Scholar**Forum**

Reflections from Africa

Essays and creative works by Open Society
Scholarship Programs' grantees and alumni

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WELCOME

Dear Readers,

The 19th edition of *ScholarForum* comes with a fresh look. To mark this change in format, we invited past and current Scholarship Programs participants to analyze issues of concern in their regions and assess how much has changed and how much has remained the same.

Starting in 2011, Scholarship Programs offered masters degrees to individuals committed to positive social change in Africa, and, from 2014, support for academic mobility for African doctoral students and faculty members. This new group of alumni are committed and concerned civil society actors, and *ScholarForum* asked them to submit articles and thought pieces on their countries. The articles included in this edition cover a range of issues, from the use of folk media in Ethiopia to how people with disabilities in Zambia can have a greater influence on the laws that directly affect them.

This edition also features the voices of two previous scholarship recipients who have contributed to earlier editions of *ScholarForum*. These scholars will provide updates on education in Myanmar and projects in Egypt that are changing entrenched norms around women's rights.

We conclude this edition of *ScholarForum* with a question-and-answer article by Scholarship Programs alumni describing social work projects for marginalized populations in Central Asia, and offering advice to current Scholarship Programs participants.

We invite you to write to the editorial team (scholarforum@opensocietyfoundations.org) with any comments or requests for additional reference sources and information about the articles featured in this edition.

Best wishes,

Open Society Scholarship Programs

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Scholar**Forum**

REFLECTIONS FROM AFRICA

Since 2011, Scholarship Programs have supported civil society leaders from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Sudan, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. In comparison to the programs' funding for scholars in other regions of the world, our number of supported grantees in Africa is relatively low, but the growing number of alumni are truly inspiring and active members of their societies. The articles below reflect these scholars' perspectives on pressing social issues ranging from natural resource management to disability rights in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Uganda, and Zambia.

Rethinking the Use of Folk Media for Food Security in Rural Ethiopia

Hagos Nigussie Kahssay, PhD, Ethiopia
Civil Society Scholar Awards 2014

This paper examines the role of folk media (cultural communication forms) for communication on issues of food security in Eastern Tigray, Ethiopia. Food insecurity is one of the defining features of rural poverty in most developing countries. In sub-Saharan Africa, food insecurity remains a chief development concern (Conceição et al., 2011). Ethiopia is also reported as being food insecure in feeding its own population. In the last three decades, the country has not been able to attain sufficient production to feed its growing population (Ejiga, 2006). Thus, poverty levels in Ethiopia remain high: the country was ranked 174th out of 187 countries in the United Nations' Human Development Index and many people remain dependent on some food aid (UNDP, 2011). Enduring poverty in rural areas of the country is evident.

A World Food Program report from 2009 shows that more than 58 percent of the total population of the Tigray region live in absolute poverty, which makes the region's situation more perilous, compared to the national average of 44.4 percent. The Ethiopian government has introduced various policies and strategies to alleviate food insecurity. In addition, the government has introduced the Public Safety Net and Food-For-Work programs as emergency relief and assistance to food insecure areas such as Eastern Tigray.

The Tigray region has always been close to the center of attention for donors and development partners. However, most of these groups focus on their ready-made proposals that rarely address the needs of people at the grassroots. Specifically, the communication approaches introduced to convey development initiatives are not contextualized to local thinking and often fail for these reasons. Highlighting practices in most development settings in Africa, Mushengyezi (2003) argues that "African governments and their development partners often tend to extrapolate communication models from the developed world and apply them wholesale in local environments in Africa." Therefore, development interventions still appear inadequate in connecting rural people to development projects such as food security programs. This highlights the need for a new development approach in which people become the main actors in their own development. This is what Kliksberg (1999) calls a new development debate: acknowledging the need for culture-based development. Culture-based development can be achieved through the "culture as a method" approach, which reflects the use of cultural expressions including "song, dance, poetry, idioms, and proverbs to enhance development efforts" (Njoh, 2006).

Musicians and dancers celebrate during an Orthodox Christian festival in Mek'ele, Ethiopia, on August 24, 2016. Photo credit: © Minasse Wondimu Hailu/Anadolu/Getty

More than 87 percent of the Ethiopian population lives in rural areas (Ethiopian Central Statistical Agency, 2007). Rural people mostly rely on folk media such as songs, proverbs, and spoken poetry to address their socio-cultural, religious, economic, and political needs. The convenience of folk media to rural people is that these communication forms are reflections of their culture and history that match the language and worldviews of the people. Communication through folk media employs idioms, signs, and symbols that are familiar with the culture and history of rural populations. They are part of the rural social environment and are credible sources of information for the local people (Hoivik and Lugar, 2009). Recent development concepts have focused on capacity building, grassroots participation, and empowerment and have led to the analysis of the advantages of folk media as vehicles for development purposes. This is because, as Bandarin et al. (2011) contend, "...good development practices corroborate the idea that the goals and agendas of modernization may be global, but the winning strategies and solutions tend to espouse the specificities of local cultures." Awa (2005) describes the need to rethink employing folk media for Africa's development and argues that "...the fact that in Africa development communication objectives are not met because of factors that are associated with excessive reliance on the modern media suggests a need to rethink the role of indigenous systems." Therefore, harnessing folk media for food security communication would not only help to educate people about the nature, relevance, and applicability of food security programs, but would also promote their participation in development processes.

Men transport water jugs in the city of Goma, Democratic Republic of the Congo, on June 10, 2019. Photo credit: © Alexis Huguet/AFP/Getty

Social and Environmental Injustices in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

Serge Kubanza, PhD, Democratic Republic of the Congo
Civil Society Scholar Awards 2015

Despite the civil war that has ravaged the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and claimed many lives, there has been a concerted effort by the government to include environmental issues and natural resource management in development and planning policies. However, Kihangi, (2012) is of the view that environmental provisions within national development policies have been incorporated with varying motivations and largely benefit certain powerful political and economic actors. A fundamental concern with regard to environmental management in the DRC revolves around the enforcement and implementation of environmental legislation. If this legislation is appropriately implemented, it can contribute to the development of the country and promote an environment in which the needs of all residents are met (Kihangi, 2012).

Social and environmental injustices in terms of local people's access to environmental resources have a long history in the DRC. These injustices are a common concern, particularly surrounding questions of resource access and the distribution and power relations in the decision-making processes. The lack of community participation in decision-making and development processes in the DRC has contributed significantly to civic disorder and conflict (Banégas et al., 2012).

The brutal exploitation of the country's resources at the expense of poor people started in the colonial period (since the rule of King Leopold II of Belgium in 1885) and has

continued since 1965 at the start of the post-independence period. The Pole Institute and International Alert (2014), for example, are of the view that if a greater proportion of the benefits from the exploitation of the DRC's natural resources are retained within the country, and if there was a more equitable distribution of these benefits to communities, there would be significant progress toward achieving peace and sustainable development in the country.

However, the absence of working institutions and frameworks through which the effective and equitable distribution of the country's wealth and resources could be managed, has in large part resulted in discontent in the general population. This, in turn, has given rise to public discussions in the form of parlement débout (i.e., stand-up parliaments on streets). Such gatherings have often generated social tensions and fuelled continued civil unrest (Banégas et al., 2012). Despite this, it is important to note that parlement débout discussions play a key role in transmitting information and rallying new recruits to join particular political parties, aimed at claiming certain entitlements and rights. Failure to obtain some of these entitlements has often resulted in violent episodes, and this is true in the case of resource management (Banégas et al., 2012).

Thus, the context of resource use and management in the DRC remains a source of conflict and attracts considerable attention in political debates. Kihangi (2012), for example, argues that the scarcity of renewable natural resources, such as clean water, inevitably leads to violence, not only in the DRC, but also in other countries of the Global South. The abundance of natural resources, for example, in the context of a country that lacks sound and effective legislative and governing structures, often tends to create enormous challenges in the country's wealth distribution (Krummenacher, 2008). This is more so in economies with centralized systems of governance such as in the DRC (Kubanza et al., 2017).

Kubanza et al (2017) have observed that a major feature of a centralized state such as the DRC is the preoccupation with bureaucracy and planning systems, which tend to emphasize the concentration of governance structures rather than adopting institutions and planning policies that emphasize the grassroots empowerment of the people. This situation has often meant that powerful individuals and elite groups have taken control of political and economic power. This has

encouraged a top-down approach to the management of public affairs even when decentralized structures exist. Administrative structures lack adequate resources and discretionary authority, and this state of affairs has hampered the efficient delivery and provision of socio-economic services. The alternative to centralizing the state, as was the case during the regime of the former president, Mobutu Sese Seko, is to move the power of control and to endow local populations with greater decision-making power. Such an approach would move the burden of resource management to local communities, which, in the context of the DRC as a whole, exhibit and expend tremendous energy and vitality in changing the course of their future.

"… the scarcity of renewable natural resources, such as clean water, inevitably leads to violence…"

Shifting the control of resource management to local people and communities would ensure that where national governments and local municipal authorities have failed to articulate new visions or provide necessary services, citizens' groups can organize and reorganize themselves to meet their basic needs and mobilize funds to build roads and clinics (Kihangi, 2012).

At a minimum, the governing bodies of natural resource management should make decision-making processes visible to stakeholders, justifying decisions with clear documentation and explanations, and making relevant information available. National- and state-level governing bodies can put structures and procedures in place that promote the transparency of communication. In turn, various stakeholders can work dynamically in an integrated manner to attain fairness through their effective collaboration and participation, recognizing that there may be compromises and trade-offs in place of consensus.

A mother sits with her children in an Internally Displaced Persons camp north of Goma in the Democratic Republic of the Congo on February 19, 2016. Photo credit: © Giles Clarke/Getty

Armed Conflict and the Situation of Single Mothers in the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo

Delu Lusambya, Democratic Republic of the Congo
Civil Society Leadership Awards 2014-2016; Civil Society Professionals Program 2016-2017

Throughout the world, and particularly in developing countries, women's rights are not fully respected. Women continue to experience numerous forms of violence, which often stifle their activity and creativity in contributing to a country's development.

Since 1996, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has faced internal violence and armed conflict. Congolese and foreign militias have acted with impunity and committed serious violations of women's rights. Young girls have been used by warring parties as transporters, cooks, sex slaves, and fighters. Those who have refused to respect these roles have been raped in public or sexually assaulted. Girls under the age of 10 and women aged 70 or older have been raped, sometimes in roads, in fields, or at home.

Although other forms of violence and abuse have been observed during armed conflicts in the DRC, sexual violence is used more often as a weapon of war. It has reached an unimaginable level. It is in this context that the country was

> ## *"The abandonment of these women and girls by their family members or spouses is the biggest cause of the 'single-mother phenomenon'"*

described as the "world capital of rapes" during the 2010 visit of Margot Wallström, the former UN Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict. As a result of this violence, many women have experienced unwanted pregnancies. Cases of sexually transmitted diseases have been reported, and many victims have attempted to commit suicide. The abandonment of these women and girls by their family members or spouses is the biggest cause of the "single-mother phenomenon" in these areas of the DRC.

The social integration of children born as the result of rape is a process marked by cruelty and exclusion. Most of these children are commonly referred to with derogatory nicknames. They are rejected by members of their families and sometimes by their own mothers. Most of them live with their grandparents. These children should enjoy the right to protection, which is given to all Congolese children, but even though the government has the obligation to protect and to support the development of every child, it does not fulfill this obligation. This is largely due to a lack of funds and a lack of willingness by leaders in the DRC.

Given the situation of single mothers, it is clear that survivors of sexual violence in the DRC need multiple forms of support. To help find a solution to this problem, together with three of my colleagues, we created an organization called Jeunes Méthodistes (Methodist Youth). Through this organization, we are implementing projects and programs aimed at helping female victims of violence and their children. Most of our projects focus on the economic empowerment of single

mothers, the right to education for women and children, and sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Although our work is not easy and there is a lack of funds, we are seeing positive results on the ground. In 2015, we started vocational trainings, provided internet connections for group work, and shared and published information related to violence against women. We were able to connect 78 young girls who have been victims of sexual violence with health providers in Eastern DRC. We also trained 16 single mothers in computer skills for their economic empowerment. Twelve of them are now employed in local nongovernmental organizations and cybercafés. In 2017, we implemented a project to provide 67 sex workers with skills and supplies to pursue work as dressmakers and agricultural entrepreneurs. Currently, many of these women are able to support their families through income generating alternatives to sex work.

A mother feeds her baby at a treatment center in Pointe Noire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, on January 11, 2007.
Photo credit: © Jean-Luc Lutssen/Gamma-Rapho/Getty

We plan to expand the vocational training for single mothers who are the heads of their households. These activities offer crucial opportunities for these women to become economically empowered and integrated into their communities. We hope to build a vocational center where we can provide annual trainings to more than 120 young girls who have experienced sexual violence and armed conflicts. We are currently looking for funding to make this center a reality.

These are small initiatives, but ones we hope can help those who continue to be affected by sexual violence and conflict.

Aware Yet Lost: Accessing the Benefits of the Sustainable Development Goals by People with Disabilities in Zambia

Thomas Mtonga, Zambia
Disability Rights Scholarship Program 2014

In the past 50 years, the international community and national civil society organizations have worked hard to change negative depictions of people with disabilities. According to the International Disability Alliance (2016), the collective and continuous efforts of different international organizations and the United Nations have resulted in the creation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

The acceptance of the convention by 151 out of 193 countries by 2016 meant that, in general, the standard of living for most people with disabilities would improve. While various stakeholders developed the convention, the world was also searching for solutions to end extreme poverty and hunger, and to improve education and the quality of life for people through the Millennium Development Goals (Kuleya, 2015). However, the goals had multiple shortfalls, including the fact that they did not directly refer to disability issues (Hambuba, 2017). As a result, many civil society organizations and the United Nations worked to develop the Sustainable Development Goals as a replacement for the Millennium Development Goals (Ban Ki-Moon, 2016). The Sustainable Development Goals were launched in 2016 and contain several clauses that directly refer to people with disabilities (United Nations, 2016). Ultimately, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities provides a platform for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals as a set of objectives that have a stronger focus on issues of concern for people with disabilities.

This paper argues that while more than 60 percent of Zambian people with disabilities who live in urban areas have received information on the content of the Sustainable Development Goals and the convention (ZAFOD and Leonard Cheshire Disability, 2017), this population cannot access and enjoy the benefits of the development goals on an equal basis with others. This comes down to two major factors: the unequal levels of education in comparison to the rest of the population, and the high levels of poverty among people with disabilities.

During the launch of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2016, countries that accepted and signed these sustainable goals were urged to incorporate the goals into national policy or legislation (Chacha 2016). In order to establish the development goals, countries party to the goals were expected to carry out extensive consultative and participatory meetings.

In 2017, I was a research consultant for Leonard Cheshire Disability, a British charity, in collaboration with ZAFOD, to conduct research on the knowledge levels of people with disabilities about the development goals and these people's involvement in the planning and implementation process of the domestication of the goals (ZAFOD and Leonard Cheshire Disability, 2017). Among the research participants, the majority of the respondents (66 percent) were people with disabilities who represented various disabled people's organizations. The remaining 34 percent were concerned disability stakeholders, including government representatives, civil society leaders, and international agencies based in Zambia.

Respondents were asked to explain how much they knew about the development goals and the Seventh National Development Plan, which domesticated the goals. The study revealed that 93 percent of people with disabilities were aware of the goals, and the majority of disabled respondents were able to articulate the issues addressed. Nevertheless, despite this great ability to understand and articulate the development goals, more than 63 percent were not aware of the national agenda to domesticate the goals. All expressed ignorance on the process of the domestication of the goals in Zambia.

In order to access appropriate facilities and services from the government, people need to understand the Seventh National Development Plan. For various reasons, it was

evident that people with disabilities did not participate in the adoption, adaptation, and implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals at the local level and, above all, though some people with disabilities seem to have knowledge of the national development plan, they did not pursue the government to meet their needs.

There is a huge gap between knowledge and process among people with disabilities that requires remedy. Knowledge is power and all people that possess "knowledge" about something have the power to determine their destiny. However, it is also clear that if one has knowledge about something but cannot use the knowledge to assist themselves, they are vulnerable (Vojozang, 2018). The knowledge possessed by people with disabilities in Zambia would have been more valuable if they were fully aware of both the Sustainable Development Goals at the international level and the Seventh National Development Plan at the local level. Instead, people with disabilities were at a loss: they were aware of the international provisions, yet they knew very little of their own laws. This created worse living conditions for people with disabilities in Zambia. In reality, these people were already living defeated lives. For instance, at local levels, they had knowledge about certain legal provisions, but were unable to access services to their enjoyment of their own rights. In Zambia, people with disabilities are, in general, aware of many other social and economic legislative provisions specifically intended for them (Simui and Mtonga, 2014). Another example of low awareness concerns taxes. According to the Disability Act (2012) and the Zambia Agency for Persons with Disabilities Act (1996): "An employee with a disability shall be entitled to exemption from income tax as may be prescribed." In all the policies and legal frameworks intended for people with disabilities, this exemption has been provided for. However, very few people with disabilities access the exemption, some because of the bureaucracy in government systems, others because they are simply not aware of the exemption despite the fact that they are employed. In order to access this, a person may have to spend more than what she/he will consequently receive as tax exemption.

In Zambia, less than 5 percent of people with disabilities have completed their general education, which runs from grades one to twelve (Zambia Agency for Persons with Disabilities, 2010). The Ministry of General Education (2016) admits that

the transition, progression, retention, and completion rates of learners with disabilities have been extremely low. For example, the Ministry of General Education (2015) shows that Zambia had about 189,600 disabled learners in primary schools, yet there were only about 9,000 learners with disabilities at the secondary school level. This educational imbalance has a spillover effect on the disability movement and its power to negotiate for a better package. In Africa, and in Zambia in particular, formal education is crucial and it plays a significant role in transforming problem solving and advocacy skills. The United Nations (1999) admits that "education is both a human right in itself and an indispensable means of realizing other human rights. As an empowerment right, education is the primary vehicle by which economically and socially marginalized adults and children can lift themselves out of poverty and obtain the means to participate fully in their communities." People with disabilities need education in order to realize other human rights, enabling them to participate in the community on an equal basis with others.

High poverty levels are another factor that prevents people with disabilities from accessing services and facilities despite having quality knowledge about the subject. Mtonga (2015) argues that as long as people with disabilities remain poor, they will always be unable to access what belongs to them. The World Bank, in the *Voices of The Poor* series (2001), states that poverty reduces the dignity of an individual, robs them of their self-esteem, takes away their negotiation power, and makes them vulnerable. According to the Southern Africa Federation of the Disabled (2013), 93 percent of Zambia's 1.8 million people with disabilities are living in abject poverty. Without doubt, high levels of poverty among these people negatively contribute to the inability of them to access and participate in the Sustainable Development Goals.

In view of the issues elaborated above, it is evident that education and poverty play an important role in determining if individuals will have the ability to access what belongs to them. The Zambian case is a good example of people with disabilities failing to change the landscape of the disability world because of inadequate education and high poverty levels.

A boy with new glasses starts school after eye surgery partially restored his vision in Uganda, April 2016. Photo credit: © Tommy Trenchard/Panos/Redux

The Role of Access to Information and the Use of Assistive Technology in Bringing about De Facto Equality for Blind and Partially Sighted Persons in Uganda

Florence Ndagire, Uganda
Disability Rights Scholarship Program, 2013

Persons with visual impairments constitute about 253 million of the world's population, with most of them living in developing countries such as Uganda (World Bank, 2016). This population faces significant challenges in terms of realizing their rights to employment and health care, their access to justice, research and documentation, public buildings, transportation, education, and financial management (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2014). This is due to a lack of access to information in accessible formats such as braille, large print, electronic text with screen reader software, and audio recordings. The greater the provision of information in accessible formats, the greater the reduction in social inequality and the barriers that hinder the effective participation of persons with visual disabilities in society (Beverle et al., 2004). However, information is not always accessible and does not meet the needs of visually impaired persons. According to a

respondent from the 2015 My Story, My Right project in Uganda, which monitors the progress in and compliance with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: "I am a child with a visual impairment, but in spite of my disability, I deserve to enjoy all the rights like other children without disabilities." The respondent also noted that he cannot read the materials at school, though he understands everything people say.

The convention recognizes the right of access to information for blind and partially sighted persons under Article 21, and confers an obligation on states to take all appropriate steps to provide information in accessible formats, including assistive technology intended for persons with visual disabilities (United Nations, 2006).

In Uganda, persons with visual impairments belong to the National Association of the Blind. This organization does substantial advocacy when it comes to the education of children and students with visual impairments. The Ministry of Education now provides braille papers and Perkins brailers to enable students with visual impairments to participate in the education system on an equal basis with others. Makerere University, for instance, provides affirmative action during the admission of students with visual impairments. A disability scheme provides funding for these students to purchase their learning equipment and to pay their personal assistants during the entire course of study. This scheme was established by Makerere University, and the Tertiary Institution Act of 1998 followed, which remedied the imbalances that have existed among persons with disabilities in the education system. It created the provision of reasonable accommodations at Makerere University, the only public institution at the time.

Civil society has been instrumental during the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Before 2006, the disability movement held several meetings to ensure that UN international human rights instruments protecting the rights of persons with disabilities would be ratified. Much advocacy was directed by civil society at various government ministries, including the Ministry of Gender, Labor and Social Development, to lobby the government of Uganda to ratify the convention. Since the ratification, civil society groups have worked tirelessly to

ensure the implementation of the convention. During Uganda's review by the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, civil society organizations collected a large amount of information regarding the progress of implementation, which helped the convention committee come up with concluding observations. Currently, the National Union of Disabled Persons of Uganda is working together with the Uganda Human Rights Commission to ensure that the concluding observations are implemented. Civil society has also worked to ensure that the Marrakesh Treaty, which guarantees the rights of access to information by persons with visual impairments, was ratified. We are now waiting for the next steps to implement the treaty.

Donors such as the Open Society Foundations have also supported initiatives to aid in the establishment of disability rights courses at Makerere University. The university has also received support in terms of computers with screen reader software called JAWS, which enables students with visual impairments to access information.

These actions have created more awareness of the rights of persons with disabilities at the national level. Most organizations, including UN Women, now advocate for the inclusion and mainstreaming of persons with disabilities. The Ugandan parliament has introduced a certificate of gender equity that requires all public institutions to submit budgets including disability accommodations. The Public Accounting and Financing Act stipulates that for any budget to be passed by a government entity, it must pass the test of gender and disability inclusion. Once the requirements are fulfilled, a certificate of gender equity is issued and the funding is granted (Public Accounting and Financing Act 2012).

Countries such as Kenya and the Republic of Niger have made more advances in the realization of the rights of persons with disabilities than Uganda, especially in education and employment. Equipment intended to support the learning of persons with visual impairments is tax free, and this is a result of the advocacy done by the disability movement in those countries. Uganda has come some way, but there is always more to be done.

REPRINTS AND UPDATES

The articles below combine a reprint of an original article followed by commentary about what, if any, developments have occurred since the original was published. In the second piece, the author provided us with a longer article and an updated perspective.

Southeast Asia

The article below from a Supplementary Grant Program Asia alum, Hsar Doe Doh Moo Htoo, was originally published in the 16th edition of *ScholarForum*. We thought the issues raised in the article about education in situations of forced migration were particularly pertinent today, given the current number of people in movement across the globe. We asked Hsar Doe Doh Moo Htoo for his thoughts on the situation of Karen people in Myanmar in 2019, which is included in the short response below.

The author chose to use the country name Burma throughout the article.

The Right to Education for Karen Refugees and Internally Displaced People

Hsar Doe Doh Moo Htoo
Supplementary Grant Program Asia, 2008, Myanmar
Originally published: *ScholarForum* Number 16 / winter 2013-14

Burma, one of the most ethnically diverse and natural resource-rich countries in the world, has experienced a series of crises since gaining independence from the British colonial government in 1948. Interethnic conflict, civil war, political instability, socioeconomic turmoil, and human rights abuses are all major obstacles that have prolonged the country's development and prosperity. In light of this, the abolishment of the military dictatorship, intensification of the democratic transition, protection of ethnic nationalities, restoration of a durable peace through political means, and reform of the economic and education system are highly desirable to Burmese citizens. After decades of military dictatorship and isolation from the global community, Burma's recent series of political and socioeconomic reforms are a welcome sign. Burmese citizens hope that they will lead to genuine reform. The prolonged armed conflicts between the Karen National Union and the Burmese Army over the last six decades have resulted in disastrous effects on Karen communities. Civil war and human rights violations forced thousands of Karen civilians to abandon their homes, agricultural fields, livestock, and property. Civil war has turned huge numbers of Karen civilians into internally displaced persons within the country or has forced them to seek refuge in Thailand. Karen people residing in areas for internally displaced persons or refugee camps have been traumatized by human rights abuses on the part of the Burmese army, including forced labor, land confiscation, sexual violence, extrajudicial killings, forced relocation, extortion, excessive taxation, and mental and physical torture. Peace talks and the initial ceasefire agreement between the Karen National Union leadership and Burmese government delegations representing reformist President Thein Sein in January 2012 brought good news to peace-loving people, including me.

However, I have mixed feelings and I am both positive and skeptical as to whether the initial peace talks will build genuine and sustainable peace and freedom for everyone in Burma. One of the main questions I have about the process is this: Can we guarantee a genuine peace for Karen and other ethnic schoolchildren in war zones where they can learn safely and happily with dignity? Improvement in the right to education is impossible for the majority of Karen children in armed conflict zones. For these children and young adults of school age, education is precarious and learning takes place under constant fear and threat. Life for Karen ethnic children and youth is often made difficult or impossible as young people are forced to hide in the jungle without proper classrooms and learning materials. However, the Karen people's desire to learn remains a driving force in their effort to get education. Karen refugees from Burma have been residing on the Thai border for almost 30 years, and the protracted situation of refugees has become a burden for Thailand as well as international aid organizations. Improving the quality of refugees' lives significantly depends on the provision of food, security, shelter, health care, and education, especially during emergency situations. Without support for these basic needs, life for refugees is a challenge. Recent budget cuts for refugee assistance could lead to greater hardship for the refugee population in Thailand. The European Union has been the largest donor for Burmese refugees since 1995, providing financial assistance in major sectors (education, food, health care, and shelter). It has minimized its funding since 2010 and now emphasizes capacity building in agriculture, livestock, and handicrafts. In the education sector, due to the funding shortage, stakeholders involved in refugee education have encountered a huge challenge that has had a great impact on sustainable education in Karen refugee camps.

The Karen Refugee Committee Education Entity is the main educational representative of seven Karen refugee camps. In these camps, it manages and coordinates schools providing basic and higher education, locally known as post-secondary education programs. For the committee, the decline of teachers' salaries is a setback because financial support plays a crucial role in providing quality education and sustains the long-term commitment of teachers to their work. According to American psychologist Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of physiological and basic needs, education and food procurement are crucial for survival. Without having met these basic needs, further growth and progress is difficult. In an

Ethnic Karen Burmese students attend class in a refugee camp in Thailand on June 7, 2012. Photo credit: © Paula Bronstein/Getty

educational setting, when children's physiological need for food is unfulfilled, they will not be able to concentrate on their studies, may have a lack of interest in schooling, may become delinquent, and, finally, may drop out. In the same manner, if they do not receive adequate food, refugee teachers on the Thai border will leave the camps and try to ensure their survival by looking for job opportunities in nearby Thai villages. Due to inadequate financial support, the rate of teacher turnover is high, especially in the basic education sector.

The quality and sustainability of education in Karen refugee camps primarily depends on experienced teachers. Their frequent replacement with novice and inexperienced teachers presents a substantial challenge. Bringing about the long-term provision of quality education to refugees is precarious. Working in the field of education, I am convinced that education is crucial to transforming the atmosphere in Burma from negative to positive. It is a vital tool that can bring lasting peace and justice, build a sustainable and

prosperous society, alleviate poverty, and revive the hopes of the citizens of Burma. Despite living in a restricted and insecure environment where there are insufficient resources and facilities, refugee and internally displaced persons and students are never reluctant about pursuing their education. It is a lifelong process, and if education is used and applied appropriately, it can transform lives, countries, and societies. Finally, as education is a fundamental human right, it should be respected. The current government of Burma and its stakeholders in political and socioeconomic reform must underscore the importance of education in their reform agenda, and provide essential support and assistance. This will revitalize the hope of school-age children and young adults, and strengthen their confidence as they work to make Burma prosperous and democratic.
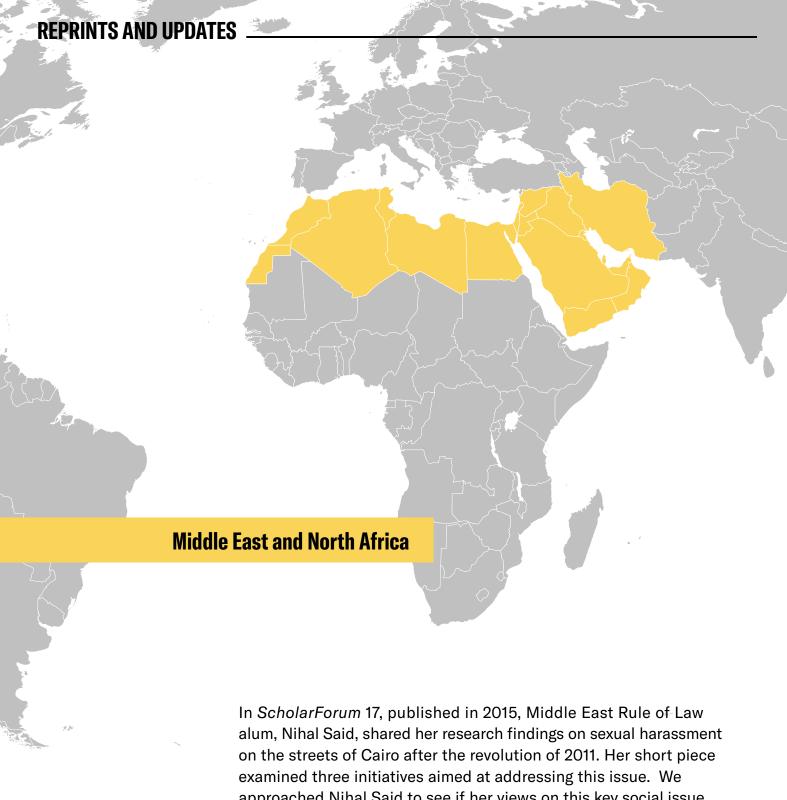
Author's Comments and Update

As outlined in my article above, it remains true that for Karen refugee communities on the Thai-Burmese border, education is a vital element for a sustainable, thriving, and hopeful society. Access to quality and equitable education is critical for refugee communities who have been through hardships to rebuild their lives, and is considered a fundamental foundation for a genuine and lasting peace in their home country. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal Number Four stresses that achieving inclusive and equitable quality education for all, including refugee children, is a high priority for the international community. However, this collective goal cannot become a reality when educational support and funding for refugee communities on the Thai-Burmese border is shrinking.

This decline in resources has become apparent since the inception of ceasefire agreements between armed organizations (e.g., the Karen National Union) and the Burmese government in early 2012. The situation in refugee camps is getting worse and the refugee community has been subjected to pressures for repatriation to their original homeland, which creates considerable anxiety. I learned that their main concerns include personal security issues due to the presence of the Burmese military in their ancestral lands. The Karen people have traditionally made their livelihoods from lowland paddy farming and rotational farming in the uplands, but with the Burmese military still present in these areas, they feel unable to return.

Since the ceasefire, the Karen Refugee Committee Education Entity, a governing body of refugee education communities in seven camps, is facing huge challenges brought about by cuts to educational funding. For basic education services and support, international nongovernmental organizations like Save the Children, the Adventist Development and Relief Agency, Right to Play, and the Jesuit Refugee Service, have played a crucial role in supporting the committee's capacity to cover the costs of operating schools, providing teaching and learning supplies, and paying monthly stipends to teachers. I have learned that due to funding cuts, some schools are being merged, teachers' salaries are being cut, and materials for school construction and teaching and learning supplies are being reduced by half. Teachers and school administrators inconsistently receive professional support, and because of this, teachers and educational personnel become demotivated. Education has become a less appealing profession. This is a sad situation. Are the rights to education of these vulnerable communities being ignored? Or, more cynically, are these funding cuts intentional to pressure refugees to return home?

It is time for the international community and national governments to show sincere empathy toward refugee communities on the Thai-Burmese border, especially if they wish to achieve the basic educational aims of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Hsar Doe Doh Moo Htoo is a passionate learner and an environmental educator at the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network, an indigenous Karen organization that empowers indigenous Karen communities. Before working with the network, Hsar began his professional career as an educational worker and teacher, working with the Karen Refugee Committee Education Entity and teaching at post-secondary schools in Karen refugee camps on the Thai-Burmese border. He has a BA in psychology and education from the Asia-Pacific International University (formerly known as Mission College) and an MS in counseling psychology from Assumption University, Thailand.

Middle East and North Africa

In *ScholarForum* 17, published in 2015, Middle East Rule of Law alum, Nihal Said, shared her research findings on sexual harassment on the streets of Cairo after the revolution of 2011. Her short piece examined three initiatives aimed at addressing this issue. We approached Nihal Said to see if her views on this key social issue have developed, or if she sees any positive movements in Egypt today. Said's piece below reflects her updated thinking on this issue, based on her recent work in Egypt.

Women's Rights in Egypt: Finding Creative Ways to Address Social Norms around Violence, Sexuality, and Gender Roles

Nihal Said, Egypt
Middle East Rule of Law Program, 2012-2014

In 2013, I was awarded a grant to research the different communication and community mobilization campaigns combating sexual harassment in Egypt. In particular, I was interested to know what prompts young people to form socially driven initiatives, such as Harassmap, Bussy Project, and the Imprint Movement, to address some of the most pressing social ills that impact the lives of the most vulnerable in Egypt. The biggest problem, to my mind, is the sexual harassment of women. My research helped me understand what the young leaders of these initiatives did to address the problem of street harassment and sexual harassment in general, which, according to a 2013 study by UN Women, affects more than 99 percent of women in Egypt (Study on Ways and Methods to Eliminate Sexual Harassment in Egypt, 2013). Specifically, I was interested in studying the potential of communication tools such as social media, crowd sourcing, social mobilization, and community theater to raise awareness of the issue.

As a society, we cannot tolerate 79 percent of all Egyptian women being exposed to the brutal practice of female genital mutilation, including 61 percent of girls between 15 and 17 (Egypt Demographic and Health Survey, 2014). This practice, even though not grounded in religion or science, and punishable by law, is still widely performed by medical professionals and is often justified to preserve social order and protect the chastity of women. Furthermore, 6.1 million Egyptian women have no access to family planning assistance, leaving them at risk of unwanted pregnancy. This lack of control disproportionately affects the poorest and least literate women. This situation is not helped by the opinions of young men about ideal family size. Of the 3,000 plus men surveyed, 67.8 percent cited the ideal family size as more than three children per family (Egypt Health Issues Survey, 2015).

In addition to this, young people's perception of gender roles and their thoughts on gender-based violence are alarming: 65 percent of people aged 18-24 justify gender-based violence (Economic Cost of Gender Based Violence Survey Egypt, 2015). This study found that one-third of married women aged 15-49 agree that wife beating is justified in at least one of the following circumstances: leaving home without telling the husband, neglecting children, arguing with their husbands, burning food, or refusing to have sex.

My earlier work and research in the field focused on the potential of using communication for social change. However, when I started working in Egypt after obtaining my master's degree, I became more and more interested in the power of young people as volunteer "first responders" to instances of violence and of youth-led networks and initiatives that championed women's rights and gender issues. I was also struck by the fact that most of these social ills victimize young people and are further preserved by the regressive perceptions of the group itself. I became interested in answering the following questions:

- How can we, as social change activists, organizations, and national institutions, further engage masses of young people to address regressive social norms that normalize violations against women?
- How can we transform the narrative around young people from being the perpetrators of violence against women and children to being a watchdog for women's rights?
- How can young people reach their disengaged peers to work on these issues and address these challenges from the grassroots?

Why Communication? Why Youth?

To address these challenges, organizations like the United Nations Population Fund, where I currently work, look to young people for solutions, for initiating community dialogues, and for promoting positive social norms around gender, reproductive health, and family planning. Our experience working with young people helped us realize that

A woman at a demonstration in Cairo to protest Egypt's sexual harassment epidemic on International Women's Day, February 6, 2013. Photo credit: © Amanda Mustard/Redux

calls for action and behavioral change do not happen only through speeches by prominent figures or through campaigns, but rather through speaking about people's arguments, fears, and concerns and understanding their logic around the continuation of such practices. Hence, we decided to use entertainment as a strategy to bring about social and behavioral change around women's and girls' reproductive health and rights.

As a result, we developed "edutainment initiatives," which combine both education and entertainment components in the design, mode of delivery, and the nature of people/entertainers involved, using music and arts to raise awareness and start a community dialogue on women's and girls' rights and reproductive rights. The project is called Music for Development, and we collaborated with young underground

bands to develop and perform songs related to various women's rights issues. The use of music, where the performers are talented young people, advances the aim of the campaign on different fronts. It engages young men on the issue of women's rights, agency, and choice through building a connection with the male performers singing about these issues. The songs use colloquial language and proverbs from Egyptian culture that dignify women and challenge those that perpetuate ideals related to big families.

We want to occupy the space, time, interest, and dialogue of those who are otherwise not interested in hearing about our ideas. If we do not have this education and media delivered at their community gatherings, they will not be exposed to ideas that in many instances shake their value systems. Although this awareness technique has been practiced in the area of

health in Egypt for decades, its frequency of use has decreased, especially with young people educating their peers. To that end, the two edutainment projects that we piloted and refer to above employ music and sports (i.e., running, walking, and team sports) as entry points to both engage men on women's rights issues and to motivate young women and girls to participate in sports and arts in public spaces.

I recall when implementing these projects that many of the youth peer educators I worked with questioned having these events open to the public out of a fear that a general audience may not be as receptive to this form of edutainment. Yet my reply was "why not?"

When we occupy spaces using entertainment, sports, and the arts, we invite young people to think about these issues and initiate dialogue in their communities and among their peers. These forms of entertainment can stimulate public discussions around the historically silenced ideas that affect the most vulnerable: young people, illiterate women, and girls, especially those with disabilities. We know that occupying public spaces contributes to social change and presents role models for young people, eventually leading to changes in attitudes. This reasoning comes from literature related to the "second and third generations" of edutainment. The second generation is concerned with social mobilization around media messages and their role in social change, while the

third generation is more dependent on the skills of an identified group of people capable of addressing the root causes of problems and their structural inequalities (Tufte, 2005).

Inspired by global experiences in the field, we used second and third generation formats in the most rural villages in Upper Egypt. Arts for social change was then used in more public spaces to challenge social norms around population growth and the harmful practices of child marriage and female genital mutilation. I understood that we needed to be present with our locally developed and citizen-produced educational media at public events and celebrations, rolling out meaningful entertainment and educational activities.

Before working for the United Nations Population Fund–Egypt, I used to believe in the power of organized groups and networks of young people who share similar norms and values to propel change in Egypt's most deprived areas. After working exclusively with young people, I realized that it is equally important to reach the masses, and that we need to occupy the spaces where people congregate and try to place our messages in forms that appeal to all people. This is especially the case when the issue relates to women's rights and gender-based violence.

Nihal Said is a statistician who has spent the past four years with the UN in Egypt. She is currently a Youth and HIV specialist at the United Nations Population Fund Regional Office for Arab States in Cairo, where she recently concluded an assignment as the Adolescents and Youth Program Analyst at the fund's Egypt Country office. Before joining the fund, Said worked with the MENA Regional Bureau of the United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

During her graduate studies in the United States, Said worked as a communications and research assistant at the Ohio University Global Health Initiative working on global health programming and researching HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa. Said graduated with a BA from Cairo University and obtained her MA from Ohio University in communication and development with a scholarship from the Open Society Middle East Rule of Law Program in 2014. Said is very grateful for the experience and mentorship that she had on the behavioral change campaigns targeting young people gained during her assignment at the United Nations Population Fund–Egypt.

ALUMNI INTERVIEW _____

ScholarForum creates a space for grantees and alumni to learn from each other. In this edition, we talked with two alumni, Danil Nikitin, a former fellow from the Social Work Fellowship Program, and Aleksandr Pugachev, an Open Society Chevening University of Edinburgh Awards recipient, about their work with their nonprofit organization, the Global Research Institute, or GLORI, in Kyrgyzstan.

ScholarForum (SF): Danil and Aleksandr, tell us a little about why you started the Global Research Institute (GLORI Foundation). What were your initial hopes for the organization when you started?

Aleksandr Pugachev (AP): We started GLORI to provide a platform that brings together a multidisciplinary team of international and local experts and activists to find solutions to health and social disparities in Kyrgyzstan, and Central Asia more broadly. At GLORI, we strongly believe that research can improve quality of life, and so we use data to inform changes and promote democracy. Scientific evidence gives much more weight to our work. We know that our interventions save lives and empower those who need support. This is what we hoped to achieve when we started GLORI back in 2008.

SF: Can you briefly describe a project you have taken on? What impact have you seen on the target populations?

Danil Nikitin (DN): Among the dozens of projects that we have managed so far, it is the WINGS of Hope project that has global recognition. For three years, the project provided high-quality, gender-based violence prevention services to 213 women in Kyrgyzstan who use drugs, provide sex services, or who are vulnerable to violence. The specific needs of these women have been continually ignored. The participants had several issues, including having lost personal identification documents like birth certificates that jeopardized access to health services for them and their children. These are women who cannot get treatment or stop using drugs right away or have lasting problems from their younger years. The women reported violence against them, including being kicked, slammed against walls, or forced to have sex, sometimes unprotected.

AP: We like to share the story that the project's name—WINGS of Hope—was proposed by participants. Early on in the project, we held a focus group with sex workers in southern Kyrgyzstan, and it was during this meeting that the idea for the name came up. The English abbreviation of WINGS stands for Women Initiating New Goals for Safety. The name stuck because, among the other things, our team wanted to find a project name that would not focus on violence. This was important from the point of view of the safety of participants and staff. Additionally, the name is uplifting.

DN: The WINGS model uses the well-known social work SBIRT approach, which stands for Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment. Women are screened to identify their risk of becoming a victim of violence, followed by an intervention aimed at motivating and improving the participant's emotional state, and developing a safety plan. They are then referred to appropriate service providers by project staff. They also set goals for the immediate future and have access to HIV testing and counseling. We found out through a three-month follow-up survey that participants experienced significantly fewer intimate partner and gender-based violence incidents, and a significant reduction in drug use. They also reported an increased ability to negotiate safe sex practices, and increased access to gender-based violence related services they had learned about through the project. For us, there is no doubt that WINGS of Hope improves the lives of the women participating in it. The WINGS model is being adapted and piloted in Georgia, India, Nepal, and Ukraine. We aim to promote the model in other countries as well.

ALUMNI INTERVIEW

SF: How do you decide which projects GLORI should engage?

DN: A combination of adhering to the mission and, to be honest, a gut feeling about whether it is a good fit. When we see that there is injustice, an intolerance for diversity, or an inequality that causes suffering, we decide how much we can do about that.

AP: We do not engage in projects where the outcomes will not be beneficial to the community, even if there is great pressure to do so.

SF: Has there been one particular collaboration that has succeeded because of your fellow alumni?

DN: The most crucial and fruitful collaboration in GLORI's development has been with the Global Health Research Center of Central Asia, an organization co-run by alumni from the Open Society Social Work Fellowship Program. Together with the center, we have managed several regional projects that helped vulnerable people, such as the USAID-funded Project CARAVAN that examined the prevalence and risk factors for tuberculosis among returning labor migrants in Kyrgyzstan and other Central Asian countries.

AP: While working with the center, we learned a lot from each other. We studied, for example, the whole spectrum of challenges that impede migrants' access to diagnostic and treatment services in their destination countries, and we were able to propose practical solutions that agencies that work with migrants are now piloting. For instance, we have seen that the engagement of both the community and religious leaders in designing and co-facilitating health-related trainings for migrants significantly increased their effectiveness. Also, due to our advocacy, policy changes were initiated that aim at minimizing migrants' risks of being deported because of issues with their health. We see that more and more people are sharing our view that people suffering illness deserve support rather than punishment.

SF: GLORI has a mission to address many issues that often affect a region's or country's most marginalized communities. Which do you see as being a priority for Kyrgyzstan in the coming year and why? What do you hope GLORI can contribute to addressing these issues?

DN: Experts see lots of challenges for Kyrgyzstan, and it's not possible to come up with a universal solution to all of them. GLORI will continue working in several health-related areas, primarily intensifying our work in adapting and piloting high-quality research models and disseminating significant findings.

In general, it seems feasible to focus on strengthening civil society and integrating communities into the policy development and decision-making processes. Civil society in Kyrgyzstan is more developed than in other Central Asian countries, and there are wonderful, highly committed experts and activists who are prepared to contribute their experience to the growth of a fairer and more transparent society. We believe that Kyrgyz civil society will be a model for other countries of the former Soviet Union where activists and organizations have a desire to bring change to their communities.

SF: If you could give one piece of advice to newly graduating Open Society scholars, what would it be? Are there strategies you can share about making an impact in your communities?

AP: If you applied for an Open Society scholarship and decided to share Open Society's vision of the ways the world can develop, then believe in your excellence. Networks are important, and we are a group of well-educated activists across the world: call us, ask us, involve us.

DN: For me, your projects will be more successful if you are able to promote partnerships between civil society organizations in your communities and leading universities where you had the privilege to study. You can start building these relationships when you are on your scholarship, and reinforce these contacts again after you return home.

Danil Nikitin and Aleksandr Pugachev are co-directors of the Global Institute for Research (GLORI Foundation), a Bishkek-based nongovernmental organization focusing on collaborative projects and evidence-based research to find solutions to pressing health and social issues in Central Asia. More information is available through their website: http://glori.kg/en/glori/about-the-foundation/

OPEN SOCIETY SCHOLARSHIP AWARDS AND PROGRAMS

Civil Society Leadership Awards

The Civil Society Leadership Awards provide fully funded master's degree study to individuals who clearly demonstrate academic and professional excellence and a deep commitment to leading positive social change in their communities. The awards directly assist future leaders in countries where civil society is challenged by a deficit of democratic practice in local governance and social development.

Civil Society Scholar Awards

The Civil Society Scholar Awards support international academic mobility to enable doctoral students and university faculty to access resources that enrich socially engaged research and critical scholarship in their home country or region. The awards allow doctoral students and university faculty to pursue fieldwork (data collection); research visits to libraries, archives, or universities; course/curriculum development; and international collaborations leading to a peer-reviewed publication.

Disability Rights Scholarship Program

The Disability Rights Scholarship Program provides yearlong master of laws awards to disability rights advocates and lawyers to develop new legislation, jurisprudence, impact litigation, and scholarship.

Palestinian Rule of Law Awards

The Palestinian Rule of Law Awards provide scholarships to qualified applicants from the West Bank and Gaza to pursue one-year academic master of laws programs at selected law schools in the United States.

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