

Progress against hunger, poverty hinges on empowering indigenous women – UN agriculture chief

15 January 2018 – Empowering indigenous women – who have higher malnutrition rates than any other social group and typically earn far less than men – is key to successfully fighting hunger and extreme poverty, the United Nations agriculture chief has said.

“Indigenous women [face a triple discrimination](#) – poverty, gender and ethnicity, both within and outside their communities – making them highly vulnerable,” Jose Graziano da Silva Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) told the Forum on Indigenous Women in Mexico City this past Friday.

They confront far higher rates of poverty, chronic malnutrition and illiteracy while having the least access to health care and political life, he said to the participants from a dozen countries.

About five per cent of the global population and 15 per cent of the world’s poorest, or some 370 million people, self-identify as indigenous. In Latin America and the Caribbean region, 15 per cent of the approximately 45 million indigenous peoples face insecurity and extreme poverty.

Indigenous women in the region encounter higher poverty and malnutrition rates than any other social group, and typically earn four times less than men, according to FAO’s new [Regional Atlas of Rural Women](#).

The situation is even worse for women in the more than 5,000 indigenous groups, spread across over 90 countries around the world.

“Their social and economic empowerment is not only an excellent way to support them, but a necessary condition to eradicate hunger and malnutrition in their communities,” underscored Mr. da Silva.

He noted that the UN’s decision to begin a Family Farming Decade in 2019 offers a platform to focus on rural livelihoods – where most indigenous peoples work.

The FAO-organized three-day forum aims to develop public policy recommendations to empower indigenous women, strengthen their decision-making and recognize their rights.

Cultivating leadership

Although indigenous women are key actors in protecting biodiversity, adapting to climate change and varying nutritious diets, they are often forgotten in development plans.

“They have fundamental roles in the spiritual, social and family arenas and are seed guardians – critical carriers of specialized knowledge,” underscored Mr. da Silva.

“With political will, we can put an end to discrimination against indigenous women,” he affirmed.

[In strife-torn Afghanistan, people need support ‘more than ever’ says senior UN aid official](#)

15 January 2018 – Amid continuing violence in Afghanistan, the United Nations and the humanitarian community has appealed for \$430 million to provide assistance to some 2.8 million people across the country who have been affected by conflict and natural disasters as well as families returning home after years in Iran and Pakistan.

“In many parts of Afghanistan, violence continues unabated and people need support more than ever,” [said](#) Toby Lanzer, the UN Humanitarian Coordinator in Afghanistan, underlining the needs in the country.

“Today I call on international donors to stand by 2.8 million people whose lives have been ruined by conflict or natural disaster, and to help people returning to Afghanistan from neighbouring countries.”

According to a [news release](#) issued by the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the plan includes activities of more than 150 national and international humanitarian organizations as well as the UN to deliver assistance to families and communities in need.

There are however, substantial challenges, including difficult access conditions as well as increasing violence against aid workers. Last year, armed clashes were the highest in a decade and civilian casualties remained near record levels.

In addition to more than two million people directly affected by the conflict including almost half a million displaced, 2017 also saw about 500,000 Afghans returning to their homes after seeking refuge in Iran, Pakistan or other countries.

The [2018 Humanitarian Response Plan](#) focuses only on providing life-saving emergency assistance such as food and shelter, medical treatment and nutrition interventions for malnourished child to people caught up in current or very recent disasters.

Besides the 2.8 million people the plan is designed for, another 8.7 million people are estimated to live with high level of needs as a result of long-standing and unresolved issues such as lack of jobs and livelihoods, long-term displacement, an underfunded healthcare system or the effects of climate change.

Humanitarian emergency assistance cannot provide a solution for such chronic needs, like land for housing or jobs and vocational training to lift them out of poverty and fragility," read the news release, underlining the need to improve the underlying conditions.

[In Colombia, UN chief meets with ex-combatants, expressing hope for future and peace process](#)

14 January 2018 – On the second day of an official visit to Colombia, United Nations [Secretary-General](#) António Guterres on Sunday expressed hopes for the future and for the peace process in Colombia.

"I am extremely happy to see the enthusiasm and commitment of the authorities, of the communities, and of the ex-combatants to the process of peace building in Colombia," Mr. Guterres said in a statement to the press from Mesetas, Meta, where he visited a territorial area for the training and reintegration of former Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) combatants.

"I had the opportunity to visit a FARC camp and to see the ex-combatants build their future and develop new activities with great enthusiasm," he said.

The communities also believe that it is possible for this region to achieve not only peace, but also prosperity and good living conditions for all its inhabitants, and that the Colombian Government will play a key role in providing the security, administration, healthcare system and infrastructures they need, and in helping the local farmers get better access to the market, he added.

"What we see here is an extraordinary transformation, and it gives me great hope for the future and for the peace process in Colombia," he stressed, reaffirming the UN's full support and solidarity with the Colombian people in this historic moment of their lives.

A bloody start to 2018 in Syria; Over 30 children killed in two weeks – UNICEF

14 January 2018 – Only in the first 14 days of the year, more than 30 children have been killed in escalating violence in Syria's East Ghouta, where an estimated 200,000 children have been trapped under siege since 2013, the top United Nations Children's Fund ([UNICEF](#)) official in the Middle Eastern country said Sunday.

“At a time when most parents are filled with the New Year's hope for their children's future, mothers and fathers in Syria are left grieving for the children they have lost,” said Fran Equiza, UNICEF Representative in Syria in a statement.

“It is shameful that nearly seven years into the conflict, a war on children continues while the world watches. Millions of children across Syria and in neighbouring countries have suffered the devastating consequences of unabating levels of violence in several parts of the country,” he added.

UNICEF received information from inside East Ghouta that people are taking shelter underground in fear for their lives.

Two medical facilities came under attack in the past days in East Ghouta, and most health centres had to close because of the violence. Schools have been reportedly closed in and around East Ghouta at a time when children elsewhere in Syria are sitting for their mid-term exams.

“While we saw a small glimmer of hope at the end of last year with the evacuation of 17 children in urgent need of medical attention, increased violence in and around east Ghouta turned hope into despair for the remaining 120 children who continue to suffer in silence waiting for urgent medical evacuation,” Mr. Equiza said.

In Idlib, to the northwest of the country, heavy violence reportedly killed and injured scores of children and women and displaced an estimated 100,000 civilians in the past few weeks. The maternity and paediatric hospital in Ma'arrat An Nu'man was attacked three times taking it out of service and killing at least one patient and two medical staff.

“We must be able to reach children in need of humanitarian assistance, urgently and without restrictions, wherever they are in Syria. The various parties to the conflict can make that happen by immediately allowing humanitarian workers to reach them with life-saving assistance,” he said.

[Bangladesh: UN agencies working to vaccinate half a million children against diphtheria](#)

14 January 2018 – As part of an intensified response to the current diphtheria outbreak, United Nations agencies are working to vaccinate more than 475,000 children in Rohingya refugee camps, temporary settlements and surrounding areas in Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar.

All efforts are being made to stop [further spread of diphtheria](#). The vaccination of children in the Rohingya camps and nearby areas demonstrates the health sector's commitment to protecting people, particularly children, against deadly diseases, said Bardan Jung Rana, UN Representative to Bangladesh of the World Health Organization ([WHO](#)).

UN estimates show that some 655,000 people have fled Myanmar to Bangladesh since August 2017.

Diphtheria is an infectious disease caused by a bacterium which primarily infects the throat and upper airways, and produces a toxin affecting other organs. The diphtheria toxin causes a membrane of dead tissue to build up over the throat and tonsils, making breathing and swallowing difficult. The disease is spread through direct physical contact or from breathing in the aerosolized secretions from coughs or sneezes of infected individuals.

Between 8 November 2017 and 11 January 2018, as many as 31 deaths and 3,954 suspected cases of diphtheria have been reported from Cox's Bazar. Nearly 10,594 contacts of these suspected cases have been put on diphtheria preventive medication.

WHO, the UN Children's Fund ([UNICEF](#)) and other health partners are working with the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare to establish fixed locations for immunization in the Rohingya camps to continue to provide life-saving vaccines to children, in line with Bangladesh's childhood immunization programme.

Nearly 150,000 children aged six weeks to seven years received pentavalent vaccine (that protects against diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis, haemophilus influenza type b and hepatitis B), and nearly 166,000 children aged 7 to 17 years were given tetanus and diphtheria (Td) vaccine, during a three-week vaccination campaign that ended on 31 December.

Two more rounds of vaccination with a diphtheria-containing vaccine, at intervals of one month, are planned to fully protect the children in camps and surrounding areas.

Children are particularly vulnerable to diphtheria. Volunteers are making door-to-door visits in the Rohingya settlements to ensure all children receive vaccination,” said the UNICEF Country Representative Edouard Beigbeder.

The massive influx within a very short time has heavily affected basic services in the settlement areas. They have no choice but to live in a very congested environment, which is impacting their health and quality of life,” he added.

To limit the spread of diphtheria to communities living near the Rohingya camps and settlements, nearly 160,000 children in 499 schools of Teknaf and Ukhiya sub-districts are also being vaccinated.

This initiative began on 1 January. Vaccination was initiated on a day when children attend school in large numbers to avail themselves of free books provided by the government at the start of the academic year.

WHO has released \$1.5 million from its Contingency Fund for Emergencies to scale up the response to diphtheria among the Rohingya population in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, over the next six months.

The funds are being used to support immunization; provide essential medicines and supplies; improve capacities for laboratory testing, case management and contract tracing; and engage with communities.