam in rural Mali and Niger. He tells IPS Mali has a very complex situation. “It is not easy to live in these areas. People there face double threats. It is double stress to flee from both armed conflict and desertification. And such people need to be welcomed and assisted, and not be seen as a threat to locals’ livelihoods.”

“That is why we used to preach tolerance and solidarity wherever we went, to avoid a situation whereby local communities would feel that their meagre resources are under threat from newcomers. There should be a dialogue, an honest and frank dialogue when communities take on each other over land and water resources,” he advises.

Against the expanding Sahara, all are equal. Fadimata, an internally displaced person from northern Mali, tells IPS that climate change is affecting everyone in the Sahel, including terrorists. “I saw with my own eyes how a group of heavily-armed young men came to a village, looking for food. “They said they wanted to do no harm, but wanted something to eat. Of course we were very scared, but the villagers ended up putting something together for these poor young men. They sat down and ate, and drank plenty of water and left afterwards. I think it is better that way than to kill villagers and steal their food, livestock and water.”

*Issa Sikiti da Silva writes for the IPS
How to ‘Fix the Business of Food’ and save the planet

With up to one billion undernourished people around the world, and agriculture and land use systems increasingly vulnerable to climate change and land degradation, more companies within the global food industry need to start aligning their operations with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals or SDGs, writes *Samira Sadeque.*

As climate action remained a heightened focus at this year’s U.N. General Assembly, the Barilla Center for Food and Nutrition held an event in New York where different parties came together to discuss how to fix food security and get different stakeholders from governments to private sector to come together to make an impact.

Guido Barilla, President of the Barilla Foundation, announced the launch of the report “Fixing the Business of Food, the Food Industry and the SDG challenges” at the event.

The report noted that the food industry is a key sector in achieving sustainable food, land, water, and oceans. But current agriculture and food systems “lead to widespread hunger, malnutrition, and obesity”, accounting for almost a “quarter of greenhouse gas emissions, over 90 percent of scarcity-weighted water use, most losses of biodiversity, overexploitation of fisheries, eutrophication through nutrient overload, and considerable pollution of water and air, for example through the burning of crop residues”.

The report found that while food industry leaders have already taken steps towards aligning with the SDGs, “more work is needed in terms of business action towards sustainable development, as well as to make sustainability reporting more systematic, detailed, and useful for all parties”.

“Our planet is crying out for us to make these changes,” said Barilla during his remarks. “Together with our partners we set ourselves the challenge of assessing the food industry progress…in aligning the sustainable development goals.”

Columbia University professor and Sustainable Development Solutions Network Director, Jeffrey Sachs, and Direc-
When asked how many companies are actually adapting sustainable development practices with high priority, Charlotte Erbsoll, U.N. Global Compact Senior Advisor, said “too few,” citing a recent study by the organisation.

“It’s very clear that despite all the excitement around SDGs it’s really very superficial what companies are doing,” she said.

During the event she said that only 27 percent of companies where carrying sustainability through their supply chain.

“We can see that companies are certainly trying to embed sustainability in their strategy, they’re embedding policies,” she added, “but when we look at what kind of impact they are having on the ground, it’s far from what we need to see.”

“We found that companies look at health as mainly a responsibility for their workplace health departments but they don’t think about the potential negative impacts they can have in the production, supply, market chain and so we really want to see is they view health as a leading indicator for their activities.”

**Accountability a key**

A key highlight of the workshop was the lack of accountability and the need for each sector to hold other sectors accountable.

Sachs shed light on the importance of the different sectors coming together.

“We will not get sustainability on the planet, unless there’s co-responsibility,” he said. “We’re going to lose the resilience of the food sector itself if climate change, loss of biodiversity, destruction of land, scarcity of water continues the direction we’re going.”

In terms of achieving the SDGs, while there’s an obvious role for governments to play, Gerbrand Haverkamp, executive director of World Benchmarking Alliance (WBA), says they stay focused on the private sector.

“That means we want to make sure that business is conducted – so the way that coffee is sourced, the way that we grow bananas…that is done in a way that it doesn’t undermine progress and also starts to contribute towards progress on the SDG,” Haverkamp told IPS in an exclusive interview.

“But to make sure companies do that, we need to make sure that we are able to articulate what that means [so] that we can measure how good they are doing, and then we make those results publicly available,” he said, adding that this allows both the consumers and investors a way to tell the company how they’re performing and what risks their under-performance can pose.

Haverkamp added that while companies tend to be generally interested to engage in these practices, a bigger challenge remains the data collection.

“Companies do not adequately collect a lot of data or they fail to disclose it, so that’s a technical issue,” he added. “And to be able to hold someone accountable, you need to understand the issue.”

Others who spoke at the workshop include Emanuela Claudia Del Re, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Representative of the European Commission; Angelo Riccaboni, Full Professor Of Business Administration, University of Siena as well as Chair of the Prima Foundation; and Diane Holdorf, Managing Director of Food and Nature at the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD), based in Geneva, Switzerland.

* Samira Sadeque writes for the IPS.*
UN welcomes ‘Most Comprehensive Agreement Ever’ on global health

The UN has taken a critical step towards ensuring that its members make full health coverage for its citizens a priority and necessity.

Describing it as an “important landmark” on our “journey to health for all”, Secretary-General António Guterres on Monday welcomed the UN Political Declaration on universal health coverage, or UHC, which commits countries to advance towards full coverage for their citizens in four major areas around primary care.

During a meeting of heads of State, ministers, health leaders, policy-makers, and universal health coverage champions, the UN chief called UHC “the most comprehensive agreement ever reached on global health – a vision for Universal Health Coverage by 2030”.

World leaders made the public commitment during the meeting at the beginning of the high level week of the UN General Assembly, themed “Universal Health Coverage: Moving Together to Build a Healthier World”.

He maintained that this “significant achievement” will drive progress over the next decade on tackling communicable diseases, including HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria, while addressing non-communicable disease and the growing threat of antimicrobial resistance through robust and resilient primary healthcare systems.

“The Political Declaration also states the need to ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health-care services and reproductive rights”, he continued. “It is essential to protect the wellbeing and dignity of women and girls”.

The UN chief pushed for an urgent “change the financing paradigm” to “step up the pace of investment” towards UHC.

Stressing the importance of “bold national leadership”, the Secretary-General underscored: “Let us all be champions of health for all”.

Inside patients’ ward
Universal right, not a privilege

General Assembly President Tijjani Muhammad-Bande opened the meeting by underscoring that access to critical health services “must be a universal right and not a privilege”.

“We must ensure that nations around the world can benefit from each other in medical training, provision of medical infrastructure, among others, if we are to achieve our agreed SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals)”, he stated. Mr. Muhammad-Bande said the objective of UHC is to “strengthen our health systems” to guarantee a “healthier life for everyone” by ensuring that people have access to “affordable, preventive, curative and rehabilitative health services”.

According to the General Assembly President, to obtain quality health services, Member States must support each other, including with “integrated, efficient, safe and people-centred care” and continue to invest in research “to better equip us in preventing diseases, among other benefits”.

In conclusion, he pointed to the “profound” challenges we face, saying: “I am confident that if we continue and strengthen international co-operation and seize the opportunities already available, while creating even more opportunities, we can overcome them – together”.

‘A political choice’

Universal health coverage means all people regardless of their ability to pay, having access to the health care they need, when and where they need it, without facing financial hardship.

Congratulating world leaders, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General at the World Health Organization (WHO) told the historic meeting that UHC was “a political choice: today world leaders have signaled their readiness to make that choice.”

The declaration comes the day after WHO and partners flagged the need to double health coverage between now and 2030, or leave up to five billion people unable to access sufficient services.

In adopting the declaration, Member States have committed to investing in policies which would prevent financial hardship from out-of-pocket healthcare payments. It also aims to implement high-impact health interventions to combat diseases and protect women’s and children’s health.

Human development outcome

At the same time, David R. Malpass, President of the World Bank Group, informed the meeting that “with the changing nature of work”, the World Bank and International Finance Corporation (IFC) are “supporting the roll-out of mobile health insurance platforms” to extend finance protection to tens of millions of people across 22 countries.

“To improve health outcomes, we must go beyond health”, he flagged. “That means supporting communities by improving education, broadening social services and creating jobs”.

According to Mr. Malpass, investments in health facilities, vaccines and health technology “will be wasted”, if issues like “childhood stunting, girls education and weak social safety nets that leave families vulnerable” are not addressed.

For her part, Melinda Gates, Co-Chair of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation asserted that it was now time “to get down to the hard work” of turning “commitments into results”.

“We all have a role to play”, she said. “Donors and country Governments need to move beyond business as usual to bolster the primary health care systems that address the vast majority of people’s needs over their lifetimes”.

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