

UN Conference on South-South Cooperation Reaffirmed

UNITED NATIONS (IPS)

The 192-member General Assembly has reaffirmed its decision from last year to convene a High-Level U.N. Conference on South-South Cooperation. The venue and the date remain to be finalised.

The resolution requests that the President of the General Assembly, Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann, entrust the President of the High-Level Committee on South-South Cooperation, Ambassador Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser of the State of Qatar, to undertake the necessary consultation



Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser, Permanent Representative of the State of Qatar to the United Nations in New York. UN Photo/Paulo Filgueiras

with member states in order to prepare for the proposed Conference.

These consultations will be held with a view to the General Assembly taking a decision, during its current 63rd session, on the nature, date, budgetary implications, objectives and modalities of the Conference.

Although there has been overwhelming support to hold the Conference in a developing country, there have been no formal offers by any member states to host the meeting.

The conference will commemorate the 30th anniversary of the 1978 U.N. Conference on Technical Cooperation Among Developing Countries (TCDC) held in Argentina, which adopted the Buenos Aires Plan of Action on South-South Cooperation.

The commemoration of the 30th anniversary comes at a time when South-South Cooperation has acquired greater prominence due to significant gains in many parts of the developing world.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has repeatedly declared: "I am committed to strengthening United Nations support for South-South cooperation."

Addressing the ministerial meeting of the Group of 77 in September, UNDP

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South-South Development Expo Market Solutions for Development

UNITED NATIONS (IPS)

In a novel approach aimed at strengthening social and economic ties among developing nations and sharing knowledge and best practices, the Special Unit for South-South Cooperation (SU/SSC) within the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is launching a South-South Human Development Stock Exchange (SS-HDSX). The launch will be an integral part of the celebrations of the Fifth U.N. Day for South-South Cooperation and the first-ever Global South-South Development Expo and Exhibition of development solutions, Dec 16-19.

"What is needed are stronger commitments to capitalise on existing innovations, facilitate networks of knowledge sharing and establish funding mechanisms that would help to encourage nascent and innovative programmes to reach their full potential," says Kemal Dervis, UNDP Administrator.

There is no shortage of networks to identify best practices and development innovations by developing countries' institutions, but what is lacking are the mechanisms that can effectively facilitate the actual transfer of knowledge from one Southern country to another, according to the SU/SSC.

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'BIMSTEC is the Bridge Between South Asia and Southeast Asia'

By Wolfgang Kerler

UNITED NATIONS (IPS)

Leaders of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand vowed to strengthen their collaboration when they met for the second summit of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) in November.

"BIMSTEC is the bridge between South Asia and South East Asia," India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said, hosting the meeting in New Delhi. He added that, "in the past ten years, [BIMSTEC's] combined GDP increased two and a half times to reach 1.7 trillion U.S. dollars."

Formed in 1997, BIMSTEC has grown from five to seven member states. The sub-regional group is aimed at providing a link between the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) as members from both organisations are engaged in BIMSTEC.

"There is much greater connectivity between us, more trade and investment and more people to people exchanges," Singh stressed.

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Migration Experts Share Solutions

By Nergui Manalsuren

UNITED NATIONS (IPS)

Meeting in Dakar, Senegal, leading migration experts called on the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to engage in more co-operation and dialogue within and across regions to address the challenges that migration can present and maximise positive impacts on development.

“Efforts must be made to ensure that the needs of migrants are specifically considered and well understood and that they do not become scapegoats for deteriorating labour market opportunities,” said William Lacy Swing, Director General of the International Organisation for Migration (IOM).

“We must not let the global economic and financial crisis lead to negative stereotyping of migrants or xenophobic policies,” said Swing at two-day conference on “Refugee Protection and International Migration in West Africa” held in Dakar, Senegal. The conference was sponsored by the U.N. High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), the IOM and the ECOWAS in partnership with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

The conference was the second in a series of four regional meetings. The first was held in May in Yemen.

The conference which was officially opened by Senegal’s President Abdoulaye Wade, brought together some 200 officials from U.N. agencies, ECOWAS members, donor countries, and national and international NGOs to discuss issues relating to refugee protection and international migration in West Africa.

ECOWAS consists of Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Cote D’Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinee, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leon, and Togolese Republic.

Swing said that in an era of human mobility and human displacement on an unprecedented scale -- persistent economic and demographic disparities, ease of communications and travel, recurring conflicts, natural disasters, environmental degradation and climate change, and now a very serious economic and financial crisis -- greater mobility of persons must be ensured.

“My central proposition is that today’s

irregular migratory movements in West Africa require us to look beyond the distorting lens of pre-defined categories and real or perceived institutional mandates to the real needs of the persons involved -- a needs-based protection approach. This must be the basis for solutions,” continued Swing.

The conference examined migratory movements within West-Africa and explored opportunities offered by the 1979 ECOWAS Protocol relating to freedom of movement and residency to help identify solutions.

According to Ron Redmond, an UNHCR official, migratory movements to other regions of the African continent and beyond were also examined, with a particular focus on ways to reduce illegal migration while promoting legal and safe options.

“Participants looked at how the free movement of citizens within the ECOWAS region and ECOWAS’ common approach on migration could provide tangible responses to the challenges faced by refugees and migrants in West Africa,” said Redmond.

A few examples of best practices were shared during the conference.

In Angola, IOM and UNHCR jointly facilitated four workshops in 2008 on “Protection and Mixed Migration” sensitising 200 immigration, border and law enforcement officials to the challenges of humane handling of migration flows that are likely to contain a diversity of groups, including vulnerable individuals.

In Somaliland, IOM trained local NGOs, including the Somaliland National Human Rights Commission and organisations working with community leaders on the situation of mixed migration to Yemen through the Gulf of Aden.

According to IOM, a comprehensive training package included information on the international rights of migrants, as well as elements of customary and Sharia law.

“These are just two examples amongst others that we would be happy to promote in the ECOWAS region,” said the head of IOM.

The situation in the Gulf of Aden provides a good illustration. UNHCR and IOM together created and co-chair the Mixed Migration Task Force (MMTF) under the auspices of the Protection Cluster for

Somalia. Several U.N. agencies and international NGOs with key roles to play in addressing population movements in that part of the world are active participants.

“The Task Force has been recognised as a model of good practice in cooperation. I would fully endorse its replication and adaptation in the West Africa region,” added Swing.

He suggested that a number of mechanisms can be established without infringing on the rights of States to remove irregular migrants from its territory.

“In this regard, I would like to once again reiterate the importance of protection of human rights of migrants, especially of nationals of neighbouring states in order to avoid situations in which migrants become stranded and are pushed back and forth between countries,” Swing told to members of ECOWAS.

Meanwhile, the Philippines Foreign Affairs Undersecretary Esteban Conejos, who chaired the second meeting of the Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD) in Manila in October 2008, visited the U.N. headquarters in New York.

Asked by IPS about the Dakar conference, he said that “during the global forum in Manila, one of the things that we did is to showcase the Philippine concept of lifecycle approach to protect and support our migrants.”

“This is an idea where the government provides protection at every stage of migration continuum: pre-deployment, on-site protection, as well return and integration. So this is the same principle of the lifecycle approach that we can also apply to West-Africa,” Conejos said.

“One of the functions of the forum was to focus on practical experiences and share the best practices among the countries. The countries that came to participate took notes of those presentations. The beauty of the forum was that it was very informal, so countries were free to share their experiences,” he told IPS.

He expected greater participation of countries, including ECOWAS members during the next Global Forum on Migration that is going to take place in Athens in November 2009.

“About 160 countries participated in Manila, and we expect more in Athens,” the Undersecretary told IPS.

Caribbean Countries Meet to Discuss Challenges of Migration

By Ulrich Knapp

UNITED NATIONS (IPS)

Border security and migration management were the main topics of a Castries, Saint Lucia meeting on migration in the Caribbean.

Government officials from 18 Caribbean countries, along with representatives of regional institutions and international agencies -- including the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) -- discussed best practices and lessons learned in managing child migration, responses to the diverse challenges of human trafficking, HIV/AIDS and mobility in the Caribbean.

"The fact that all governments come together is confirmation to us that these countries are interested in these migration issues and that they are vital to them," Niurka Piñeiro, spokesperson of the International Organization of Migration (IOM),

which organised the meeting, told IPS. "Our main goal is to make sure that these countries have the right tools and the right training to expedite the flow of bona fide migrants who are crossing borders but at the same time be equipped with the latest technology in order to stop or to detect anyone trying to enter their territory illegally."

"That is what IOM is doing in Haiti," Piñeiro said. "We have a project in the Dominican Republic, one in the Bahamas, and we have just finished one in Trinidad and Tobago," Piñeiro added.

According to IOM, the Caribbean region is characterised by a very fluid internal movement of persons. Lack of economic opportunities in many areas, coupled with historical patterns of movement, and in some cases human rights abuses and disasters, are the main drivers influencing migration of people both within and outside the region.

Irregular migration, migrant smuggling, human trafficking, the spread of HIV/AIDS, brain-drain and mass outflows of migrants all come to form

parts of the current migration dynamics in the Caribbean.

IOM's World Migration 2008 study shows that the Caribbean region has one of the highest net emigration rates in the world. While there is intra-regional migration -- such as between Haiti and the Dominican Republic -- in 2000, Caribbean migrants in the United States totalled 2,879,000 or 9.6 percent of the foreign-born population (U.S. Census, 2000).

Intra-regional movements are the smallest, estimated at 10 per cent of overall migration. The Dominican Republic, Guyana, Haiti and Jamaica are the main sending countries to other Caribbean destinations, while The Bahamas, the British and U.S. Virgin Islands, and the Turks and Caicos are the main receiving countries and territories.

The aim of the Saint Lucia meeting was to increase dialogue and cooperation and in doing so strengthen Caribbean capacity to manage migration challenges.

Indigenous Reporting - Between Activism and Professionalism

Analysis by Diana Cariboni*

LA PAZ (IPS)

Indigenous journalism would seem to be in a stage similar to what environmentalism experienced a few decades ago: born of necessity and protest, it is caught in a constant state of tension between activism and professionalism.

The problem is that "we are sources and media at the same time," said Silsa Arias, head of communications for the National Indigenous Organisation of Colombia (ONIC), in last week's discussion in La Paz on how to carry out the work of production, research, writing and editing at a workshop titled "Journalistic Minga: Developing Indigenous Reporting in Latin America".

Arias, a member of the Kankuamo community, is a leader of the indigenous movement in her country. But she also studied journalism, and is responsible for the news reports that appear on the ONIC web site and their on-line radio station Dachibedeá (Our Voice).

Her concern was echoed by other participants in the November workshop sponsored by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and organised by the Inter Press Service (IPS) global news agency.

Taking part in the workshop were indigenous people from Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Peru and Venezuela who have taken on the task of informing, educating or protesting, through community radio stations, alternative or local media outlets, and social movements.

Two reporters from Nicaragua were unable to attend the workshop. One was in the hospital with malaria, and the other was unable to convince the airline that he did

not need a visa to travel to Bolivia.

Their cases illustrate the kind of hurdles that have cropped up at every step since IPS assigned me the task of identifying colleagues in the region dedicated to indigenous issues, providing training and assistance for each of them to write a feature story, editing the article, and publishing the stories on the agency's world news service.

In indigenous zones in Latin America, the "digital gap" is "an abyss," said workshop participants. Some of them only have access to email once a week or every two weeks.

Meanwhile, the trip by river that Milton Piranga, from Colombia, wants to make to write about an Amazon jungle indigenous community that is on the verge of disappearing costs 1,500 dollars -- more expensive than a plane ticket to Europe. Piranga also belongs to a vulnerable indigenous group, the Koreguaje, who live in the southern Colombian department (province) of Caquetá and number just 3,500 people. His father, an important Koreguaje chief, was murdered by the guerrillas when Piranga was just 10 years old.

The Spanish language brought over by the conquistadors became a source of tension. Forced to learn it in order to communicate with other native groups and with the rest of society, indigenous people sometimes use it reluctantly.

It was interesting to watch the workshop participants from other countries interviewing Aymara peasant farmers in the mountains of Laripata, 300 km from La Paz. Doña Teodora was calmly explaining in her own language how she, with the help of her neighbours, had built a terrace in 25 days to plant turnips, when an indig-

enous workshop participant from Colombia became impatient and quipped "Speak to me in Spanish; we can't understand each other this way."

In the face of her insistence, Teodora began to insert a few Spanish words into her account. The simultaneous translation by an IFAD expert sounded overly concise, and left all of us feeling that we were missing out on things. So the interviewers decided to tape record the woman speaking in her own language, and later ask for a complete translation by IPS correspondent in Bolivia Franz Chávez, who speaks Aymara.

In Laripata, some 50 families in three villages scrape out a living while fighting erosion on their small terraced plots of land. Through a programme financed by IFAD, they receive funds and technical assistance to revive traditional agricultural practices like terrace-building, which curbs erosion.

Journalism is a marvelous tool for providing a broad view of reality, for learning to piece together the puzzles of day-to-day problems, for making out the hidden connections between events and developments, and for highlighting nuances and contradictions. The men and women who met last week in La Paz got involved in journalism out of necessity, motivated by the need to protest and denounce what is happening to the indigenous people of Latin America. They were grateful to be able to take part in the meeting and the discussions, and to receive some technical assistance and tools. Time will tell whether or not they make the profession their own.

*Diana Cariboni is IPS regional editor for Latin America.

'One Sector & One Country Cannot Do It Alone'

By Wolfgang Kerler

UNITED NATIONS

The Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) are urging Southeast Asian governments to take action against the spread of HIV/AIDS among migrant workers.

The region's steady economic growth over the last decade has led to an unprecedented flow of migrants. An estimated 12.6 million migrant workers left Southeast Asian source countries -- Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Viet Nam -- while more than 7.6 millions moved to the region's fast-growing countries of destination -- Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore and Brunei.

A country-by-country assessment, released by ASEAN and UNDP in November, reveals that despite their contributions to destination economies, migrants have no or little access to national AIDS programmes and their services. The little data available indicates a much higher HIV infection rate among migrants than in the general population.

"This assessment provides information that will be useful for policy makers, health givers and clinicians in ensuring that migrant workers and mobile populations are provided with high-quality pre-

vention and treatment services," Surin Pitsuwan, Secretary-General of ASEAN, said.

Marta Vallejo, HIV/AIDS programme specialist at UNDP told IPS that "it is not migration per se that puts people at risk of HIV infection, but the conditions and situations in which some migrants find themselves."

Divided from their home communities and confronted with different kinds of discrimination, migrant workers were "more vulnerable to be exploited and victimised, and to engage in risk behaviour that can result in HIV infection," Vallejo said.

To fight the spread of HIV/AIDS among migrants, Vallejo outlined three key actions the affected countries should take:

First of all, the sharing of more comprehensive data on risk behaviour and vulnerabilities of mobile population is needed in order to respond effectively.

Secondly, governments both of source and host countries should recognise the contributions of migrants to their national economies -- and therefore provide the funding for an adequate access to health services and AIDS programmes in every phase of the migration cycle.

Thirdly, multi-sectoral and cross-boarder dialogue and co-operation will be needed to tackle the

spread of HIV/AIDS among migrants. Different ministries from different countries and the private sector, too, should work together -- as according to Vallejo, "one sector and one country cannot do it alone."

The ASEAN-UNDP report also urges countries to "reinforce policies and commitments on HIV/AIDS such as the ASEAN Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers signed by the ASEAN Leaders in January 2007." In this declaration, ASEAN member states pledged to work closer together in order to grant migrants fundamental political, economic and social rights.

Already in 1992, the ASEAN members have set in place the ASEAN Task Force on AIDS (ATFOA) to synchronise their efforts. Among ATFOA's achievements are the creation up of a regional information system and the support of scientific research on the impacts of the AIDS pandemic on socio-economic development in the region.

When they met in Vientiane in May, leaders of ASEAN concluded that "further regional and national efforts will be needed to involve and empower people living with HIV" and that those people are still facing "stigma, discrimination and other barriers to treatment and care services, and to a life with hope and dignity."

New Tsunami Warning System

By Ida Karlsson

UNITED NATIONS (IPS)

A new high-tech tsunami warning system has been launched in Indonesia. The Indian Ocean region is far ahead in terms of regional cooperation, according to U.N. Economic, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) officials say.

"The warning system in Indonesia is very good news," Peter Koltermann, head of the tsunami unit at UNESCO's Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (UNESCO/IOC), told IPS.

Four years ago, there was no exchange of information between the countries bordering the Indian Ocean. Today the cooperation is highly developed compared to other regions. "The Indian Ocean region has a far better exchange of earthquake-data than the Mediterranean Sea region, for example," Peter Koltermann said, emphasising that, "It is harder to change existing information structures than to build new ones, as in the case of the Indian Ocean region."

The project was completed in cooperation with Australia, Japan, Madagascar, Malaysia, the Maldives, Pakistan, South Africa, Sri Lanka and Yemen -- which all border the Indian Ocean.

These countries share real-time earthquake-data, they run joint training, education and practice activities. In 2010 there will be regular exercises for evaluation and training purposes. Cooperation with Thailand, Tanzania and Kenya are also underway.

"I'm sure that a large proportion of the people could have been saved in 2004 if we'd had the system then," Joern Lauterjung, the co-ordinator of the German emergency tsunami assistance project, told IPS. The new high-tech warning system was built with German technology.

In deep water a tsunami spreads at the speed of jet aircraft. The critical factor is time. A quarter million people lost their lives in the devastating Asian tsunami four years ago. With no disaster communication thousands of people died in neighbouring countries hours after the earthquake struck. But with the new system countries like Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Pakistan will be warned.

"In 2004 there were 300 victims in Somalia, even though the tsunami took eight hours to get there. That would definitely be avoided now," Lauterjung said.

Indonesia was the country worst hit by the earthquake-triggered 2004 Asian tsunami. Following the disaster, the German and Indonesian govern-

ments established the early warning project. The system combines information from hundreds of stations and several sources: pressure sensors on the sea bed, buoys on the surface, seismometers and GPS-systems. The backbone of the system are the large yellow steel buoys which monitor the water and seabed. The 130 million dollar system will predict where and when a tsunami would hit. Flash news of changes will be sent to authorities, to police stations but also to mosques, schools and television and radio stations.

But the challenge is getting coastal communities to evacuate smoothly after an alert. "Though progress has been made it would take years before everyone will know what to do," Lauterjung explained.

The UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon welcomed the launch of the Indonesian Tsunami Early Warning System, congratulating Indonesia's government for its regional leadership by taking steps towards making its citizens less vulnerable to the effects of these kinds of natural disasters. "The United Nations, for its part, will continue to work with all partners to ensure that we are ready when disaster strikes. In that spirit, I offer my congratulations on this important achievement," he said.

Harnessing the Zambezi

Water as a Catalyst for Development

By Pilirani Semu-Banda

LILONGWE (IPS)

If the socio-economic development goals of the eight countries that share the Zambezi River basin are to be met, countries along the river should quickly implement plans towards managing water resources in an efficient, effective and sustainable manner.

This was the agreement made during the Fourth Zambezi Basin-wide Stakeholders Forum which took place in Malawi's capital, Lilongwe in November.

The gathering, an annual event of stock-taking and strategising first held in 2005, focuses on managing the resources of the Zambezi basin. This year's forum was aimed at turning the Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) Strategy and implementation plan of the Zambezi river basin resources into action.

The IWRM spells out how the eight Zambezi Riparian States -- Angola, Botswana, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Zambia, Tanzania and Zimbabwe -- can share the benefits derived from the water resources of the Zambezi River Basin in a sustainable and equitable manner.

Malawi's Principal Secretary for irrigation and water development, Andrina Mchiela, alerted the forum to several serious warning signs concerning the water situation in the region. She said that many rivers in the water basin are now running dry before they reach the lakes or seas they previously emptied into. Across the region, water tables are drying up and wetlands are fast disappearing. She said there was need to speed up the process of implementing the IWRM to counter these negative developments.

The IWRM strategy addresses four issues, namely lack of coordinated water resources development, poor environmental management approaches, weak climate change adaptation measures and weak regional cooperation and integration mechanisms.

"There is need for a very careful management of the water resources in the Zambezi Water Basin," said Mchiela. She said there is growing demand

for fresh water in the region, which is currently using 50 percent of all fresh water sources. "At the current trend, by 2025, we shall be using 75 percent of all the fresh water."

Globally, up to one billion people lack clean water, two billion have no proper sanitation and seven billion will be faced with severe water shortages by 2015, according to Mchiela. She said the IWRM should be used to improve the situation, at least in the region.

"We need in-basin people that are dedicated towards finding solutions to these challenges," said Mchiela.

Another problem facing the Zambezi Basin is the

He said water, food and energy security can be realised from the Zambezi water basin, explaining that it is the biggest river basin in SADC with abundant water resources and good soils that need to be effectively utilised.

"There is so much potential in this water basin," said Msibi. The Zambezi basin is home to over 40 million people, according to the 2007 IWRM Forum Report. The basin is reported to be rich in human, social, political, economic, natural and ecological diversity and has high potential for agriculture, fisheries, forestry, wildlife and hydroelectric power generation.

David Harrison, Senior Advisor and Consultant for Global Freshwater Team, called on the Zambezi water basin riparian states to learn from the effective management currently taking place on China's Yangtze River basin. The Yangtze is the world's third longest river. Harrison cited flood control initiatives, constructing and operating of dams in ways that reduce impacts on the river and its aquatic populations as some of the projects that should be encouraged in the Zambezi water basin.

The formulation of the IWRM followed the Zambezi Watercourse Commission (ZAMCOM) agreement signed by the eight riparian states in July 2004. The countries indicated that they recognised the significance of the Zambezi

watercourse as a major water resource in the region and the need to conserve, protect and sustainably utilise the resources of the basin. The states also committed themselves to ensure equitable and reasonable utilisation and efficient management and sustainable development of the water basin resources. States came up with resolutions to improve water reservoir management for improved food security and for the rehabilitation, management and monitoring of environmental-vulnerable areas in the basin. The forum was attended by delegates from government ministries for environment, water, justice, finance, fisheries, forestry, agriculture and energy, non-governmental organisations working in environment and water sectors, traditional leaders who represented their communities, universities and research institutions, parliamentarians, private sector, and local government leaders.



Run-off contaminates the water supplied to Luanda, Angola's poor neighbourhoods.

Ferdinando Casagrande/IPS

impact of climate change. According to Kenneth Msibi, Water Policy and Strategy Expert for the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the Zambezi is the worst-affected basin in the world. Frequent floods and intense droughts are expected to become even more frequent occurrences. In 2007 alone, Botswana, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe all experienced intense flooding which affected more than half a million people.

Msibi said that a large part of the population of six of the eight states along the Zambezi live below the poverty line and water management has a role to play in economic and social development for the region. "The challenge is to use water as a catalyst for development," said Msibi. "We now need to see tangible actions if the region has to achieve poverty reduction and economic prosperity," said Msibi.

Sustainable Solutions Arise From the Community

By Darío Montero

MEDELLÍN, Colombia (IPS)

The global financial crisis has not demoralised those involved in community projects throughout Latin America and the Caribbean who took part in ECLAC's fourth social innovation in November.

Optimistic based on her lengthy experience evaluating sustainable development plans, Colombian economist Norah Rey de Marulanda said the countries of the region have learned their lesson and will not reduce spending on education, health or other social areas, "at least not drastically, as some predict." Nevertheless, Rey de Marulanda, a member of the Committee of Notables that selected the finalists in the Experiences in Social Innovation contest organised by ECLAC (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean), says "the global crisis will affect the region, without a doubt."

"Private philanthropy funds will be reduced, because companies will cut back on their funding as the profit margins of their investments shrink," she said at the three-day fair in Medellín. "However, I believe the same thing will not happen in the case of non-governmental organisations that through different channels receive funding from governments, from Europe for example, because governments have budgets and obligations that they have to live up to," she said.

In a conversation with IPS during the fair, Rey de Marulanda, a former Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) manager of integration and regional programmes, expressed her conviction that the governments of Latin America will be much more cautious now when it comes to cutting social spending, even if they do limit it somewhat.

"A lesson was learned from the crisis of the 1980s," when public spending was drastically reduced, she said. "Unlike at that time, there are democratic governments in all of Latin America today, and this is a question of governability. "If poverty rates rise, there will be protests," and the social pressure will function as an antidote, "because it has been seen that governments can fall if that kind of problem is not addressed," she said.

"Problems could occur, however, in countries in the region which already have very low levels of social spending, in some cases as low as 50 dollars a year per person. That is insufficient to start with, and if it is cut by

10 dollars, it's almost as if it disappeared completely," said the expert.

Concurring with that view, ECLAC recommends keeping social spending levels steady, because "otherwise poverty will grow substantially once again, and in five or 10 years, social problems will become acute, and governance will be affected." The first line of defence against a crisis like the current one, which originated in the United States, is often communities themselves, because of their potential to organise people and come up with creative solutions, no matter how isolated and plagued with problems they are.

As ECLAC Commission Secretary Laura López said, economists must not forget that solutions to problems can come from communities themselves. And that is the point of the Experiences in Social Innovation contest that the U.N. regional agency and the U.S.-based W. K. Kellogg Foundation have held every year since 2004.

The response has been fruitful for the 12 finalists of the 2007-2008 edition, as well as for the steady flow of visitors Wednesday through Friday to the installations set up in the central square of the University of Antioquia, which was selected to host the fair. The finalists chosen from 874 applicants are 12 projects from eight countries in Latin America and the Caribbean: Argentina, Belize, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador and St. Lucia.

The initiatives come from a wide variety of communities, including a slum neighbourhood in Chile, the Cuban countryside, and indigenous communities in Colombia and Ecuador. They represent innovative ways of improving education, health, environmental conservation, nutrition, income-generating capacity and gender equity, and include youth and social responsibility programmes.

According to ECLAC, "All of these initiatives have contributed effectively to the social development of communities and to reducing poverty and exclusion. They all have in common their creativity, active citizen participation and reasonable costs." The five prize-winners will receive, in descending order, 30,000, 20,000, 15,000, 10,000 and 5,000 dollars from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, as well as technical and institutional support from ECLAC, which will monitor the projects and provide backing in their relations with governments and public bodies.

"The important thing here is not the funds, which of course are a help, but the backing

received and the credibility gained from a positive evaluation by the regional U.N. agency," one of the heads of the "A Roof for Chile" project, which works in a slum neighbourhood in Santiago, told IPS. "We are seeking a sponsor who will understand how professional we are, in order to combat erroneous beliefs that those who work with the poor are allowed to build mediocre housing," he said.

That is what the applicants are seeking: visibility, to show that solutions to problems, no matter how serious, are more sustainable and substantial if they arise from and include the communities themselves.

The finalists say their projects are sustainable, despite the crisis. Cuban Professor Nelson Valdez is a delegate, along with farmer Agustín Pimentel, of a project that contributes to ecological balance on small farms in the Cuban province of Pinar del Río. "We are carrying out a number of ecological and productive measures to restore production levels in degraded ecosystems, and to recover biological, agricultural and forest biodiversity and improve the living standards of farmers," Valdez, an agricultural researcher, explained to IPS. The Cuban innovative community development experience "began over two years ago and has been replicated in other rural parts of the country, with very good involvement and guidance by the state.

"But we have practically funded the project out of our own pockets, those of the researchers and the farmers themselves," said Valdez, who added that the prize money, as well as the support from ECLAC, would be very welcome.

The idea of the participating university researchers is that the farmers will eventually run the project on their own.

Pimentel admitted that the project got off to a rocky start. He said it was originally conceived of for just 10 families, but today involves around 2,400. "At first, there was little comprehension of what the project was about, and it was hard going," said the farmer. "But now we are respected and accepted, as indicated by the fact that we are here with authorisation from the state."

All 12 finalists say they have already won, just by making it to Medellín, where they have been able to draw attention to their innovative social initiatives with active community involvement -- thus showing that communities from vastly distant and different places can come together to contribute solutions.

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Administrator Kemal Dervis said that UNDP is keenly interested in the outcomes of the proposed U.N. Conference on South-South Cooperation. "I believe this Conference will provide a platform for even greater discussions to set the agenda, forge stronger partnerships and adopt measures to harness a whole range of emerging

opportunities in the South to better address the development challenges of the South," he said. He added that UNDP is also committed to instituting the principles and modalities of South-South cooperation throughout its entire portfolio of global and country programmes. "Furthermore,

within the new fourth cooperation framework for South-South cooperation, we in UNDP and the Special Unit for South-South Cooperation are committed to delivering on the promise of sharing South-South solutions," Dervis said.

continued from page 1 South-South Development Expo...

The SS-HDSX project is being billed as a marketplace for cooperation projects between or among civil society organisations from developing countries seeking to promote human development and the U.N.'s Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

The SS-HDSX launch will showcase six innovative, market-based and policy-supported mechanisms that have contributed to inclusive development: South Africa's Global Social Investment Exchange (GSIX) and the South Africa Social Investment Exchange (SASIX); Brazil's Bolsa de Valores Sociais & Ambientais/Social and Environmental Stock Exchange (BOVESPA); the United States' eBay GivingWorks; India's GiveIndia; Shanghai United Assets and Equity Exchange (SUAEE); and the South-South Global Assets and Technology Exchange (SS-GATE).

These partners, together with the UN-NGO-IRENE Best Practices Network of the NGO Section of the U.N.'s Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), will bring together their respective strengths to launch the joint global SS-HDSX.

The establishment of the SS-HDSX is "walking the talk," Francisco Simplicio, project manager of the development exchange at the SU/SSC told IPS. "We are strengthening and capitalising on proven experiences, we are building on the successful experience of our partner SASIX."

The Stock Exchange will facilitate an online platform of resources by centralising South-South cooperation initiatives and social investors.

Through this platform, social investors will be able to identify and support projects that have been reviewed for credibility, risk and impact. This, in turn, will lead to increased governance standards, transparency and accountability among best practices.

The SS-HDSX is the second track of the South-South Global Assets and Technology Exchange (known as SS-GATE): an internet-based, transparent and market-operated transactional system.

The SS-GATE lists appropriate development solutions as socially investable propositions. The initial public offerings (to be known as

Development IPOs) need support by public and private entities, as well as civil society and ordinary citizens.

The Human Development Stock Exchange will utilize the projects available on the UN-NGO-IRENE Best Practices Network website as an entry point.

Meanwhile the UN-NGO-IRENE Best Practices Network is inviting NGOs for partnerships in SS-HDSX platform, including collaborative projects that will replicate activities -- or provide technical assistance to -- another country. As a result, NGOs will be cooperating with other NGOs benefiting from shared knowledge and experiences.

In its pilot stage, the SS-GATE Techtransfer Track has already helped conclude two South-South technology transfers.

One such tech-transfer resulted in increasing Gabon's production of building materials by 30 times, while reducing the cost of production by 50 percent. Another technology transfer in the same industry led to the creation of 8,000 new local jobs in Ethiopia.

continued from page 1 BIMSTEC is the Bridge...

By combined efforts, the BIMSTEC member states want to tackle current transnational challenges.

One of BIMSTEC's goals is to combine Thailand's "Look West" policy with the "Look East" policy of India and South Asia. The thirteen priority sectors of cooperation agreed on are Trade & Investment, Technology, Energy, Transport & Communication, Tourism, Fisheries, Agriculture, Cultural Cooperation, Environment and Disaster Management, Public Health, People-to-People Contract, Poverty Alleviation and Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crimes.

A BIMSTEC Convention on Combating International Terrorism, Transnational Organised Crime and Illicit Drug Trafficking has already been finalised and is ready to be signed.

The seven countries also pledged further investment in their infrastructure -- in particular transportation and communication linkages.

A proposed free trade area between BIMSTEC states -- on which negotiations are soon to be concluded -- is expected to boost economic growth in the whole region.

Indian's Prime Minister said that BIMSTEC "[needs] to coordinate on issues of maritime transport such as construction of a deep-water port to service the region, inter-modal connectivity, cooperation among our port authorities and our shipping and logistics networks." Rail, road and air linkages between the countries were also to be improved.

Next year's meeting of BIMSTEC will concentrate on poverty alleviation. Nepal's Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal Prachanda -- whose country will be the host of next year's meeting -- commented the eradication of poverty, the major challenge for the region: "The rising food prices have further compounded the problem... It is imperative to take initiatives at all levels to withstand crises through mutually-beneficial project-based cooperation and other collaboration at the national, regional as well as inter-regional levels."

To further coordinate the collaboration, a BIMSTEC Poverty Alleviation Centre is going to be established in Bangladesh.

In order to address food shortages and skyrocketing food prices, the BIMSTEC member states discussed the creation of a common food

bank as it was proposed by Bangladesh's Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed.

The political leaders decided to initiate short- and long-term joint research programmes to increase productivity and yields in the region. Joint marketing campaigns and special packages are aimed at increasing the number of tourists coming to the region as well.

Bangladesh's Chief Adviser also suggested that, "climate change be included as a priority area of the BIMSTEC." He stressed that his country was especially threatened by rising sea levels. A sea level rise of one meter would inundate one-fifth of Bangladesh.

Prime Minister Singh offered to share information and data from India's Tsunami Early Warning Centre. India is also hosting the BIMSTEC Energy Centre and the BIMSTEC Weather and Climate Centre.

In his concluding statement, India's Prime Minister said that "the Summit has given a strong political impetus to the strengthening of our cooperation in the identified thirteen areas. We have agreed to direct our officials to focus on concrete outcomes and implementation of decisions that have been reached."

Still Time to Save the Patagonian Sea

By Marcela Valente

BUENOS AIRES (IPS)

It is not too late to save the area of the South Atlantic known as the Patagonian Sea, one of the richest marine ecosystems in the southern hemisphere, says the report of an international alliance of environmental groups.

After four years of work involving more than 80 experts, the Forum for the Conservation of the Patagonian Sea and Areas of Influence is releasing its report assessing the state of conservation of the area.

"Today we are still in time to maintain the ecological integrity and productive potential of this vast ecosystem," concludes the extensive report, of which a 300-page executive summary under the title "Review of the Status of Conservation of the Patagonian Sea and its Areas of Influence" is being published this month.

The Patagonian Sea is a three million square kilometre southwestern stretch of the Atlantic Ocean, running from southern Brazil to Uruguay, Argentina's southernmost province of Tierra del Fuego, and west around Cape Horn, along the Chilean fjords.

The Forum is an alliance of South American and international environmental groups formed in 2004 to advocate for the preservation of a region rich in biodiversity, which has a huge environmental significance for humanity.

The Argentine members of the alliance include Fundación Patagonia Natural (the Natural Patagonia Foundation) and Fundación Vida Silvestre (the Wildlife Foundation), and the international members include the Wildlife Conservation Society, Conservation International, and the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF).

Publication of the ambitious research project was made possible by funding from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

Forum coordinator Claudio Campagna told IPS that one of the goals of the Review was to "gather together the fragmented and partial knowledge that exists on the area."

"If it's true that change is built on information, we are at the most promising stage in terms of finding solutions to the problems affecting this ecosystem," he said.

Campagna, a marine mammal expert, explained that, in contrast to what occurs in other seas, "not a single species has been endangered to the point of extinction" in the

Patagonian Sea. "We are heading towards the collapse of certain populations, and others are dropping considerably in numbers, but no species has gone extinct," he underlined.

The report warns that illegal and non-sustainable fishing, the incidental catching of sea birds, mammals and turtles, the introduction of species for aquaculture purposes, and the discharge of untreated sewage are some of the "serious problems that are threatening the abundance of species and the economic potential" of this vast expanse of saltwater.

"At least 20 coastal cities in Uruguay and Argentina discharge their untreated sewage into the aquatic environment," says the report. This phenomenon is felt most acutely in the waters surrounding the metropolitan areas of Buenos Aires and Montevideo, but it also affects other seaside cities.

The Patagonian Sea is one of the most productive marine regions in the southern hemisphere. There, for example, phytoplankton -- the microscopic floating plants that are at the base of the food chain in water ecosystems -- is found in concentrations that are on average three times greater than that of any other ocean. The Sea absorbs enormous amounts of carbon dioxide and contributes to mitigating global warming.

Moreover, according to the study, this habitat provides a haven for 700 species of vertebrates, including animals such as dolphins, penguins, South American sea lions and whales, which attract great global attention and help draw support for conservation programmes.

Of the world's 129 marine mammal species, 47 can be found in the Patagonian Sea, and a total of 83 species of marine and coastal birds live in the area, along with five of the seven known sea turtle species.

As for invertebrates, there are 900 species of molluscs alone, some of which are only found in the Patagonian Sea.

In addition to the many species that are commercially important -- such as squid, common hake, croaker and shrimp --, the ecosystem's global significance resides in the fact that it provides a feeding ground for migratory birds, fish, turtles and sea mammals that travel to the area from distant regions, the Review points out.

Every year, millions of Magellanic penguins gather to breed in coastal and island nesting colonies.

And during breeding season, the Southern Right Whale draws large numbers of whale watchers to the coast of Argentina.

In spite of the wealth of natural resources, only 0.5 percent of the area is protected, through some one hundred coastal preservation areas, which are not connected and thus lack the necessary integration to face the challenges posed by a dynamic system. What is worse is that these areas are characterised "by relatively ineffective management," the study underlines.

"The international goal is to have 10 percent of the world's oceans under some form of protection by 2012," Campagna said. But for the Patagonian Sea, that target seems far away.

Nonetheless, the Forum "does not share the simplistic view that the solution to the Patagonian Sea's conservation problems lies solely in the establishment of protected areas where all forms of economic activities are banned," he said.

"The Forum has detected some areas where greater protection would be justified. But it deems that it is possible to achieve a form of ecosystem management that will promote economic activities without affecting biodiversity or the natural course of ecological processes," he added.

As an industry, "fishing in Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay has relatively low importance in the context of each state," the study's authors observe. In Brazil's case it amounts to only 0.8 percent of the country's total production of goods, while in Argentina it drops to 0.3 percent, and in Uruguay to 0.1 percent. This means that there is great potential for development.

The researchers suggest that an "integrated model" is needed to assess the value of sea products and services and to preserve some 65 endangered species, including sea turtles and an increasing number of sharks and rays, in addition to sea birds and mammals that are at risk.

The Review notes that the problems "are not caused by a lack of legislation but by faults in the application and enforcement of the existing legal framework," and that some conservation instruments that could contribute to the sustainable use of resources "are employed, but only timidly."

"Planet Earth is a great ocean dotted with a few huge 'islands' called continents," the study concludes, in an effort to highlight the wealth that must be preserved.

Oceans and seas occupy 70 percent of the planet's surface, and 80 percent of the southern hemisphere, but only few seem to be aware of the magnitude of the wealth held in these waters.