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The Fight Against ANTIMICROBIAL RESISTANCE

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TWN - South Centre
Regional Workshop on
Antimicrobial Resistance
in Asia

Editor's Note

IN the history of modern medicine, 1928 was clearly a seminal year. For it was in that year that Sir Alexander Fleming discovered the antibiotic penicillin. Although it was an accidental discovery, it heralded the era of antibiotics that revolutionised modern medicine.

Unfortunately, the miraculous qualities of this medicine were an invitation to overuse and misuse. Doctors resorted to prescribing antibiotics for the mildest of ailments. This was despite the warning sounded by Fleming in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech that overuse of penicillin could lead to the targeted bacteria acquiring resistance.

The whole problem has been compounded by the fact that the use of antibiotics has not been limited to human beings. Since the 1930s beginning first in the West, the practice of administering them to livestock became commonplace. For farmers, the nightmare of livestock diseases and the culling of the diseased seemed to be a thing of the past and the very efficacy of antibiotics encouraged liberal use of such drugs. But the real attraction of antibiotics for farmers is that they purportedly promote growth and development of their livestock in addition to treating diseases.

The manufacturers of these antibiotics have not done much to caution farmers to use the antibiotics sparingly and not as growth promoters. On the contrary, they have been promoting their antibiotics with even more gusto.

The net result of this profligacy has been the contamination of the environment with the residues of such drugs. Some two-thirds of the rivers surveyed in a recent global study were found to contain antibiotic traces.

All this abuse, misuse and overuse of antibiotics has given rise to the emergence of antibiotic (or antimicrobial) resistance. It is a terrifying thought that very soon we could have a situation in which antibiotics will cease to work. The sick and injured would have to undergo the same pain and ordeal – and even risk of death – that patients in the pre-antibiotic era did.

In recent years, there has been an increasing realisation that the world is now facing a crisis of antimicrobial resistance and action has to be taken to arrest its spread. On our part, the Third World Network sought to highlight this pressing threat by co-organising, with the South Centre, a Regional Workshop on Antimicrobial Resistance in Asia in June. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has been at the forefront of the global governmental effort; in 2017, for example, it called for an end to the use of antibiotics in livestock for growth promotion and disease prevention without diagnosis.

In short, what is called for is a policy for the rational use of antibiotics and other antimicrobial medicines. Antibiotics should be prescribed only if they are absolutely necessary. In cases where they can be dispensed with, it would be highly irresponsible to prescribe them.

In addition, there is the problem of finding new antimicrobial medicines to replace those which have lost their potency. Here governments must take the lead as major pharmaceutical firms have little interest in products which require years of research but yield comparatively little dividend. And once they have made a new discovery, governments must not hand it over to Big Pharma for a song. Instead, they must grant licences to companies which have a pricing policy more acceptable to the public.

Our cover story for this issue highlights the challenges facing the global community in its battle against antimicrobial resistance. While it is clear that to be truly effective the battle has to be waged globally, this should not preclude targeting specific areas of the world where the incidence of resistance is inordinately high, such as Asia. Moreover, in view of the previous neglect of the environment as a source of antibiotic pollution, it may be necessary to adopt an 'environment first' approach.

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It is with great sadness that we inform readers of the passing away in May of S M Mohamed Idris, the publisher of this magazine and Chairperson of the Third World Network. Although he did not partake in its actual production, once an issue was off the press, he would scrutinise it with a comb and comment on the contents. Occasionally, this would result in a lively exchange!

He was by any measure an astonishing phenomenon. Endowed with a prodigious memory, he read voraciously to keep abreast with current events. Although he had no formal higher education, he could hold his own against any university don or intellectual.

Born in rural India to a family who later migrated to the then Malaya, he was active in local government as a councillor in the early days of Malaya's independence. But it was as a pioneer of civil society, having founded and led three of the country's most active non-governmental organisations – the Consumers' Association of Penang, Sahabat Alam Malaysia and the Third World Network – that he will long be remembered.

We will all miss him.

– The Editors

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Humankind is faced with the threat of antimicrobial resistance, and unless action is taken to address this, antibiotics and other antimicrobial medicines may cease to work. **25**

THIRD WORLD RESURGENCE is published by the Third World Network, an international network of groups and individuals involved in efforts to bring about a greater articulation of the needs and rights of peoples in the Third World; a fair distribution of world resources; and forms of development which are ecologically sustainable and fulfil human needs.

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TRIBUTE

A true champion of the people and the environment

The death in May of S M Mohamed Idris, the founder of the Third World Network, has robbed civil society, both local and international, of one of its finest embodiments. But as *Martin Khor* shows in the following tribute, he was much more than that. As one who devoted a lifetime to activism and agitation on critical issues affecting the planet long before they became common currency, he had few peers.

S M Mohamed Idris was one of a kind. He was a force of nature. And in more ways than one.

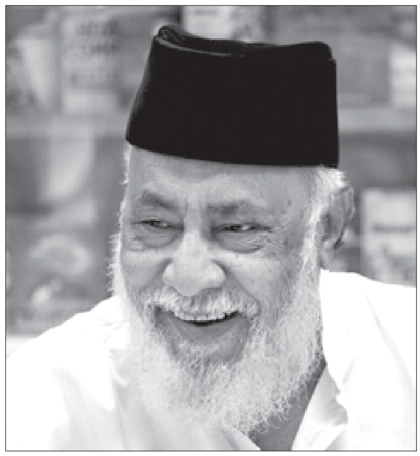
His passing on 17 May was the passing of an era. I doubt we will be so fortunate to have someone like him again.

He had such an incredible mind, with an insatiable thirst for information on all kinds of issues, from the most minute to the largest. He could process and synthesise all that information and see the links between them. And then translate them into points for concrete actions and policies.

He put this intellect, creativity and knowledge of practical action to constant use, day after day, from his adolescence till the last day of his 93 years of life. Family and friends told him to take it easy, especially in the last few months. But he could not. He was driven by passion to right the wrongs in the local community, the country and the world.

He could not bear to read that children go hungry, when so much food is wasted. He would be incensed by the chopping of trees, whether in cities or the hills and forests. He could not stand that Malaysians' health was being threatened by unsafe food, occupational hazards, road accidents, polluted air … when all these could be prevented.

Most of all, he wanted ordinary people to stand up for their rights. 'Complain!' became one of the popular slogans of the Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP), which he led for 50 years. If you are cheated; if the house you just bought has holes or cracks in the wall; if your work-



S M Mohamed Idris (1926-2019).

place is harming your health; if the forest you go hiking in is being felled, don't just take it or grumble to yourself. Make an official complaint, mobilise your friends and neighbours, assert your rights, and fight back!

This rallying call of Idris's became CAP's guiding philosophy. Idris transformed the objectives of the consumer movement. Instead of focusing on which brand of camera or motorcar to buy (the traditional main issue of consumer organisations), he redefined the movement's concerns towards whether the basic needs of food, health, education and housing are being met.

By steering CAP in this direction, Idris opened the path for citizens not only in Malaysia but also many other countries to broaden the scope of the issues that consumers can and should take up.

CAP operated in its earlier years under difficult conditions, when government was very sensitive to public criticism, let alone protests.

I remember reading, after returning from studies abroad in the mid-1970s, an issue of CAP's *Utusan Konsumer* news magazine which carried a frontpage photograph of huge casuarina trees with their roots exposed by erosion on Penang's Gurney Drive beach, and the accompanying headline 'The death of Penang's trees'.

'Aren't you afraid of being arrested and CAP being closed down?' I asked Idris. His answer: 'We just have to highlight this problem.'

This incident reveals how scared ordinary Malaysians were at that time, how restrained the media were, and how Idris saw CAP's role as speaking up when no one else was willing to.

Through its annual seminars (which usually featured around 50 speakers and papers on all aspects of a specific topic like the state of health, education or rural development, the economy and even the administration of law and justice), CAP pushed the envelope to assert that all these were legitimate issues to take up.

'We pay the taxes that finance the government's operations,' Idris would say. 'We thus have the right to give the government our views on how the ministries and agencies are performing and how to improve.'

The environment was a large part of Idris's concerns. CAP organised its first forum on the environment in 1971 and held a large symposium on 'Crisis in the Malaysian Environment' in 1978. In 1982, the new Malaysian Environment Minister Stephen Yong visited CAP and told us this was among his first acts because it was CAP's work that led to the Ministry

Mohamed Idris at a protest against the uprooting and transplanting of trees in Penang, Malaysia. He saw the central importance of protecting the environment.

being formed.

The environment became so important an area that Idris initiated another organisation to deal with it. Thus was born Sahabat Alam Malaysia, which Idris also led for 40 years.

In the early 1980s, Idris discussed with us the need to expand CAP's work internationally as the source of many problems lies in the global system. Consequently the CAP conference of 1984 was on the development crisis in the Third World. Experts, journalists and activists from all over the world took part. They urged CAP to set up a network to tackle the problems faced by developing countries in the imbalanced world system. Thus was established the Third World Network.

Idris was well known internationally. When I visited the office of the American consumer movement icon Ralph Nader and said I was honoured to meet him, he surprised me by saying: 'The honour is mine. I have heard all about Mohamed Idris and CAP. He is the world's consumer rights champion.'

The renowned public health activist from South Africa, Prof. David Sanders, was impressed after visiting Idris and CAP. 'You have set up a whole effective machinery for citizens to know and fight for their rights.'

Idris was far ahead of the curve on many issues. He started an anti-sugar campaign three decades ago when few knew the full extent of the dangers of excessive sugar intake. CAP took up the climate change issue long before governments recognised it as the biggest threat to the world's survival.

The antibiotic resistance issue, now seen as the biggest global health problem, was taken up by CAP in the 1980s. Twenty years ago, Idris became excited about the need to protect microorganisms in the soil; two years ago, the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) publicised its report on how crucial these microorganisms are and how they are now being threatened.

Many laws in Malaysia have been changed or created because of Idris's memoranda and discussions with various government ministers and officials. And many planned projects that he viewed as being wasteful or damaging to people's interests or to the environment have been cancelled or modified. For example, CAP successfully campaigned with other non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to save Penang Hill from a massive development project in the early 1990s.

Idris was against the USA-Malaysia free trade agreement negotiations (which were cancelled in the early 2000s) and the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPPA) and its new form CPTPP. In his view, these trade pacts would cause Malaysia to give up many of its important present policies and compromise the country's sovereignty. He met personally with Malaysia's then International Trade Minister to press his points, and sent a series of letters and memoranda to numerous ministers.

His last big battle was against the RM45 billion Penang Transport Master Plan (PTMP), which he was convinced would ruin Penang's environment and way of life. In recent months, he personally led two protests, including one near the site of the planned project under the PTMP to create three islands on reclaimed land.

Idris was a simple man who always wore a white kurta and sarong. He was not one to chase after awards. The only two he accepted were the Tun Razak Award and the International Islamic University's inaugural Ibnu Khaldun award last November (but he insisted the award be given to CAP and not himself).

He was not one who rested on his laurels. Despite his numerous achievements, Idris was always frustrated that there were so many injustices in the world, and that Mother Nature was facing the worst-ever crisis. So he drove himself and others to continue the work started so long ago.

When I last met him at his Rose Avenue home in early May, he was full of energy, reminding me to get CAP to take up all the many unresolved issues. After his death, his daughter Fathima told me that her father, even while in hospital, had wanted her to convey to me the need to do research on why reducing food waste would also lower food prices.

I started by saying Idris was a force of nature. Such a force is from someone who does not follow the normal ways of the world but charts his own way, creating a path that others follow. As for Nature, he had the rare gift of seeing the interconnectedness of things and the central importance of protecting the environment.

Rest in peace, Mohamed Idris, one of the very finest sons Malaysia has ever produced, and a true champion of the people's interests and of the environment. Rest assured that many in the country and around the world will carry on the work to which you devoted your life. ◆

Martin Khor is the Honorary Secretary of the Consumers' Association of Penang, and Advisor to the Third World Network, two of the organisations that S M Mohamed Idris founded and led.

Human well-being threatened by 'unprecedented' rate of biodiversity loss

'Our destruction of biodiversity and ecosystem services has reached levels that threaten our well-being at least as much as human-induced climate change,' says the chair of an expert panel on the subject.

Mike Shanahan

Overfishing is one of the drivers of biodiversity loss.

NATURE loss is accelerating worldwide at an unprecedented rate, with grave impacts for human well-being, according to a major report approved by more than 130 of the world's governments.

The report, launched in Paris on 6 May, says fundamental changes are needed to everything from farming and fishing to private investment and governance to ensure the benefits continue to flow.

While such warnings have been heard before, this is the most comprehensive assessment to date, and the first that governments have come together to endorse. The findings are set to influence world leaders who are meeting in China next year, aiming to reach a new global agreement on biodiversity.

'The evidence is incontestable,' said Robert Watson, chair of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), which produced the report. 'Our destruction of biodiversity and ecosystem services has reached levels that threaten our well-being at least as much as human-induced climate change. We have a closing window of opportunity to act, and narrowing options.'

Key findings

The report is the result of three years of work by hundreds of scientists who have reviewed 15,000 sources of information. It shows how nature is crucial to humanity, providing food, water, energy and medicines, as well as livelihoods and cultural and spiritual fulfilment. But it shows too that many species are fast declining in range and numbers, and that the services ecosystems provide, such as water and carbon storage, seed dispersal and pollination, are breaking down.

Humanity has 'severely altered' three-quarters of the planet's land surface, it says, adding that one million species are threatened with extinction, many within decades. Watson said the continued loss of biodiversity 'will undermine the ability of most countries to achieve most of the Sustainable Development Goals', which all UN member states have pledged to achieve by 2030.

While climate change will make all of this worse, so too could some efforts to prevent global warming. IPBES says, for example, that plantations of bioenergy crops can have negative impacts on biodiversity and on ecosystem services that are key to food and water security.

The report says biodiversity loss and ecosystem destruction is being driven by a litany of problems including overfishing, deforestation, pollution, agricultural expansion, rising seas, unsustainable hunting, illegal wildlife trade, invasive species and climate change. It also highlights important 'indirect drivers' such as rapid economic growth, poorly planned urbanisation and rising per capita consumption.

Spotlight on China

The IPBES report is global in scope and makes grim reading for all regions. It warns, for instance, that if the current trends continue, 'there could be a substantial decline in the economic and non-monetary value of nature's contributions' to people across Asia in coming decades. With its diverse landscapes and rapid development, China exemplifies many of the problems and potential solutions IPBES describes.

The country has established

many protected areas and greatly increased its forest area in recent years. But it also faces significant conservation challenges, particularly in its drylands, lakes, rivers and coastal wetlands, of which less than half of the original area remains. These include overexploitation, pollution, extractive industries and invasive species, which IPBES has said are 'key biological threats to China's social development and ecological security', costing $17 billion each year.

According to IPBES, the number of invasive species harming China's agricultural ecosystems has been growing by about three species a year since 1900, with a faster rate of increase in the past 15 years. This is a huge threat, particularly to China's 193 million small farms, which are living repositories of crop diversity. That biodiversity is also threatened by economic forces. In response to market demand, many subsistence farms are being replaced by commercial monoculture. The loss of traditional crop varieties and associated local farming knowledge is removing options that could be crucial to efforts to adapt to a changing climate.

'This is a threat to the sustainability and resilience of the whole traditional farming system,' said Yiching Song, of the Centre for Chinese Agricultural Policy of the Chinese Academy of Sciences. At the same time however, said Song, there is growing demand in China for safe, good-quality and varied food because of rising incomes, food safety issues and increasing concern for the environment. 'This is good news and an opportunity for crop biodiversity protection and farmer seed system enhancement,' she said.

Bringing about a revolution

Only 'transformative change' can prevent further declines in humanity's natural life-support systems by 2050 and beyond, says the IPBES report. 'By transformative change,' said Watson, 'we mean a fundamental, system-wide reorganisation across technical, economic and social factors, including paradigms, goals and values.'

Among other things, the report calls for better ways of producing and using food, energy and water, more inclusive decision-making and governance of natural resources, new frameworks for private investment and incentives for environmental protection. It urges governments to ensure that policies in all areas from health to housing, from defence to finance, take account of biodiversity. And it gives examples of effective policies, practices and governance structures to conserve and sustainably use biodiversity.

One example that IPBES highlights is China's Sloping Land Conversion Programme (or Grain for Green), the world's largest reforestation effort. By paying farmers to plant trees on their land and providing degraded land to rural families to restore, it has transformed more than 15 million hectares of degraded agricultural land and 17 million hectares of barren mountainous wasteland to natural vegetation, though at a local level some results have been more mixed.

'The figures are really big – $40 billion spent, over 30 million hectares of land restored and some 32 million households engaged,' said Himlal Baral, a senior scientist at the Center for International Forestry Research, based in Indonesia. 'This is a great restoration effort and many countries can learn lessons from this. It shows that if you put in economic incentives, there is potential to restore degraded and marginal land.' He noted that while some of the programme's benefits such as soil and water conservation and landslide protection are local, the carbon storage achieved by planting so many trees benefits the whole planet.

Having worked in China for several decades, Jianguo (Jack) Liu, a professor at the Center for Systems Integration and Sustainability at Michigan State University, is hopeful. 'Enormous change has already taken place,' he said. 'The government has increasingly paid attention to the environment. That is very positive, of course, but there are still challenges to be addressed.'

Liu pointed out that, in the past, assessments of government officials were based on gross domestic product (GDP) and took no regard of environmental performance. 'The higher the GDP, the more likely someone would be promoted,' he said. 'Now, they are evaluated by environmental and economic performance. If you have had a bad environmental record, you will be punished and will not be promoted.' Liu said he would like to see this approach 'scaled up, implemented and enforced nationwide'.

A new global deal

All eyes will be on China's efforts to conserve nature next year, when Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province in southwest China, hosts the 15th Conference of the Parties to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). Representatives of nearly 200 governments will meet there to agree a new 10-year framework to halt biodiversity loss and protect ecosystems. It could be a sombre meeting, as delegates will confirm that progress towards the last agreed targets, set in Aichi, Japan, in 2010, has been abysmal. The IPBES report suggests that most of the 20 Aichi targets will be missed.

'The IPBES Global Assessment tells us how much we have achieved, where we are on track, where we are not, why, and what the options are for moving forward,' said the CBD's executive secretary, Cristiana Pasca Palmer, who added that it will make an 'invaluable contribution' to the process of setting ambitious, achievable targets in the post-2020 global biodiversity framework.

'The assessment also shows that threats to biodiversity cannot be addressed by governments alone,' said Pasca Palmer. 'In fact, it underscores the urgent need for transformational change to safeguard nature and the ecosystem services that underpin all life. This requires everyone to get involved – including businesses, communities and individuals – as we lay the foundations for an even more ambitious biodiversity agenda for the next decade.' ◆

Mike Shanahan is a freelance writer and journalist specialising in environmental issues such as climate change and biodiversity loss. This article is reproduced from the chinadialogue website (www.chinadialogue.net).

World hunger is on the rise

While the phenomenon of poverty in the midst of plenty is reflected in the current conjunction of growing world hunger amidst a global grains glut, there are many misconceptions as to the nature of the problem and its resolution. *Timothy A Wise* clarifies.

FOR the third straight year, UN agencies have documented rising levels of severe hunger in the world, affecting 820 million people. More than two billion suffer 'moderate or severe' food insecurity. During the same period, the world is experiencing what Reuters called a 'global grains glut', with surplus agricultural commodities piled up outside grain silos rotting for want of buyers.

Severe hunger affects 820 million people, while more than two billion suffer moderate or severe food insecurity.

Obviously, growing more grain is not reducing global hunger.

Yet every day, some academic, industry or political leader joins the Malthusian chorus of warnings about looming food shortages due to rising populations and strained natural resources. For example, here's Richard Linton, dean of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at North Carolina State University, sounding the familiar alarm: 'We've got to find a way to feed the world, double the food supply,' he said. 'And we all know, if we don't produce enough food, what the outcome is: it's war, it's competition.'

'How will we feed the world?' calls the preacher. 'Increase our bounty,' responds the choir.

There is so much wrong with that answer. And even with the question, which is profoundly arrogant.

How will 'we' feed 'the world'? We know who 'we' mean when we ask that question: rich countries, with high-yield seeds and industrial-scale agriculture. The United States thinks it's feeding the world now. It is not.

More than 70% of the food consumed in developing countries, where hunger is pervasive, is grown in those countries, the majority of it by small-scale farmers. Those farmers are the main people doing the feeding now. And they're only using 30% of agricultural resources to do it. (That means industrial agriculture is using 70% of the resources to feed 30% of the population.)

There is no 'world' out there, passively waiting to be fed. Most of the hungry are small-scale farmers or live in farming communities. They aren't waiting for food handouts; they are actively – often desperately – trying to feed their families and their communities.

But the world already grows more than enough food to feed 10 billion people, which is nearly three billion more than we currently have.

Why do we keep getting it so wrong, acting like growing more commodity crops will end hunger?

Indian economist Amartya Sen won his Nobel Prize for showing that famine is rarely caused by food shortages. Frances Moore Lappé showed us almost 50 years ago in her seminal *Diet for a Small Planet* that hunger isn't caused by a scarcity of food.

Hunger is caused by a scarcity of power on the part of food producers and the poor. Power over land, water and other food-producing natural resources. And the power to earn incomes that can allow people to buy the food they need.

The illusion that 'we' feed 'the world' has its home in places like the US state of Iowa, planted fencerow to fencerow in corn and soybeans in a system designed to coax every last bushel from the incomparably fertile soil.

But it's hard to find demonstrable ways that Iowa's prolific production feeds any hungry people in the developing world. Iowa mainly feeds pigs, chickens, the junk food industry and cars; half of our corn goes to ethanol, and 30% of soybean oil is now used for biodiesel fuel. The world's poor can't afford meat and they don't drive cars; junk food is the last thing they need.

We export about half our soybeans and 15% of our corn, but even those don't feed the hungry, because they're mainly used as animal feed, overwhelmingly for hogs, many in China, the world's biggest pig producer and consumer. But the poor aren't eating that pork; it mainly feeds the country's growing middle class.

At best, Iowa's prodigious production of corn and soybeans is making food bills a little lower for the developing world's emerging middle classes. But it is an illusion that Iowa is feeding the hungry.

And it's a dangerous illusion that we can solve global hunger by ex-

A grain storage pile in the US. At a time of rising levels of hunger, the world is experiencing a 'global grains glut'.

panding global production with industrial-scale agriculture. Dangerous because the way we are growing that food, on chemical-intensive, monoculture farms, is quite literally destroying the resource base – soil, water, climate – on which future food production depends.

Take Iowa, again: The state has lost half its topsoil to erosion, the product of excessive row-cropping. Half-a-million acres came out of conservation in the last decade as farmers planted right up to streambeds trying to cash in on the ethanol-fuelled high in corn prices. Soil is a renewable resource, but only if you farm it in a way that protects and renews it.

Iowa is also failing to renew that other renewable resource, water. The state's agriculture is mainly rain-fed, but the Jordan and Dakota aquifers are being pumped at unreplenishable rates. It takes five gallons of water a day to raise a hog; with 20 million hogs, that's more than 30 billion gallons of water a year. It takes three to distill a gallon of ethanol from corn; that's more than 12 billion gallons of water annually. If ethanol and meat production grow at projected rates, those huge aquifers will eventually run dry.

A cornfield in the US state of Iowa. 'It's hard to find demonstrable ways that Iowa's prolific production [of corn and soybeans] feeds any hungry people in the developing world.'

Meanwhile, the excessive chemical applications needed for corn and soybeans pollute drinking water and destroy habitats for those species agriculture needs to grow food. A recent UN report raised alarms about mass extinctions, while another study documented an 'insect apocalypse' that includes the loss of key pollinators for crops.

Meanwhile, every part of Iowa's agriculture is implicated in and threatened by climate change. Industrial agriculture is a major emitter of greenhouse gases: The excessive fertiliser applied to Iowa's corn fields emits clouds of nitrous oxide, more potent than carbon dioxide. The state's factory farms also contribute when concentrated manure is sprayed on farmers' fields.

The changing climate makes current farming practices all the more self-destructive. US National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) modelling for Iowa shows a high probability of more intense storms, like the recent cyclone and continued flooding, with a growing threat of long droughts. A University of Minnesota study estimated that by 2075, Iowa corn yields could be 20% to 50% lower than they are today.

It's not a system that's working well, and if we're worried about the overall availability of food, we in the rich world should stop doubling down on industrial agriculture and immediately take two simple measures: First, reduce food waste, which squanders one-third or more of the food the world produces. Second, stop diverting food and land to biofuel production.

In the meantime, let's stop feeding the illusion that producing more US agricultural commodities will do anything to reduce global hunger. ◆

Timothy A Wise directs the Land and Food Rights Program at the Small Planet Institute in Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA. He is the author of the recently released Eating Tomorrow: Agribusiness, Family Farmers, and the Battle for the Future of Food *(New Press, 2019). The above article was first published in Heated x Mark Bittman (heated.medium.com).*

Another missed opportunity for meaningful agrarian change in South Africa

When Nelson Mandela's government came to power in South Africa in 1994, it failed to carry out the land reform necessary to destroy the structure of land ownership which underpinned the apartheid system. To quell the simmering discontent that has built up over the years, an advisory panel on land reform was set up under the aegis of the President. *Marc Wegerif,* who has read the panel's recently released report, offers his verdict on whether the report fulfills its goal.

THE report of the South African President's Advisory Panel on Land Reform and Agriculture was released to the public on 28 July and is being reviewed by the cabinet. The important question is whether this report offers a vision and recommendations that can address the land issue in South Africa.

Villagers till their fields in South Africa's North West Province. 'The space for new, smaller-scale farmers to succeed is almost non-existent' in the country.

Perhaps the most revealing statement comes on page 93 where they acknowledge: 'The panel has not agreed on what the vision should be for transformative agrarian reform.' Agrarian reform is the wider economic and social reform of rural society and agriculture that land reform is one important part of. There is abundant and longstanding evidence that successful land reforms (those that improve production and the lives of rural people in poverty) are part of wider programmes of agrarian and rural change, including ensuring access to appropriate technology, support services, market access for small-scale farmers, and interventions beyond agriculture, such as improving rural health and education services. The few mentions of agrarian reform in the document are a narrow interpretation that does not address much-needed social changes or the wider agriculture and food system.

Without a vision of what kind of agriculture, what kind of food system and what kind of rural society we are building, it is hard to understand what is informing the suggestions in the report. Indeed, what one finds are limited and, in some cases, contradictory recommendations based on a limited analysis of the current situation in South Africa and how this was created.

The historical context section of the report gives an overview of land conquest and dispossession up to 1913. Strangely it says nothing of post-1913, and therefore the apartheid-era, land dispossession. It also says nothing about the way a particular form of agriculture was destroyed and another form built up not only through the destruction of African farms and African trade networks, but also with a wide range of interventions to support and ensure the success of white farmers using large-scale and high-external-input agriculture. It follows that there are also no recommendations on how that sector should be changed.

The problem statement does not mention how the failure to link post-apartheid land reforms to wider agrarian changes has been one of the main impediments to success for new farmers; not least because new and smaller-scale farmers have had to contend with market conditions orientated to a small number of large producers. Inequality is not just in land holding in South Africa, but in every other part of the agri-food sector from processing to retailing. For example, just three companies own 73% of the maize storage capacity in the country, with the foreign-owned Afgri being the largest of these. The failure of many land reform beneficiaries to succeed in agriculture is not so much due to the government's failure to deliver effective support, as the report emphasises; it is about the unjust structure of the agri-food system that makes it very difficult for most farmers to succeed even if they have skills and support.

The approach in the report leaves the core of still largely white-owned commercial farming in place and pushes that model of agriculture onto

Wheat harvest in the Western Cape province. Many protections for the larger-scale commercial farming sector in South Africa remain in place.

new farmers who get land through reforms. There are, for example, proposals for the involvement of 'agri-businesses, specifically the input suppliers', in 'training and mentoring new farmers'. This would clearly only promote farming that uses these companies' inputs and the continuation of the same model of farming that is only working for a small minority now. Likewise, the proposals for public-private partnerships and the 'voluntary contribution' (in exchange for incentives) of land by commercial farmers and other existing land owners will put them in a position to set the pace and nature of reforms.

The report claims that 'the large-scale commercial farming sector … has been a high performing sector in the past 20 years, even though all programmes and policies that provided it with special benefits have been abolished'. This is misleading in a number of ways. Firstly, protections for that model remain in place, including legislation like the subdivision of agricultural land act. Secondly, there is a lock-in as the scale of traders, processors and retailers and their longstanding relations with particular large farmers remain in place and favour the larger farmers. Thirdly, the long history of support for that model of agriculture put these farms in the privileged position they were in to take advantage of market opportunities that arose with economic liberalisation.

Probably more important though is the question of what is meant by 'high-performing' and who benefits. Yes, some large farms and agribusiness investors are profiting, in particular from increased exports of high-value crops, but many other commercial farmers in South Africa have gone out of business or are struggling to survive.

The space for new, smaller-scale farmers to succeed is almost non-existent. Workers bear the brunt of increased pressure for profits in a globalised market, with only a very small minority of workers having reasonable working and living conditions, while the majority face casualisation and poverty wages that leave even the hardworking unable to buy a balanced diet for themselves and their families. The children of farm workers are some of the most vulnerable to food insecurity in a country where close to one in four children are stunted due to poor nutrition.

The discussion on farming models only addresses the forms of ownership and the scale of farm. It completely ignores the important differences in actual models of production that, regardless of ownership and scale, can range from the agroecological family farms selling in local markets to high-external-input operations that are totally dependent on corporate supply chains and global markets. The assessment of the success of models also focused only on farm-level viability, with no attention to the really important questions of which models work better for the society and environment in the context of serious challenges of poverty and inequality along with climate changes and ecological destruction.

There are some positive points in the report that should be acted on, such as the calls for: support to smallholder farmers; extension services and programmes to promote agroecology; and the clear call on the President to sign into law the Subdivision of Agricultural Land Act 64 of 1998, which would repeal the existing law and make it easier for new farmers to access smaller parcels of agricultural land. But there is little knowledge in this; after all the parliament passed the new subdivision act 21 years ago.

The lack of agreement on what kind of agriculture and food sector is needed in South Africa in part reflects a lack of imagination about the possibility of a different future beyond the colonial and apartheid-created, and now corporate-controlled, agri-food system. It is also because the issue is highly contested and those who profit from and have power in the current system are committed to preserving and extending it for their benefit.

Those with such interests were well represented in the Advisory Panel, with, amongst others, the inclusion of Dan Kriek, the president of AgriSA, and Wandile Sihlobo, who works for Agbiz. AgriSA represents the largest commercial farmers in the country and Agbiz most of the largest corporate actors in the agri-food sector, such as ABSA, Afgri and Tiger Brands. As Agbiz state on their website, 'One of the core functions of Agbiz is to represent the interests of its members in terms of policy and legislation matters,' and they are proud to say, 'Through its direct participation, Agbiz is able to influence policy makers at the highest level.' Farm workers and landless people were among those not represented in the panel. ◆

Marc Wegerif is a post-doctoral fellow at the Human Economy Programme, Centre for the Advancement of Scholarship, University of Pretoria, South Africa. He writes in his personal capacity. The above article is reproduced from Pambazuka News *(No. 888, www.pambazuka.org).*

Trade tensions, policy uncertainty weakening global growth

The global growth outlook has weakened amid unresolved trade tensions and elevated international policy uncertainty, with growth projections for 2019 downgraded across both developed and developing countries, says a United Nations report.

Kanaga Raja

Persistent trade tensions have weighed on the trade performance of many developed and developing countries.

IN its *World Economic Situation and Prospects (WESP)* mid-2019 report, the UN said while looser monetary conditions have contributed to some stabilisation in global financial markets and capital flows, the world economy continues to face considerable downside risks arising from persistent trade tensions, the build-up of financial imbalances, and intensifying climate change.

Against this backdrop, it said, world gross product growth is now expected to moderate from 3.0% in 2018 to 2.7% in 2019 and 2.9% in 2020, reflecting a downward revision from its forecasts released this January.

The *WESP* mid-2019 report, which updates its earlier report released in January 2019, said in the face of these multifaceted challenges, tackling the current growth slowdown and placing the world economy on a robust path towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development require more comprehensive and well-targeted policy responses. This should include a combination of monetary, fiscal and development-oriented measures, said the report.

'It is increasingly clear that policies to promote sustainable development will need to look beyond GDP growth and identify new and more robust measures of economic performance that appropriately reflect the costs of inequality, insecurity and climate change,' said Elliot Harris, UN Chief Economist and UN Assistant Secretary-General for Economic Development.

According to the *WESP* report, the weaker growth outlook across most regions is attributable to a confluence of external and domestic factors.

On the external front, persistent trade tensions and higher tariffs have weighed on the trade performance of many developed and developing countries. Rising barriers to trade have not only directly impacted global trade flows but have also increased uncertainty, affecting business and consumer confidence. As a result, global merchandise trade volume growth has slowed more sharply than expected, particularly in late 2018 and early 2019.

Data from the United States Census Bureau showed that bilateral merchandise trade between the United States and China has declined by more than 15% since September 2018, when the second round of tariffs came into effect. This has also impacted global value chains in East Asia and other trading partners, said the report.

Elevated trade-related headwinds have been compounded by continued volatility in global commodity prices, it added. Oil prices have recovered from the recent lows in December 2018, with the Brent spot price reaching $75 per barrel in April 2019. The UN said that the assumptions underlying the economic forecasts in its report are for Brent spot prices to average $65.5 in 2019 and $65 in 2020. However, these assumptions are subject to high uncertainty. With global oil demand expected to decelerate and United States crude oil production growing, an effective extension of the OPEC-led production agreement is a key determinant of crude oil prices in 2019. Significant supply disruptions and a spike in oil prices due to geopolitical factors remain possible, given the situation in Iran, Libya and Venezuela.

Among other commodities, agricultural commodity prices are generally expected to remain weak in the near term. However, localised spikes of food prices in parts of Western Asia and Africa due to weather-related shocks and conflicts cannot be ruled out, said the report.

Growth projections for 2019

According to the *WESP* report, growth projections for 2019 have been revised downward in all major developed economies.

In the United States, the growth momentum is projected to moderate as headwinds from trade policy are compounded by the waning effects of fiscal stimulus. Economic sentiment indicators in the United States deteriorated in early 2019, as tangible impacts from tariff hikes and trade tensions materialised, and consumer confidence was buffeted by the longest federal government shutdown in history. The Congressional Budget Office estimates that the five-week shutdown, which impacted 800,000 federal employees, reduced the level of GDP in the first quarter of 2019 by 0.2%, although much of this will be recovered later in the year.

The United States' GDP is projected to grow by 2.3% in 2019 – down from 2.9% in 2018 and a projection of 2.5% (in the forecast released in January) – as the effects of fiscal stimulus measures wane and export growth is hampered by ongoing trade disputes. In 2020, GDP growth in the United States is expected to moderate further to 2.1%.

In Europe, while the effects of auto production disruptions are expected to dissipate, economic activity will be dampened by weaker confidence, softer external demand and prolonged uncertainty surrounding the Brexit developments.

The EU is projected to expand by 1.5% in 2019 and 1.8% in 2020. This constitutes a downward revision compared with the previous forecast, as the trade-related downside risks attached to the last baseline forecast have started to materialise. By contrast, private consumption remains relatively robust. Solid labour market conditions underpin upward wage pressure, which together with subdued inflation rates supports household purchasing power and private consumption spending.

The report said that the postponement of the United Kingdom's exit from the EU without clarification as to the way forward has increased the risk of a disorderly separation. This could have severe negative consequences in the form of a disruption or even breakdown in trade flows to and from the United Kingdom.

In Japan, weak external demand has weighed on investment in the manufacturing sector, while household consumption remains sluggish. Japan's growth forecast for 2019 has been revised down from 1.4% to 0.8%, with the revision reflecting weakening external demand.

For the economies of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), external conditions, including demand from major economies and prices of non-oil commodities, are less supportive in 2019. Growth is expected to moderate, especially as fiscal policies are largely growth-neutral and several countries have tightened monetary policy. The aggregate GDP of the CIS and Georgia is expected to increase by 1.9% in 2019 and 2.3% in 2020.

The growth outlook for many developing economies has also weakened, said the report.

Southern Africa, Western Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean have seen particularly large downward revisions for growth in 2019.

The economic outlook for Africa remains challenging. While growth is estimated to pick up, the region faces difficulties in embarking on a robust and sustained growth trajectory, amid a global slowdown, tepid commodity prices and protracted fragilities in many commodity exporters. Aggregate GDP growth for the region is projected at 3.2% in 2019 and 3.7% in 2020, after an estimated expansion of only 2.7% in 2018.

The weaker prospects for Southern Africa are attributable to the devastation caused by Cyclone Idai, coupled with a subdued outlook for South Africa's economy, which is severely hampered by power shortages.

In Western Asia, growth in Saudi Arabia is projected to slow amid oil production cuts, while Turkey will only gradually emerge from recession following a sharp contraction in domestic demand in the second half of 2018.

The downward revision of the outlook for Latin America and the Caribbean reflects weaker-than-expected activity in the region's largest economies – Argentina, Brazil and Mexico – and a further severe contraction in Venezuela. GDP for the region is projected to expand by only 1.1% in 2019 and 2.0% in 2020, following growth of 0.9% in 2018.

In contrast, growth prospects remain favourable in other developing regions, most notably East Africa and East Asia.

In China, recent policy stimulus measures will largely offset the adverse effects from trade tensions. Growth in China is projected to moderate gradually from 6.6% in 2018 to 6.3% in 2019 and 6.2% in 2020. Recent monetary and fiscal stimulus measures are expected to bolster domestic demand, partially offsetting the adverse impact of trade tariffs on overall growth. Nevertheless, these measures could also exacerbate domestic financial imbalances, raising the risk of a disorderly deleveraging process in the future.

Despite downward revisions, growth in India remains strong amid robust domestic demand. The Indian economy expanded by 7.2% in 2018. Strong domestic consumption and investment will continue to support growth, which is projected at 7.0% in 2019 and 7.1% in 2020.

According to the report, in the second half of 2018, gross fixed capital formation growth moderated, including in several large developing and transition countries.

The prolonged period of high uncertainty in the global policy environment has hampered business sentiments and weighed on capital spending, particularly in trade-oriented sectors.

'A sharper and more protracted downturn in international trade activity could significantly impact the medium-term growth outlook of trade-dependent economies,' said the report.

In many developing countries, investor confidence has also been adversely affected by elevated domestic policy uncertainties, amid persistent structural challenges.

In several large economies, such as Brazil, Mexico and South Africa, the inability to achieve a sustained revival in investment could weigh on already weak long-term productivity growth, further impeding their sustainable development prospects.

Economic projections for the least-developed countries (LDCs) have also been downgraded (from the forecasts released in January). After expanding by 4.8% in 2018, GDP growth in LDCs is projected to decline slightly to 4.6% in 2019, before improving to 5.8% in 2020. Thus, Sustainable Development Goal 8.1 (at least 7% annual GDP growth in the LDCs) remains distant, said the report.

In the near term, living conditions in countries such as Afghanistan, Angola, Burundi, Haiti and Lesotho are expected to improve only slightly. In addition, Cyclone Idai has caused a humanitarian crisis in Mozambique, a country that already faces extremely difficult economic conditions, amid a prolonged debt crisis and political instability. Against this backdrop, there are concerns over the capacity to manage mounting public health and food security challenges, and to mobilise financial resources for reconstruction.

Monetary and fiscal policy stances

According to the report, the slowdown in global economic activity has triggered a shift towards easier monetary policy stances across many developed and developing economies. This shift is taking place in an environment of subdued global inflation, amid weakening demand and a moderate outlook for global commodity prices.

Among the developed economies, headline inflation generally remains below central bank targets. Across the developing regions, including Africa and Latin America, inflationary pressures have also eased, in part reflecting more stable exchange rates and improved agricultural production.

In March, the United States Federal Reserve (Fed) lowered its expectations from two rate hikes to none in 2019, while maintaining the target range for the federal funds rate at 2.25-2.50%. The Fed will also begin to slow the pace of its balance sheet normalisation.

In efforts to boost credit growth, the European Central Bank (ECB) recently launched a new series of targeted longer-term refinancing operations and delayed any increase in interest rates until at least 2020.

Meanwhile, the People's Bank of China further lowered the reserve requirement ratios for banks in early 2019 to improve domestic liquidity conditions.

Given increased uncertainty over growth prospects, a few large developing economies, including Egypt, India and Nigeria, have also reduced their key policy rates.

Recent monetary policy shifts have helped stabilise global financial conditions and pushed up asset prices. After significant financial pressures in the second half of 2018, capital flows to emerging economies recovered in early 2019, with a modest increase projected for the rest of the year. However, financial markets remain prone to abrupt shifts in investor sentiments and risk assessments. Furthermore, emerging economies continue to face the challenge of translating capital inflows into productive domestic investments.

'The easing of monetary policy may have reduced some short-term risks, but is unlikely to significantly boost domestic demand in countries with highly leveraged household and corporate sectors,' said the report.

Moreover, high policy uncertainty, particularly surrounding unresolved trade disputes and the Brexit process, may also limit the effectiveness of monetary policy.

For many economies, said the report, a more protracted period of monetary accommodation could exacerbate financial imbalances, thus raising medium-term risks to financial stability.

As monetary policy space remains limited, more countries worldwide are adopting easier fiscal policy stances to bolster growth, said the report. For many economies, however, their ability to introduce large-scale fiscal stimulus measures is limited, given persistent fiscal deficits and elevated public debt levels. For commodity-dependent economies, fiscal space remains constrained as commodity prices are still well below levels seen before 2014.

The report said the extended period of low global interest rates fuelled increasing borrowing by governments. Many countries have seen a significant rise in interest burdens, undermining governments' capacities to utilise fiscal policy to pursue development objectives. In 2018, interest payments alone exceeded 20% of government revenue in several countries in Africa, Latin America and South Asia. These countries are also particularly vulnerable to shifts in financial conditions, via a rise in borrowing costs, currency depreciations or commodity price shocks. Of particular concern is the rising number of low-income countries that are either already facing difficulties in servicing their debt or at a high risk of debt distress.

Given increasing downside risks to growth and limited fiscal resources, policymakers in many countries face the challenge of simultaneously supporting short-term economic activity and preserving fiscal sustainability. In this environment, said the report, there is a risk that policymakers would delay structural reform measures necessary to address sustainable development challenges, including eradicating poverty, tackling rising inequality and enhancing climate change resilience.

For most countries, there is a need to improve the efficiency of fiscal spending, channelling expenditure towards measures that will promote more inclusive and sustainable growth prospects. In addition, measures to improve fiscal management are also important to strengthen public finances and preserve confidence. These measures include improving the allocation of expenditure, expanding the tax base and ensuring that public borrowing is channelled towards productive investment, said the report.

Major downside risks

According to the *WESP* report, the baseline scenario rests on the assumption that current economic and financial conditions will not deteriorate further. However, with major downside risks prevailing, there is a significant possibility of a sharper slowdown or more prolonged weakness in the global economy that could impact development progress, it cautioned.

A further escalation of trade disputes among the world's largest economies poses a significant risk for both short- and medium-term global growth prospects. Alongside unresolved trade tensions with China, the United States recently signalled its intention to impose additional tariffs on the European Union, primarily targeted at the aircraft and food industries. This is in addition to the imposition of steel and aluminium tariffs that are already in place.

'The impact of a spiral of additional tariffs and retaliations would not only dampen growth of these large economies, but also have severe spillover effects on the developing economies, particularly those with high export exposure to the impacted economies,' the report warned.

The report also cautioned that in addition to rising global trade tensions, the effectiveness of the present rules-based multilateral trading system is under threat. The World Trade Organisation (WTO)'s dispute settlement process may become constrained by member states' failure to fill the vacancies of the Appellate Body (AB) which makes the final binding decisions on appeal cases. As of 1 April 2019, only three AB members remained, the minimum number for a quorum to review a case. Since two serving members' terms end on 10 December, failure to secure new appointments to the AB would leave the WTO without an appeal function by the end of 2019. 'Paralysis in the Appellate Body would critically weaken the rules-based multilateral trading system, at a time when the number of active trade disputes has risen significantly.'

The report also said that recent shifts towards more accommodative policies may have lifted investors' sentiment in the short term. However, the impact on asset prices and risk-taking behaviour could increase financial risks in the medium term. Prolonged loose financial and lending conditions – including lower expectations over the federal funds rate in the medium term – will fuel search-for-yield behaviour, contributing to a further build-up of debt.

The high level of indebtedness has become a prominent feature of the global economy. The global stock of debt is nearly one-third higher than in 2008 and more than three times the global GDP. Elevated levels of debt are not only a financial risk in themselves, but also a source of vulnerability in case of an economic downturn. If the slowdown in the global economy becomes more acute, firms and households may struggle to roll over debt, triggering a disorderly deleveraging process, large corrections in asset prices and spikes in risk aversion.

In this context, a particular risk stems from the recent upsurge of leveraged loans in the corporate sector in some developed countries. The global leveraged loan market has grown to about $1.3 trillion, more than double its size a decade ago. In the United States, it now exceeds the size of the high-yield corporate bond market. Rising investor demand, coupled with firms' willingness to take on more debt, has led to a deterioration in underwriting standards and credit quality of these loans.

The report noted that in 2018, the average global temperature was the fourth highest since 1880. The 20 warmest years on record have occurred in the past 22 years amid continuously rising carbon dioxide levels. The degree of warming during the past five years has been remarkable, both on land and in the ocean. The last five years now hold the record for the hottest period since modern measurements started. The year 2019 might prove to be warmer still, given forecasted El Nino conditions.

In 2019, the level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is projected to witness one of the largest ever increases in 62 years of measurements. A large proportion will remain in the atmosphere for thousands of years, said the report.

The Atlantic hurricane season this year is predicted to be slightly below average, but the impacts of long-term global warming are increasingly present. Last year's season was the third in a series of above-average seasons, causing damages of about $51 billion. There were also devastating floods in India and a major typhoon in the Philippines. The 2018 wildfire season included California's largest and deadliest wildfire yet and an extremely rare event when wildfires broke out north of the Arctic Circle in Scandinavia. These and other severe costly events made 2018 the fourth-costliest year in terms of insured losses since 1980. Three insurance and reinsurance firms (Aon, Munich Re and Swiss Re) estimate the economic cost of natural disasters in 2018 at $155-225 billion, with only $79-90 billion insured.

The report also said that the number of conflict-related forcefully displaced persons, including refugees and internally displaced people, is estimated to have continued to rise in 2018. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the number of refugees under its mandate exceeded 20 million in June 2018, while the conflict-related internally displaced population stood at 39.7 million. Existing political instabilities and social tensions could lead to a further increase in forcefully displaced people in 2019.

About 95% of conflict-related forcefully displaced persons are hosted in developing countries, pressuring fiscal balances. Despite financial support from the international community, many host countries divert substantial financial resources from already-strained budgets to support forcefully displaced residents. This may impinge on other social provisions as well as on the policy space available to react to external shocks, said the report. ◆

Kanaga Raja is Editor of the South-North Development Monitor (SUNS) *published by the Third World Network. This article was first published in* SUNS *(No. 8913, 23 May 2019).*

ECONOMICS

Trump and China

Much of Trump's trade war is pure political theatre, says *Richard D Wolff.*

WATCHING the US President speak about China and the tariff/trade war he initiated against China is exhausting. One day he says a deal is in the works and the stock market soars. The next day he tweets something offensive to Chinese sensibilities, adds a threat of new tariffs on more Chinese goods, and the market tanks. Scary headlines follow. A day or two later, the whole theatric is run again.

Along the way, Trump or his underlings give statements that are systematically incorrect and/or misleading on a truly heroic scale. Let me mention here just three of them. First is Trump's repeated claim that the billions in tariffs he has already imposed on China are costing China billions paid to the US. This is wrong. A tariff is the name of a tax. The Trump/GOP regime has imposed a massive set of new taxes (something conservatives used to say they were against) on the US. And make no mistake, the taxes fall on US companies and consumers.

US President Donald Trump with his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping. Trump's trade war against China has already imposed real costs on both the US and Chinese economies.

That is because a tariff is paid to the US government by the US company that imports something from China that is subject to the tariff. That US company can and usually does pass the cost of paying this tariff onto the prices of whatever it sells. Then it is the US consumer who shares the cost of Trump's tariffs with US companies. Those are economic losses to the US economy that follow from Trump's tariff/trade war against China.

Second is the likewise repeated accusation that China has been 'stealing' intellectual property (production technologies, product designs, etc.). This is a truly bizarre accusation. For at least the last 30 years China has offered a deal to US corporations (and likewise to European and Japanese corporations). China offers a disciplined labour force at wages far below what those corporations pay in their home countries. China also offers one of the world's largest and fastest-growing markets for those corporations' outputs. China's offers translate into big profit boosts for the corporations which have chosen to accept them. In return, China has demanded (1) that foreign corporations bring in capital to pay for building new factories, warehouses, offices, etc.; and (2) that foreign corporations share their technologies, product designs, etc.

Watching the US President speak about the trade war he initiated against China is exhausting.

No one forced any US company to accept China's offers. Corporations have come in growing numbers because what China offered turned out to be very profitable. To call all that 'stealing' now after 30 years may yield big headlines, may allow Trump to posture as the tough leader ending abuse from others, but it is as phoney as a $4 bill.

Third is the claim that China 'cheats' in the sense that the government subsidises its industries, allowing them to compete globally with lower prices. This is misleading. All countries help their own corporations with tax cuts, subsidies, preferential buying and countless other advantages not provided equally to other countries' corporations. This practice is as old as capitalism itself.

Each country's corporations spend big bucks on lobbyists, political donations and bribes to get favours from their government; they always have. China no doubt does it, too. But for the US to play innocent, the victim of others' bad behaviour, is simply silly. The Trump 2017 tax cut for all businesses in the US (from 35% to 21% of profits) was an enormous competitive advantage for US firms competing against others from countries that gave their businesses no comparable tax cuts.

So what is really going on in the Trump tariff war against China? First and foremost, this is Trump political theatre. He keeps the spotlight on himself. He postures as serving America at foreigners' expense: the bully, tough guy working for our side. He keeps it going for as long as it works to distract the public from focusing on his political problems, failures, legal risks and so on. This is what politicians often do until the economic costs of the theatre outweigh the political gains. That point is coming fast, with job losses, price increases and the profit losses from businesses having to cope with changing trade patterns (often referred to as supply chains) and the uncertainties of when the tariffs will end and whether international trade will return to what it had been.

The bottom line for Americans is this: Trump's government is intervening massively in the world market by hitting it with historically unprecedented tariffs and endlessly threatening more. There already are and will surely be more real costs to both the US and Chinese economies. Eventually, Trump will move on to provoke some other crisis that can do for him politically what he hopes the tariff war against China did. Then a deal will be struck between the US and China that enables both sets of leaders to claim victory and return to something not very different from what it was before Trump started the war. That, after all, is what happened among the US, Canada and Mexico – after much headline grabbing around 'ending' the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). A new deal was struck (now awaiting ratification) with a new name but little basically different from what NAFTA was.

Proceeding unchallenged while all this theatre plays out is a US economic system becoming ever more unequal and being ripped apart by all the consequences of that rising inequality. ◆

Richard D Wolff is Professor of Economics Emeritus at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst where he taught economics from 1973 to 2008. He is currently a Visiting Professor in the Graduate Program in International Affairs of the New School University, New York City. This article is reproduced from The Red Hook Star-Revue *(www.star-revue.com).*

India's shadow banking crisis is intensifying

India is currently facing a liquidity crisis as both commercial and shadow banks have tightened their lending. While commercial banks are struggling with high levels of non-performing loans, it is the shadow banks, which hitherto have played a leading role in financing automobile and housing loans, that may prove to be more of a danger to the stability of the financial system.

Kavaljit Singh

Dewan Housing Finance Corporation Ltd (DHFL) is a large-sized shadow bank on the verge of bankruptcy.

THE ongoing liquidity crisis in India's shadow banking sector is intensifying. The troubles that started with defaults by Infrastructure Leasing & Financial Services Limited (IL&FS) last year are far from over as the sector continues to face a severe liquidity crisis. If tight liquidity conditions persist over the next three quarters, it may turn into a solvency issue for several shadow banks.

After the IL&FS collapse, the entire sector is facing a crisis of confidence as investors are shying away from investing in securities issued by shadow banks. Several shadow banks are finding it difficult to raise money from banks, mutual funds and the rest of the financial system for either funding their growth or rollover of existing short-term debt. Some are resorting to asset monetisation to meet their immediate repayment obligations. Leave aside those shadow banks that have weak financial profiles, even financially sound and better-governed entities are also facing a liquidity squeeze. Most private-sector shadow banks have reduced disbursement of loans to preserve liquidity.

After growing aggressively in the last three years, the credit disbursals by shadow banks have fallen almost by a third this year. Consequently lending for housing, automobiles, consumer durables and small businesses has substantially declined. Since shadow banks play a vital role in loan financing in the housing and automobile sectors, the reduced availability of funding has significantly contributed to the slowdown in these sectors.

The automobile sector has been badly hit by the ongoing liquidity crisis as shadow banks were the leading financiers of commercial vehicles, passenger cars and two-wheelers in India. Before the onset of the liquidity crisis, close to 40% of new auto loans were issued by shadow banks.

According to the Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers, passenger car sales declined by 26% in April-July 2019 over the same period last year. Close to 300 dealer showrooms of passenger vehicles have shut down across India in the last one year as shadow banks have stopped financing vehicle purchases, while automakers have either cut production or shut production plants temporarily to keep inventory in check. Analysts estimate that tens of thousands of jobs in India's auto sector are at risk if the slump continues.

Since commercial banks are still struggling with high levels of non-performing assets, they are not rushing in to fill the void left by the shadow banks. Rather, commercial banks may also like to reduce their exposure to stressed sectors such as automobiles and housing to improve their balance sheets.

All these developments in the financial sector will have severe ramifications for the overall economy as the bulk of India's economic growth is driven by domestic demand.

DHFL: The new poster boy of liquidity crisis

Since September 2018, hardly a week passes without more bad news about the cash-strapped Dewan Housing Finance Corporation Ltd (DHFL). On 16 August, DHFL again default-

A car manufacturing plant in India. The Indian automobile sector has been badly hit by the shadow banking crisis as shadow banks had been leading providers of vehicle loans.

ed on its repayment obligations worth Rs 15.7 billion on non-convertible debentures and commercial papers. Nothing new as the company has not been able to meet most of its debt repayment obligations since June 2019, but this was the largest default by DHFL to date.

DHFL has a total debt liability of Rs 850 billion as of 19 June 2019, out of which secured loans stood at Rs 749 billion while the rest is unsecured. The company posted a net loss of Rs 22 billion in the fourth quarter of 2018-19.

The company's lending business has virtually come to a standstill with no fresh disbursements of loans taking place in the last six months. The series of defaults have made it almost impossible for the company to raise new money from the financial markets.

In July, while announcing the fourth-quarter financial results, the company admitted that it was 'undergoing substantial financial stress' and its ability to raise funds was 'substantially impaired and the business has been brought to a standstill with there being minimal/virtually no disbursements … These developments may raise a significant doubt on the ability of the company to continue as a going concern'.

Of late, DHFL sold its stake in non-core businesses to meet some of its repayment obligations, but it has not been able to find suitable buyers for a majority equity stake in the company. So far, investors have only shown interest in buying portions of its asset portfolio.

In August, the company approached the consortium of lenders with a resolution plan that includes conversion of debt to equity, a moratorium on repayments, and new credit lines to start fresh lending. The bankers are currently discussing the plan. At present, the Wadhawan family controls DHFL, with a 39.21% stake in the company. If the lenders accept the resolution plan, they may also demand that the company's management be replaced, because in January online news portal CobraPost raised allegations that DHFL had created shell companies to divert funds worth Rs 31 billion.

After the IL&FS collapse, DHFL is the second large-sized shadow bank on the verge of bankruptcy. With so much public money at stake, banks, mutual funds, pension funds and insurance companies are all keen to avoid bankruptcy at debt-ridden DHFL.

A belated regulatory response

In the past two months, several regulatory measures have been announced by the Ministry of Finance and the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). Some of the regulatory measures were long overdue. For instance, returning the regulatory authority over the housing finance sector from the National Housing Bank to the RBI is a welcome move, provided the staff strength of the RBI is suitably increased to undertake both onsite inspections and off-site surveillance of housing finance companies that constitute a major segment of India's shadow banking sector.

Another notable development is that the RBI is now empowered to remove any director and supersede the board of directors of shadow banks 'in the public interest or to prevent the affairs of a nonbanking financial company being conducted in a manner detrimental to the interest of the depositors or creditors, or financial stability or for securing the proper management of such company'.

Besides, the RBI has been given powers to remove or debar auditors if they fail to conduct their role correctly. The financial penalties are also enhanced if the shadow banks don't implement the regulatory measures.

The RBI has recently cancelled registrations of 1,851 shadow banks that could not raise even Rs 20 million to meet the minimum regulatory requirements. One wonders why such entities were permitted to run a shadow bank in the first place.

What about carrots?

Both the Finance Ministry and the RBI have announced several policy measures to ease liquidity pressure in the shadow banking sector. However, the effectiveness of these measures remains to be seen. Amongst others, these include an increase in any bank's single-exposure limit to a single shadow bank from the existing 15% to 20% of tier-1 capital; priority sector lending status for credit to shadow banks for on-lend-

The Reserve Bank of India and the Ministry of Finance have taken several regulatory measures to address the shadow banking crisis.

ing to agriculture, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and housing; and reduced risk-weights for consumer loans.

In her Union Budget speech on 5 July, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman provided a one-time six months' partial credit guarantee to public sector banks for the first loss of up to 10% to purchase high-rated pooled assets from financially sound shadow banks amounting to Rs 1 trillion. It is too early to assess the impact of this measure as its operational guidelines were issued only on 13 August, but the fact remains that this one-time facility is only meant for 'financially sound' shadow banks. In other words, the least risky shadow banks (such as HDFC and LIC Housing Finance) will benefit from this facility, not the cash-starved weaker entities such as DHFL and Reliance Capital.

On 23 August, the Finance Minister announced additional liquidity support of Rs 200 billion to housing finance companies to be provided by the National Housing Bank, as part of a stimulus package. The minister also announced that public sector banks (PSBs) would fast-track collaborations with shadow banks for loans to SMEs, small traders and microfinance institutions under the co-origination scheme introduced last August by the RBI. Under this scheme, shadow banks will take a minimum of 20% of the credit risk by way of direct exposure while the co-originating PSB will take the rest of the credit risk.

This scheme allows shadow banks to expand their business and thereby book profits with little investments while the PSBs can meet their priority sector targets of lending to such sectors, albeit with higher credit risks. At the time of writing, there is no information available about the volume of loans disbursed under the co-origination scheme. Since there are better and safer options available to the PSBs to achieve priority sector lending targets, they may not be willing to collaborate with ailing shadow banks and thereby accept higher credit risk, unless they are forced to do so by New Delhi.

This policy move begs the question: Why push public sector banks to increase lending to shadow banks? And particularly at a time when the capital-constrained PSBs already have considerable exposure to troubled shadow banks (such as DHFL and Reliance Capital) and are currently struggling to repair their balance sheets from the NPA crisis.

Despite recapitalisation, the PSBs don't have the appetite to take on higher credit risk by lending more to the ailing shadow banking sector. Such policy moves would make PSBs more vulnerable as the potential risks in the shadow banks could spill over to banks. Since the PSBs account for nearly 70% of India's banking sector, this raises potential financial stability concerns.

Rather, the strategy should be to ringfence the current liquidity crisis in the shadow banking sector and thereby prevent the problems from spilling over into the Indian banking sector.

In China and elsewhere, the authorities are trying to disentangle the interconnectedness between the shadow banks and commercial banks to ensure the contagion risks arising from a failure of large shadow banks in the banking sector are contained and overall financial stability is preserved.

To restore investors' confidence, the RBI should undertake an asset quality review of shadow banks to bring to light all problems, similar to what the RBI conducted for commercial banks in 2015.

An inherent problem with the business model of shadow banks is their over-reliance on short-term funding to fund longer-term assets, which creates an asset-liability mismatch and a liquidity problem. To finance infrastructure and long-term industrial projects, New Delhi should set up specialised development finance institutions with explicit public policy mandates and higher standards of transparency and accountability. ◆

Kavaljit Singh is Director of Madhyam, a New Delhi-based non-profit policy research institute. The above is reproduced from Madhyam Briefing Paper No. 27 (28 August 2019). The full paper with illustrations is available at www.madhyam.org.in.

Another IMF bailout in Argentina

Argentina is experiencing another recession, this time under right-wing president Mauricio Macri, who has once again turned to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for help. Will this time be different?

Alan Cibils

Argentine President Mauricio Macri meeting IMF Managing Director Christine Lagarde in Buenos Aires, March 2018. In June 2018, Argentina signed a three-year stand-by agreement for $50 billion, the largest loan in the IMF's history.

THREE and a half years after Mauricio Macri came to power in Argentina in December 2015 on the promise of fixing the country's economy, it has instead fallen into a deep recession. In response, the government has turned to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for help, with memories of the last IMF bailout still fresh in the minds of Argentinians.

Today, what little credit existed in Macri's early days has dried up, and sky-high interest rates are encouraging financial speculation over productive investment. Unemployment and poverty rates have risen sharply, as has the number of people with basic needs unmet. Plunging economic activity has negatively affected fiscal revenue, so meeting the zero-deficit target requires new spending cuts. To top it all off, inflation has risen, reaching almost 50% in 2018. Economic growth and development are terms that have been virtually erased from official public discourse and policy objectives.

This panorama lies in stark contrast to Macri's campaign promises, which included reducing inflation to a single digit and a 'downpour of investments' that would arrive from abroad when investors saw how business-friendly the new government was. This in turn would lead to greater stability, economic growth and more jobs, and all would be well again, he claimed.

Macri's election followed 12 years of centre-left rule under Peronists Néstor Kirchner (2003-07) and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, often known as CFK (2007-15). In the first years under the Kirchners, Argentina's economy had improved steadily. The first two Kirchner administrations were marked by a strong economic recovery from the 1998-2002 recession and massive 2001-02 crisis, with high rates of economic growth, sharp reductions in poverty and unemployment, and a substantial upturn in real wages and consumption. This resulted from a heterodox economic policy framework aimed at developing the domestic market using expansionary monetary and fiscal policy, and a managed exchange rate that favoured domestic consumption and production.

During CFK's second term, however, problems began to crop up. First, international commodity prices began to decline, increasing pressure on Argentina's foreign sector accounts. In response, CFK implemented exchange controls, or government-imposed limits on foreign currency operations, which led to the development of a black-market exchange rate where Argentines traded pesos with dollars and other currencies as the value of their money depreciated. Second, inconsistencies in the management of monetary and exchange rate policies resulted in inflation and appreciated exchange rates. Third, New York Judge Griesa's 2012 ruling in favour of holdout vulture funds suing Argentina temporarily interrupted debt service payments and access to foreign capital markets, prompting fears of a government default. The government struggled to respond to challenges requiring policy adjustments until it was too late. Furthermore, sectors of the electorate became discontented with exchange controls and inflation, decisively influencing the outcome of the 2015 presidential election.

Big business, and especially finance, were optimistic in the face of Macri's electoral victory. Bloomberg welcomed Macri with a revealing headline: 'Wall Street Is in Charge in Argentina (Again).' They were right. From his first day in office, Macri implemented typical neoliberal trade and finance liberalisation policies – removing most barriers to the free movement of goods and services and, more importantly, finance, including eliminating exchange controls. The government's hope was that by 'neoliberalising' the economy, foreign investment would flow in and thus correct external imbalances. For a country experiencing a shortage of foreign exchange, this move risked making external imbalances worse.

The result of these policies was to flood the local market with imported goods, killing local jobs and businesses and worsening the trade balance, while foreign investments never materialised.

For the first two years, the Macri administration issued massive amounts of public debt to service the country's external deficit, most of it denominated in foreign currency. However, by February 2018, foreign capital markets had largely stopped bankrolling Argentina, setting off a run on the peso, resulting in devaluation and a surge in inflation. The lack of access to foreign credit meant that Argentina was headed for another default, or a forced debt restructuring at best.

A May 2018 protest in Buenos Aires against the government's loan negotiations with the IMF. Memories of the IMF bailout in 2000 – which accelerated the country's economic downturn – are still fresh in the minds of Argentinians.

Enter the IMF

At that point, Argentine authorities turned to the IMF in desperation. It wasn't the first time: Argentina turned to the IMF in 2000 when, after three years of recession, it was unable to service its massive debt. The IMF conditioned its loans on fiscal spending cuts, accelerating Argentina's economic downturn and making the massive December 2001 crisis that followed inevitable.

Not much has changed at the IMF in the 18 years since Argentina's last experience. In mid-June 2018, Argentina had signed a three-year stand-by agreement for $50 billion, the largest loan in the IMF's history. With a seriously flawed diagnostic of Argentina's problems as a point of departure, the conditions attached to the loan were vintage IMF: fiscal austerity with a zero-fiscal-deficit target excluding debt service payments; a renewed commitment to an inflation-targeting monetary policy; a floating exchange rate regime; and ending central bank financing of the treasury, among others.

However, by mid-August 2018, after another run on the peso consumed most of the IMF's first disbursement of $15 billion, Argentina's authorities once again turned to the IMF to request a larger loan. By the end of September, the IMF had approved a $6.3 billion extension to the original loan, with new conditions attached and, more importantly, a substantially accelerated disbursement schedule: 90% of the loan would be disbursed before December 2019. With presidential elections in October 2019, many interpreted this move as a clear show of IMF support for Macri's re-election.

Among the new conditions was a 180-degree change in monetary and exchange rate policies. The obvious failure of targeting inflation through a freely-floating exchange rate framework led the IMF to implement a zero-growth target for the monetary base – or no inflation, a very recessionary tool. The Argentine central bank increased its nominal interest rate to more than 70% in order to withdraw pesos from circulation and meet the target. It also implemented a floating exchange rate, limited to an inflation-adjusted range. If the exchange rate moves outside of that range, the central bank is allowed to intervene in the foreign exchange market. All of this implies that IMF lenders see exchange rate stability as key to lowering inflation in Argentina.

What have been the results of Argentina's new engagement with the IMF? In the foreword to the April 2019 World Economic Outlook report, the IMF noted that macroeconomic instability in Argentina (and Turkey) and numerous other factors 'have all contributed to a significantly weakened global expansion, especially in the second half of 2018'. Since consumption, investment and economic activity dropped significantly and inflation almost doubled since the agreement was signed, the IMF is implicitly acknowledging that its policy recommendations in Argentina have failed and are contributing to the slowdown in global economic growth.

While the first stand-by agreement enabled Argentina to avoid a default and foreign creditors to get paid, the second agreement incentivised capital flight by providing additional dollars to short-term speculators, not unlike the capital flight that led up to the 2001-02 crisis. In other words, Argentina is again at the edge of the abyss, facing a potentially explosive economic and social situation just ahead of presidential elections in October.

What to expect

Will Argentina end up going over the edge, or turn around and find its way back to growth and development? The answer depends in part on the outcome of the upcoming elections, where there will likely be two clear alternatives.

The first is either Macri or another candidate from within his political party. Macri's support and approval ratings have plunged since mid-2018. As a result, many are suggesting that María Eugenia Vidal, governor of the province of Buenos Aires, should run in his place. Regardless of who the candidate is, the policy programme is clear. In a recent interview, when asked what his economic programme would be if re-elected, Macri said he would continue with the same policies but at a faster rate. One can expect greater austerity, a reprivatisation of the social security system, labour flexibilisation (i.e., further erosion of workers' rights), and deeper cuts in public sector wages and employment. In other words, an acceleration of the downward spiral already in place, with a major crisis as a likely outcome. This would be the 'over the edge' option.

The alternative is a candidacy centred around former president CFK, who announced on 18 May that she would run for the primary elections of the Peronist party as a vice-presidential candidate to her former chief of staff, Alberto Fernández. CFK remains the opposition politician with the most support, but while her approval rating has increased in recent months, she still faces a considerable portion of the electorate who do not want her back in office. While the Fernández team has not spelled out an economic programme in detail, they have spoken of the need to reactivate economic growth, job creation and consumption, and to control inflation through a 'social pact of citizen responsibility'. Should they or a similar candidate win, they will almost certainly have to negotiate a private debt restructuring. But perhaps the most difficult negotiation will be with the IMF, since almost the entire loan as it stands must be paid off by the end of 2023. This will most certainly be the trickiest aspect of an opposition victory, given how inflexible the IMF has proven to be in these kinds of negotiations. As IMF Managing Director Christine Lagarde recently stated: 'It would be foolish on the part of any candidate [in the Argentine elections] to turn their back to the work that is underway.'

But hopefully, Argentina will do just that: leave IMF austerity and neoliberalism behind and, more importantly, learn the lesson, once and for all, that neoliberalism and the IMF are antithetical to development. ◆

Alan Cibils is an Argentine economist and Chair of the Political Economy department at the Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento in Buenos Aires, Argentina. This article is reproduced from nacla.org, the website of the North American Congress on Latin America.

Ghana's gold remains in the hands of multinational corporations

The disproportionate focus on corruption of national leaders distracts from the systemic theft of national wealth by multinational corporations.

Celina della Croce

Gold miners at work in Ghana. The country is among the largest exporters of gold, yet less than 1.7% of global returns from its gold make their way back to the Ghanaian government.

EVERY year, the vast majority of Ghana's natural wealth is stolen. The country is among the largest exporters of gold in the world, yet – according to a study by the Bank of Ghana – less than 1.7% of global returns from its gold make their way back to the Ghanaian government. This means that the remaining 98.3% is managed by outside entities – mainly multinational corporations, who keep the lion's share of the profits. In other words, of the $5.2 billion of gold produced from 1990 to 2002, the government received only $87.3 million in corporate income taxes and royalty payments.

The dominant discourse propagated by institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) that control the levers of global finance blames the bad governance of local officials for the consequences of this plunder, citing corruption scandals as the main reason for a lack of resources. However, the discourse around bad governance – the idea that corrupt local officials are to blame for endemic poverty, and low indicators of health, education and other measures of national well-being – focuses on what happens with the 1.7% of the returns that Ghana receives.

Sarah Bracking from the University of Manchester points out that 'the company would argue that the market value of output is not synonymous with their surplus, or profits, as working capital, wages, depreciation of machines and so forth must be paid from this. However, the figures do act as a good illustration of the low returns to the sovereign owners of subsoil resources, as a proportion of their final market value, which, in Africa, can be estimated as typically in the region of between three and five percent, but which in this case is lower (about 1.7%).' Holding officials accountable for their use of public funds should be a given, but what about the remaining 98.3% of the returns generated by Ghana's gold exports?

Individuals are blamed, fingers angrily pointed at corrupt governments, while the nations they govern are robbed blind by transnational corporations. It is these corporations, working with institutions like the IMF and the World Bank, that define the terms of this conversation. These international lenders bury borrowing countries with steep interest rates and terms that grant lending institutions the power to determine and approve national policies.

National leaders of countries that fall into the debt trap are forced to forfeit the right to create their own policies for access to loans. These leaders are then blamed for the consequences of policies and terms crafted by lending institutions (a key form of neocolonialism). They are also blamed for the vestiges of hundreds of years of colonialism that came before.

In some cases, it is true that national leaders are involved in corruption scandals. In others, corruption scandals are fabricated, relying on a deeply embedded narrative and lack of faith in national leadership in the Global South, despite a lack of evidence (seen recently in Brazil with the imprisonment of leading presidential candidate Lula da Silva).

Even in cases where the corruption of local governments does exist, the amount of money pilfered pales in comparison to the wealth extracted by transnational corporations. In other words, robber barons are blaming petty thieves for the consequences of their large-scale robbery schemes. According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), multinational corporations' offshore tax hubs result in an estimated $100 billion in annual tax revenue losses for developing countries. Vijay Prashad of Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research calls this phenomenon 'tax strikes', or the idea that 'those who hold capital, who are the masters of property, have been – essentially – on strike against regimes of taxation. They use their vast wealth to either hide their money or change tax laws to offer them increasing protections'. Rather than using this money for the social good – to invest in public services, infrastructure, health or education – they use it to increase their own wealth, often by 'inflat[ing] the stock market and various asset bubbles'.

A slum neighbourhood in the Ghanaian capital Accra. Wealth produced by Ghanaian resources is being appropriated by transnational corporations instead of benefiting the Ghanaian people.

Comparatively, during a 2013 keynote address, World Bank President Jim Yong Kim cited that corruption in the form of bribery and theft by government officials costs developing countries between $20 billion and $40 billion each year. In other words, by a rough calculation, the amount that corrupt government officials cost developing countries is anywhere from 40% to 80% less than half of the amount that these nations lose in offshore tax havens.

The real power, then, remains in the hands of multinational corporations, which not only make off with vast sums of wealth belonging to the 'darker nations', but also continue to exercise control over nations in the Global South, where they use access to finance as a lever to impose policies that benefit themselves at the expense of the people who live there.

When local leaders are deemed too much of a threat to multinational corporations' interests, they are quickly deposed through coups, as we saw in Haiti (2004) and Honduras (2009), or destabilisation campaigns, as we see in Venezuela today. Kwame Nkrumah, a leader in Ghana's independence struggle and the country's first president, referred to this process as neocolonialism. 'The essence of neo-colonialism is that the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside,' Nkrumah wrote in his book *Neo-Colonialism, the Last Stage of Imperialism*. Through organisations like the IMF and World Bank, former colonialists would strive for 'the general objective ... to achieve colonialism in fact while preaching independence'.

Fifty-four years after Nkrumah wrote *Neo-Colonialism, The Last Stage of Imperialism* (1965) and 62 years after Ghana's independence from Great Britain (1957), Nkrumah's assessment remains as clear and relevant as ever. The preferred words of imperialism have shifted, but the underlying structure remains the same: a system where an illusion of freedom obscures the power relations and where monopoly capital, in the form of transnational corporations and lending institutions, exercises control over the country's economic and political reality.

The narrative of today's neocolonialists blames 'bad governance' as the obstacle to a better future in which Ghanaians benefit from their vast mineral wealth, as Gyekye Tanoh of the Third World Network (Africa) points out in his recent interview with Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research. According to this trope, the corruption of local governments is to blame. However, this narrative leaves out of the picture the pillage of natural resources and exploitation of labour by colonisers (Great Britain, in the case of Ghana).

Not only were the systems to process crude forms of minerals such as oil and gold not developed by colonisers, but the country's reliance on foreign capital to buy and process these resources has kept the country in a position similar to its colonial status pre-1957, as Nkrumah predicted, where transnational corporations, rather than the state of Great Britain, keep the vast majority of revenues produced from Ghanaian gold and other resources. Tanoh explains: 'The entire system that was set in place since the 1980s to force countries to rely upon raw material exports and to become dependent on foreign buyers is what leaves countries like Ghana with such a minuscule amount of the wealth taken from Ghana's land. "Good governance" is not going to solve this, unless "good governance" refers as well to the deep structural dynamics.'

Ghana's first president Kwame Nkrumah wrote the book *Neo-Colonialism, the Last Stage of Imperialism*.

Pointing a proverbial finger at those responsible for the distribution of 1.7% of wealth generated and framing them as the main culprits of corruption, poverty and underdevelopment, is not just reckless and irresponsible; it is part of a systemic narrative that deflects attention away from the real thieves: the multinational corporations that preside over the 98.3% of the remaining wealth. It is intellectually dishonest to ignore the broader historical context that is responsible for the low returns of Ghanaian gold to Ghanaian citizens. True bad governance is the appropriation of 98.3% of wealth produced by Ghanaian resources that lines the coffers of transnational corporations instead of being returned to benefit the Ghanaian people.

Of the 10 top multinational firms that operate on the African continent, only one (Vale, of Brazil) is located in the Global South. Of the remaining nine, three are United States corporations, three are Canadian, two are Australian, and one is British. All are private transnational corporations. In other words, the gold that is extracted from Ghanaian soil (like the natural wealth extracted from across the African continent and Global South) is immediately handed over to multinational corporations – almost entirely based in and controlled by the Global North (or, at best, by the national elite) – to be processed, refined and distributed. Death, rape and preventable illnesses that plague those who work in or live near the mines are rampant in the areas where these companies operate (as illustrated by Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research's latest briefing – see www.thetricontinental.org/ten-canadian-mining-companies-financial-details-and-violations/).

It is intellectually dishonest to blame local leaders as the main culprits for bad governance, conveniently leaving multinational corporations out of the picture.

Though Ghana won its independence in 1957, the vestiges of colonialism and underdevelopment did not magically leave with it. Under colonialist rule, resources were extracted from former colonies – like Ghana – to sustain the wealth of their colonisers. Wealth produced from gold (further enhanced by enslaved or bonded labour) quickly left the country, promoting development in England while leaving Ghana void of the infrastructure to develop or refine its own resources, and leaving its people without access to basic services.

To accept the narrative on bad governance is to forfeit what Fidel Castro called the Battle of Ideas. It is to let the powerful – transnational corporations, and the web of institutions that protects their interests, from the IMF to corporatised non-profits and mainstream media – define the terms of the conversation on development, sovereignty and the lives of the people who inhabit the resource-rich land. It is to forfeit the control of Ghanaian resources to transnational corporations, the very thieves of the majority of the country's wealth, under the false pretext that the Ghanaian people are incapable of managing it themselves. To quote Tanoh, 'the language of "good governance"... implies that it is only the aberrant behaviours of the public officials that should be seen as corruption. Yet of course the lack of resources available to accountable public institutions makes it impossible to create or sustain meaningful domestic anti-corruption mechanisms.'

It is intellectually dishonest to blame local leaders as the main culprits for bad governance, conveniently leaving multinational corporations out of the picture. It is the vestiges of colonialism, and its continued neocolonialist forms, that deprive the Ghanaian people of the right to process, develop and manage their natural wealth and to be the drivers of their own policies – in other words, their right to national sovereignty. It is transnational corporations, the stand-ins of yesterday's British empire – often aided by an enthusiastic national bourgeoisie – that have robbed the Ghanaian people of sovereignty over their resources, their wealth and their future. ◆

Celina della Croce is a coordinator at Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research as well as an organiser, activist and advocate for social justice. Prior to joining Tricontinental Institute, she worked in the labour movement with the Service Employees Union and the Fight for 15, organising for economic, racial and immigrant justice.

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The global threat of antimicrobial resistance

Antimicrobial resistance (AMR) is a major and serious problem. It represents possibly the greatest global crisis in public health today, akin to climate change as the top environmental problem.

Martin Khor

Inappropriate use of antibiotics is accelerating the development of antimicrobial resistance.

ANTIMICROBIAL resistance is resistance of a microorganism to an antimicrobial drug that was originally effective for treatment of infections caused by it. Resistant microorganisms (including bacteria, fungi, viruses and parasites) are able to withstand attack by antimicrobial drugs, such as antibacterial drugs (e.g., antibiotics), antifungals, antivirals and antimalarials, so that standard treatments become ineffective and infections persist, increasing the risk of spread to others.[1]

Resistance by bacteria and other microbes to antibiotics and other medicines may be a natural process, as the disease-causing microbes evolve through time in response to the medicines. However, the rate of resistance is accelerated and the scope of resistance broadened by several factors: the inappropriate use of antibiotics, due to inappropriate prescribing and dispensing; inappropriate marketing methods and sales promotion; lack of awareness among patients; the inappropriate and widespread use of antibiotics in the animal husbandry and agriculture sector, which passes on resistant microbes to humans; the spread of resistance through the environment; and the existence of certain genes that specialise in accelerating and spreading resistance among bacteria, thus greatly increasing the rate and spread of resistance to many species of bacteria that cause diseases.

AMR is now a global crisis, with many pathogens becoming resistant to many antibiotics. As leading public health officials and senior scientists have warned, we are now entering a post-antibiotic world, in which it is increasingly difficult to treat simple ailments and dangerous diseases. The incidence of multidrug resistance has risen significantly, and for a few diseases there is almost no cure left. In 2012, then World Health Organisation (WHO) Director-General Dr Margaret Chan warned that every antibiotic ever developed was at risk of becoming useless. 'A post-antibiotic era means in effect an end to modern medicine as we know it. Things as common as strep throat or a child's scratched knee could once again kill.' The Chief Medical Officer of the United Kingdom, Dame Sally Davies, warned in 2013 of a 'catastrophe' of AMR being so widespread that we would be back to a 19th-century situation of a pre-antibiotic era when many diseases could not be treated.

Recent information on the extent of resistance

A good description of the extent of the AMR crisis has been given by WHO in its Fact Sheets on AMR. The following is a summary of the WHO findings as at January 2018:[2]

• Antimicrobial resistance threatens the effective prevention and treatment of an ever-increasing range of infections caused by bacteria, parasites, viruses and fungi.

• Patients with infections caused by drug-resistant bacteria are at increased risk of worse clinical outcomes and death compared with patients infected with non-resistant strains of the same bacteria. They also consume more healthcare resources than patients having non-resistant strains of the same bacteria.

• There are high proportions of antibiotic resistance in bacteria that cause common infections (e.g., urinary tract infections, pneumonia, bloodstream infections) in all regions of the world.

• Resistance of *Klebsiella pneumoniae* (common intestinal bacterium that can cause life-threatening infections) to a last-resort treatment (carbapenem antibiotics) has spread to all regions. In some countries, because of resistance, carbapenem antibiotics do not work in more than half the people treated for *K. pneumoniae* infections. *K. pneumoniae* is a major cause of hospital-acquired infections such as pneumonia, bloodstream infections, and infections in newborns and intensive care unit patients.

• Resistance in *Escherichia coli* to a widely used medicine for treating urinary tract infections (fluoroquinolone antibiotics) is very widespread. This treatment is now ineffective in over half of patients in countries in many parts of the world.

• A high percentage of hospital-acquired infections are caused by highly resistant bacteria such as methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) or multidrug-resistant Gram-negative bacteria. People with MRSA are 64% more likely to die than those with a non-resistant form of *S. aureus*, which is a common cause of severe infections in the community and hospitals.

• In 2016, there were 490,000 new cases of multidrug-resistant tuberculosis (MDR-TB). Only a quarter of these were detected and reported. Extensively drug-resistant tuberculosis (XDR-TB) has been identified in 121 countries. MDR-TB requires treatment courses that are much longer and less effective than those for non-resistant TB. Among new TB cases in 2016, 4.1% were MDR-TB (19% for those previously treated for TB). About 6.2% of people with MDR-TB have XDR-TB.

• As of July 2016, resistance to first-line treatment for *P. falciparum* malaria (artemisinin-based combination therapies or ACTs) was confirmed in five countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam) of the Greater Mekong subregion. Patients with artemisinin-resistant infections recover if they are treated with an ACT containing an effective partner drug. However, along the Cambodia-Thailand border, *P. falciparum* has become resistant to almost all available antimalarial medicines. The spread or emergence of multidrug resistance, including resistance to ACTs, in other regions could jeopardise important recent gains in malaria control.

• Treatment failures due to resistance to treatments of last resort for gonorrhoea (third-generation cephalosporin antibiotics) have been confirmed in at least 10 countries. The new updated WHO guidelines for gonorrhoea do not recommend quinolones (a class of antibiotic) due to widespread high levels of resistance. Gonorrhoea may soon become untreatable as no vaccines or new drugs are in development.

UN Photo/Laura Jarriel

The UN General Assembly high-level event on AMR, 21 September 2016.

• In 2012, WHO reported a gradual increase in resistance to HIV drugs, albeit not reaching critical levels. Since then, further increases in resistance to first-line treatment drugs have been reported. In 2010, 7% of people starting antiretroviral therapy (ART) in developing countries and 10-20% in developed countries had drug-resistant HIV. In some countries, resistance of 15% or more is reported for those starting HIV treatment, and up to 40% among those restarting treatment. Those who have HIV resistant to first-line treatment require second- and third-line regimens but these are three and 18 times more expensive respectively than first-line drugs.

The global response

The WHA Global Action Plan and other developments

WHO's World Health Assembly (WHA) in May 2015 adopted the Global Action Plan (GAP) on Antimicrobial Resistance. It has five objectives: (i) to use medicines properly in human and animal health; (ii) reduce infection by sanitation, hygiene and infection prevention measures; (iii) strengthen surveillance and research; (iv) educate the public as well as doctors, veterinarians and farmers on proper use of antibiotics; and (v) increase investment in developing new medicines, diagnostic tools and vaccines.

Implementation of the GAP at global and national levels will be a good start in the long battle against AMR. It is important to recognise the conditions and challenges faced by developing countries and assist them to address these challenges in order to facilitate their implementation of the plan.

The WHA resolution (WHA68.7) adopting the GAP requested WHO member states to submit national action plans (NAPs) within two years, i.e., by May 2017. WHO, the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) have produced a manual for preparing the NAPs.[3]

As of April 2017, 67 countries had completed their national action plans and 62 others were in the process of doing so, according to a WHO secretariat report.[4] Almost all the NAPs reflect the One Health approach, with a multisectoral coordination group and actions planned across health, agriculture and other sectors. According to WHO: 'The challenge now is to implement plans, sustain action and ensure that essential priority actions are incorporated into relevant plans and budgets.'

WHO has also carried out the following: (i) established the Global Antimicrobial Surveillance System (GLASS), with 43 countries enrolled or in the process of doing so; (ii) developed a list of critically important antimicrobials for human medicine (WHO CIA List), with the latest version in 2016; (iii) published in November 2017 a set of guidelines on the use in food-producing animals of the antimicrobials included in the list, aimed at preserving their effectiveness and protecting public health; (iv) published in 2017 a set of guidelines on infection prevention and control at the national and acute healthcare facility level; (v) published in 2016 global guidelines on the prevention of surgical site infection; (vi) published an updated version of the WHO model list of essential medicines in 2017, with an antibiotic chapter offering guidance on management of major infective syndromes; and (vii) issued a list of priority antibiotic-resistant bacterial pathogens where new medicines are most urgently needed, to guide the priority for research and development (R&D) of new antibiotics.

Pursuant to a decision in resolution WHA68.7, WHO is also developing, in consultation with member states and relevant partners, 'options for establishing a global development and stewardship framework to support the development, control, distribution and appropriate use of new antimicrobial medicines, diagnostic tools, vaccines and other interventions, while preserving existing antimicrobial medicines and promoting affordable access to existing and new antimicrobial medicines and diagnostic tools, taking into account the needs of all countries, and in line with the global action plan on AMR'. The document is still under preparation.[5] A draft of the framework has been prepared by the WHO secretariat. It is important for developing countries to take an active role in the consultations with WHO to develop this framework.

The UN General Assembly high-level event and political declaration on AMR

Another landmark development at the global level on AMR was the adoption on 21 September 2016 of a political declaration by heads of state and government at a high-level event on AMR. It was subsequently formally adopted by the United Nations General Assembly.

Many political leaders and ministers spoke at the event on the need to fight the AMR crisis. The political declaration recognised that antibiotic resistance is the 'greatest and most urgent global risk' and that 'due to AMR many 20th century achievements are being gravely challenged, particularly the reduction in illness and death from infectious diseases…'. This is the first-ever statement by the heads of all the countries that recognise the AMR crisis and in which they pledge to take action.

The then UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said that AMR has become one of the biggest threats to global health. 'All around the world, many common infections are becoming resistant to the antimicrobial medicines used to treat them, resulting in longer illnesses and more deaths. At the same time, not enough new antimicrobial drugs, especially antibiotics, are being developed to replace older and increasingly ineffective ones.'

The heads of three international agencies, WHO, FAO and the OIE, made speeches and also issued a joint statement signifying their joint efforts to address AMR. The WHO Director-General Margaret Chan warned that 'AMR poses a fundamental threat to human health, development and security'. Referring to the declaration, she said 'the commitments made today must now be translated into swift, effective actions … We are running out of time.'

The declaration stressed the need for developing countries to obtain financial resources. It also stressed that 'affordability and access to existing and new antimicrobial medicines, vaccines and diagnostics should be a global priority'.

On the need for innovation, the declaration recognised the importance of delinking the cost of investment in R&D from the price and volume of sales so as to facilitate equitable and affordable access to new medicines, diagnostic tools and vaccines.

The declaration established a task force of agencies (co-chaired by WHO and the UN Secretary-General's office) which would provide guidance for global action on AMR, and requested the UN Secretary-General to report on progress of implementation of the declaration and to make further recommendations.

In 2017, the Interagency Coordination Group (IACG) was established by the UN Secretary-General to follow up on the declaration. It was made up of individual experts (many drawn from health ministries) and representatives of UN and other international organisations. The final report of the IACG was submitted in April 2019 to the UN Secretary-General, who will present his own report to the UN General Assembly in 2019. (See following article.)

The need for developing-country involvement

It is to be expected that the developed countries will take the lead in the global fight against AMR. This is due to the greater availability of financial resources, and higher levels of scientific knowledge, research capability and technology as well as institutional and organisational capabilities including in the healthcare sector. Thus much of the global progress in the fight against AMR, in science, technology, surveillance, regulations and discovery of new antimicrobials, is expected to take place first in the developed countries.

However, the developing countries will also have to play a central role in the global battle against AMR, since it is in these countries that the majority of the world population reside, that there is the highest number (and in some cases highest incidence) of people suffering from drug-resistant diseases, and that pathogens with the genes specialising in spreading resistance have mainly been found in patients. Moreover, in an increasingly globalised world with a high degree of travel and trade, there can be the easy spread of drug-resistant bacteria and diseases.

Therefore, the special needs and

interests of the developing countries have to be given the highest priority in the global fight against AMR if we are to make adequate progress.

Developing-country awareness of the AMR crisis

Political leaders and public health officials in developing countries are becoming more aware of the AMR crisis.

At the summit meeting of the Group of 77 and China, which has 130 developing-country member states, held in Santa Cruz (Bolivia) in May 2014, the political leaders of the Group adopted a declaration which included the following paragraph 66:

'We are concerned about the increasing problem of antimicrobial resistance to existing drugs, including those against TB and malaria. As a result, increasing numbers of patients, especially in developing countries, face the prospect of dying from preventable and/or treatable diseases. We urge the international health authorities and organisations, especially WHO, to take urgent action and to work together upon request with developing countries that do not have adequate resources to address this problem.'

In May 2017, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM)'s health ministers and senior officials met on the sidelines of the World Health Assembly. The NAM ministerial declaration they issued referred to AMR as follows: 'We express great concern on the spread of antimicrobial drug resistance and its potential massive threats to global public health achievements and the urgent need for global action to address this threat and, welcoming the political declaration of the high-level meeting of the UN General Assembly on antimicrobial resistance and progress made in implementing resolution WHA68.7 on Global Action Plan on Antimicrobial Resistance; and the crucial need to support Member States with technical assistance to develop their national plan on antimicrobial resistance in response to the Global Action Plan.'[6] NAM is a movement of more than 100 non-aligned countries, most of them developing countries, which works mainly within the UN. It is significant that such an umbrella organisation of so many developing countries called for urgent global action to address AMR and expressed the crucial need to support its member states with technical assistance to develop their national AMR plans.

The health ministers of WHO's South-East Asia Region, at a WHO regional workshop in Jaipur (India) in September 2011, adopted the Jaipur Declaration on AMR, which included the following: 'We the Health Ministers of SEAsia Region … recognise it is imperative that national governments accord utmost priority to this neglected problem, to preserve efficacy of anti-microbial agents in our fight against microbial diseases.' It was followed by 18 action points.

And as mentioned above, in May 2015, the World Health Assembly, of which the majority of members are from developing countries, adopted the Global Action Plan on AMR, with a commitment that national action plans would be drawn up by all countries within two years. However, in most developing countries, the public is still lacking knowledge and awareness of the threat of AMR, while coordinated and systematic action is also at only a beginning stage. Therefore, much more has to be done.

Impact of AMR in developing countries

People in developing countries will be most affected by the AMR crisis. AMR is estimated by the UK-sponsored Review on Antimicrobial Resistance, in a 2014 report, to globally cause 700,000 deaths annually at present (and this is a low estimate).[7] The number of annual deaths attributable to AMR is projected to rise to 10 million in 2050. Of these deaths, it is projected that 390,000 will be in Europe, 317,000 in North America, 22,000 in Oceania, 4.7 million in Asia, 4.2 million in Africa and 392,000 in Latin America.

For most diseases the majority of people affected by AMR are in developing countries. The Review on Antimicrobial Resistance concludes that 'countries that already have high malaria, HIV or TB rates are likely to particularly suffer as resistance to current treatments increases'.[8] Particular countries at risk include India, Nigeria and Indonesia (malaria) and Russia (TB), and Africa will suffer greatly as the HIV and TB co-morbidity is likely to get worse.

The Review also estimates that 300 million people are expected to die prematurely because of drug resistance over the next 35 years (i.e., 2015 to 2050) and world GDP will be 2% to 3.5% lower than it otherwise would be in 2050. Between now and 2050 the world can expect to lose $60-100 trillion of economic output if AMR is not tackled. (By 2030, world GDP will be 1.4% smaller, with over 100 million people having died prematurely.) Countries from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, the club of rich nations) are expected to have $20-35 trillion in cumulative loss of output by 2050; which means that about $40-65 trillion or two-thirds of the losses will be borne by non-OECD countries.

The case of tuberculosis is illustrative. In a 2016 report, the Review on Antimicrobial Resistance found that of 'the 10 million deaths that might be associated with drug resistance each year by 2050, around a quarter will come from drug-resistant strains of TB'.[9] Most of these anticipated cases and deaths from resistant TB will be from developing countries, although TB is also affecting several developed countries.

The majority of people affected by increasing resistance to drugs treating malaria and to the first-line treatments for HIV/AIDS are also from developing countries. Pathogens that are increasingly resistant to powerful antibiotics (*E. coli*, *K. pneumoniae*, *S. aureus*, *Salmonella*, *Shigella*, gonorrhoea) are prevalent in developing countries.

Policymakers and the public in developing countries should therefore recognise that the AMR crisis is mainly taking place in their countries and that they have to give the highest priority to addressing it. At the same time, the international community has to pay special attention to the needs of developing countries and to assist them in addressing the AMR crisis.

Genes accelerating resistance found in developing countries

In recent years, there has been the discovery of at least two types of genes (NDM-1 and MCR-1) that have the characteristic of being able to make bacteria highly resistant to known drugs and to also spread from one species of bacteria to other species through horizontal gene transfer. Bacteria containing these genes were first found in developing countries, and their presence is now confirmed in many other countries. The discoveries of NDM-1 and MCR-1 add urgency to the task of addressing antimicrobial resistance.

The NDM-1 gene has the ability to alter bacteria and make them highly resistant to drugs. In 2010, two types of bacteria (*E. coli* and *K. pneumoniae*) were found to host this gene. Most of the initial cases were found in South Asian countries. It has since spread to many countries. The gene has been found to jump among various species of bacteria at superfast speed, making more species of bacteria drug-resistant. NDM-1 has now been found in over 20 species of bacteria. The gene makes the bacteria highly resistant to all known drugs except two, including colistin.

In 2015, scientists found another gene, MCR-1, which creates resistance to colistin, a powerful antibiotic used as a last resort to treat infections when other medicines do not work. The gene also has the characteristic of being able to move easily from one strain of bacteria to other species of bacteria. Yi-Yun Liu and colleagues published a paper in *The Lancet Infectious Diseases* journal in 2016[10] revealing they found the MCR-1 gene in pigs at slaughter that they tested, chicken and pork being retailed and hospital patients. The scientists found the gene in 166 out of 804 pigs at slaughter that they tested, 78 of 523 samples of chicken and pork being retailed, and in 16 of 1,322 hospital patients. The study indicates there is a chain in the spread of resistance from the use of colistin in livestock feed to colistin resistance in slaughtered animals, in food and in human beings. Colistin is part of a category of antibiotics known as polymyxins. Previously they had not been widely used in humans due to their toxic side-effects, but they have recently become a last-resort treatment when other antibiotics do not work because of resistance.

One of the authors of the study, Prof. Jian-Hua Liu from South China Agricultural University, was quoted by *The Guardian* as saying these are extremely worrying results, which reveal the emergence of the first polymyxin resistance gene that is readily passed between common bacteria such as *E. coli* and *K. pneumoniae*. This suggests that ‘the progression from extensive drug resistance to pan-drug resistance is inevitable’, added Liu. Extensive resistance is when a bacterium is resistant to many drugs, while pan-drug resistance indicates resistance to all drugs.

Another of the paper’s co-authors, Prof. Timothy Walsh from the University of Cardiff, told the BBC: ‘All key players are now in place to make the post-antibiotic world a reality. If MCR-1 becomes global, which is a case of when and not if, and the gene aligns itself with other antibiotic resistance genes, which is inevitable, then we will have very likely reached the start of the post-antibiotic era. At that point, if a patient is seriously ill, say with *E. coli*, then there is virtually nothing you can do.’

A major reason for the emergence and spread of the gene is suspected to be the heavy use of colistin to feed livestock to promote their growth. In February 2016, *The Lancet* published a comment from scientists that ‘we must take the call to curtail the use of polymyxins (including colistin) in agriculture to the highest levels of government or face more patients for whom we need to say, “Sorry there is nothing I can do to cure your infection.”’ Other antibiotics that are used by human beings should also be prohibited or heavily restricted in the livestock sector, especially if they are used as growth promoters.

The 2016 paper mentioned that besides China, the MCR-1 gene had also been found in Malaysia and Denmark. Since then, the gene has also been discovered in bacterial samples in many other countries, including Thailand, Laos, Brazil, Egypt, Italy, Spain, England and Wales, the Netherlands, Algeria, Portugal and Canada. ◆

Martin Khor is Advisor to the Third World Network. The above is extracted from his paper The Global Threat of Antimicrobial Resistance and the Challenges and Needs of Developing Countries *(TWN Series on Antimicrobial Resistance, No. 1, 2019). The paper is a revised and updated version of a background paper used as speaking notes by the author in a panel discussion during the UN General Assembly high-level event on antimicrobial resistance at the UN in New York on 21 September 2016.*

Notes

1 World Health Organisation (WHO), 2015. Fact Sheet on Antimicrobial Resistance.

2 WHO, 2018. Fact Sheet on Antimicrobial Resistance, January 2018.

3 WHO, FAO, OIE, 2016. Antimicrobial resistance: a manual for preparing national action plans.

4 WHO, 2017. Antimicrobial resistance: Report by the Secretariat (Document A70/12, dated 10 April 2017).

5 See WHO, 2017. Antimicrobial resistance: Report by the Secretariat (Document A70/12, 10 April 2017), paragraph 18 for a report on the progress of the framework.

6 See South Centre News on AMR No. 4, 6 September 2017.

7 Review on Antimicrobial Resistance, 2014. Antimicrobial resistance: Tackling a crisis for the health and wealth of nations, pages 5, 13.

8 Ibid., page 9.

9 Review on Antimicrobial Resistance, 2016. Tackling drug-resistant infections globally: Final report and recommendations.

10 Yi-Yun Liu et al., 2016. Emergence of plasmid-mediated colistin resistance mechanism MCR-1 in animals and human beings in China: a microbiological and molecular biological study, *The Lancet Infectious Diseases*, 2016, 16: 161-68.

New UN report calls for urgent action to avert antimicrobial resistance crisis

The United Nations, international agencies and experts on 29 April released a groundbreaking report demanding immediate, coordinated and ambitious action to avert a potentially disastrous drug-resistance crisis.

IF no action is taken – warns the UN Interagency Coordination Group (IACG) on Antimicrobial Resistance which released its report – drug-resistant diseases could cause 10 million deaths each year by 2050 and damage to the economy as catastrophic as the 2008-09 global financial crisis. By 2030, antimicrobial resistance could force up to 24 million people into extreme poverty.

Currently, at least 700,000 people die each year due to drug-resistant diseases, including 230,000 people who die from multidrug-resistant tuberculosis. More and more common diseases, including respiratory tract infections, sexually transmitted infections and urinary tract infections, are untreatable; life-saving medical procedures are becoming much riskier; and our food systems are increasingly precarious.

A doctor examining a tuberculosis patient at a hospital in India. Some 230,000 people die each year from multidrug-resistant TB.

The world is already feeling the economic and health consequences as crucial medicines become ineffective. Without investment from countries in all income brackets, future generations will face the disastrous impacts of uncontrolled antimicrobial resistance.

Recognising that human, animal, food and environmental health are closely interconnected, the report calls for a coordinated, multisectoral 'One Health' approach.

It recommends countries:

• prioritise national action plans to scale up financing and capacity-building efforts;

• put in place stronger regulatory systems and support awareness programmes for responsible and prudent use of antimicrobials by professionals in human, animal and plant health;

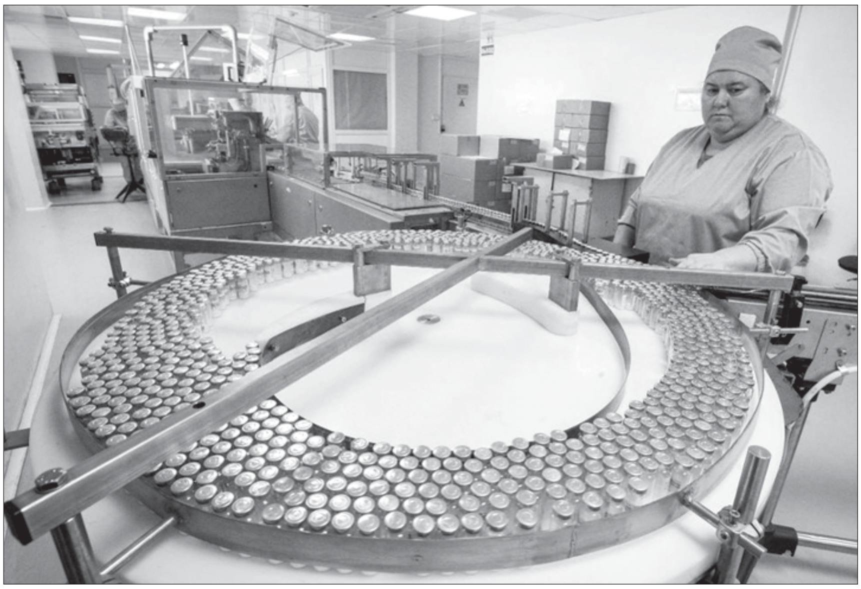
• invest in ambitious research and development for new technologies to combat antimicrobial resistance;

• urgently phase out the use of critically important antimicrobials as growth promoters in agriculture.

'Antimicrobial resistance is one of the greatest threats we face as a global community. This report reflects the depth and scope of the response needed to curb its rise and protect a century of progress in health,' said Amina Mohammed, UN Deputy Secretary-General and Co-Chair of the IACG. 'It rightly emphasises that there is no time to wait and I urge all stakeholders to act on its recommendations and work urgently to protect our people and planet and secure a sustainable future for all.'

The recommendations require immediate engagement across sectors, from governments and the private sector, to civil society and academia.

Convened at the request of world leaders after the first ever UN High-Level Meeting on Antimicrobial Resistance in 2016, the expert group brought together partners across the UN, international organisations and individuals with expertise across human, animal and plant health, as well as the food, animal feed, trade, development and environment sectors, to formulate a blueprint for the fight against antimicrobial resistance. The IACG Secretariat was hosted by the



An antibiotic manufacturing plant. The world is already feeling the economic and health consequences as crucial medicines become ineffective.

World Health Organisation (WHO), with contributions from the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the UN (FAO) and the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE).

This report reflects a renewed commitment to collaborative action at the global level by FAO, OIE and WHO.

'The report's recommendations recognise that antimicrobials are critical to safeguard food production, safety and trade, as well as human and animal health, and it clearly promotes responsible use across sectors,' said FAO Director-General José Graziano da Silva. 'Countries can foster sustainable food systems and farming practices that reduce the risk of antimicrobial resistance by working together to promote viable alternatives to antimicrobial use, as laid out in the report's recommendations.'

'Antimicrobial resistance must be addressed urgently, through a One Health approach involving bold, long-term commitments from governments and other stakeholders, supported by the international organisations,' said Monique Eloit, Director-General of OIE. 'This report demonstrates the level of commitment and coordination that will be required as we face this global challenge to public health, animal health and welfare, and food security. We must all play our part in ensuring future access to and efficacy of these essential medicines.'

'We are at a critical point in the fight to protect some of our most essential medicines,' said Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of WHO and Co-Chair of the IACG. 'This report makes concrete recommendations that could save thousands of lives every year.'

The report highlights the need for coordinated and intensive efforts to overcome antimicrobial resistance, which is a major barrier to the achievement of many of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, including universal health coverage, secure and safe food, sustainable farming systems and clean water and sanitation. – *WHO/IACG/FAO/OIE* ◆

Letter of appreciation to an IACG member

Martin Khor, Senior Advisor to the Third World Network, was one of the members of the IACG. Reproduced below is the text of a letter sent to Khor by the IACG Co-Chairs, UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina J Mohammed and WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, upon the completion of the expert group's mandate.

Dear Mr. Khor,

As Co-Chairs of the ad hoc Interagency Coordination Group (IACG) on Antimicrobial Resistance, we would like to thank you for your commitment and service as a valued member of the group, which completed its mandate on 29 April 2019 upon the handover of the report to the United Nations Secretary-General.

The IACG recommendations give us a blueprint for further action against the looming threat of antimicrobial resistance across the One Health spectrum. The successful IACG report would not have been possible without your hard work, support and diverse expertise across human and animal health, food and the environment. Carrying this forward, there will be continued need for action across sectors and stakeholders at the national and global levels. In this regard, we rely on you as leaders in your respective fields, to continue championing this issue and the IACG recommendations in your respective agencies and countries, within the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

It is our pleasure to inform you that the Tripartite agencies [WHO, FAO and OIE] have already taken steps to start implementing the IACG recommendations through the establishment of a Joint Secretariat, which will collaborate with all agencies and stakeholders.

Thank you for your continued support as we embark on the implementation of the IACG recommendations. ◆

Global governance to tackle antimicrobial resistance: The way forward

To be truly effective, action to combat antimicrobial resistance has to be global. Recognising this, in 2016 the United Nations General Assembly requested the UN Secretary-General, in consultation with FAO, OIE and WHO, to take steps to convene an international group to provide practical advice to tackle this scourge. The result was the emergence of the Interagency Coordination Group (IACG) on Antimicrobial Resistance convened by the Secretary-General in March 2017.

Haileyesus Getahun and Hanan Balkhy


UN Photo/Mark Garten

The handover of the IACG report to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres (centre left) at the UN in New York on 29 April.

IN the 2016 Political Declaration of the high-level meeting of the United Nations General Assembly on antimicrobial resistance,[1] member states requested the UN Secretary-General, in consultation with the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) and the World Health Organisation (WHO), to convene an ad hoc interagency coordination group co-chaired by the Executive Office of the UN Secretary-General and the Director-General of WHO to provide practical guidance for approaches needed to ensure sustained, effective global action to address antimicrobial resistance, including on options to improve coordination.

The Interagency Coordination Group (IACG) on Antimicrobial Resistance was convened in March 2017 with membership drawn from United Nations and multilateral agencies, as well as individuals with expertise in human, animal and plant health, food safety, trade, development and the environment. It handed over its report with 14 recommendations to the UN Secretary-General in April 2019.[2]

In developing its recommendations, the IACG was guided by several key principles. These included a focus on promoting and supporting a One Health approach to antimicrobial resistance; strengthening existing systems and mainstreaming efforts to combat antimicrobial resistance so as to leverage gains across the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); supporting mobilisation of all stakeholders, including governments, international organisations, academia, civil society and the private sector, at global, regional, national and local levels, with a strong emphasis on enabling country-level action and with due consideration to country-specific context, capacity and infrastructure; and that recommendations should be practical and feasible to implement.

The IACG report focuses on three key messages. Firstly, antimicrobial resistance needs to be understood as a global crisis that is placing a century of progress in human health and achievement of the SDGs at serious risk, including the goals related to health, food security, clean water and sanitation, responsible consumption and production, and poverty and inequality. Although alarming levels of antimicrobial resistance have been reported in countries of all income levels, low- and middle-income countries are at particular risk due to higher disease burden; weaker health and surveillance systems; inadequate regulatory frameworks; poor infection prevention and control in health facilities and farms; lack of access to clean water, sanitation and hygiene; and lack of access to quality-assured antimicrobials, vaccines and diagnostics. Misuse and overuse of antimicrobials in human, animal and plant health are major drivers of the emergence and spread of resistant pathogens in many countries. At the same time, it also recognises that millions of lives are lost every year due to lack of access to existing antimicrobial agents: inadequate access to antibiotics alone kills nearly six million people annually, including a million children who die of preventable sepsis and pneumonia.[3]

Secondly, the IACG emphasises the need for far more urgency in the global response, without which the health and economic impacts of antimicrobial resistance could reach disastrous levels within just a generation as a result of increased morbidity and mortality, escalating healthcare costs and damage to food production, trade and livelihoods. On the other hand, the IACG report notes that many of the tools needed to address antimicrobial resistance are readily available: the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) estimates that in higher-income countries, for example, a package of simple interventions to address antimicrobial resistance, such as handwashing and more prudent prescribing of antibiotics, could pay for itself due to costs averted,[4] while in lower-income countries, additional but still relatively modest investments are urgently needed. If investments in and action against antimicrobial resistance are delayed any further, the world will have to pay far more in the future to cope with its growing impact.

Thirdly, because the drivers of antimicrobial resistance lie in humans, animals, plants, food and the environment, a more robust and sustained One Health response is critical to engage all stakeholders, at all levels, across sectors and disciplines, around a shared vision and goals. Such a response requires that programmes, policies, legislation and research to address antimicrobial resistance be designed and implemented in a way that enables multiple sectors and stakeholders engaged in human, terrestrial and aquatic animal and plant health, food and feed production and the environment to communicate and work together to achieve better public health outcomes.

The IACG recommendations focus on addressing gaps and challenges in five key areas of the response to antimicrobial resistance: 1) accelerating progress in countries; 2) innovating to secure the future; 3) collaborating for more effective action; 4) investing for a sustainable response; and 5) strengthening accountability and global governance (see box).

This article focuses primarily on the IACG recommendations relating to global governance and accountability. These recommendations recognise that stronger and sustained global leadership and advocacy and a more powerful global narrative and vision are needed to advance the global response to antimicrobial resistance. The recommendations strongly underpin the need to accelerate progress in countries, which lies at the heart of the global response to antimicrobial resistance. Although many countries have developed national action plans on antimicrobial resistance, many of them are focused narrowly on human health and many countries lack resources and capacity to effectively implement them. The following are the key recommendations and structures proposed for the global governance of the antimicrobial resistance response.

Tripartite agencies at the core

The Tripartite collaboration between FAO, OIE and WHO has provided leadership in the global response to antimicrobial resistance for many years. The IACG recognises the core leadership mandate of the Tripartite agencies to facilitate the One Health response on antimicrobial resistance in close collaboration with other UN and international agencies, including UN Environment and the World Bank. Their role is critical in providing member states with normative guidance, standards and tools to tackle antimicrobial resistance for human, aquatic and terrestrial animal and plant health, as well as in food and feed production and food safety. They have an important role in identifying priorities for research and development and facilitating implementation research in a One Health context, as well as defining the financial needs and gaps for national and global responses, including the costs of inaction and anticipated returns on investment.

The IACG has strongly emphasised the need to ensure that these organisations have adequate organisational capacity and core funding to collaborate effectively and to perform their key roles. Work is already underway to strengthen the Tripartite agencies and step up their response. The Tripartite agencies already have a memorandum of understanding to boost their collaboration on antimicrobial resistance and have developed a joint workplan that includes UN Environment. The Tripartite also facilitated the work of the IACG through a jointly resourced secretariat. All recent meetings of the governing bodies of the Tripartite discussed antimicrobial resistance, including the implication of the IACG recommendations. WHO has raised its response to antimicrobial resistance from a single department into a division level with consolidation of all antimicrobial resistance-related activities and paving the way for its central role to lead the global One Health response, along with the Tripartite and other UN and international agencies. OIE has a department dealing with antimicrobial resistance.

Global leadership group on antimicrobial resistance

The IACG has proposed the creation of a global leadership group on antimicrobial resistance comprising current and former heads of state and ministers of agriculture, environment, finance, health, and water and sanitation, as well as other eminent individuals, to play an enhanced political advocacy role that will help to increase and maintain urgency, public and political support, and visibility of antimicrobial resistance on the global development agenda.

The key function of the leadership group will be to maintain urgency, public support, political momentum and visibility of the antimicrobial resistance challenge on the global agenda, as well as advocating for action, including support for the expanding work of the Tripartite agencies, UN Environment and other international and regional entities. It can monitor and report on progress, gaps and accountability in the global response to antimicrobial resistance. The group should oversee the preparation of a plan of action with key performance indicators, particularly to ensure that its activities are supporting country-level action. It should be supported by a secretariat managed by the Tripartite agencies. This secretariat can also develop and facilitate a partnership platform for global coordination and action.

Multi-stakeholder partnership platform

With support from the Joint Tripartite Secretariat, a constituency-based partnership platform will strengthen coordination and communication among stakeholders in the response to antimicrobial resistance. The key function of the platform will be to advocate for multi-stakeholder engagement with the participation of member states, UN agencies, international and intergovernmental organisations and regional entities, civil society, the private sector, researchers and other key stakeholders to develop and work towards a shared global vision, goals and coordinated action on antimicrobial resistance. The platform should have diverse representation (e.g., governments, private sector and civil society representing human, animal, plant and environment health, as well as agriculture and food and feed production).

The IACG recommendations

A. Accelerate progress in countries

A1: All member states ensure equitable and affordable access to existing and new quality-assured antimicrobials as well as alternatives, vaccines and diagnostics, and their responsible and prudent use by competent, licensed professionals across human, animal and plant health.

A2: All member states accelerate the development and implementation of One Health-focused national action plans on antimicrobial resistance (NAPs) within the context of the SDGs.

A3: All member states phase out the use of antimicrobials for growth promotion, consistent with guidance from the Tripartite agencies (FAO, OIE and WHO) and the Codex Alimentarius, starting with an immediate end to the use of antibiotics categorised as the Highest Priority Critically Important Antimicrobial Agents on the WHO List of Critically Important Antimicrobials for Human Medicine.

B. Innovate to secure the future

B1: Public, private and philanthropic donors and other funders increase investment and innovation in new quality-assured antimicrobials (particularly antibiotics), novel compounds, diagnostics, vaccines, waste management tools, and safe and effective alternatives to antimicrobials for all sectors as well as implementation and operational research.

B2: Existing and future global access initiatives promote and support equitable and affordable access to existing and new, quality-assured antimicrobials, diagnostics, vaccines, waste management tools and safe and effective alternatives to antibiotics in all sectors.

B3: Public, private and philanthropic research funders and other stakeholders build upon current research and development efforts, strengthen implementation and operational research, and research coordination and collaboration in a One Health context.

C. Collaborate for more effective action

C1: Systematic and meaningful engagement of civil society groups and organisations at all levels.

C2: Systematic and meaningful engagement of and enhanced action by the private sector at all levels.

D. Invest for a sustainable response

D1: Governments; global, regional, national, bilateral and multilateral financing and development institutions and banks; and private investors systematically apply standards to assess risks and impacts related to antimicrobial resistance when making investments.

D2: Additional and increased investments including from domestic financing in all countries; existing and future financing mechanisms in human, animal and plant health, and the environment give greater priority to antimicrobial resistance in their resource allocations; public, private and philanthropic donors contribute additional funding, including to support implementation of NAPs.

E. Strengthen accountability and global governance

E1: The Tripartite together with UN Environment, other United Nations agencies and the World Bank, in the context of United Nations reform, strengthen joint One Health action based on target-setting, country priorities and needs by enhancing organisational capacity and providing adequate and sustainable core funding for antimicrobial resistance activities.

E2: The urgent establishment of a One Health global leadership group on antimicrobial resistance, supported by a joint secretariat managed by the Tripartite.

E3: The Secretary-General, in close collaboration with the Tripartite agencies, UN Environment and other international organisations, convene an independent panel on evidence for action against antimicrobial resistance to monitor and provide member states with regular reports on the science and evidence related to antimicrobial resistance, its impacts and future risks, and recommend options for adaptation and mitigation.

E4: The Tripartite agencies and UN Environment expedite the process led by member states to develop the global development and stewardship framework to combat antimicrobial resistance in line with the scope described in the 2015 World Health Assembly resolution on antimicrobial resistance (WHA68.7). As member states finalise this process, they should also consider the need for new international instruments. ◆

Such a platform, with support from the Secretariat, would create opportunities to collectively address diverse areas of importance by all stakeholders, serve as a venue for information sharing and collaboration, and promote leadership by key partners around the shared global vision and narrative.

Independent panel on evidence for action against antimicrobial resistance

While the Tripartite agencies collect and analyse data on antimicrobial resistance in their respective sectors, there is currently no entity with the responsibility to collate and review the available evidence on antimicrobial resistance across the human, animal, plant and environmental sectors, and to assess the implications for One Health policy and action. For this reason, the IACG has also proposed the creation of an independent panel on evidence for action against antimicrobial resistance that would provide robust and authoritative assessments of the science, data and evidence related to antimicrobial resistance across all sectors, assess its potential impacts and future risks, and recommend options for adaptation and mitigation to governments and all stakeholders in the form of periodic reports.

The panel would have representation across the One Health spectrum, including experts from human, terrestrial and aquatic animal and plant health as well as the environment, food and feed production and food safety sectors. Terms of reference and composition of the independent panel will also be the subject of stakeholder consultations, drawing on the experiences and lessons of similar, existing entities, such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

International instruments

Finally, recognising that there are differing views among stakeholders about the potential need for and merits of developing binding or non-binding international instruments to combat antimicrobial resistance, the IACG has urged member states, the Tripartite agencies and UN Environment to conclude the current, ongoing process of developing a global development and stewardship framework to combat antimicrobial resistance (GDSF) – an effort called for in both a 2015 World Health Assembly resolution and the 2016 Political Declaration – as soon as possible.

The IACG also noted that the GDSF may provide an initial platform for member states to advance a stepwise approach towards new, binding or non-binding international instruments, and emphasised that any such instruments should include a stronger focus on supporting the distribution, responsible and prudent use of existing and new antimicrobial medicines, diagnostics, vaccines and other interventions, while also preserving existing antimicrobial agents, including those used against priority pathogens identified by WHO. In the meantime, the IACG recommends that countries give priority to adopting and implementing global standards and best practices to tackle antimicrobial resistance developed by the Tripartite agencies and other international and national authorities.

Conclusion

Overall, effective implementation of the IACG governance and accountability recommendations will require an unprecedented collaboration across human, animal and plant heath, as well as the food and feed production and environmental sectors, to advance a One Health response that is truly commensurate with the threats posed by antimicrobial resistance. To maintain their leadership role, the Tripartite agencies will need to step up their joint and individual efforts, mobilise additional resources and institutional capacity, and implement flexible and novel ways of working across sectors and disciplines, backed by strong commitment and support from their governing bodies.

The challenges of antimicrobial resistance are complex and multifaceted, but they are not insurmountable. Implementation of the recommendations in the IACG report will help to save millions of lives, preserve antimicrobials for generations to come, and secure the future from drug-resistant diseases. ◆

Dr Haileyesus Getahun, MSc, PhD, has been working on antimicrobial resistance in the World Health Organisation as Director of the UN Interagency Coordination on Antimicrobial Resistance since June 2018. Prior to this appointment, he was a Coordinator in the Global TB Programme of WHO, leading WHO's efforts on HIV-associated TB and TB prevention, and integrated community-based TB activities. He obtained Masters and PhD trainings in public health from the University of Ghent and Institute of Tropical Medicine in Belgium.

Professor Hanan H Balkhy, MD, is Assistant Director-General, Antimicrobial Resistance at WHO. She graduated from King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, in 1991 and completed her paediatric residency training at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, USA 1993-96; followed by a paediatric infectious diseases fellowship from 1996-99 from the Cleveland Clinic Foundation and Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio, USA. Prior to her appointment with WHO, she was the Executive Director, Infection Prevention and Control at the Ministry of the National Guard for 10 years.

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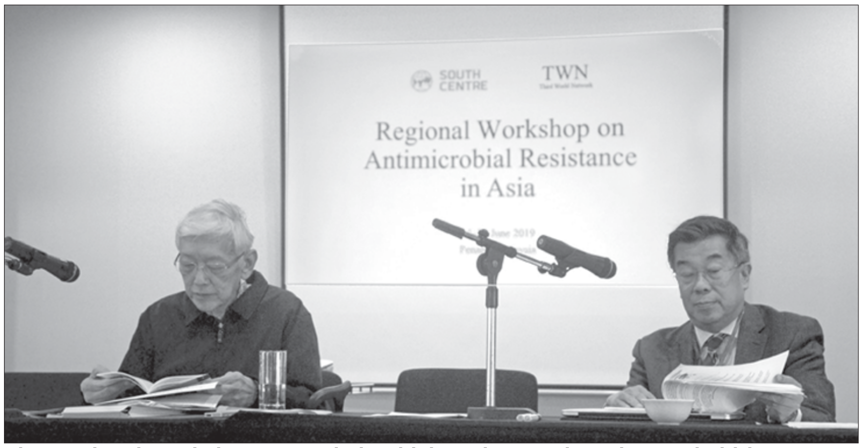
Gearing up against the AMR threat in Asia

The challenges confronted by the region that faces the greatest impact from the antimicrobial resistance crisis, and how it can deal with them, were addressed by a recent workshop held in Penang, Malaysia.

THIS increasingly grave problem brought over 70 national and inter-governmental officials, experts and civil society campaigners to the discussion table at the Regional Workshop on Antimicrobial Resistance in Asia, which took place on 24-26 June. The participants came from countries in South-East and South Asia, China and the Pacific region, as well as from international bodies including the World Health Organisation (WHO), Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), the three agencies tasked with combatting AMR on a global level.



The Regional Workshop on Antimicrobial Resistance in Asia was held in Penang, Malaysia, in June.

The workshop, which followed on from the first edition held last year, was co-organised by the Third World Network (TWN) and the South Centre with support from the Fleming Fund, an initiative of the United Kingdom Department of Health to assist developing countries in addressing AMR issues.

The developing world is expected to suffer the heaviest toll from AMR, with Asia being the most severely affected. The UK-sponsored Review on Antimicrobial Resistance has estimated that, at current trends, there would be 10 million deaths due to AMR globally in 2050. Of these, 4.7 million are projected to be in Asia, 4.2 million in Africa and almost 400,000 in Latin America.

Given the seriousness of the problem, action is urgently needed, and it has to take into account the multifaceted causes of AMR. One major factor behind the development of AMR is inappropriate prescribing and consumption of antibiotics by doctors and patients. Antibiotics are also misused for non-therapeutic purposes, such as to promote growth and prevent disease, in the livestock and aquaculture sectors. Further, antibiotic residues in soil and water can spread AMR through the environment.

Tackling all these different drivers of AMR demands a 'One Health' approach where the health of people is connected to the health of animals and the environment, as underlined by the Malaysian Deputy Health Minister Lee Boon Chye in his opening address at the Penang workshop. This approach should be collaborative, multisectoral and transdisciplinary, he said, with the goal of achieving optimal health outcomes for the human and animal sectors especially to preserve the efficacy of antimicrobial medicines.

The One Health principle is indeed reflected in the national action plans (NAPs) drawn up by various Asian countries to control AMR, which recognise the importance of coordination and engagement between the different sectors – human health, animal health and environment – involved. However, in practice, intersectoral collaboration has in many cases been limited, some of the workshop participants revealed, highlighting a gap that needs to be plugged to ensure more effective AMR containment efforts.

Besides enshrining the One Health approach, the NAPs have also been in line with WHO's Global Action Plan on AMR and its strategic objectives:

(1) improve awareness and understanding of AMR through effective communication, education and training;

(2) strengthen the knowledge and evidence base through surveillance and research;

(3) reduce the incidence of infection through effective sanitation, hygiene and prevention measures;

(4) optimise the use of antimicrobial medicines in human and animal health; and

(5) prepare the economic case for sustainable investment, and increase investment in new medicines, diagnostic tools, vaccines and other interventions.

In the workshop, participants outlined the measures taken by their

A poultry farm. Some countries have banned the use of antimicrobials as livestock growth promoters.

respective countries on these five fronts. For instance, initiatives have been implemented in various countries to raise awareness of AMR among health professionals, farmers and the wider community. Separately, to promote rational use of antimicrobial medicines, regulations have been adopted by some countries to, among others, ban their use as livestock growth promoters, while clinical guidelines for physicians set appropriate prescription practices.

Infection prevention and control (IPC) is another priority; speaking at the workshop, former Yale and Australian National University academic John Beggs emphasised the need to 'break the chain of contagion' by interrupting the spread of resistant microbes. He advocated a broad definition of IPC, one which extends to dealing with the socioeconomic factors facilitating the spread of resistant bacteria, such as poor-quality infrastructure, low levels of societal governance and inadequate health expenditure.

Clearly, much has to be done to stem the proliferation of superbugs, but the anti-AMR drive is faced with several constraints. One common lament voiced at the workshop was over insufficient financing to support implementation of the NAPs that have been put together. Among other needs, funding is required to build national capacities for surveillance of trends in the development of AMR. This entails investment in human and technical resources such as training microbiologists and equipping microbiology laboratories. Many participants called for the setting up of a global fund to assist countries in countering the AMR threat and, at the national level, for governments to allocate dedicated budgets for AMR control.

Tubes of bacteria samples in an AMR testing laboratory. Funding is required to build national capacities for surveillance of AMR trends.

The workshop discussions also brought home the need for increased focus on the environmental factors contributing to the spread of AMR. In the face of the greater attention devoted thus far to the human health and animal health areas, the environment sector was described by Noor Haza Fazlin Hashim from the National Hydraulic Research Institute Malaysia as 'the missing piece in the jigsaw' of anti-AMR programmes.

Moreover, focus should be directed not only at antibiotic residues in the environment but also at other possible environmental drivers of AMR such as pesticide and metal residues. In her presentation at the workshop, Nisanart Charoenlap, a scientist from Thailand's Chulabhorn Research Institute, pointed to a study which revealed that the *E. coli* and *S. typhimurium* bacteria could increase their resistance in the presence of herbicides and antibiotics, while another study found that certain metals exhibited co-occurrences with specific antibiotic resistance genes.

Ultimately, as TWN's Director of Programmes Chee Yoke Ling said during the concluding session of the workshop, AMR could be framed in terms of a 'systems approach'. Accordingly, health systems need to be strengthened, and farming and food systems oriented away from the dominant but damaging industrial agriculture paradigm.

What it would take for more effort and resources to be channelled towards such measures is political will. There is thus a need to convey to senior decision-makers in government the sheer scale of the AMR threat.

In this regard, if money talks, then estimates of the economic costs of AMR highlighted at the workshop positively scream: Citing World Bank projections, Anthony So, co-convener of the UN Interagency Coordination Group on AMR, said that if AMR is unchecked, the world stands to lose up to 3.8% of its annual gross domestic product (GDP) by 2050, with an annual GDP shortfall of $3.4 trillion by 2030. – *TWN* ◆

Tackling AMR starts with the environment

AMR containment in the waste and environment sector has largely been neglected, say *Amit Khurana* and *Rajeshwari Sinha*.

WHILE the environment is about all the living and non-living things around us, soil, water and waste from different sources are key elements of concern in the context of AMR. A common perception is that the 'environment' is at the end of the spectrum. But this perception could be challenged. The environment is at the receiving end of what we do – sink as we know it – but it also acts as a source of what comes back to us. It can be a starting point of this two-way relationship.

Concerns have been raised over the potential role of sewage treatment plants as breeding grounds for AMR.

We should rethink and reprioritise because so far, the focus has been on 'what is going in' and not on 'what is coming out'. It is likely that the complete picture is missing. A picture where one part – the environment – is potentially more relevant than the others. This is because the environment is a big pool of AMR determinants – such as antibiotic-resistant bacteria (ARBs), antibiotic resistance genes (ARGs) and antibiotic residues – wherein the continuous and perhaps everlasting interplay among these determinants potentially sets the ground for resistance growing like a chain reaction.

The environment – a missing link in global guidance and national action

AMR containment in the waste and environment sector has largely been neglected. The Global Action Plan on AMR (2015) provided limited guidance on the environment despite recognising the One Health nature of the problem and calling for multi-stakeholder action.[1] While global deliberations now include environmental AMR issues, there is no environment-specific guidance such as World Health Organisation (WHO) guidelines on use of medically important antimicrobials in food-producing animals or guidance on integrated surveillance of AMR in foodborne bacteria.[2, 3]

This is disappointing but not surprising as managing the environment is not the key mandate of the three organisations which came together a few years ago to guide countries in the global fight against AMR. These are WHO, the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) and the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE). Consequently, both as a problem and as a solution, the human side of the crisis has received maximum attention, followed by the animal sector. In order to fill this gap, UN Environment has been a recent addition to the WHO-FAO-OIE tripartite. However, since it is a delayed entrant, concrete guidance for national policymakers and stakeholders – such as on discharge limits of AMR determinants in waste and on environmental AMR surveillance – appears to be a distant reality.

On the other hand, despite limited global guidance, countries – though to varying degrees – have outlined their approach to address the environmental side of AMR in their national AMR action plans. This is encouraging and reflects a country's willingness to own up to the problem, but without global guidance, it may result in inadequate on-the-ground response, which would also not be uniform across national boundaries.

Our engagement with environmental policymakers and regulators from different Asian and African countries points towards the need for a coordinated country-level advocacy exercise to make environmental stakeholders aware and secure their buy-in and commitment – just like what the WHO country offices are doing with the AMR focal points of health ministries. Until this happens, the One Health approach to contain AMR would not really be realised. But it is still unclear who is going to do it and what the plan for action is, if any.

Waste from different sources

The point sources that are of concern regarding environmental AMR could be segregated into farms, factories, healthcare settings and household/community. AMR determinants in solid or liquid waste from these sources may, directly or after treatment, reach the external environment such as soil and water or get into other point sources.

Farms include those involved in rearing animals for food, i.e., food-animal production farms such as of poultry, dairy, pigs and fish. Intensive farms, which are characterised by high stocking densities, poor animal husbandry practices and higher use of chemical inputs such as antibiotics, are a big concern as 75-90% of antibiotics consumed by animals are excreted un-metabolised through faecal matter and urine. The excreta are also known to contain a high load of bacteria including resistant bacteria. Farm manure such as from poultry farms is found to harbour ARBs and ARGs. The application of treated or untreated litter to agriculture fields is a common practice in different parts of the world and leads to a wider dissemination into the agriculture food chain.[4]

Another example of such cross-sectoral dissemination of AMR determinants is use of poultry litter in fish ponds. In the case of aquaculture, wherein antibiotics are dumped in a medium like water, the possibility of dissemination of AMR determinants into external water bodies is higher. Absence of or inadequate primary effluent treatment plants at fish farms adds to the problem.[5]

Another set of farms includes those consisting of crops and plantations, wherein a big part of unspent sprayed antibiotics ends up in the agricultural soil and enters into water bodies through the run-off.

Factories are another important point source for waste. These include slaughterhouses and units processing food such as meat, dairy and fish, pharmaceutical manufacturing plants and feed mills. Samples from drug manufacturing sites or from wastewater treatment plants receiving drug manufacturing sewage have been shown to contain high levels of pharmaceuticals, genes, mobile genetic elements as well as resistant bacteria.[6, 7, 8]

A third set of point sources are healthcare settings; waste from these has high concentrations of AMR determinants.[9] These include primary, secondary and tertiary care hospitals and diagnostic laboratories as well as veterinary care clinics.

Hospital waste has high concentrations of AMR determinants.

Sewage treatment plants (STPs), which receive waste from household and community area point sources, are a new concern. Conventional plants are not designed to address AMR. There are questions emerging on the potential role of STPs as breeding grounds for AMR.[10] Research also shows that STPs may not lead to the selection of resistance.[11] There is a need for new waste treatment technologies to achieve high efficiency of ARG or ARB removal.

Rivers, lakes, ponds, oceans, groundwater and soil including agricultural soil act as sinks which receive AMR determinants from different sources. These could be termed as non-point sources, since AMR determinants through these sinks enter back into humans, animals and the food chain. Studies have shown the prevalence of AMR determinants in groundwater, drinking water, surface water as well as in soil.[12, 13] A recent study indicated that airborne transmission of ARGs is also posing a threat.[14] Other than AMR determinants, biocides and heavy metals in the environment have been found to influence the emergence of AMR through co-selection and cross-resistance mechanisms. Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) aspects are also linked to the spread of AMR through environmental routes.[15] Limited handwashing behaviour, unsafe drinking water, lack of functional toilets and open defecation are known to drive the rise of infections and thereby antibiotic use.

From policy to practice

AMR has no boundaries but countries manufacturing high quantities of antibiotics or food from animals and those which are big consumers of antibiotics (per capita or overall) or food from animals have ample reasons to prioritise waste management to contain AMR from the environment.

A comprehensive approach is required to address this complex issue. The precautionary principle should be adopted and ongoing research should inform future policy and plans. To begin with, from the perspective of AMR containment, it is important to assess existing laws, policies and standards; scale and spread of key waste sources; prevalent waste management practices; and type and extent of waste generated and discharged. Also, it is important to understand the resources, capacity and infrastructure for environmental AMR surveillance and the enforcement of policies.

Relevant laws, policies and standards include those which help the setting of discharge limits for residual antibiotics in industrial effluents such as from the pharmaceutical sector and other industrial and healthcare settings. Until this happens, there is no yardstick to check antibiotic discharge from these point sources of concern. This can be facilitated if antibiotics in effluents are considered as hazardous chemicals in view of their public health impact, similar to the way the issue of pesticide pollution is addressed. Countries need to adopt policies which favour an ‘AMR-centric’ approach to waste management.

Notably, the existing effluent standards typically cater to select parameters such as pH, biological oxygen demand, chemical oxygen demand and total suspended solids, which do not help monitor antibiotic residues. Scientists will also have to figure out how to address the discharge of ARBs and ARGs. In the case of farms, policies that help regulate the land application of farm litter and reduce its impact on agriculture and grazing animals are important.

Policies facilitating extended producer responsibility in the pharmaceutical sector and drug take-back programmes would help in the safe disposal of unused or expired antibiotics. Guidelines on siting, biosecurity, sanitation and hygiene for different point sources will further complement these policies.

AMR surveillance in the environment will be crucial from the point of view of a long-term AMR containment strategy.[16] This should include surveillance of ARBs, ARGs and antibiotic residues. Such surveillance should be integrated with AMR surveillance in the human, animal, food and agricultural sectors. An integrated surveillance strategy or framework that provides guidance on key antibiotics, bacteria and genes, sample type, size, locations, etc. is critical. Given the resource-intensive nature, environmental AMR surveillance should be prioritised well and implemented in a phased and progressive manner.

It is essential to recognise that AMR pollution (discharge of AMR determinants in the environment) is best avoided. If antibiotic misuse – such as in humans and animals – is eliminated in the first place, then this would mean that 'what is going in' is controlled. If this does not happen, no matter how well we manage our waste, we would still continue to pollute more than we can clean up. It would not be sustainable. To conclude, it is time that an 'environment first' approach was established to catch up on lost time not spent on this complex but critical public health issue of modern times. ◆

Amit Khurana is the Director of the Food Safety and Toxins Programme at the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) in New Delhi, India. He leads research and advocacy on animal and environmental aspects of AMR and the implementation of AMR action plans. He has been part of state, national and international committees and pushes for policies relevant to the Global South. At CSE, he also leads campaigns against aggressive marketing of junk foods and promotes sustainable agriculture.

Rajeshwari Sinha is the Deputy Programme Manager in the Food Safety and Toxins Programme at CSE and is involved in managing the global and national portfolio of the AMR programme. She obtained her PhD in enzyme and microbial biochemistry from the Indian Institute of Technology in Delhi, following which she transitioned into working on the science-policy interface in the area of public health. Previously, she worked with the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative to provide technical support to the development of the National Biopharma Mission in India.

The above article is reproduced from AMR Control 2019-20 *(resistancecontrol.info).*

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Antibiotics found in global rivers exceed 'safe' levels, study finds

Some of the world's most iconic rivers contain antibiotics in concentrations that exceed safety standards, according to a global study testing hundreds of rivers across six continents.

Madison Dapcevich

AN analysis looking for more than a dozen common antibiotics in 711 rivers in one-third of the world's countries found that concentrations in some rivers were some 300 times higher than 'safe' levels, in what researchers say could lead to more resilient strains of antibiotic-resistant bacteria around the world.

'Until now, the majority of environmental monitoring work for antibiotics has been done in Europe, North America and China. Often on only a handful of antibiotics. We know very little about the scale of [the] problem globally,' said researcher author John Wilkinson. 'Our study helps to fill this key knowledge gap with data being generated for countries that had never been monitored before.'

Nearly 100 testing kits were flown to rivers around the world to water systems such as Indochina's murky Mekong River, the serene Seine River in Paris and London's central Thames. At each location, local scientists collected and froze samples to ship back to the University of York in the UK to compare against 'safe' levels established by the AMR Industry Alliance. These levels typically range between 20,000 and 32,000 nanograms per litre (ng/l).

'The results are quite eye-opening and worrying, demonstrating the widespread contamination of river systems around the world with antibiotic compounds,' said researcher Alistair Boxall.

Concentrations represent a global concern. Safe levels were most frequently exceeded in Asia and Africa while Europe and North and South America also had levels of concern. By far the worst were levels tested in Kenya, Ghana, Pakistan, Nigeria and Bangladesh – and the discrepancy between wealthy and poverty-stricken nations is evident. For example, metronidazole, a common antibiotic used to treat mouth and skin bacterial infections, clocked in at levels 300 times greater than the safety level at one site in Bangladesh. By comparison, tributaries of the River Thames had a maximum total of 223 ng/l of antibiotic material – 170 times less than those captured in Bangladesh.

Children collect plastic bottles from a polluted river in Bangladesh. In one river in the country, the concentration of one common antibiotic was found to be 300 times greater than the safe level.

Trimethoprim, a drug mostly used to treat urinary tract infection, was most prevalent and found at almost half of the 711 sites, while ciprofloxacin was documented as going over the safety threshold in 51 different tested sites.

'Many scientists and policymakers now recognise the role of the natural environment in the antimicrobial resistance problem. Our data show that antibiotic contamination of rivers could be an important contributor,' said Boxall. 'Solving the problem is going to be a mammoth challenge and will need investment in infrastructure for waste and wastewater treatment, tighter regulation and the cleaning up of already contaminated sites.'

The highest-risk sites were those found next to wastewater treatment plants, waste, sewage dumps and places of political turmoil, CNN reported. Regardless of their source, antibiotics in rivers present the potential for bacteria to develop resistance that further reduces efficacy in human treatment.

United Nations estimates suggest 'alarming levels' of antibiotic resistance could kill 10 million people in the next 30 years as some of the world's most common diseases are becoming untreatable. 'There is no time to wait. Unless the world acts urgently, antimicrobial resistance will have disastrous impact within a generation,' wrote the UN's Interagency Coordination Group on AMR in its 2019 report.

Researchers suggest that investing in infrastructure for safe water, sanitary hygiene and establishing standardised wastewater treatment protocols could help protect against such outcomes. ◆

Madison Dapcevich is a freelance reporter for the environmental news site EcoWatch (www.ecowatch.com), from which this article is reproduced.

Climate crisis may have been pivotal in rise of drug-resistant superbug, study warns

While we are all aware that the climate crisis and antimicrobial resistance are two of the most dangerous threats facing humankind, we are not cognizant of the fact that recent research has shown that the linkages between the two phenomena may be deeper and longer than thought. *Jessica Corbett* explains.

A NEW analysis warns that 'global warming may have played a pivotal role' in the recent rise of a multidrug-resistant fungal superbug, sparking questions and concerns about the emerging public health threats of the human-caused climate crisis.

Reporting on the research on 23 July, CNN outlined the history of *Candida auris*: 'Until recently, scientists considered it a mystery how *C. auris* popped up in more than 30 countries around the globe a decade after it was first discovered in 2009. It emerged simultaneously on three continents – in India, Venezuela, and South Africa – between 2012 and 2015, each strain being genetically distinct.'

The drug-resistant *Candida auris* (pic) 'may be the first example of a new fungal disease emerging from climate change'.

The study – published on 23 July in *mBio*, an open-access journal of the American Society for Microbiology – argues that *C. auris* 'may be the first example of a new fungal disease emerging from climate change'.

'The argument that we are making based on comparison to other close relative fungi is that as the climate has gotten warmer, some of these organisms, including *Candida auris*, have adapted to the higher temperature, and as they adapt, they break through human's protective temperatures,' lead author Arturo Casadevall, chair of molecular microbiology and immunology at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, said in a statement.

Fungal diseases are relatively uncommon in humans because of body temperature – but if they adapt to rising temperatures, and aren't easily treatable with medications, they could increasingly endanger human health on a global scale. Casadevall warned that while *C. auris* may be the first fungal disease whose emergence scientists have tied to rising temperatures, it potentially won't be the last.

'Global warming may lead to new fungal diseases that we don't even know about right now,' he said. 'What this study suggests is this is the beginning of fungi adapting to higher temperatures, and we are going to have more and more problems as the century goes on.'

The Stat News website published a piece on 23 July that mentions the new study but also addresses a series of pressing questions about the emerging superbug with help from experts including Tom Chiller, chief of mycotic diseases at the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and Tejas Bouklas, an assistant professor in the department of biomedical sciences at Long Island University.

Among those questions is: Could *C. auris* help other fungi adapt to be bigger threats to humans?

According to the Stat News article: 'That's a question Bouklas is wondering about. "The more ubiquitous it becomes, the more problematic. Because now it could potentially transmit DNA to other Candida species. And maybe even bacteria," she said.

'That idea is not far-fetched. Fungi can mate sexually, Chiller pointed out, allowing them to swap large amounts of DNA.'

In light of the potential impacts of the climate crisis on public health highlighted in the study, Casadevall charged in his statement that 'we need to make investments in better surveillance of fungal diseases'.

'We are pretty good at surveilling influenza and diseases that cause diarrhoea or are contagious, but fungal diseases are not usually contagious and therefore nobody has really bothered to document them well,' he said.'If more fungi were to cross over, you really wouldn't know until somebody started reporting them in the literature.'

Chiller, in his interview with Stat News, agreed that more research on the superbug is vital to protecting the public.

Understanding *C. auris*'s backstory is crucial, Chiller said, because 'these things are going to continue to emerge. And understanding how they emerge and where they emerge might lead us to prevention strategies or reactive strategies or preparation strategies for the next big thing'. ◆

Jessica Corbett writes for Common Dreams (www.commondreams.org), from which this article is reproduced.

Brazil: From global leader to US follower

Under the far-right Bolsonaro, Brazil is abandoning its regional leadership to align with US interests in Latin America.

Helder do Vale

BRAZIL recently gained the vaunted status of 'Major Non-NATO Ally'.

This title symbolises the new, preferential relationship that Brazil has been pursuing with the US as a result of the continued efforts by far-right President Jair Bolsonaro to inaugurate a new phase in Brazil's global role.

Bolsonaro's presidency has initiated deep changes in Brazilian foreign policy, which was traditionally based on multilateralism, non-interventionism and a commitment to universal human rights. Bolsonaro's abandonment of that traditional foreign policy is driven by his belief that despite changes in the world order, the future will remain US-led – and, as such, a partnership with Washington is essential.

With this partnership, however, Brazil is relinquishing its position as a global leader to become a junior follower of Donald Trump's foreign policy.

Ideological affinity is a major component of Bolsonaro's foreign policy, which has had practical and immediate consequences for Brazil. For example, due to Trump's trade war with China, Beijing has been downgraded in the priorities of Bolsonaro's government despite being Brazil's main trading partner, and opportunities to increase trade in Asia are now wilfully overlooked.

Brazil's prominent leadership role in Latin America is also being sacrificed as a result of its enthusiastic promotion of US interests in the region.

The new vision guiding Brazilian foreign policy is centred around anti-globalism and presumptions of

Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro (left) with his US counterpart Donald Trump. 'Brazil is relinquishing its position as a global leader to become a junior follower of Donald Trump's foreign policy.'

Western cultural superiority.

According to this worldview, Bolsonaro's rise to power represents a unique opportunity to restore traditional moral values that will somehow help Brazil in its mission to save 'Western civilisation' from decline. As such, a partnership with the like-minded Trump is imagined as a means by which to reaffirm the supremacy of the West.

These ideas form part of the broader ideological agenda which the current Brazilian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ernesto Araújo, has put forward in various articles. In one of his most notorious pieces, a journal article entitled 'Trump and the West', Araújo lays bare the version of Brazilian nationalism he aims to pursue: a national mission to, in essence, recover Brazil's 'Western soul'.

The traditional nuclear family and Christian values – perceived as the hallmarks of 'Western civilisation' – are the central pillars of Araújo's moral nationalism and, as such, should be seen as the foundation of Brazil's new foreign policy orientation.

Consequences of Brazil's foreign policy shift

If Brazil's new ideological position represents a stark renunciation of its previously active role in the building of a liberal world order, it is also becoming increasingly clear that the country will now abandon its previously progressive contributions to solving major global problems.

As a consequence, Brazil will no longer be seen as a leader among developing countries – a widely respected role that the country has played since 2003, when Brazilian governments prioritised South-South cooperation.

Brazil's radical shift in foreign policy orientation is already causing shockwaves at home and abroad. Bolsonaro often flirts with the idea of potentially withdrawing from the Paris Agreement on climate change, having already abandoned the Marrakesh Migration Pact. Additional uproar emerged in Brazil due to Bolsonaro's close ties to Israel and his promise to recognise Jerusalem as its capital and to close Brazil's embassy


The Ministry of Foreign Affairs building in Brasilia. The new vision guiding Brazilian foreign policy is centred around anti-globalisation and presumptions of Western cultural superiority.

in Palestine. In the past, Brazil has systematically defended the creation of a Palestinian state, and was among the first countries to open an embassy in Palestine.

Being averse to both multilateralism and cooperation with developing countries, Bolsonaro seeks to keep his distance from the United Nations and the BRICS grouping (which comprises Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). More concretely, Bolsonaro considers the deepening or even the maintenance of established diplomatic ties with the BRICS as detrimental to the new Brazil's alliance with the US. Indeed, under Brazil's new foreign policy priorities, China and Russia are now perceived as potential adversaries.


'Bolsonaro seeks to keep his distance from ... the BRICS grouping.' Picture shows the flags of the five BRICS member states.

In attempting to recover Brazil's 'Western soul', Bolsonaro's government hopes to receive US support in its efforts to become a permanent member of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The Trump administration has indicated that the US will support Brazil's bid to gain admission to the OECD.

In Bolsonaro's evolving geopolitical map, Brazil is slowly abandoning its regional leadership to align with the US's interests in Latin America. In this context, Brazil's engagement with other Latin American countries is mainly based on ideological affinity. Hence Brazil is showing interest in strengthening bilateral relations with Chile, a country that Bolsonaro admires principally due to his admiration for Pinochet's brutal dictatorship (1973-89), and with Argentina, with which bilateral relations remain warm as long as the conservative-minded President Mauricio Macri remains in power.

Venezuela is, for quite different reasons, another important country for Bolsonaro. He uses Venezuela's unrest to escalate the intensity of his rhetorical confrontation against the Venezuelan regime, which resonates powerfully with Bolsonaro's supporters at home and abroad.

Opposition from within

The rationale for and discourse surrounding Brazil's blind alignment to the US is facing heavy criticism from parts of Bolsonaro's own government. These dissident voices can be heard in the agribusiness sector, the military and the Brazilian diplomatic corps.

Operating as they do within a clear set of international interests, agribusiness is a pragmatic group of actors who understand that Bolsonaro's rhetorical tactics are harming their international interests. Those who consider China a pivotal player in the expansion of Brazilian agricultural exports are understandably disturbed by Brazil's increasing distance from the BRICS.

Parts of the Brazilian military also appear sceptical about Brazil actively positioning itself within the US sphere of influence, believing this to be a blind alignment that could easily compromise the image of Brazil as a strong, autonomous country.

Bolsonaro's foreign policy also faces opposition from within Brazil's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where career diplomats are increasingly voicing their concerns over the president's wanton abandonment of the multilateralism that Brazil has historically and effectively used to engage with the rest of the world.

In an increasingly dog-eat-dog world, Bolsonaro hopes that Brazil can establish itself as a privileged US partner. However, given the waning support for Bolsonaro's foreign policy at home, as well as its fundamental lack of pragmatism, these radical shifts in Brazil's international affairs may ultimately prove to be ephemeral. ◆

Helder F do Vale is an Associate Professor at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies in South Korea. This article is reproduced from the Foreign Policy In Focus website (fpif.org).

Does might truly make right?

There is no end to the turmoil in the Middle East and currently there are at least three full-scale sieges going on in the region. *Gary Sick* comments.

The aftermath of a Saudi-led coalition airstrike in Yemen.

THE Middle East has reverted to a kind of primitive savagery. The states of the region had historically treated their citizens with casual brutality, in the interest of preventing dissent, but the ferocious civil wars and interstate conflicts since the so-called Arab Spring in 2011 have introduced a new level of viciousness reminiscent of the Middle Ages.

Despite the civilised terminology of modern international relations, the old rule that 'might makes right' is very much alive and well in the interactions of states. Take the word 'siege'. It has a nice medieval ring to it, with images of armoured knights planting their battle flags around some fortified town, trying to starve them into submission. But there are at least three full-scale sieges going on in the Middle East today. They may lack the colourful appurtenances of the distant past, and they involve entire states rather than fortified towns, but the purpose is just as grim as any knightly undertaking.

Yemen

When Mohammad bin Salman (MbS), the 29-year-old son of the newly ascendant king of Saudi Arabia, was appointed Minister of Defence in 2015, one of his first major acts was to intervene in the Yemeni civil war. His primary instrument of war was the immensely expensive, high-tech Saudi air force. He also assembled a coalition of forces, starting with his neighbour in the United Arab Emirates, which provided ground forces and training for foreign fighters and tribal militias.

From the beginning, the Saudi pilots came in for intense criticism since their bombs seemed to hit almost everything except military targets. Factories, markets, dairies and farms were hit, sometimes repeatedly, in addition to wedding parties, mosques and apartment buildings. The Saudis insisted that they were not responsible for most of these events, even though their coalition's planes dominated the air.

Part of this, indeed, could be attributed to pilot error and collateral damage. But a pattern emerged. Saudi Arabia and its allies established selective blockades of Yemeni ports, on the grounds of preventing Iran or others from smuggling armaments into the country. This resulted in lengthy delays of imported wheat and other foodstuffs. This, together with destruction of food production and delivery within the country, resulted in near-famine. Inadvertently or not, two-thirds of the Yemeni population today would be near starvation without UN assistance. Destruction of water supplies and hospitals has resulted in the greatest cholera outbreak in the world.

Regardless of the cautious and neutral language of diplomacy, it is a siege.

Qatar

Two years later, in June 2017, the UAE and Saudi Arabia suddenly announced a total boycott of the energy-rich peninsular state of Qatar. They accused Qatar of supporting the Muslim Brotherhood and sponsoring terrorist activities. By this time the two Mohammads (bin Salman, MbS, of Saudi Arabia and bin Zayed, MbZ, of the UAE), both dominant political figures in their two countries, had joined up with Donald Trump. Trump initially applauded their plot, even though the largest US airbase in the Middle East was located just outside Doha, Qatar. Over time the United States has moved to a more neutral position, but the boycott has persisted. All air traffic into and out of Qatar has been reduced to a single narrow passage; all movement of goods across Qatar's land borders has been blocked; and transshipment of goods via ports of the blockading states has been prohibited.

Qatar is a tiny state with vast financial resources. Saudi Arabia and the UAE made no secret of their expectation that Qatar would succumb to their pressure in a matter of weeks. Two years later, Qatar has adapted and seems to have weathered the crisis. However, the siege continues.

Iran

In May 2018, the United States announced its withdrawal from the

A nearly deserted border crossing between Qatar and Saudi Arabia in June 2017, after the Saudis and the UAE announced a total boycott of Qatar.

Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), otherwise known as the Iran nuclear deal. At the time, Iran was in compliance with the terms of the deal, which had been negotiated by the United States together with the other permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany, and ratified unanimously by the Security Council. On Trump's watch, the United States reimposed the sanctions that had been removed as part of the deal and then imposed a harsh additional set of sanctions, including a total ban on the Iranian oil trade and the criminalisation of large parts of the Iranian government and economy.

President Trump said that the purpose of this unprecedented siege of a UN member state was to drive Iran back to the negotiating table for a more comprehensive agreement. His aides did not openly dispute the president, but they made it very clear that their objective was to remove the theocratic regime in Tehran. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo recently summarised the purpose of the Maximum Pressure campaign as follows: 'We have applied enormous pressure to enable the Iranian people to change the direction of their leadership.' The president said he was prepared to meet Iranian leaders and negotiate without preconditions; his aides set some daunting conditions and said that negotiations would take place 'when circumstances are right'.

An oil facility in Iran. US sanctions on Iran include a total ban on the country's oil trade.

On one point there is agreement. Iran's economy is suffering. GDP is down; inflation is up; businesses that rely on imports or exports are facing collapse; and critical items, even including medicine, are in dwindling and uncertain supply. The Iranian government, however, appears to be in little danger. Demonstrations have largely ceased, and the external threat seems to have prompted some rallying around the flag. Hardliners, who take profit and vindication from external interference, are ascendant.

Who pays the price?

So there are three sieges presently being pursued in the Middle East. None of them appears to be accomplishing its stated purpose, and each of them could be ended tomorrow. But the siege-masters are unwilling to acknowledge any error, and they seem to believe that any sign of weakness would raise questions about their own might.

So all three seem destined to be drawn-out affairs, not unlike medieval campaigns to take a well-fortified castle. The warriors in their planes and the policymakers in their comfortable offices will make their calculations and persevere. And just like in the Middle Ages, it will be the little people caught between might and right who will pay the price. ◆

Gary Sick served on the US National Security Council staff under Presidents Ford, Carter and Reagan. He was the principal White House aide for Iran during the Iranian Revolution and the hostage crisis and is the author of two books on US-Iran relations, in addition to several other edited books and articles dealing with US Middle East policy. He has a Ph.D. in political science from Columbia University, where he is Adjunct Senior Research Scholar and former director of the Middle East Institute (2000-03). He is a member (emeritus) of the board of Human Rights Watch in New York and founding chair of its advisory committee on the Middle East and North Africa. He is the executive director of Gulf/2000, an international online research project on political, economic and security developments in the Persian Gulf, being conducted at Columbia University since 1993.

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The Notre Dames of Gaza: Our mosques and churches are also burning

When Parisians and others in the Western world watched in agony the painful spectacle of Notre Dame on fire, few paused to give thought to the pain experienced by the Palestinians when their churches and mosques are almost routinely bombed and blown up by the Israelis. *Ramzy Baroud* elaborates.

AS the 300-foot spire of the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris tragically came tumbling down on live television, my thoughts ventured to Nuseirat Refugee Camp, my childhood home in the Gaza Strip.

I had also watched on television as a small bulldozer hopelessly clawed through the rubble of my neighbourhood mosque. I had grown up around that mosque. I spent many hours there with my grandfather, Mohammed, a refugee from historic Palestine. Before grandpa became a refugee, he had been a young imam in a small mosque in his long-destroyed village of Beit Daras.

A mosque destroyed by an Israeli airstrike in Gaza.

Mohammed and many in his generation took solace in erecting their own mosque in the refugee camp as soon as they arrived in the Gaza Strip in late 1948. The new mosque was first made of hardened mud, but was eventually remade with bricks, and later concrete. He spent much of his time there, and when he died, his old, frail body was taken to the same mosque for a final prayer, before being buried in the adjacent Martyrs Graveyard. When I was still a child, he used to hold my hand as we walked together to the mosque during prayer times. When he aged, and could barely walk, I, in turn, held his hand.

But Al-Masjid al-Kabir – the Great Mosque, later renamed Al-Qassam Mosque – was completely pulverised by Israeli missiles during the summer war on Gaza which started on 8 July 2014.

Hundreds of Palestinian houses of worship had been targeted by the Israeli military in previous wars, most notably in 2008-09 and 2012. But the 2014 war was the most brutal and most destructive yet. Thousands were killed and more injured. Nothing was immune to the Israeli bombs. According to Palestine Liberation Organisation records, 63 mosques were completely destroyed and 150 damaged in that war alone, oftentimes with people seeking shelter inside. In the case of my mosque, two bodies were recovered after a long, agonising search. They had no chance of being rescued. If they survived the deadly explosives, they would be crushed by the massive slabs of concrete.

In truth, concrete, bricks and physical structures don't carry much meaning on their own. It is we who give them meaning. Our collective experiences, our pains, joys, hopes and faith make a house of worship what it is.

Many generations of French Catholics have assigned the Notre Dame Cathedral its layered meanings and symbolism since the 12th century. As the fire consumed its oak roof and much of the structure, French citizens and others around the world watched in awe. It was as if the memories, prayers and hopes of a nation rooted in time were suddenly revealed, rising, all at once, with the pillars of smoke and fire.

But the very media that covered the news of the Notre Dame fire seemed oblivious to the obliteration of everything we hold sacred in Palestine as, day after day, Israeli war machinery continues to blow up, bulldoze and desecrate.

It is as if our religions are not worthy of respect, despite the fact that Christianity was born in Palestine. It was there, in our historic homeland, that Jesus roamed the hills and valleys teaching about peace, love and justice. Palestine is also central to Islam. Haram al-Sharif, where Al-Aqsa

The Notre Dame Cathedral fire.

Mosque and the Dome of the Rock are, is the third holiest site for Muslims everywhere. Yet Christian and Muslim holy sites are besieged, often raided and shut down per military diktats. Moreover, the Israeli army-protected messianic Jewish extremists want to demolish Al-Aqsa and the Israeli government has been digging underneath its foundation for many years.

Although none of this is done in secret, international outrage remains muted. In fact, many find Israel's actions justified. Some have bought into the ridiculous explanation offered by the Israeli military that bombing mosques is a necessary security measure. Others are motivated by dark religious prophecies of their own.

Palestine, though, is only a microcosm of the whole region. Many of us are familiar with the horrific destruction carried out by fringe militant groups against world cultural heritage in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. Most memorable among these are the destruction of Palmyra in Syria, the Buddhas of Bamyan in Afghanistan and the Great Mosque of al-Nuri in Mosul.

Nothing, however, can possibly compare to what the invading US army has done to Iraq. Not only did the invaders desecrate a sovereign country and brutalise her people, they also devastated her culture that goes back to the start of human civilisation. Just the immediate aftermath of the invasion alone saw the looting of over 15,000 Iraqi antiquities, including the Lady of Warka, also known as the Mona Lisa of Mesopotamia, a Sumerian artifact whose history goes back to 3100 BC.

I had the privilege of seeing many of these artifacts during a visit to the Iraq Museum only a few years before it was looted by US soldiers. At the time, the Iraqi curators had all the precious pieces hidden in a fortified basement in anticipation of a US bombing campaign. But nothing could prepare the museum for the savagery unleashed by the ground invasion.

Since then, Iraqi culture has largely been reduced to items on the black market of the very Western invaders that have torn that country apart. The valiant work of Iraqi cultural warriors and their colleagues around the world has managed to restore some of that stolen dignity, but it will take many years for the cradle of human civilisation to redeem its vanquished honour.

Every mosque, every church, every graveyard, every piece of art and every artifact is significant because it is laden with meaning, the meaning bestowed on them by those who have built or sought in them an escape, a moment of solace, hope, faith and peace.

On 2 August 2014, the Israeli army bombed the historic Al-Omari Mosque in northern Gaza. The ancient mosque dates back to the 7th century and has since served as a symbol of resilience and faith for the people of Gaza.

As Notre Dame burned, I thought of Al-Omari too. While the fire at the French cathedral was likely accidental, destroyed Palestinian houses of worship were intentionally targeted. The Israeli culprits are yet to be held accountable.

I also thought of my grandfather Mohammed, the kindly imam with the small, handsome white beard. His mosque served as his only escape from a difficult existence, an exile that ended only with his own death. ◆

An Iraqi National Museum official sitting amid the museum's destroyed artifacts, April 2003. Just the immediate aftermath of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq saw the looting of over 15,000 Iraqi antiquities.

Ramzy Baroud is a journalist, author and editor of Palestine Chronicle. His latest book is The Last Earth: A Palestinian Story *(Pluto Press, London). Baroud has a Ph.D. in Palestine Studies from the University of Exeter and was a Non-Resident Scholar at Orfalea Center for Global and International Studies, University of California Santa Barbara. His website is www.ramzybaroud.net. The above article is reproduced from MintPress News (https://www.mintpressnews.com/notre-dame-gaza-mosques-churches-also-burning/).*

Reclaiming heritage: Bilingual education in Guatemala

The Guatemalan educational system continues teaching Indigenous children only in Spanish, despite the large number of legal instruments that support intercultural bilingual education. *Diana Pastor* makes out the case for a bilingual education system in which the Indigenous language is taught along with Spanish.

Schoolchildren from an Indigenous community village in Guatemala.

IT was 1964, and in the small village of Paxixil in western Guatemala, a young messenger played a drum. He walked the main village roads announcing in Maya K'iche' that, by order of the government, parents must send their children to school.

My mother, who did not understand Spanish at that time, knew that the feared day had come. Although she had a great desire to learn to read and write, she was also scared. 'How am I supposed to learn in Spanish?' she wondered. 'How am I going to say that I know such a thing, or that I do not know another, if I am only able to speak in K'iche'?'

This uncertainty was not a concern just of hers, but of many children of Paxixil and other communities where *Castellanización* (Spanishification) was the first step of a mandatory primary education in Spanish, and part of a greater process of cultural assimilation to spread the language over the Indigenous regions in Guatemala.

Years later, my mother moved from her home to the city after marrying my father (himself Maya K'iche'). From the time I was born, I was educated in Spanish, partly because she moved to an urban area and partly because of pressure from my father, who did not want me to repeat the experience of discrimination he had faced due to his poor Spanish as a child worker in Guatemala City.

My father was right: having Spanish as a first language facilitated my education and even rid me of being discriminated against. I grew up something like an Indigenous person but camouflaged, and paying a high price for it – becoming a monolingual person. A great and important part of my K'iche' cultural heritage was lost, and it is only now that I am trying to recover that richness that was taken away due to the educational and social conditions established at that time, and which, unfortunately, remain in place today.

The Guatemalan educational system continues teaching Indigenous children only in Spanish, despite the large number of legal instruments that support intercultural bilingual education. These include the Political Constitution of the Republic, which recognises the right of people and communities to their cultural identity according to their values, their language and their customs; the General Law of Decentralisation, principles of which are respect for the multiethnic, multicultural and multilingual reality of Guatemala; and the Municipal Code, which establishes that the Municipal Council must organise commissions of intercultural bilingual education and establish the mandate of the management of pre-primary and primary education, as well as literacy and bilingual education programmes.

There is also Government Law 19-2003 of National Languages, which recognises the respect, promotion, development and usage of the Indigenous languages of the Maya, Garífuna and Xinka Peoples in Guatemala, and the National Education Law that establishes that education must respond to the multilingual, multiethnic and multicultural environment of the communities. In addition, the Guatemalan Peace Agreements and the Convention on the Rights of the Child endorse an intercultural bilingual education system. The basis for implementing a more suitable educational system to the communities is there, but in practice, bilingual education has not begun because there is no political will to carry it out.

In 2016, the Constitutional Court issued a ruling in which the Ministry of Education was ordered to implement bilingual and intercultural education in the 13 schools of the municipality of Santa Catarina Ixtahuacán, in the department of Sololá. The petitioners claimed that 99.7% of the

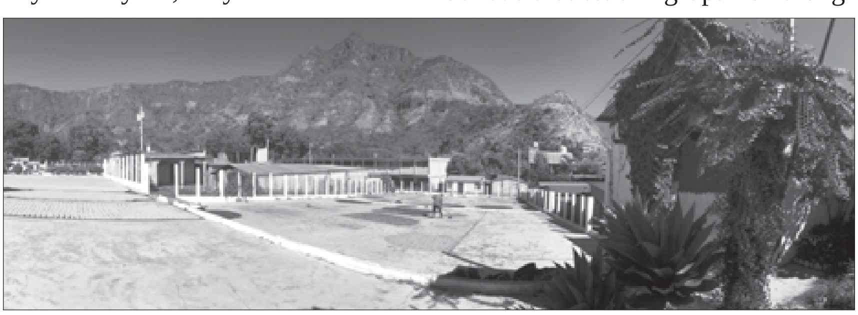
Market day in the Maya K'iche' town of Chichicastenango. The Guatemalan Constitution recognises the right of people and communities to their cultural identity according to their values, language and customs.

population in this municipality are Maya K'iche' speakers, so it is incongruous that they continue working on the basis of an educational system where neither the methodology nor the content being taught is culturally relevant.

The following year, in 2017, the Ancestral Authorities of Santa Catarina Ixtahuacán and others involved in the issue held a discussion on the progress of this ruling, stating that there had been more limitations than progress in the implementation of bilingual education. They warned that in order to improve the primary education situation in the country, it is necessary to change the teaching dynamics and stop implementing 'filler' activities, otherwise students' performance and grades will continue to decline.

Many of the teachers in schools with an Indigenous population do not master the languages of the community. If they do, they are not able to adapt to a bilingual teaching system because they would have conflicts when using the methodology of the didactic materials. Teachers are also detached from social and cultural contexts. These and other difficulties explain why monolingual education in Spanish is considered to be the most logical, practical and convenient way to educate in the country. Parents and the community not only do not demand an adequate education that adheres to their reality, but are forced to adapt, sacrificing with it the opportunity for their children to learn in their mother languages.

As a result of a racist ideology strongly established since colonial times, many people in Guatemala believe that teaching in Maya languages represents a waste of time, and instead favour the proper learning of Spanish and other foreign Western languages, especially English. It is common to find Guatemalans who believe that teaching Spanish alongside Maya, Xinca and Garífuna languages is a setback for education and makes children 'ill-equipped' to find jobs in a globalised world that demands being at the forefront, knowing other foreign languages.



The municipality of Santa Catarina Ixtahuacán in Guatemala. In 2016, the Constitutional Court issued a ruling calling for the implementation of bilingual and intercultural education in the municipality's schools.

The language of a community is its soul, because through it, knowledge is transmitted and new generations are educated. Interrupting this dynamic systematically eliminates the cultural richness and lifestyles of Indigenous communities.

It is necessary that the State of Guatemala, rather than implementing new laws, put into practice those that already exist in a real and integral way. In the words of Pedro Monroy, teacher and principal of Cruz Ayapan primary school in the municipality of San Juan Sacatepéquez, 'Different forms of education are needed so that children can learn without fear, having confidence in themselves, developing their own capacities, enhancing their skills and abilities, practising the values of the community, and using adequate materials with the help of trained personnel. Unification of criteria is needed in terms of how intercultural bilingual education should be, and it must be supervised to achieve real progress.'

It is necessary to understand as well that what is taught should not only be in Indigenous languages, but should also include constructed and systematised knowledge from the vision and lifeways of the community, from their own worldview. The situation in Santa Catarina Ixtahuacán is an example of a small yet crucial struggle that can generate a domino effect in hundreds of Indigenous communities of the country, so they can demand the quality, inclusive and adequate education that children in Guatemala deserve. ◆

Diana Pastor (Maya K'iche') is from Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, and is programme and communication assistant for Cultural Survival and editor of EntreMundos*, an independent magazine on human rights and development in Quetzaltenango. She studied social work at the Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala and at California State University, Monterey Bay. This article first appeared in* Cultural Survival Quarterly *(June 2019) published by Cultural Survival.*

The post-election challenges for Indonesia's feminist movement

While the increase in the number of women elected to the national legislature in the recent Indonesian elections is to be welcomed, this can hardly be celebrated as a triumph for feminism. The fact is there are serious obstacles ahead. *Dyah Ayu Kartika* explains the nature of these challenges.

At least 4,000 people joined this year's Women's March in Jakarta, doubling last year's attendance.

WHEN the votes were counted in Indonesia's 2019 elections, women activists had one thing to welcome: the number of women in the national parliament had increased to 20.4%, up from 17.3% in 2014. Many feminists welcomed this progress, hoping that the greater presence of women would contribute to more gender-sensitive policy.

Not all of the recently elected representatives, however, have a clear gender perspective, and some even declare themselves anti-feminist. The highly patriarchal nature of political parties, and the shift towards a more conservative Indonesian society, also present obstacles that women legislators must face when advocating for progressive gender policies. The number of women who gained parliamentary seats in the 2019 election is therefore a simplistic measure of how women actually performed. The real discussion should focus on what these women legislators could do in the next period to pass better policies for women.

The rise of religious conservatism has notably affected the dynamics of how women are engaging in politics. The battle between feminists and conservatives over the framing of narratives in Indonesia is not a new phenomenon, but in today's political climate the conservatives have the advantage. Conservative groups are now consolidating their organisations to take aim at policies that regulate aspects of 'morality', and are also pushing a conservative agenda outside of parliament. Conservative organisations are producing analytical reinterpretations of gender and feminism that undermine the original theories proposed by feminists, and aiming these messages at women and young girls who have limited understanding of these concepts.

We need to look beyond the lawmakers pushing for women's rights agendas, and focus on how Indonesia's feminists and women's rights activists can counter the narrative presented by conservative groups. I met activists from various backgrounds to hear their reflections on the movement to date. These conversations led me to the conclusion that Indonesia's present-day feminist movement is fragile: while individuals and groups joining the movement are increasing in number, they are fractured and struggle to engage with the grassroots. This presents a challenge to making the movement more sustainable and impactful. Feminists and women's rights movements need to address these shortcomings to curb the conservative narrative.

A 'new hope'?

We are going to see more diverse faces in legislative bodies in the next governmental period. Some are women with commitments to protecting women and children's rights. One such legislator is Netty Prasetyani from the Prosperous Justice Party (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, or PKS). The wife of former West Java governor Ahmad Heryawan (Aher), Netty took a leading role on women's and children's issues during Aher's administration and oversaw the provincial P2TP2A (Pusat Pelayanan Terpadu Pemberdayaan Perempuan dan Anak), an integrated support service for women and child victims of violence.

In my interview with Netty, she showed a commitment to the elimination of underage marriage and support for the proposed Elimination of Sexual Violence Bill (known in Indonesia as RUU P-KS, not to be confused with PKS the party), as the current criminal code law does not cover the protection and rehabilitation of victims. Netty's position is peculiar given her membership of PKS and the party's official opposition to the bill. Nonetheless, she acknowledges this contrast and encourages dialogue between opponents in her party and supporters of the bill. It might not be easy, but she believes bridging differences will open up conservative perspectives on sexual violence cases.

Furthermore, there are opportunities for women representatives to secure more strategic positions in the next parliamentary period. Puan Maharani is the daughter of former President Megawati Soekarnoputri and the Coordinating Minister for Human Resources and Culture during President Joko Widodo's first administration, and is said to be a candidate for the next speaker of the national parliament (DPR-RI). If successful, Puan would be the first woman to take on the position. Masruchah, Commissioner of the National Commission on Violence against Women (Komnas Perempuan), is optimistic that Puan's appointment would benefit the cause, stating, 'She is a woman; she shares similar experiences [with women]. She has learned about women and children's issues during her administration as the Coordinating Minister for Human Resources and Culture. She urged DPR-RI to make progress in discussions of the Elimination of Sexual Violence Bill.'

Meanwhile, an emerging contender, the Indonesia Solidarity Party (Partai Solidaritas Indonesia, or PSI), has been considered the new hope for better policies for women. Having garnered substantial votes in major cities across Indonesia, including Jakarta and Bandung, PSI is now ready to compete in local parliaments. However, Dhyta Caturani, a veteran Indonesian feminist and the head of Purple Code, a feminist organisation working on cybersecurity issues, cautioned against expecting too much: 'PSI needs to be tested. I know people in PSI, and some of them are activists. There are progressive individuals there. But, in politics, you cannot only be kind. The system is so strong, so it's important that you have the capacity and capability to play the game. Experience is critical.'

Key policy issues in Jokowi's second term

The new legislators will have a lot of work to do if they plan on collaborating with feminists and women's rights activists in the next five years. A number of key policies might well become the battleground between feminists and anti-feminists on moral issues ranging from sexual violence to enforcing dress codes and curfews on women.

The first policy issue concerns the revision of the 1974 Marriage Law to increase the minimum age of brides from 16 to 18. The law also contains problematic clauses that perpetuate the unequal position of men and women within households, and permits polygamy. Women's rights activists have two options: to push for the revision of other clauses, or, more critically, assist in the preparation of a government regulation (Peraturan Perundang-undangan, or Perppu) that will regulate the age limitation in lieu of a change in legislation.

The second policy issue is the hotly debated Elimination of Sexual Violence Bill. While the bill aims to enshrine the prevention and prosecution of sexual violence and rehabilitation for victims, some conservative religious groups oppose the bill on the grounds that it is Western-influenced and disruptive to family values.

Despite the controversy, there is little parliamentary interest in finalising the bill anytime soon. PKS rejects the bill and argues that Indonesia needs to adopt preventative measures – instead of taking curative action – in cases of sexual violence, and has endorsed the Family Resilience Bill (RUU Ketahanan Keluarga) as the solution. Within Indonesia's highly patriarchal society, though, the concept of 'family resilience' is often misunderstood as placing the onus of moral responsibility on women, and conservatives consider the Family Resilience Bill an acceptable alternative to the Elimination of Sexual Violence Bill. The Regional Representatives Council (Dewan Perwakilan Daerah, or DPD-RI) first proposed a draft of the Family Resilience Bill to the national parliament in 2017, and PKS will likely push the discussion of the law in the next period. When responding to the proposal, feminists need to be critical to avoid misconceptions and possible contradictions with their agenda.

The third policy involves the implementation of discriminatory local bylaws. In 2017 the National Commission on Violence against Women noted around 421 discriminatory policies across Indonesia, and the number continues to increase. Politicians are likely to publish populist regulations, and with the rise of conservatism in society, there will be more such discriminatory policies which undermine women's bodily autonomy: through curfews or regulations on how women should dress. Recently, in the city of Depok, a proposed law to control how people dressed based on religious norms was shot down by the city council.

Reflecting on those challenges, Indonesian feminists need to solidify their actions and develop concrete steps to create the social conditions that will support progressive legislative change. Feminists therefore need to gear up to challenge the growing conservative influence, but what are the modalities that they have to work with?

Feminism and its discontents

Indonesia's feminists have historically adopted multiple approaches – liberal, radical and intersectional – to address struggles that span land rights, voting rights, worker protection, protection from sexual violence, and more. However, the rapid growth of digital feminist activism, influenced by the global feminist movement, has created a perception amongst conservatives of a singular feminist movement in Indonesia.

Conservative groups are now making sweeping assumptions that feminism is only advocating for 'liberal' values, such as bodily autonomy and LGBT rights, as opposed to a broader and more intersectional approach that includes the interpretation of feminist theory from an Islamic worldview.

The recent growth of Indonesia's feminist movement is largely due to the success of online activism in mainstreaming gender and feminist narratives, and is a promising sign of progress in achieving gender equality in Indonesia. Many digital feminists are young, well-educated and connected to the global movement. They are savvy in the use of social media as primarily a tool to educate, engage and mobilise their followers. The worldwide Women's March campaign and the #MeToo movement have also spurred young Indonesian feminists to build an alliance and attract more people to join the cause. At least 4,000 people joined this year's Women's March in Jakarta, doubling last year's attendance, and activists used the event to urge DPR-RI to pass the Elimination of Sexual Violence Bill. As veteran feminist Dhyta Caturani asserts:

'This is the biggest feminist movement in Indonesia, unlike anything I've seen in my 25 years of activism. There are many self-proclaimed feminists, individuals and groups. When I started One Billion Rising [part of a global campaign to combat sexual violence against women and girls] in 2013, many were not even comfortable with the term "feminism", and now it has changed.'

Online initiatives have emerged in response to a growing demand for feminist information in Indonesia. Established in 2013, *Magdalene* is a feminist online magazine that provides a platform for young Indonesian feminists to share their personal experiences and commentary on how the socio-political environment has impacted their lives. The website publishes short articles and interviews and recently branched out to podcasts, and generates an average of 150,000 page views each month. Other, smaller-scale online-based initiatives have emerged to introduce feminist concepts to young Indonesians, such as the Jakarta Feminist Discussion Group, Indonesia Feminis, Konde.co and more.

At the same time, the Muslim feminist movement has continued to evolve and provides an important space for organisations to expand their grassroots network when striving for gender justice in Islam. In 2017, three Muslim organisations named Alimat, Rahimah and Fahmina (ARAFAH) initiated the Indonesian Women Ulamas Congress (Kongres Ulama Perempuan Indonesia, or KUPI) in Cirebon, West Java, bringing together approximately 2,000 *ulamas* (Islamic clerics) and academics from across Indonesia. The gathering is vital proof that gender equality has always been part of Islamic teaching, countering the hardliners' assumptions about the position of women in the Islamic hierarchy. The congress resulted in the condemnation of three major problems: sexual violence, child marriage and environmental degradation. The women *ulamas* continue to spread this message in their study circles and public policy advocacy, including the Elimination of Sexual Violence Bill.

Younger pupils of Islam with an interest in gender justice can turn to individuals who are known for their critical analysis, such as Kalis Mardiasih, a columnist with a *pesantren* (Islamic intensive schooling) background, and Laily Fitry, a PhD candidate in theology. Furthermore, community-led small initiatives are also growing, such as Forum Islam Progresif, a leftist-based organisation that facilitates discussion on feminism and Islam, and the Halaqah Muslimah Progresif, an online-based discussion about gender and Islam. Both groups target students and young people across Indonesia by using Instagram, the most popular form of social media, as their main platform to spread the message. Naila Fitria, the founder of Halaqah Muslimah Progresif, said:

'We want to counter and balance out the "hijrah" narrative offered by Muslim conservatives. It is sickening. They use religion as their central argument. Therefore, we cannot use secular feminists' argument to counter their massive campaign. We need to produce pro-women reinterpretations that stem from religious doctrine to curb their narrative.'

Fractures in the feminist movement

Unlike the conservative movement, which promotes a single religious narrative when campaigning for their ideas, feminists grapple with multiple sites of oppression, and consequently tend to be reactive when responding to specific policies. As Dhyta Caturani says: 'The movement is scattered, and that's our loss. The [conservatives] are solid; we are not. Our work actually complements each other but is not sewn together well. They have an anchor of the movement, whereas feminism has many issues to fight for: LGBT rights, bodily autonomy, right to work, and so on. We don't have an overarching solution for these problems.'

The diverse nature of feminism entails disagreements in responding to specific issues, which consequently often result in a backlash against feminism. The disagreement ranges from trivial debate over women's sexuality – as seen in the case of the badminton athlete Jonathan 'Jojo' Christie – to the struggle of women farmers and Muslim women. The former case occurred in March 2019, following Jojo's celebratory shirt removal after a gold medal win. The infatuated public reaction of Indonesian women sparked debate over women's sexuality, whether it constituted harassment or sexual expression, and its counterproductive implications for the gender equality movement.

There are other, more fundamental debates about class and religion. Dhyta Caturani says that feminists still think the longstanding struggle of women farmers and workers is not fully situated within the feminist movement, because these women still experience a patriarchal culture at home. Additionally, in March 2018 two students were banned from their campus for wearing face veil clothing (*niqab*), provoking debate about whether the *niqab* can be considered a woman's choice or a form of oppression. The cracks not only cause public bewilderment about the feminist endeavour, but also create fractures within the feminist movement itself.

Different approaches to feminism mean different strategies are needed to include more people in the movement. Muslim feminists, for example, are not comfortable with using the terms 'gender equality' and 'feminism' in their community. They prefer to say 'gender justice', a value that Islam upholds. As Naila Fitria said: 'Muslim feminists use very subtle words to be accepted by the community. For instance, I use "gender justice", not "gender equality", because it is safer, especially if male participants are present [in the study circle, or *pengajian*]. They will protest because it is scripted in the Quran that men and women are not equal. Thus, I declare myself a Muslim feminist. If I said I am a feminist, they won't accept me.'

Where one group prefer to be bold in their fight against discriminatory practices, others prefer to use subtler methods. Take PSI and their campaign against polygamy as a form of violence against women. Some women's rights activists were not comfortable with their strategy and thought it would harm the years of advocacy undertaken by Muslim feminists. Here is Masruchah's reflection on the PSI anti-polygamy campaign:

'We mostly agree with PSI's stance, but the anti-polygamy campaign? Don't use it! We need to look at this as a collective movement, and our approach brings consequences. If you want to turn down polygamy practices, take aim at the Marriage Law. [The forms of] gender-based violence [are] many, but if you go directly to the polygamy issue, it will offend some groups. This is about strategy.'

Where the conservatives use religious argument in disseminating their message, feminists could use a similar strategy by producing a more progressive interpretation that attracts those who are currently undecided. Has it been effective in reaching the wider public though?

Is Indonesia's feminist movement too elitist?

After the translated version of my article on anti-feminist politics appeared in Tirto.id, the Family Love Alliance (AILA) criticised it for being reflective of a feminism which benefits only people from urban, Western-educated backgrounds, saying: '…This is what I always say, everywhere, that feminism is not about women, let alone fighting for women's life. It is not a women's movement, but an elite women's movement.'

Some women activists I met with agreed with the critique. Dhyta Caturani says: 'This is my criticism of Indonesia's feminist movement. Most of the liberal feminists come from an urban and middle-class background. They have the privilege to access so many things, like feminist references in English. What have they done to break it through? Has intersectionality, as our jargon, been applied to our movement? Yes, but only a few of them.'

Naila Fitria agrees that feminists need to work at the grassroots level to counter the conservative movement. She says, 'If you circulate your ideas amongst the middle class, we would always be a minority. Intellectuals should be [engaging] at the grassroots. It is indeed tiring and requires extra work, but that's exactly what they [the conservatives] are doing today.'

To say that the feminist movement is entirely elitist would disregard years of activism by grassroots feminist organisations working to create change from below. Take, for example, the Indonesian Women's Coalition, which works for women's leadership education; Migrant Care, which advocates on behalf of Indonesian migrant workers; PEKKA (Pemberdayaan Perempuan Kepala Keluarga, or the Empowerment for Women Head of Households), which extensively engages with women workers; and longstanding religious-based organisations such as Fatayat NU and Aisyiyah Muhammadiyah.

However, feminist movements indeed have elitist tendencies, with a heavy use of jargon and privileges. Most Indonesian feminists today come from similar backgrounds: middle-class, tertiary-educated, perhaps at foreign institutions, and maintaining high fluency in English, which enables them to access more feminist literature. Not many of them have extensive experience working at the grassroots level, while the women engaged in the grassroots groups are still prone to conservative campaigns to convert the members of more progressive networks. Feminists need to be more engaged with grassroots movements to prevent a shift within established networks.

The recent successes in women's representation inside parliament have been influenced by women's movements working behind the scenes, and the progress seen in women's representation in politics in the 2019 elections should be acknowledged. During Jokowi's second term, however, feminists and women's rights activists will need to organise themselves better to face the challenges that lie ahead. Feminists must be stronger and more unified than ever, build bridges with 'opponents', and build coalitions with other movements that are crucial to preventing the backslide of feminist progress in Indonesia. ◆

Dyah Ayu Kartika (Kathy) is a researcher for the Centre for the Study of Religion and Democracy (PUSAD Paramadina), Jakarta. She previously worked as researcher for Indonesia's National Commission on Violence against Women (Komnas Perempuan). She received her Bachelor of Psychology from Universitas Indonesia and continued her study in Development Studies, majoring in Human Rights, Gender and Conflict Studies: Social Justice Perspective in the International Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University.

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Share the wealth, not the misery

Paul Cudenec argues that, despite scepticism on the left, France's Gilets Jaunes (Yellow Vest) movement has moved on from demands about petrol prices to a broader anti-capitalist struggle.

SOMETHING extraordinary has been happening in France. Since November 2018, a vast movement of dissent has broken out across the country with huge energy and seemingly unlimited staying power. It has staged weekend after weekend of revolt against President Emmanuel Macron's regime.

'The Yellow Vest revolt is basically against capitalism, even if that is not the language in which it was originally expressed.'

From abroad, people will mainly have seen images of thousands of Yellow Vests, or Gilets Jaunes, flooding the streets of Paris, battling with riot cops amidst a fog of tear gas and fusillades of rubber bullets. These dramatic scenes mask the fact that the Gilets Jaunes are not a product of the French capital but of another, deeper, poorer France that has little in common with the ostentatious wealth targeted by angry protesters on the Champs Elysees.

The movement began in the countryside, in small towns and villages, where people mobilised through social media to occupy roundabouts and block roads in protest, initially, at the rise in petrol prices. If its emphasis very quickly broadened into a general call for social justice, that is because this was always the underlying cause. The petrol was just a trigger.

Reasons for rebellion

Ask any protester why they are there and you will get more or less the same reply.

It's all about 'sharing wealth better', one Gilet Jaune, Benoit, tells me. 'Equality and opposition to a world of inequality,' says Audrey, on the same roundabout. 'We are in a vertical world and it would be good to make it a horizontal and proportional one,' declares Thierry.

It was a stroke of genius to use as the symbol of revolt the hi-vis waistcoat that has to be carried, by law, in every vehicle on the road. Immediately it created the impression of a brand-new movement, with no history or fixed political dogma, to which anyone could belong.

It is, however, debatable whether this is in fact the case. Many on the left regard the Gilets Jaunes as merely the latest guise of a social struggle that has been going on for decades, if not longer. In many ways the Yellow Vests have merely seized the battle-soiled political banner last wielded in the intense struggle against the Loi Travail labour reforms under President Francois Hollande in 2016 and by the Nuit Debout movement, which filled France's city squares at the same time.

But in some respects, the Yellow Vest movement is very different. It has managed to grab the imagination and support of sections of the French public who showed little interest in previous social struggles.

The rural small-town origins of the uprising are the key to understanding why. When Macron became president in 2017, it was on the ticket of 'modernising' the French economy and, thus, its way of life. But a lot of people in France don't want to be modernised. They like their traditional communities, where people look out for each other rather than compete, where social protection exists for those in trouble, where the emphasis is on conviviality and enjoying life, rather than on working furiously just to stay alive and pay the bills.

A lot of the Gilets Jaunes represent what is called '*la vieille France*', 'old France', the France that has its own values, its own ways of doing things. For Macron, this traditional old France is an obstacle to be swept aside in order to drag the country into the 21st century – as defined by neoliberals.

Back in August 2018, Macron told an audience in Denmark that the French people were '*Gaulois refractaires au changement*' – Gauls who stubbornly hold out against change. This little poke did not go down well at home and the Gilets Jaunes have since reclaimed the label as a positive one, imagining themselves as the Gauls of the popular Asterix comic books, holding out against cohorts of Roman soldiers. Like their cartoon ancestors, the Yellow Vests don't want to be ruled by Rome or Brussels. And they don't want to end up like *les anglais*, with Macron widely depicted as the French version of Margaret Thatcher.

Social not national

However, their fight for social justice and rejection of neoliberal capitalism has, somehow, become partly and often uneasily aligned with a very different political tradition – that of the nationalist far-right. The waving of the French flag and the singing of the Marseillaise has been awkward for many on the left. When the Gilets Jaunes first appeared, many veteran activists didn't know how to react and waited on the sidelines for a week or two. Some purists were never convinced, but the majority of anti-capitalists quickly realised that the thrust of the movement was social rather than national and decided to join their ranks.

I chatted about this issue with Jean-Marc, a 30-something libertarian Marxist who has been taking part in Gilets Jaunes protests in Paris and in the south of France since the early days of the uprising. 'Right from the start, it was all about social justice,' he insists. 'The problem was the lack of political culture. They weren't using "good" political language, so people on the left thought they must be "bad". But it was soon obvious this wasn't the case.'

Jean-Marc has little time for comrades who shun the Gilets Jaunes struggle because of the minority far-right presence. He says: 'It's as if in Egypt you'd said you couldn't participate in the revolution because the Muslim Brotherhood were there. There are struggles that exist outside the usual political framework.'

He says that he was struck by a report of a known neo-Nazi arrested during a Yellow Vest protest in Paris for spraying graffiti. The message he wrote was simply calling for an increase in unemployment benefit. 'It's the struggle that's important, not the people involved,' he says. 'Gilets Jaunes tend to be very wary when anyone starts talking party politics.'

Democratic structure

As well as blocking roads and packing the streets, Yellow Vests in France have been busy building an alternative democratic structure around their movement. Local assemblies have been established all over the country and two 'assemblies of the assemblies' have been staged on a national level, featuring hundreds of delegates.

The declaration that emerged from the first of these, at Commercy, was then sent back down the structure to be endorsed locally. It gives a good idea of the principles behind the movement. It says: 'We are revolting against the high cost of living, against precarity and misery. We want our loved ones, our families and our children to live in dignity.

'Twenty-six billionaires own as much as half of the human species and that is unacceptable. Let's share wealth and not misery! Let's do away with social inequality! We demand immediate increases in pay, in the minimum wage, in benefits and in pensions; the unconditional right to healthcare and education; free public services for everyone.'

The declaration says that priority Yellow Vest issues include 'real democracy, social and fiscal justice, environmental and climate justice, the ending of discrimination'.

For a movement which was superficially sparked by a demand for cheaper petrol, the environmental element of the yellow message is surprisingly strong. As early as December, Gilets Jaunes set out to block a Monsanto-Bayer site at Trebes in southern France under the banners of 'GJs for ecology' and 'Monsanto = cancer'. Many other such protests have been held since. For the big 16 March protests in Paris, the Yellow Vests were hoping to join forces with climate change protesters. The chaos on the streets meant the planned convergence did not quite materialise, but this did not stop the head of Greenpeace France, Jean-Francois Julliard, from telling media his organisation shared many aims with the Gilets Jaunes.

He told Sky News: 'We are gathering under the banner "environmental and social emergency". So today we are creating the link, like maybe we have never done it before, between the climate movement and the social movements. Between the message carried by the yellow vests and the message carried by environmental organisations. Because we realised we have many things in common, many similar messages.'

Radicalising the revolt

Another attempted convergence is between the Gilets Jaunes and the trade union movement. But this has been problematic, as there is a lot of distrust of the unions. They were seen by many during the Loi Travail protests as putting the brakes on revolt, rather than encouraging it, and some feel it was their lack of radicalism that forced popular discontent to find another, yellow, means of expressing itself.

But if the trade unions themselves, rather than their members, have been kept at arm's length by the Gilets Jaunes, the same is not true of the more radical anti-capitalist left. The Yellow Vest revolt is basically against capitalism, even if that is not the language in which it was originally expressed.

As this became apparent, so the make-up of the protesters changed. Opinion polls showed a drop in support for the Gilets Jaunes among wealthier parts of the population, which was matched by a corresponding rise in support from the working class.

The refrain 'a-anti-anticapitalista!' has become a familiar one in Gilets Jaunes protests, alongside protest classics such as '*police partout, justice nulle part!*' – 'police everywhere, justice nowhere!' By the start of April, after 20 weeks of repression, propaganda and intransigence on the part of the government, the chant 'Revolution!' was also increasingly in evidence.

It was announced in April that the Gilets Jaunes will be playing a leading role in the anti-capitalist mobilisation against the G7 summit of leading industrial countries being hosted by France in Biarritz from 24-26 August. This follows their presence alongside local activists and railway workers in December to protest against a preliminary G7 meeting in the Basque city. The tear gas, rubber bullets and nasty injuries give a hint of what to expect when Macron and other world leaders turn up in town later this summer.

A glimpse of sunshine

And so what for the future? Social protest movements in France, as elsewhere, have the habit of disappearing pretty quickly once the initial energy has dropped. This may yet be the case with the Gilets Jaunes, but it seems less likely. For a start, there is the impact of the enormous levels of police violence, with literally thousands of protesters injured by grenades, rubber bullets and batons and several even losing eyes and arms.

This has installed a deep hatred of the 'forces of order' among the kind of people who, at the start of the movement, fondly imagined that the police might turn out to be on their side. The corporate media have, likewise, gone so far in their contempt for the Yellow Vests that they have completely alienated a large section of their audience. Months of violence and lies are not forgotten easily and the relationship between the French elite and the larger public will probably never be the same again.

These factors have also helped in ensuring that, in the course of half a year, the Gilets Jaunes have succeeded in creating not just a network but also a culture. They have their very own political colour, their own icons, their own songs and their own distinctive war cry of 'ah-oo!'

A documentary film about the Yellow Vests, *J'veux du soleil*, has been attracting big and enthusiastic audiences in cinemas across France. Made by Gilles Peret and Francois Ruffin, a left-wing MP, it focuses on individual Gilets Jaunes encountered on roundabouts across France.

It is unashamedly positive about the spirit behind the movement and the effect it has had on the lives of isolated, anxious provincial people who are struggling to make ends meet. The Yellow Vest uprising has given many of these people new friends, a new family, a sense of purpose, fraternity, community, belonging. It has, as one young woman tells Ruffin in the film, brought a glimpse of sunshine into their otherwise grey existences.

Why would they want to give all that up and go back to watching helplessly on TV as President Macron tears French society apart? ◆

Paul Cudenec is a writer based in southern France and a member of the writers' cooperative Shoal Collective. His further reports on the Gilets Jaunes movement can be seen at winteroak.org.uk. The above article was first published in Red Pepper *(Summer 2019, www.redpepper.org.uk).*

The suppression of musical culture in Gaza

The practice and presence of music in Gaza is limited, neglected and sometimes not even welcomed. Due to the Israeli-Egyptian blockade and the current highly conservative government and social norms, there are no music majors in secondary school or university, for example, and most (if not all) of the few private teachers have left Gaza.

Salsabeel H Hamdan

‘WHEN music is suppressed within a society, there is something wrong within its history, ideology, mind and – of course – spirit,’ says Naem Nasir, a former music teacher and now a well-known director of plays produced in both Gaza and the West Bank.

Visitors to Gaza very quickly notice a strained relationship between local social norms and one of the most important facets of any culture – music. The practice and presence of music is limited, neglected and sometimes not even welcomed. Due to the Israeli-Egyptian blockade and the current highly conservative government and social norms, there are no music majors in secondary school or university, for example, and most (if not all) of the few private teachers have left the Strip. The only music funded or otherwise supported to any significant degree is that which exalts Islam or adheres to a narrow definition of Palestinian heritage.

Once visitors pick up on this characteristic of culture in Gaza (and to a much lesser extent, the West Bank), they often ask, ‘Why did it evolve this way and when?’ Naem Nasir is a music historian of sorts in Gaza – but he also speaks from painful personal experience about what he calls ‘the loss of our musical heritage’.

Nasir is a Palestinian born in the Gaza Strip and is now a theatre director. But his original vocation was as a music teacher, both in Libya and Gaza. Twice he has been imprisoned in Israel for protesting the occupation – the first time for two years while in high school and the second for six months during the First Intifada. It was during his first imprisonment that he composed two of his first musicals.

Salsabeel H Hamdan/Washington Report on Middle East Affairs

Gaza’s only music store opened in 2017.

Over the course of his career, Nasir produced and wrote more than 50 plays, musical scores and short poems, appearing in several short films along the way after he got his certification in drama and music from Ashtar Art School in Ramallah. The school sent foreign teachers to Gaza periodically and he was one of the fortunate few to be allowed to study with them for three years.

Nasir went on to participate in many Arabic and European festivals, which enriched his development as a composer and director – a benefit today’s Palestinian artists from Gaza don’t have. Towards the end of the 1990s, he founded both the Masafat Theatre Group and the Palestine Orchestra for Arabic Music in Gaza; however, Nasir was forced to shut both down less than a year later due to lack of funding. Nasir is still producing plays, but not music.

‘My heart deteriorated after I had to close the orchestra,’ he recalls. ‘I become really emotional whenever I remember the loss; the government couldn’t even afford a place for my musicians to rehearse.’

Impact of occupation

Palestine had a rich and a very varied musical heritage before 1948, Nasir says. ‘Every village had its own musical taste and style, different from other villages, and this gave birth to many unique, traditional songs. But that all changed when Israel was created and its forces occupied our land, tearing all this apart.’

The displacement of more than 700,000 Palestinians disrupted the social fabric, destroying along with it much of their cultural and musical heritage. Instruments typically aren’t among the items seized when people are in a rush to leave a house under siege, and living in squalid conditions in refugee camps is not conducive to a 'luxury' like making music.

This destruction of a society, thought at first to be short-term but later proven to be as good as permanent, had inevitable consequences that persist today. Every generation since 1948 evolves further away from its cultural roots. Moreover, notes Nasir, the cultures of the countries to which the refugees moved (Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt) 'invaded' over time what remains of Palestinian identity.

'I feel sick when I attend wedding parties in Gaza and don't hear a single Palestinian wedding song played there, as we used to years ago,' Nasir says. 'Instead, we have these Egyptian songs and music styles, as if we do not have wedding songs of our own.'

He adds, however, that the music of many neighbouring countries, especially Lebanon and Jordan, heavily borrowed from the original Palestinian music.

There also has been a push over the years to revive and nurture Palestinian heritage. And some Palestinian youth listen and feel an affinity to what is now called Palestinian music, with its themes related to patriotism, wars and lost land. But this, says Nasir, is not representative of the rich breadth of the original Palestinian music.

'Over time, the occupation narrowed Palestinian music to specific niches,' he explains. 'It's like the occupation of the land is now also an occupation of our culture and our minds. We focus almost exclusively on the need to uplift the spirit of Palestinians, free our land and honour the martyrs and their mothers.'

Still another layer of occupation that has affected musical expression among Palestinians, especially in Gaza, is the Israeli blockade, which prevents most musical instruments, as well as performers and teachers, from entering.

For example, Khamis Abushaban, of the Edward Said Conservatory of Music in Gaza, recently told *The Independent*, 'We had a cello teacher who was living here since 1997 but this year she had to go back to Romania for personal reasons. We had a Russian colleague who taught guitar and trumpet, but unfortunately, she left in October too. Of course, here we have no replacement. So those lessons are gone.'

Nasir observes, 'The siege has doubled the problem! In my youth, I used to be able to travel to Europe and interact with other musicians from different nationalities who played other genres of music from all over the world. Thus, I was able to develop my own, unique style of music, as a Palestinian, by seeing how different or similar it was to others'. I could learn from other techniques, while protecting it from being confused with neighbouring musical styles, especially Arabic, Egyptian, Turkish or what is called Israeli music.'

The characteristics that make Palestinian music unique have now become so vague, says Nasir, that Palestinian youth today often do not recognise the music or songs that originated in their own culture, other than those with patriotic themes.

Impact of religious trends

Another limiting force on music in Gaza today is what Nasir labels false religious beliefs. Some religious scholars regard music as trivial or even *haram* (prohibited) unless it relates to motherhood, patriotism or Islam.

Nasir responds that this is an extreme interpretation of Islam and, in fact, many Gazans do not believe in such a strict interpretation. For example, Mohammad Assaf, the first Gazan Palestinian to win the Arab Idol competition, performed many Western pop songs and was encouraged by his friends and family. That's not to deny that he had his detractors; he remains a controversial figure in Gaza.

Several youths in Gaza who were interviewed for this piece, but did not want to be named, said they would be afraid to publicly embrace other types of music. 'Society, as well as our parents, believe that music is only for partiers and losers, who have not been guided by Allah to the righteous path,' said one. 'It is not the image they want for us in front of society and relatives; they want us to be doctors, engineers and "religious" people.'

A cumulative oppression

As a result of all these dynamics, the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics found in 2015 that only 39.2% of Gazans listen to music, compared with 71.2% of Palestinians in the West Bank.

However, there are some early signs of resurgence: A store that sells musical instruments opened in Gaza in 2017 and, last October, diploma programmes in drama and music opened at Gaza University, the first of their kind. (Note, however, that the university's website cautions that the programmes will be offered for only a year, until the need for these professions decreases. In addition, no actual instruction with instruments will be offered; the focus is viewed as more technical than 'fine arts' – preparing people to work in radio and TV, for instance.)

Finding instructors for those programmes will be a challenge. There is no government funding for teaching or reviving Palestinian musical heritage, and there are fewer than five centres/institutions that teach music in the entire Gaza Strip.

Is all of this important, given the dire economic conditions in Gaza? Music doesn't put food on the table, after all. Nasir says 'yes'. When there is a destruction of any aspect of culture, he says, 'it is easier for Israel and other colonial powers to fill the gap with their own inventions – and thus destroy the very existence of a Palestinian identity'. ◆

Salsabeel Hamdan is a Gaza-based writer for WeAreNotNumbers.org, a youth project that pairs international mentor-authors with youth in the Strip to share the human stories behind the numbers in the news. This article is reproduced from the Washington Report on Middle East Affairs *(June/July 2019).*

Feng Chih (1905-1993) was a Chinese poet, writer and translator. He was also the director and then honorary director of the Institute of Foreign Literature.

Sonnet

Feng Chih

We often pass a night warm and intimate
In an unfamiliar room whose shape
In the daytime we have no way to know,
Let alone its past, its future. The plain

Endlessly stretches before our window.
We vaguely remember the road we came by
In the dusk: such is our knowledge.
Tomorrow, we will leave and return no more.

Close our eyes then! Let these warm, intimate nights
And unfamiliar places weave in our heart:
Our life is like the plain outside the window.
Upon the misty plain we recognise
A tree, a flash of lake-light; within the boundlessness
Is hidden the forgotten past, the seen-unseen future.

Translated by Wai-Lim Yip