



# NGO REPORTER

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By NGOs For NGOs

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## Editor's Desk

The sleep of reason begets monsters, said Goya. These monsters are galloping now in newspaper headlines in every part of the world. Often corrupt or ineffective leaders sleep and impose their nightmares on those they govern. Nations move toward war and rebellions sweep away the humanity of the powerless, whose ineffective protests go unheard.

Sometimes the sleep of reason comes from the very weaknesses of those oppressed, who try to impose logic on the irrational, inventing evidence to help explain lives that have spun out of their control. When reason is suspended the vampires move in. In Malawi, rural farm workers are convinced that they are being attacked and bled. Two men suspected of being human vampires have been beaten to death. Strangers are suspect; three visiting Catholic priests were attacked and nearly lynched. An encampment for foreign aid workers was destroyed because it was suspected that the group was harboring vampires. Peasants suspect that the government is behind it all, attacking with syringes at night, taking their blood to sell in exchange for foreign aid. The governor of Blantyre was attacked and stoned by an angry crowd. Trying to stop the rumors, the government arrested a reporter who was interviewing a man who claimed to have been attacked. The reporter was imprisoned briefly, and later released. The vampires are still at large.

In Nigeria, where the country's constitution protects human rights, the laws allow states a lot of leeway. A woman who has slipped between the cracks is now under sentence of death by stoning, having offended the Shariah laws against adultery. She will be buried up to her waist and then stoned to death for having had a baby out of wedlock – even though she was not married, even though the man who

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## Pollutants in the Food Chain

A symposium in Yokohama, Japan in November of 2002 brought together scientists and policymakers from all over the world to discuss the effects of substances introduced into the environment by farming, manufacturing, and sewage treatment. These have a demonstrable effect on the endocrine (regulatory glandular) systems of the bodies of fish, reptiles, birds, and mammals. Among the topics were the actions of these substances and their combinations at a molecular level, present means of detecting such substances, and improvements which would be needed to make simple, inexpensive detection methods available to all countries. Importance was given to the applicability of studies of toxicity in fish and rodents to risks for humans exposed to the same chemicals.

The mechanism of action of pollutants which impact species is usually by imitation of a natural chemical that fits into an important molecule, such as an estrogen, androgen, vitamin D, lipid or cortisol receptor or a protein which directs the creation of new DNA, sometimes causing such dramatic effects as sex changes, bony deformities, and decreased fertility in affected species. This is not the only mechanism of action, however, as all living creatures also possess "clean-up" proteins designed to metabolize foreign substances (a process which itself can lead to damage to the organism) and many of these substances are readily stored in fat and poorly excreted, thereby subjecting the organism to years of exposure.

The most significant aspect of the conference was the general consensus that little solid evidence has yet emerged to clearly implicate most pollutants as having direct toxicity in human beings, except for

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### ***What in the World?***

In China, farmers have discovered a way to increase yields and save water while greatly reducing the amount of methane that is released in rice cultivation. Methane traps the sun's heat at 21 times the rate of carbon dioxide, which is usually considered the villain in greenhouse gases. Draining the rice fields instead of leaving them flooded reduces the activity of the soil bacteria that release methane and has lowered the rate of emission by 40 %.

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## Pollutants

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lead poisoning and the possible thyroid effects of PCBs. Research has already pointed to such effects as development of masculine traits by female fish (androgenization) after exposure to paper mill effluent, and the feminization of fish, frogs, molluscs and birds after exposure to organochlorides, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), alkylphenols and bisphenol A, but no comparably clear-cut effect has been documented in humans. There was a dearth of studies on brain chemistry in humans at the conference. It was pointed out that little is known about the impact of *mixtures* of chemicals, which are more likely to exist in the environment. Much more work remains to

be done before there can be any positive conclusions on the effect of pollutants on humans.

There was much discussion about the criteria the world's nations should use for protection from possible hazards, given the lack of clear evidence for effects of exposure in humans. Some advocated the precautionary principle, using animal and fish effects as though they were "canaries in the coal mine"; others advocated a more evidence-based approach, requiring proof of effect prior to protective legislation. Since people are poor subjects for study because they are so mobile, so varied in their diets, habits, and exposures to toxins, and since science is funded by political agen-

cies that must also support industry, it seems unlikely that much change in policy will be effected any time soon.

The symposium was hosted by two international organizations, SCOPE (*Scientific Committee on Problems of the Environment*) of ICSU, the International Council for Science) and IUPAC (*International Union of Pure and Applied Chemistry*), representing forty nations and twenty-two unions. The Japanese Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry and the Japanese Chemicals Evaluation and Research Institute co-sponsored the meeting.

— Dr. Kathleen Padilla Orsak

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## Editor's Desk

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was her partner will get off scot-free because he denied paternity. In order for a man to be held responsible, four men must actually witness the fornication. An appeal to the courts has been denied and the sentence of stoning will be carried out next year, when the baby girl has been weaned. The last woman sentenced for adultery was saved by an intervention by the government, which seems reluctant to interfere again. Only public pressure on the Nigerian government can possibly save her.

In India, which accounts for four out of ten cases of polio, a drive to eradicate the disease was making spectacular headway when reason slept. In 2001, immunization had brought the number of new cases down to only 239. Last year, it zoomed to 1,509 – largely as a result of poor women in Uttar Pradesh who responded to a rumor that the polio drops would make their children sterile. Children, denied the vaccine, are once again getting the dread disease and infecting others.

If the forces of reason are to prevail, the sleepers must be aroused. NGOs have always been the gad-

flies to prick public conscience into wakefulness. In major cities, people protest against the possibility of war. In Romania, a plan to build a theme park to Dracula is being fought by conservationists who are trying to protect the town where the real monster, Vlad the Impaler, lived. It is a World Heritage Site. Promoters hope to attract tourism, but saner heads are suggesting they move the titillation elsewhere, where they will not trivialize history. Perhaps the fearful people of Malawi will put a stake through the hearts of their Draculas as well. In India, NGOs are working to eradicate polio and trying to rout the rumors that hold back a cure. Human rights groups and women's groups are besieging their own governments to put pressure on Nigeria and trying to bring the force of public condemnation to bear on the injustice against women. But NGOs, too, must combat the impulse to doze. We must not use real weapons against imaginary monsters, while countering real monsters with imaginary resources.

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## What They Are Doing

An exciting find in Timbuctu recently uncovered thousands of manuscripts dating from the 13th and 14<sup>th</sup> century. It had previously been thought that Black Africa had no written tradition, and that knowledge was transmitted only through speech, song, and dance. The manuscripts were found moldering in chests that had been handed down through the generations by about fifteen families in Mali. There is now a race to protect the documents, many of which are Koranic and deal with conflict resolution. Several governments, notably Canada, are opening schools to revive the techniques of copying ancient manuscripts. UNESCO and others are raising money to build a new library in Timbuctu. They are trying to preserve the work before it falls to dust by saving it on microfiche. NGOs involved are the *Timbuctu Heritage Institute*, and the *W.E.B. Dubois Foundation*. Contact: Timbuctu Heritage Foundation: Issa Mohamed, [issatimbuctu@hotmail.com](mailto:issatimbuctu@hotmail.com) or Larry Childs, [lchilds@cs.org](mailto:lchilds@cs.org), or Aboubacrene Ag Mohammed, c/o ONG - Tilwat, Bamako, Mali.

# The Aftermath of War

In Sierra Leone, a small, resource-rich West African country, the post war scenes are vivid. Amputees wrestle for food and justice in the tangle of reconstruction; hundreds of SUV's bearing international NGO and UN logos line the streets of Freetown, while on the sidelines, thousands await hope in a cup of rice or a bite of fish. On any given day, hundreds of women entrepreneurs sell their wares in the capital and numerous ex-combatants hang around on corners, smoke cigarettes and hope for a job someday. Local NGO activity is prominent; on side streets and main streets, banners proclaim their missions, from sustainable development to economic empowerment initiatives to just about anything that encourages peace and prosperity, hope and healing.

The human rights NGO's are numerous. During the war, they monitored and reported the thou-

sands of abuses and depended on small media to get their messages out. Now, as UNAMSL is cutting back on peacekeepers, the Special Court and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission are poised to start the hard work of prosecuting perpetrators and healing this ravaged country. Local NGO's are finding a new voice, and refocusing and revitalizing their mission to prepare for a country without war. While international NGO's and aid agencies flocked to this country in a time of donor and external need, soon it will be the local NGO's who will be the visionaries of Sierra Leone. Many international organizations are joining hands with local organizations, offering help and expertise until the indigenous organizations get off the ground.

In one such pairing, PDHRE, the *Peoples Movement for Human Rights Education*, will partner with

a local human rights organization, CAVE, the *Campaign Against Violent Events* (founded in 1994 by George Buannie) to support the development of a sustainable human rights education program that will be initiated within the country. CAVE believes that human rights violations must be prevented, and not merely monitored. The program will teach the principles of human rights to accommodate the needs and aspirations of communities, cultures, and regions while promoting a culture that is rooted in solidarity and equitable justice. Holistic human rights education is relevant to people's daily lives and is the key to avoiding future conflict. It is a powerful tool for social and economic transformation and political accountability. It will be the people of Sierra Leone who will implement the program and the people themselves who must be the peacekeepers for the future.

— Charmaine Crockett

*What They Are Doing (cont.)*

Seven international NGOs have formed a coalition, the *Conflict Transformation Working Group*, to facilitate interaction between the UN and its civil society partners in peace-building efforts, so that NGOs are fully utilized, from prevention to the resolution of disputes. Locally based groups in conflict situations are usually more trusted than outsiders trying to impose alien solutions. International NGOs with a local presence can contribute technical support without seeming to be athreat. They have arranged for the release of child soldiers and have met with rebel groups that refused to confer with government officials. They have assisted the UN in the process of identifying liaison groups in besieged countries. In a report to the United Nations, "Building Peace from the Ground Up," the coalition has issued a call for stronger collaboration with the UN, and has provided a blueprint for partnership. The groups are *Fellowship of Reconciliation*, *Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns*, *Mennonite Central*

*Committee*, *Quaker UN Office*, *Saferworld*, *World Conference on Religion and Peace*, and *World Vision International*.

Disasters like the one in Bhopal, India, where thousands of people were killed resulted in laws passed in the US that require companies to disclose chemical emissions. The law does not cover other kinds of dangerous pollutants or practices however, and obtains only within the United States. Now a coalition of NGOs and labor organizations are pushing for an international right to know that would require companies to disclose possible contaminants or hazards that might result from their operations in any part of the world. In the coalition are *Oxfam*, *Amnesty International*, and the *Sierra Club*. Transparency would hold companies to ethical standards. No large company would be able to do business carelessly and with impunity simply because it was beyond the reach

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# NGOs: Getting the Message Across

In today's age of technology, information should be recent, easily available and not cumbersome to decipher. The NGO/DPI Communications Workshop Committee workshop, *Affordable Communications Technologies: NGOs Connect*, introduced innovative means of communicating. It focused on high-tech, low cost, and easy-to-use technology that is readily available to NGOs and their constituents.

*Webcasting* is used to telecast a meeting or a conference from one geographic area to another. One needs only an Internet connection and the facilities to project the image to the designated audience. During key conferences that are generally closed to the public, viewers can follow the proceedings clearly. This option can be utilized in most countries around the world.

*Video conferencing* is another popular technique widely used at the United Nations. It is fully interactive and very simple to put into operation. It has a high level of stability, reliability and security. Video conferencing is generally used to interact with departments that are situated away from headquarters.

*Teleconferences* are the most popular communication devices and have been around the longest. The key benefit to teleconferencing is that it allows for a large group to participate in a conference simultaneously. It is the cheapest available mode. With telephone lines set up in even the most remote part of the world, all it takes is for the local telephone provider to establish conferencing capabilities. Benefits include reduced travel costs, timely information distribution and cost effectiveness. Most teleconferences can be recorded and distributed to participants.

*Listserve*s allow NGOs to communicate with a target audience. E-mail lists can be used for announcements, for moderated or open discussions, or to facilitate ongoing planning. They can be in different languages and are eas-

ily stored.

*CD-ROMs* can be used as a learning tool. One has been used effectively to instruct rural women farmers in Africa. A CD ROM was produced in the native language and included topics like generating income through self-sustainable employment and better utilization of existing resources. The project goals were to develop a package of learning materials for rural women farmers and entrepreneurs.

*Information Hubs* are also known as a directory. An information hub is a one-stop shop for information.

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## What in the World

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If you are thinking about traveling and don't want to be stopped and double-checked at the airport, don't carry cheese or chocolate aboard. They have the same density as explosives and will be picked up by some security equipment.

In a report on the Gypsies, or Roma, UNDP expresses fears that the group may become a permanent underclass unless their poverty is addressed before Eastern European countries join the European Union. Many of the Gypsies in former Communist countries are living in conditions resembling those of the poorest in sub-Saharan Africa. One in six is starving. Twenty percent of the children are too poor to go to school. Delay in dealing with their problems will mean that their marginalization will be harder to deal with later, and may unleash racist and xenophobic reactions in the wealthy European Union countries.

Hope for an AIDS vaccine has come from an unlikely source: the sex workers in Kenya, a country where one out of every six adults is infected with HIV. After engaging in unprotected sex with hundreds of men over the course of years, and having seen many of their clients

Hubs can be used to help NGOs obtain information or provide an added value to audiences. Most current websites of nonprofit organizations are online brochures, rather than hubs.

The digital age has finally caught up with the NGO sector. This workshop highlighted several easy practical applications that are in use, and encouraged NGOs to utilize available resources to better reach their target communities.

—Karen P. deAndrade  
and Lester Wilson

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die of AIDS, the "prostitutes of Nairobi" have not contracted the disease. About 90% of sex workers die of it, but these women have been spared. Scientists are trying to discover how they developed their immunity. They are the subject of intense evaluation by the scientific community. Perhaps the genetic structure of the cells of the Nairobi women will result in a breakthrough.

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## What They Are Doing

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of local law. Full disclosure would allow informed choices to be made by the localities involved, and the public could choose not to patronize offenders.

FINCA, the *Foundation for International Community Assistance*, makes small loans to 200,000 poor people every year to help fund small-businesses in developing countries. This micro finance initiative allocates money directly to the recipients, ninety percent of whom are women. Governments are bypassed. They currently lend from a portfolio of about \$30 million, dispersing their money three times a year. About 97 percent of the recipients pay back their loans.