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editorial

Health of a nation

It's hard to comprehend the devastation and loss of life caused by the tsunami in Asia. The scale of the tragedy has shocked a world used to living with the periodic consequences of what we euphemistically call 'natural disasters'.

There's nothing natural about the scale of the tragedy that followed in the wake of the tsunami. Nature may be indiscriminate, but poor people in poor countries are the most vulnerable when such a disaster occurs.

Lessening the impact of these disasters is within our powers. The tragedy in Asia reminds us of the importance of development – of tackling the poverty that leads to so many people living in insecure conditions.

This issue of Interact focuses on the story of CIIR/ICD in Yemen – a story that began 30 years ago. In that time, our work there has made a significant contribution to the development of the country's health services.

The articles in this issue of Interact give a glimpse of how development work really can make a difference to people's lives. The challenge for us now is to build on the compassion and the sense of common humanity in our response to the tragedy in Asia – and to make 2005 the year when the world started to make poverty history.

Editor

Cover picture: Boys in the town of Jebin in the Raymah region of Yemen. Photo: Nick Sireau/CIIR

An explosive situation

Rosemary Read describes a chilling experience while working for the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel

TODAY two of us decided to go to Beit Furik, a village of 10,000 to the south-east of Nablus, to say goodbye and deliver some photos to some people we had met when we were there earlier.

We had been there to learn about the situation of the village which has several new settlements of Israelis nearby, and to help with the olive harvest. One family we helped kindly asked us back to their home for a large and very tasty meal, which was especially kind of them as they were still fasting due to Ramadan.

We were looking for their house when we realised with great shock it was in ruins. We soon learned what had happened. At about 3am on 2 November there was banging on the door. It was Israeli soldiers who told the family to get out – they had 25 minutes to take what they needed and then the house would be destroyed. There was no explanation but the mother feared that her son, who has been

in hiding for three years, had been found and killed and this was a military punishment operation.

Shouts for help

They shouted to the neighbours to help, but at first this wasn't allowed. After a bit the soldiers relented and the family and neighbours threw as much as they could out of the windows and took the heavy furniture through the doors.

Next door to the house there is a petrol station and the owner reasoned with the Israeli captain. Too much explosive and the whole thing could go up. The captain agreed this could be disastrous and gave orders for a limited explosion.

Time was up. The family pleaded and were given five more minutes, but then they had to leave. Half an hour after the bang on the door they watched as the house the father had built 24 years previously, and where they had brought up seven sons and four daughters, collapsed.

Lives in ruins

Today what we saw, instead of the happy home where we had feasted so well just a few weeks ago, were piles of rubble, twisted metal rods bare of concrete, a shattered bath, the wall blocks lying in the garden – and a family trying to rebuild their lives in what remains of the ground floor of the house. (This would also have been destroyed if it hadn't been a 'limited explosion'.) The ground floor had been the apartment for one of the married sons and his family – four people in all. Now it houses 13, crammed in with the saved furniture, and with rain coming in through the cracks caused by the explosion.

An explanation was given at the end of the 'operation'. The Israelis said they believed that the son in hiding had been behind a suicide bombing in Tel Aviv on 1 November. He is still in hiding.

Ruled by guns

What they hoped to achieve by destroying a house he hasn't visited in three years I don't know. Why they suspected him of that particular atrocity I don't know. What I do know is that they have caused a lot of suffering to the family and much resentment among the younger sons.

Working here for even such a short time has been a great experience and privilege. I have laughed, cried, been scared, threatened, challenged and bored – but mostly I have been struck by how awful life is for the majority of Palestinians for most of the time.

It is one thing for me to be stuck at a checkpoint for an hour or so – I always knew I was going to be OK and at the end of three months would be leaving this situation. Not so for those who go through it all the time and who will be hearing the gunfire tonight ... and tomorrow ... and the night after.

Rosemary Read is a member of the CIIR Board of Trustees. This article was written in December 2004 while she was working for the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel.

A sign at the checkpoint at Beit Furik. The English and Arabic read 'Exit only'; the Hebrew translation says 'Exit Dog'.



Matt Robson/EAPPI



The ongoing disaster of poverty

AS I WRITE, the world is still in shock at the devastation caused by the tsunami in Asia. There has been an overwhelmingly generous response from individual people and from some governments.

But it is a sobering thought that every week the same loss of life quietly takes place. Every day an estimated 30,000 people die needlessly due to poverty, hunger and disease. That's why CIIR is part of a coalition of more than 160 organisations aiming to make poverty history.

I hope that the humanity and concern shown in the response to the tsunami can be repeated during 2005 but in a different way. **MAKEPOVERTYHISTORY** doesn't require individuals to give money, but to raise their voices and press for change. It can work if millions of people urge their governments to increase aid and make it more effective, to make trade fairer and more beneficial to poorer countries, and to drop the debt that still cripples so many countries.

Politics and power

We need to do this because the decisions that affect the lives of so many are made by politicians and governments. Even relief is political. Governments can so easily manipulate and control food aid and other relief for political purposes.

Take the situation in Aceh – one of the areas worst hit by the tsunami. This province has been experiencing a conflict with severe human rights abuses and loss of civilian life for almost 30 years. The new Indonesian government made a pledge for peace at the end of 2004 and it is imperative

The impact of natural disasters on the poorest people reinforces the urgent need to tackle poverty, writes Christine Allen

that it continues to act on it. The first step is to ensure that relief efforts in Aceh are not politically manipulated in any way and that the conflict ceases. There have been reports that access to certain parts of the region is being denied. Recovery from this disaster for the people in Aceh will require not just aid and relief but a commitment to long term development built on peace.

Permanent emergency

Reconstruction and development will continue long after the pictures have left our media. And it is with a long term vision that change – not just short term 'relief' – really can come about.

In 1998, Hurricanes Georges and Mitch devastated large parts of Central America. CIIR was working with poor communities whose people had been living in a state of what our country representative described as almost 'permanent emergency', such was their poverty and vulnerability. Many of those who experienced the tsunami would have been living in a similar situation. The impact of such disasters on these people is extremely deep.

Therefore, amid the immediate relief efforts, plans for long term development and reconstruction are essential. What we learned from Central America was that real participation of the people is necessary to ensure effective relief and development efforts. This means participation and ownership from local communities, organisations and governments with a particular concern for seeking the

involvement of those who are excluded, especially women.

The wider picture

Aside from the physical effects, there are severe psychological effects that will last for many years. I remember visiting a project in Nicaragua where a development worker had been using different therapy techniques – drawings, exercises and conversations – to help the community develop its vision of a new life. If we are serious about wanting people to have life in all its fullness, then this sort of support is as essential as the plastic sheeting and water purifiers.

Tsunamis and hurricanes also remind us of the power of the earth and the vulnerability that the poorest have in the face of such natural phenomena. We are stewards of creation and that is why one of CIIR's strategic themes over the next three to five years is the environment.

The connections between the environment and development are complex, but the effects are felt most starkly by those who are poorest. Growth, trade, aid and development all need to take into account their impact on the environment and not increase the vulnerability of the poorest in the face of nature's power.

Christine Allen is CIIR's executive director.

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Do your bit to make poverty history: sign up at www.makepovertyhistory.org

Every day an estimated 30,000 people die needlessly due to poverty, hunger and disease

Elections due in Somaliland

PREPARATIONS ARE UNDERWAY FOR Somaliland's parliamentary elections, which look set to go ahead in April as planned, according to CIIR's advocacy coordinator for the region, Dr Steve Kibble.

Dr Kibble visited the country in December and has produced a pre-election assessment report with CIIR country representative for Somaliland Dr Adan Abokor. The report outlines discussions Dr Kibble and Dr Abokor had with election officials and with potential international observers in Kenya and Ethiopia.

The report is optimistic that, despite funding and security constraints as well as disagreements over more equitable gender representation,

the elections can go ahead within the time frame.

Dr Kibble said: 'The international community is pushing for democratic norms and practice in Africa and should provide support for Somalilanders' wish for greater democracy, not least in the provision of international observers to help ensure an expected reasonably free and fair election.'

Previous elections in the country have proved peaceful and popular. In December 2002, CIIR organised an observation team for the local elections comprising Somalilanders and international representatives. A report on those elections with recommendations was produced in March 2003 and is available on the CIIR website.

CIIR is committed to helping ensure that the forthcoming elections are peaceful and welcomed by the populace. CIIR has considerable election-observing experience, having observed elections in Namibia in the 1990s and 2004, in South Africa and Mozambique in 1994, in East Timor in 1999 and in Somaliland in 2002.

Voters queue patiently during the local elections in Somaliland in 2002.

Homophobia holding back HIV and AIDS work

STRATEGIES to tackle HIV and AIDS and promote development need to incorporate an awareness of the implications of homophobia in order to be more effective, according to a former CIIR/ICD country representative for Peru, writes *Finola Robinson*.

Carolyn Williams, who is now working as a consultant for Jamaica Aids Support, told a CIIR meeting that she is returning to Peru to conduct research into how the fight against homophobia could be further incorporated into development work.

Carolyn described how people who fail to live by society's sexual norms often struggle with their own identity and can become increasingly marginalised. 'You cannot separate poverty from discrimination,' she said.

'HIV and AIDS has been very problematic in that it has bolstered negative attitudes to men who have sex with men: it has pathologised gay men,' she said. 'It then becomes very difficult to break away from judgement and blame.'

She described how research into the sexual practices of men in certain parts of Latin America reveals that a high percentage of those in poorer communities have had sex with other men. Yet many of those men still classify themselves as heterosexual, and might even go home and have sex with their wives, thus increasing the risk of transmitting diseases such as HIV and AIDS.

'What does the term "heterosexual" mean nowadays?' asked Carolyn. 'In a homophobic, hetero-normative society, how do we find those men who live a heterosexual life but go out and have sex with men? We have to find ways to reach out to them.'

Mark Bradbury



MAKEPOVERTYHISTORY

CHURCHES and Christian agencies are coming together to mobilise Christians to take action as part of the **MAKEPOVERTYHISTORY** campaign.

On 29 January, an ecumenical event in central London brought together Christians, activists, church leaders and other faith leaders to make a stand for trade justice, debt cancellation and more and better aid.

Christian leaders and campaigning experts gave talks on issues around poverty and policy change, and there was also music,

action and a marketplace area where people learned how to get more involved.

Stephen Rand, local church leader and speaker at the event, said: 'This event is a wonderful opportunity to make sure churches have the inspiration and information to get involved – after all, Christians are followers of Jesus who brought good news to the poor.'

Find out how to support the year-long campaign – and get a white band to wear to show your support – at www.makepovertyhistory.org

Giving voice to Latin women

CIIR/ICD partner organisation *Mujer: Imágenes y Testimonios* (MIT – Woman: Images and Testimonies) is holding its third annual competition to gather the lived experiences and viewpoints of women.

The aim of the competition is both simple and ambitious: to open a space for expression so that Latin American women can reflect on their lives and claim their leading role in them.

The competition, which will be held simultaneously in Colombia, Ecuador, Costa Rica and Peru,

invites written testimonies and photos on the theme of migration. Latin women living in Europe are also encouraged to contribute their experiences.

Bárbara Ortiz, who was a CIIR/ICD development worker with MIT in Ecuador, says: 'Women: Images and Testimonies is not like other competitions. The aim is not to reward success, but to facilitate the empowerment of the women over their lives.'

For more information see www.mujerytestimonios.com.ec/convocatoria/presen.htm

No agreement on indigenous peoples' rights

THE UNITED NATION'S Decade of Indigenous People has drawn to a close without a final agreement on a UN declaration on indigenous peoples' rights, *reports Ailbhe Darcy*.

Work on the declaration began 10 years ago, and hundreds of consultations were carried out with indigenous representatives before a draft was finally completed with their approval. Agreement on the declaration was the decade's main goal – but several governments, especially the UK, the US, New Zealand and Australia, have blocked it.

Many indigenous representatives have accused the UK and US governments, in

particular, of collaborating to prevent the concept of collective rights being enshrined in the declaration. Collective rights are vital for tribal peoples: without them, governments can break up and destroy tribal peoples whose societies are often based on principles of collective land ownership.

Survival International, a worldwide organisation supporting tribal peoples, is pressing the UK government to change its mind and acknowledge that the recognition of tribal peoples' collective rights is crucial to their survival.

For more information see www.survival-international.org

Women assert role in peace-building

WOMEN from the war-torn region of Mindanao in the Philippines have committed themselves to work for the disarmament of Mindanao and take a leading role in resolving inter-clan violence, *writes Jane McGrory*.

The pledge came following a two-day conference in Davao in December attended by 100 local participants as well as women from Cambodia, Papua New Guinea, Sri Lanka and East Timor.

The women of Mindanao used the conference as a platform to advocate for greater involvement of women in the on-going peace process between the Philippines government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. From the government side, this call was quickly heeded: the Presidential Advisor to the Peace Process issued a statement recommending that two of the four seats on the government peace panel be reserved for women.

Irene Santiago, chair of the Mindanao Commission on Women which hosted the conference, said that the women had learned the lessons of other peace processes where poor representation of women meant that women's issues were side-stepped and their access to post-conflict assistance limited. Their message was clear: there will be no real peace until women's rights and needs are met.

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Read the new CIIR Comment *A culture of peace: Women, faith and reconciliation* (sent to CIIR members with this interact or available to download from www.ciir.org).

CIIR lobbies Vatican on GM

CIIR HAS WRITTEN TO THE VATICAN calling for clarification on the Church's position on genetic modification (GM) and urging it not to promote GM crops as a solution to world hunger, *writes Finola Robinson*.

In a letter sent on 5 January to Cardinal Renato Martino of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, CIIR executive director Christine Allen says that placing too much emphasis on a technological solution to world

hunger ignores the structural questions of inequitable distribution of and access to food.

She wrote: 'Couching the debate in terms of production mistakenly presents world hunger as a problem of insufficient food production.'

To read the letter in full, to read CIIR's position paper on GM, and/or to see a draft letter that you can use to write to the Vatican, go to www.ciir.org and click on **news**, or use the search facility (keyword 'Vatican').



An organic rice farmer in the Philippines: organic agriculture is under threat from the promotion of GM crops.

The strong women of Yemen

Yemeni society is conservative and male-dominated – yet it is women who hold the country's health services together, writes **Alastair Whitson**

IT'S NOT YET NINE O'CLOCK but already the heat is building up like a wall you can't get past. Our car skids along a dirt road that is more desert than track. There are no markers but we get directions from a man riding a motorbike across the sand as if it were a snake.

We come to some thorny bushes peppered with the wind-blown detritus of modern civilisation – plastic bags and other rubbish. Suddenly a village rises from the sand and scrub, the walls of the houses the same colour as the land on which they stand. The village unfolds like a magic trick as we drive through it, to a school on the far edge, beyond it nothing but the shimmering horizon.

The classrooms are empty except for the sand, blown in drifts across the floors and into the corners. One

classroom, however, is being used during the school holidays for a six-week training course for traditional birth attendants from the villages hidden in the surrounding desert: Saa'dia, Shariff, Al-Qwatra.

Women in black

Inside the room, 15 women, completely covered in black from head to toe, are crouched against the wall. These are the traditional birth attendants (TBAs). We cannot even see their eyes. But as we get talking to them, the shapes start to shift. A hand appears from under a cloak to gesture, before being withdrawn again. Some of the women speak out, others are silent. The voices rise and fall and begin to establish the women's character and age.

We learn that the women are in their 30s and upwards, some as old as 60. They already have many years' experience of assisting with simple deliveries in their villages – one has been a TBA for 30 years. The role is a prestigious one that brings respect in the village, but until now, they have had no formal training.

In the past, when there were complications with a birth, the women used just to retreat for prayer. The course teaches the women to recognise potential problems such as breech babies and refer pregnant women to female health workers in the nearest health



Muna uses an anatomical drawing she herself drew as a visual aid during a training session for traditional birth attendants.

unit. The dangers of traditional practices are discussed – such as feeding butter to babies as soon as they are born because people believe this ensures they will grow up to be fluent orators.

Another world

The course focuses on safe deliveries, proper hygiene, good practice. The trainer, Muna, is a lively, confident woman from the training department in Hodeidah, 40 miles away. She has an easy rapport with the women, speaking the local dialect. We realise that the burqas and shawls, the submissive postures, are for our benefit. When we leave, the women will uncover their faces, move about freely, laugh and joke with each other.

Fifteen years ago, it used to be much more liberal in rural areas. Women wore colourful cloths instead of just black, and often their faces were uncovered. In the last decade, under the prevailing culture of fundamentalism, rural society has become much more conservative. But when no men are present, the women uncover and are freer. It is another world that we, as male visitors, simply will not see.

Muna, a registered midwife, has so far trained 10 groups of TBAs since she herself was trained as a trainer by CIIR/ICD development workers. She demonstrates the teaching aids she uses: the teaching relies heavily on visual aids, as many of the women are illiterate. One TBA says: 'We need to be literate; we will learn in the afternoons if we get the chance.'

Different reality

The women's commitment is unquestionable – as Zara Nouman, a CIIR/ICD development worker who is herself part Yemeni, explains: 'When I first came to train nurses and midwives, people said: "Go back to Sana'a [the capital], you will not find people to train." It was difficult at first. I would go to every home, every school, and they would say "no way"; but now they come and ask to do the training with us.'

The area where the TBA training is taking place is, says Zara, a very conservative area. 'People said: "We won't allow women trainers and we won't allow women to be trained";

but we sent two trainers to train TBAs, and attendance was really high because people want to learn. It's a very cooperative place. What we were told and what is the reality are totally different.'

The reality of maternal and child health (MCH) services in Yemen is that they are nominally managed by men, but effectively run by women. A few miles away, in the town of Beit el Faqih, we visit the MCH centre situated next door to the hospital. In 1999 CIIR/ICD helped to convert the hospital's old administrative buildings into an MCH centre. A welcoming environment was created by planting trees and erecting a sun shade in the courtyard.

Two development workers, Habiba Osman and Mariam Bakhour, trained the female health workers, devised a patient in-flow and out-flow system, and started mapping the area (identifying the living circumstances and health needs of the local population). There was suspicion at first, but now hundreds of women visit the MCH centre every month, for ante-natal care, deliveries, post-natal care, vaccinations, family planning services and health advice.

Role models

The health workers who provide the service are all women – many of them working for little or no pay. One woman in the vaccination room had worked there for six years, but was not on the payroll. She was prepared to work without pay to provide a service, in the hope that when money became available to take on another worker, she would get the job.

This is a common story, and for these women there is a fine line between commitment and exploitation. Fortunately, there are role models to show that women can succeed in Yemen's male-dominated society. One such is Bahja Abdulla Essa, a CIIR/ICD counterpart who now heads the health training department in Hodeidah governorate. Bahja has recently completed a short contract with CIIR/ICD as community participation coordinator for the district health committees of six districts.

'There are a lot of men – including



A female health worker weighs a baby.

high officials – on the district health committees,' says Bahja. 'Men are reluctant to accept a woman in my position, yet I take it as a positive challenge to prove that I can do it.'

Bahja describes how she took 24 people – directors of health facilities and district administrators – to visit other district health systems in south Yemen. 'The men were complaining, saying: "We are being led by a woman",' says Bahja. 'I told them that Queen Sheba was leader of this land and if that was good enough for their ancestors then it is good enough for them.' The men now strongly support the community participation project. 'It's given me a lot of confidence to prove that women have a strong role to play,' says Bahja.

In the final room we visited at the Beit el Faqih MCH centre, we met Dr Nadia Qaid, the first woman from the Beit el Faqih area to qualify as a doctor. A young woman, she had recently completed her training at Sana'a university, and had chosen to return to work in her home area.

Previously, the centre had employed a Russian doctor. Now, the doctor serving the women and children of Beit el Faqih is a Yemeni – and a woman. From traditional birth attendants to doctors, MCH services are in the hands of women – and they are proving that they can deliver.

Alastair Whitson is CIIR's senior editor.

THE TARMAC ROAD from Hodeidah slices through the desert towards the mountains hovering like a mirage in the distance. We drive past dunes, the wind blowing sand across the road in front of us. Yet beside the dunes whole sections of land are parcelled off and ploughed for planting. The desert plain seems bleak and uninviting, yet people have carved out a life here.

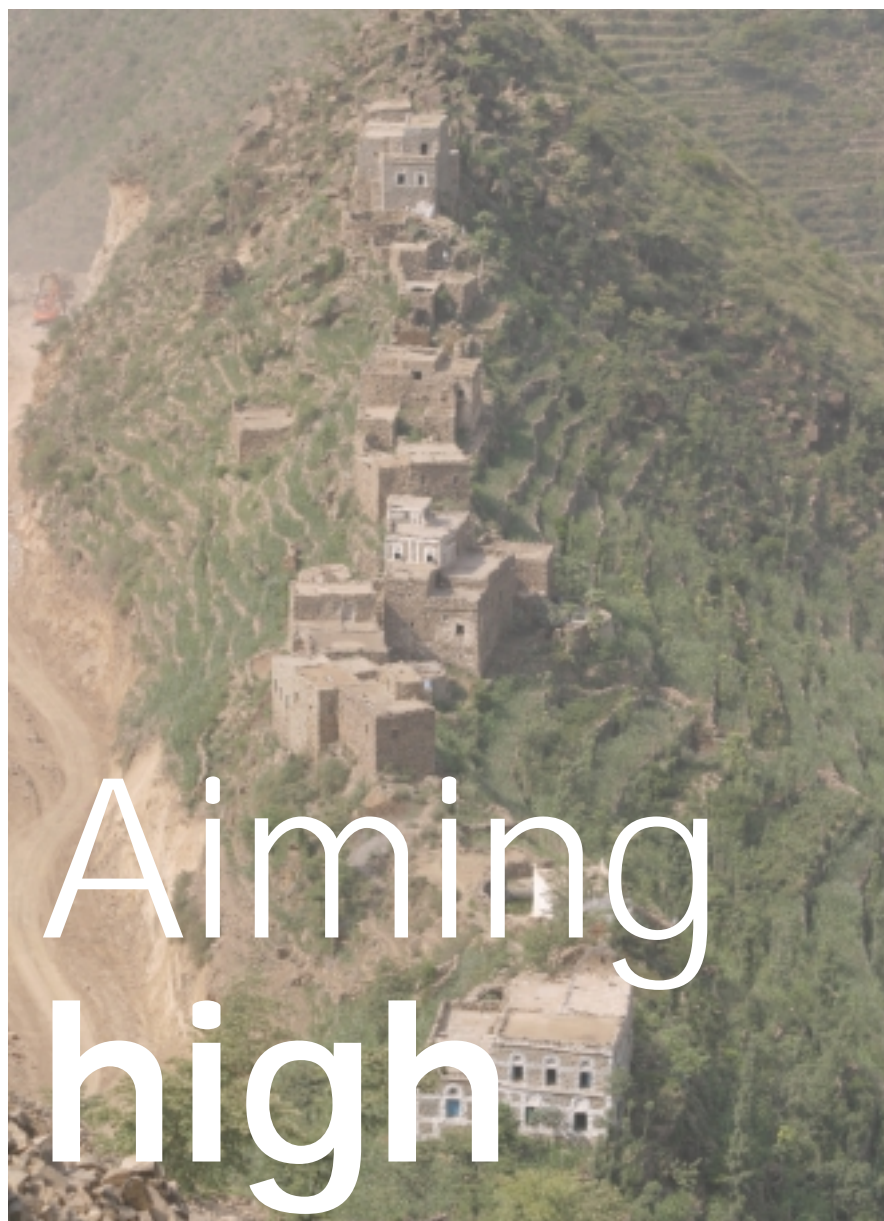
Abruptly, we swerve off the tarmac and onto a rough track. Within minutes, we are climbing up the sides of a valley, the ridges above us dotted with houses that seem almost to float in the sky. We zig-zag up sheer inclines, the hillsides above, below and beyond us decorated with terraces that climb ever upwards like giant staircases to the heavens. The terraces, ingeniously constructed in this impossible terrain, are planted with corn and qat trees. Even here, in this overwhelming landscape, people are living not by resisting, but by embracing their environment.

Savage beauty

Yet the relentless march of modern civilisation has arrived to tame and, perhaps, transform this savagely beautiful land. Rounding a bend, we are confronted by a huge earth-moving machine tearing away at the mountainside. The track is being widened and levelled, and in two years' time the rough, four-hour drive up to the village of Jebin will be a tarmac, two-lane highway.

The road will emerge onto the lip of a mountain valley, a natural amphitheatre topped by a ridge that offers the village of Jebin up to the clouds. It is a spectacular setting, remote and forbidding. Yet it is here that the new governor of Raymah, the mountain area of which Jebin is the linchpin, plans to build a new provincial capital.

For many years the remoteness of Raymah has been both its blessing and its curse. Previously part of the governorate of Sana'a, the nation's capital and even now a full day's hard driving from Raymah, this mountain region has struggled because of its isolation. Forgotten and overlooked by politicians in the big city, government services in Raymah were practically non-existent.



The remote mountain region of Raymah is rising to the challenge of providing sustainable rural health services, writes [Alastair Whitson](#)

Focus on training

When CIIR first started working in Yemen in 1974 (as the British Organisation for Community Development – BOCD), the community from Raymah went to Sana'a to ask BOCD for its help. In the words of the current CIIR/ICD country representative in Yemen, Abdulla Al Syari, 'they asked BOCD to come, and when BOCD came, it saw no services at all'.

That was the start of a long CIIR/ICD involvement in Raymah. Initially development workers directly provided health care to the region's people. But from 1981, when the government adopted primary health care as a system to deliver

health care, CIIR/ICD development workers began to provide formal training and supervision of primary health care workers. CIIR/ICD also mobilised communities to build health facilities: the community provided the land, while CIIR/ICD fundraised for buildings or renovations, and for equipment and furniture.

Many of the people trained by CIIR/ICD are still there, still providing health care services. Fatima Ghalib was trained in 1984, and 20 years on is still working in Jebin health centre on child growth monitoring and vaccination. 'The difference now is that we don't rely on expat workers, we rely on

The road to Raymah: houses cling to the ridge as earth-movers tear away the hillside for the new road.

Yemenis who have been trained,' she says. 'We now do more preventive health care, and our health education messages have brought new awareness to the people.'

As Abdulla Al Syari explains, CIIR/ICD's focus is very much on training: 'these trained people are always going to be there – the training and skills will not disappear from their heads and they will continue to work in Yemen.'

Lack of resources

However, trained health personnel cannot do their jobs without resources. When CIIR/ICD left Jebin in 1991, health services gradually deteriorated due to a lack of ongoing government support. So in 1995, CIIR/ICD returned with a new approach: training combined with building management structures that would lead to community ownership and sustainable health services.

In 1996, a Yemeni development worker was recruited to help catalyse the setting up of a district health committee system to provide community co-management of health services. This was underpinned by a cost-sharing system (reducing reliance on patchy government funding) and a revolving drug fund (to ensure the continuous availability of drugs).

'The aim was for affordable and sustainable health care for Jebin, to provide a model for other districts in Raymah and rural Yemen to follow,' says Al Syari.

CIIR/ICD is committed to supporting the implementation of district health systems as the way forward for Yemen. As development worker Dr Ahmed Hamoud, working as a health manager in Hodeidah on the Tehama desert plain, says: 'The district health system is the cornerstone for reform – for bringing health provision down from government level to the people. If people can participate directly in running the health system, can feel ownership and commitment, then this is good for sustainability.'

Hands of the people

Unfortunately, resources continue to be a problem. During our visit, Fatima Ghalib complains about the lack of free vitamins and iron pills for mothers and children, while Fatuma Al Aroosi, another CIIR/ICD trainee who is now herself a trainer of female primary health care workers, takes the opportunity to remind the new director of health for Raymah, Dr Faisal Al Saeedi, that they need resources. Dr Faisal acknowledges the problem, but his hands are tied: three months into his job, he had still not been given a budget.

It is hoped that the creation of a new governorate of Raymah, with



Nick Sireau/CIIR

Two small boys get in on the act as Fatuma Al Aroosi makes her point.

Jebin as its administrative centre, will help to solve these problems. But ultimately, the nation's health strategy will stand or fall on the success of the district health system. It is a system that puts the solutions back in the hands of the people.

As Abdulla Al Syari says: 'District health systems should be to the benefit of the people. They should be controlled by the people. They should not shy away from delivering services to the poor. They should not let government off the hook from responsibility for delivering health care. And they should be sustainable.'

Alastair Whitson is CIIR's senior editor.

Primary health care in Hodeidah

In Hodeidah, on the western coast of Yemen, CIIR/ICD has supported the health office since 1992, *writes Nick Sireau*. CIIR/ICD development workers here helped to consolidate and strengthen the skills of health office staff and health workers in urban and rural areas as well as to develop a referral system for health services within the city.

By placing its development workers in key areas – such as health education, statistics, and maternal and child health – it has strengthened the health system through training and skills transfer, according to a review of the CIIR/ICD Yemen programme in 2001 by consultant Sharon Beatty.

The wider impact is shown by the work of the health education department, which has raised awareness about health issues by working with local groups such as the radio station, girl and boy scouts, the women's union, local school teachers, health workers, local leaders, and mosques. More than 240 health education messages were aired on the radio over a period of one year.

But the main focus is on 'developing the capacity of health care workers,' says Abdulla Al Syari, CIIR/ICD's country representative in Yemen. 'Since 1991, we've trained 416. Training takes between one and three years. We take full responsibility for the training and then they go back to their villages for at

least three years before they can move on somewhere else.' The drop-out rate is low, at nine per cent, and even these are mainly girls who marry into other areas and so have to leave.

Development worker Zara Nouman says: 'We have a different way of working to other agencies. Other NGOs come in with packaged solutions and tell people what to do. But when they pull out, all that they built comes crashing down as there's been no transfer of skills.'

'We're different. We don't promise anything we can't deliver. We're here to transfer skills and train people, so that when we move out, they can carry on themselves.'

Nick Sireau is CIIR's head of communications.

Positive results

Yemen's health services are starting to take a proactive approach to HIV and AIDS, writes **Alastair Whitson**

PEOPLE WHO WENT to the Central Laboratory in Sana'a for an HIV test used to have to go to a small window on the outside of the building to get the result. If it was negative, you were given the result and you went away; if it was positive, you were called into a side room where you were told: 'There's a problem with your test, come back tomorrow'.

This approach should now be a thing of the past following the completion of Yemen's first training course on voluntary and confidential counselling and testing (VCCT). The three-month course, run by CIIR/ICD development worker Aidan Strain, taught trainees pre-test and post-test counselling skills, enabling them to discuss risk reduction strategies with clients and to pass on test results in a sensitive manner.

'This is a new thing for Yemen,' says Arwa Al Adimi, one of the trainees. 'People will need to get used to the idea that if they come for a test they will also receive some advice and information.'

Breaking taboos

Talking about HIV and AIDS at all is a new thing for Yemen. Until quite recently it was effectively a taboo subject. When the first AIDS case surfaced in the mid-1990s, the country was totally unprepared. At the time CIIR/ICD was running a refugee health centre in Sana'a, and medical staff from the centre went to the hospital daily to tend to the patient. 'No hospital staff would touch him due to lack of information,' says CIIR/ICD country representative Abdulla Al Syari.

There is still an undeniable stigma around HIV and AIDS. Another VCCT trainee, Ibtisam Abdulla Al Thubhany, says: 'The attitude of the community here is so bad. Some

people even suggest that people who are HIV positive should have it stamped across their forehead.'

However, attitudes are slowly changing. In February 2000, CIIR/ICD organised a seminar that brought together senior government and health administration policy makers, security people, journalists and NGO representatives to discuss HIV and AIDS. 'Up until then policy makers from different sectors had not come together to discuss HIV and AIDS in Yemen,' says Al Syari. Now the country has a national AIDS strategy – in which the VCCT training programme is a key element.

Powerful influence

'VCCT is recognised as the first building block in any national HIV and AIDS care and prevention programme,' says Aidan Strain. If people are testing positive, then funding can be sought for support services and treatment services, and for promoting community and self-help groups; if people are testing negative, then the counselling that comes with a test will start to have

an impact on risk behaviours, help make HIV less of a taboo subject, and perhaps restrict the spread of the virus.

The VCCT model uses the powerful influence of the HIV testing experience to focus the client on risk reduction. But as Aidan (an Englishman) explains, the model had to be adapted to fit Yemeni views. 'It's culturally sensitive to talk about sex at all,' says Aidan. 'We've had to change the way we approach these topics, and encourage the trainees to adapt the model further to fit Yemeni cultural norms.'

The aim of the training is to provide Yemen with a pool of national experts on VCCT who can introduce and disseminate good practice throughout the country. At the round-up session for the day's training, Aidan says that 31 tests were done that day – and there are two positive results to give. 'The big challenge now is to start giving people positive results,' he tells the trainees. 'It's quite a hurdle to get over – but everyone needs to do it because it's going to be an everyday occurrence.'

The extent of HIV and AIDS in Yemen is not accurately known, yet Dr Saeed Al Shaibani, director of the Central Laboratory in Sana'a, says: 'In the past, we did not have the cases we have now. The increase is frightening.' The national AIDS strategy, of which the VCCT training programme is the first stage, has not come a moment too soon.

Alastair Whitson is CIIR's senior editor.



Aidan Strain talks to VCCT trainees.

Nick Sireau/CIIR

WHEN IT HAPPENED minds came together. Struggles converged like many rivulets forming a powerful river. Floating hopes joined to become an unstoppable, collective Hope. It all flowed towards the future.

This was the force of the thousands of radical spirits who came together at the Zimbabwe Social Forum (ZSF) in central Harare at the end of October. Problems were attacked, common struggles found. Visions of the society we want abounded, strategies were laid out. It felt like the future had appeared on the horizon.

Webs that empower

Believing in the importance of the process as much as the event, our months of meetings were open, transparent and directly democratic. Those of us creating the Freedom Youth Camp to be held at the ZSF believed the tools we use must build the house we want. So our meetings were held with the fighting concepts of horizontality and participation. We sewed new webs of power, webs that empower.

The three-day event was an eruption of diversity. The Freedom Youth Camp was a space where hundreds of young radicals had fiery discussions on sexism, grassroots democracy, non-violent direct action, alternative youth culture and a web of other subversive realities.

Grassroots democracy

In the camp the Students' Solidarity Trust hosted a heated discussion on student victimisation which saw youths erupting into *toyi toyi* war dances then sitting down, sweaty, to look at the history of the struggles of Zimbabwe university

Webs were woven uniting the oppressed as many struggles became one

students against Rhodesian colonialism, IMF-imposed structural adjustment programmes and, now, a centralised and controlling bureaucracy. New forms of organisation were the key words as students at the discussion talked of the need to organise grassroots people outside of the traditional hierarchies.

The debate on grassroots democracy facilitated by the Zimbabwe Youth Survival Alternative Project saw youth giving birth to visions of community

Weaving a way forward

The Zimbabwe Social Forum offered new hope for Zimbabwe's people, writes Samm Farai Monro

Howard Burditt/Reuters/CORBIS



Supporters of opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai outside the High Court in Harare. Initiatives like the Zimbabwe Social Forum are now promoting alternative approaches to grassroots democracy.

democracy where communities control the decisions that affect them and the resources around them. This is democracy that doesn't rely on distant 'leaders' but empowers communities to run their own lives with community assemblies and committees in charge of everything from their water to their schools.

The 2001 Argentinian social rebellion came to people's minds, where Argentinians rose up against the IMF and their country's economic chaos, and began to run their communities and factories. Ideas blossomed for building democracy from the grassroots: community discussion groups, economic cooperatives, radical drama groups...

Into the future

Meanwhile other tents saw young workers gathering to fight for a living wage and economic justice activists attacking global debt. HIV and AIDS

activists shouted about their need for free anti-retroviral drugs. Home-based care workers spoke of their exploitation and their desire for a regular salary. Constitutional militants strategised on how to win a new people-centred constitution through determined demonstrations and street actions. The future was being born.

The forum culminated in feelings of hope. Webs were woven uniting the oppressed as many struggles became one. Neoliberalism, patriarchy and centralised power were surrounded by these webs. Social justice and economic justice became fighting words linking one soul to another. A grassroots movement was born.

Samm Farai Monro describes himself as 'a Zimbabwean freedom fighter, performance poet, media activist, human being'.

Men in Nicaragua are tackling the ingrained culture of machismo, writes Nick Sireau

Turning the tide

TEN YEARS AGO, a group of men came together in Managua, Nicaragua, to talk about violence against women. Most of them were struggling with violence themselves, but were increasingly aware that their behaviour was out of control. As the discussions developed, they began questioning one of the most ingrained social traditions in Nicaraguan society – machismo.

A CIIR report (*Men changing: Power, masculinities and non-violence from Latin America to Europe*, 2002) describes machismo as ‘an aggressive form of masculinity that dictates how men should think, feel and behave to be considered “real men”.’ The report continues: ‘In much of Central and Latin America the idea that men are physically, intellectually and sexually superior to women is instilled into both sexes from an early age. This deeply rooted inequity is damaging to both men and women.’

Studies estimate that up to 70 per cent of Nicaraguan women have been victims of violence, mainly at the hands of their partners. For many men, physical violence, often with knives or guns, is the normal way of settling differences, according to the CIIR report. ‘Challenging machismo is therefore key to addressing not only domestic violence but a more general culture of violence,’ the report concludes.

More than just talk

As the group of men in Managua began discussing family violence, they gradually realised that what was needed was a major change in society. Says Xavier Muñoz, one of the founders of the group: ‘After some time, the women started saying to us, “It’s very nice to talk, but you’re not really doing anything.” So we decided to start an NGO.’

In May 2000, the Asociación de Hombres Contra la Violencia (the association of men against violence) was born. The organisation’s main focus is relations between men and women, although it does also look at men-men relations and men-children, in particular the father-child relationship. ‘For me it’s not always been easy to be a father. Kids make your hair turn white,’ says Xavier.

‘I’ve got a boy aged 15. It’s a difficult age, but also very rewarding. It makes me happy when he says he loves me and I say I love him too.’

Promoting gender equality is not an easy task, either. Xavier gives the example of one man from his group who went home one day after a workshop. His meal, prepared by his wife, was on the table. After he had finished eating it, he picked up the cutlery, went to the sink and washed it.

His wife, shocked, looked at him and said: ‘Even this you’re taking away from me.’ He realised that he had not even asked her if he could do this. ‘I didn’t talk to my wife about what I wanted to do. I decided everything myself. I was invading her last space,’ he later told the group.

Spreading the word

The association works in rural and urban areas, although Xavier says that often working with peasant farmers can be easier than with sophisticated city men. ‘They’re more authentic. They say, “I hit my wife because she doesn’t obey me.” Professionals, meanwhile, hide behind

elaborate arguments, theories and books.’

Following the success of the association’s work among men and its campaigns against violence, a CIIR/ICD development worker, Patrick Welsh, organised workshops to extend the initiative to other countries in the region. ‘Most of the participants were responsible for training within their organisations or were leaders and would then go on to share their experiences with other men,’ says Patrick. The initiative has also gained wide media coverage, while the association in Nicaragua has published, with CIIR’s support, a guide for groups of men who want to discuss in depth issues of violence and masculinity.

As Carmen Medina, CIIR/ICD’s country representative in El Salvador, who was closely involved in the project, says: ‘Women can relate to men who have been given the opportunity to rethink their masculinity. Indeed, they gradually become free men.’

Nick Sireau is CIIR’s head of communications.



Breaking down the barricades of machismo: a fisherman in Nicaragua.

Nick Sireau/CIIR



Women at a small toy manufacturing business assisted by ADIM.

Ready for business

A development organisation in Nicaragua is helping women get ahead in business, writes Nick Sireau

IT'S SATURDAY in the district of La Concepción, near Managua, the capital of Nicaragua. A group of farmers – including some women – are sitting in a circle, discussing what will happen on the Sunday. It's a major event for them: the first agricultural fair ever organised in the district, and it's taken months to prepare.

Life is difficult for small farmers in Nicaragua. They grow a variety of crops – including coffee, avocado, pineapple and *petaya* (yellow dragon fruit) – in a country where competition is intense. Products flood in from other Latin American countries, often at cheaper prices. Local markets are swamped with farmers selling similar produce. And with implementation of the Central America Free Trade Area (CAFTA) looming, the situation is going to get worse. Already, they have to dump a lot of produce when they don't sell enough.

New prospects

That's why they've turned to the Asociación Alternativa para el Desarrollo Integral de Las Mujeres (ADIM – the alternative association for the total development of women). ADIM is a CIIR/ICD partner organisation that helps

local communities and individuals with business and human resource development. It offers training and small grants so that businesses can develop.

With ADIM's support, the small group of farmers in La Concepción prepared an action plan for their work, which included planning the fair.

Says Efigenio Castro, the president of the coordinating group organising the fair: 'There are 40,000 people living in this area, yet we've never done a fair before. All the other markets are saturated, so we're hoping this one will provide an opening for us.'

The action plan has also included converting from chemical to organic farming. Two staff from CONDEGA, another CIIR/ICD partner in Nicaragua, visited La Concepción to train the farmers in organic composting.

Says Efigenio: 'Chemical farming is more expensive and damaging. The costs of production are high. Organic farming has allowed us to reduce our costs and prices.'

Managing development

Sandra Monge and Elizabeth Mora are development workers from Costa Rica placed with ADIM. The organisation,

which is 10 years old, mainly works with women – 1,200 in all – in three districts near Managua: Masaya, La Concepción and Rivas. The project they work with was set up in 2000 to support small businesses. It provides training for women in a range of business management skills such as sales, planning and basic accounting. The target is to get 525 women into the small business sector – so far, they've reached 80 per cent of this.

Says Sandra: 'The women's education is very limited – many never finished primary school. The challenge has been to form a training programme covering the technical areas of business management in an accessible way.'

The project works by training coordinators who then train the beneficiaries – a training of trainers approach. They mainly work with women who already have small businesses, but who are struggling and have not developed them further.

Business plan

Says Elizabeth: 'There are a range of reasons why women don't expand their businesses beyond subsistence levels. Generally, this is because they don't have a vision of what they can achieve. Their self-esteem is too low and their domestic responsibilities too high.'

Using a methodology known as popular education – which takes the social reality of participants as the start point – ADIM helps the women develop their plans and exchange ideas. At first, they look at what small changes could be done quickly to improve their businesses. Then they look at the longer term plans. Sometimes, groups will take a particular woman's business as a case study to discuss in depth.

Says Josefa Cisneros, who heads ADIM's business development project run by Sandra and Elizabeth: 'A lot of what we do is about developing the women's sense of identity. We even have training modules on communication, health and sanitation, sexuality and identity, negotiation techniques, dealing with conflict, and being autonomous and setting goals.'

It's a long process, but one that is increasingly bearing fruit.

Nick Sireau is CIIR's head of communications.

WHEN I WAS ASKED to lead a radio programme in the province of Azuay in Ecuador on sexual health and HIV and AIDS, my first reaction was: 'But what do I know about this?' Like many people, I had some general knowledge of the subject, but no particular expertise.

'Calm down,' my colleagues told me, 'you will have access to specific information on the subject and we will be here to give you a hand.' So it was that I threw myself into this adventure, which won me over from the start.

The 'Facing up to sexual health' programme is an interactive space for information, questions and debate on sexual health and HIV and AIDS, in a frank and open manner, without taboos and without mincing words. The initiative came from RedSIDAzuay (the Azuay AIDS network) and is broadcast on the radio station Ondas Azuayas. It was able to count, from the start, on the support of Mujer: Imágenes y Testimonios (Woman: Images and Testimonies), the organisation where I worked as a CIIR/ICD development worker, and the CIIR/ICD office in Ecuador.

Everybody's problem

The first question facing us was how to deal with such a controversial topic through a medium like radio and in a conservative society like that of Cuenca in Ecuador. From the beginning we were

A radio programme in Ecuador is confronting head-on the need to raise awareness about HIV and AIDS, writes **Bárbara Ortiz**

Talking out loud

clear that it was vital to present HIV and AIDS as a problem present in society from which no one is exempt.

It was therefore necessary to demystify the illness, and at the same time to stop identifying it with certain groups of persons, since HIV is transmitted according to our behaviour and habits. We had the inestimable help of Maria, a woman from rural Cuenca living a perfectly 'normal' life, who discovered several years after the death of her husband that she had contracted the virus from him.

So far the programme has dealt with a good number of themes on basic questions of sexual health and HIV and AIDS: can I become pregnant in my first sexual relationship? If I suspect that my husband has sexual relationships outside marriage, can I ask him to use a condom when he is with me? What are the ways

in which HIV is transmitted?

The programme aims to treat the questions simply and naturally, emphasising the positive elements and avoiding over-dramatising the situation of people living with HIV and AIDS. However, we have also kept up with shattering news such as the rapid development of the funerary industry in Costa de Marfil owing to the great number of people who are dying from AIDS-related illnesses.

Positive reactions

Reactions during the programme have been very positive. Many people have stressed the importance of opening a space where themes that are taboo in Cuenca society, and are difficult to speak of in other places, can be dealt with publicly and openly. People have also welcomed the educational tone of the programme and the approach of dealing with issues through conversation and dialogue.

Others comment that the programme meets a need to accustom ourselves to talk naturally about sexuality, sexually transmitted diseases, teenage pregnancy, and HIV and AIDS. These are topics about which everyone needs to be aware, so that we can consciously take the decisions which help us to protect ourselves.

'Facing up to sexual health' has only been on air for a few months, but it has a great future. From one Wednesday to the next, with the support and the involvement of all those who listen to us, the programme is becoming an innovative alternative in Ecuadorian radio.

Bárbara Ortiz was a CIIR/ICD development worker with Mujer: Imágenes y Testimonios (Woman: Images and Testimonies). She is from Spain.

HIV and AIDS in Ecuador

Pablo Corral / VICORBS



Two women at Cuenca market: the radio programme will help raise awareness about HIV and AIDS among Ecuadorian women.

IN ECUADOR the numbers of HIV positive people and of AIDS cases have grown over recent years. The coastal province of Guayas has nearly 90 per cent of the cases in the whole country. As in other countries, at first most of those affected were men who had sex with men, sex workers and their clients. But now most cases affect the wives and partners of those men – women who do not generally know the risk they are running and, for cultural reasons, do not ask their sexual partners to use condoms. The prognosis for Ecuador is that the epidemic will continue, mainly in groups like young people and women, who have less access to information on how to protect themselves.



A woman at a sewing project, one of a number of small businesses seeking to empower women

The US-backed centre-right National Opposition Union defeated the FSLN. Since the 1996 elections, the Liberal party has been in government, although the president from 1996 to 2001, Arnoldo Aleman, is currently awaiting trial on charges of corruption, fraud and embezzlement.

Development issues

Nicaragua has not suffered from the effects of political instability and corruption alone. On 29 October 1998 Hurricane Mitch struck, causing extensive damage. This was followed by a severe drought in 2001. These events pushed environmental degradation to the top of the agenda. Top-layer soils vital to successful agriculture were washed away and water sources were contaminated. Environmental deterioration continues, contributing to the vulnerability of Nicaragua's farmers.

New free trade agreements with the US and other countries are expected to deepen poverty, as the local industry is vulnerable to strong competition from the multinationals. Poverty and social exclusion hit rural areas particularly badly, and women often suffer most of all. The country's foreign debt is nearly US\$6 billion.

CIIR/ICD in Nicaragua

CIIR/ICD has been working in Nicaragua since the 1970s and currently has 10 development workers in post. We work with a national network of NGOs who focus on building a just society and overcoming the main causes of environmental vulnerability. Programmes address gender relations, strengthen citizen participation and promote agro-ecological practices and sustainable agricultural development.

country profile: Nicaragua

CENTRAL AMERICA is the region with the greatest inequality in the world, and within that region the country with the greatest inequality is Nicaragua. The richest 10 per cent of the population control almost half of the country's resources, while the poorest 10 per cent receive less than one per cent of the national income. Nicaragua's people have had to deal not only with the impact of years of political instability, but also with the aftermath of natural disasters that have killed thousands and left hundreds of thousands homeless.

History

After colonisation by Spain for over 300 years, Nicaragua became an independent republic in 1840. In the 1920s a guerrilla campaign led by Augusto Cesar Sandino was launched against US military presence in the country. Sandino's assassination on the orders of the subsequent president, General Anastasio Somoza Garcia, ended the rebellion. The Somoza family ruled the country with US backing from 1937 until the 1979 revolution, led by the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN).

The FSLN nationalised lands held by the Somoza family, turning them into cooperatives, and launched a national literacy and health campaign. They received widespread popular support and in elections in 1984 Daniel Ortega was elected president with two-thirds of the vote.

Members and supporters of the Somoza regime had fled to neighbouring Honduras, where the US continued to support them and provide them with arms. 1981 saw the beginning of the US-backed Contra rebel attacks against the Sandinistas.

A peace agreement was signed in March 1988 and elections were held.

Facts and Figures

Population	5,128,517
Population living below \$1/day (1990-2001)	82.3%
Population living below national poverty line (1987-2000)	48%
Maternal mortality	150 per 100,000 live births
Infant mortality	36 deaths per 1,000 live births
Under 5 child mortality	43 deaths per 1,000 live births
Literacy rate	67.5%

Breaking the silence

CIIR/ICD development worker Anne Rimmer is helping Namibia tackle the deep-rooted problem of domestic violence, writes Lucy Cathcart

FROM THE WINDOW of Anne Rimmer's office at the Legal Assistance Centre, situated high on a hill overlooking Namibia's capital city, Windhoek, the city appears tranquil and sleepy. But in her own line of work Anne knows it's not as peaceful as it seems. Domestic violence, rape, and other acts of brutality against women are prevalent in this society.

The Legal Assistance Centre (LAC) works to promote human rights and access to justice in Namibia, and acts for people who cannot afford legal fees. In addition to general human rights cases, the centre also deals with cases relating to discrimination against people living with HIV and AIDS, and cases involving land and housing disputes.

Anne is based at the Gender Research and Advocacy Project of the LAC. 'The gender unit,' says Anne, 'makes such a tangible difference to women's lives by successfully advocating for legislation to protect women.' One of the most recent pieces of legislation to come into effect as a result of LAC's lobbying work was the Combating of Domestic Violence Act.

Ground-breaking work

The scale of the domestic violence problem in Namibia is overwhelming. A study published in 2003 stated that 'one in five women are in an abusive relationship, and more than a third of women report having suffered physical or sexual abuse at the hands of an intimate partner.'

'That's why this piece of legislation was so crucial,' explains Anne. 'But our job isn't just to advocate for legislation. We also make available simple guides to

the legislation so that people understand the law and their rights. We train key service providers, such as police, magistrates and social workers, on their duties under the law, as well as educating rural women about their rights.'

Namibia is around three times the size of the UK, but has a population of only 1.6 million. With such a thinly spread population, it is extremely difficult to ensure that new legislation is translated into reality. The LAC's work to inform people of the issues and their rights is ground-breaking, both in its scope and in its creativity.

For example, it commissioned five films on domestic violence, each following the same story but set in five different communities and languages, and a series of radio dramas, produced in four languages (Afrikaans, Oshiwambo, Herero and Nama/Damara) and aimed at rural audiences. It sponsored a website design contest involving 32 schools, and brought together school students and local artists in six rural communities across Namibia to design and paint murals depicting

positive solutions to the problem of domestic violence. One head teacher referred to the murals as 'education on walls'.

Unequal odds

Anne, who worked in the UK section of Amnesty International before moving to Namibia, is intensely proud of the achievements of the Gender Research and Advocacy Project – but one of her constant struggles is simply to find the funding to keep the project going. She says: 'The challenge is that Namibia is classed as a middle-income country, which many donors do not wish to fund. However, this hides the fact that Namibia is one of the most unequal societies in the world in terms of income. So the high incomes of the few hide the desperate poverty of the many.'

Despite the challenges ahead, Anne is an irrepressible optimist. She is excited about the prospects for the future: 'A whole new programme of training on advocacy, to empower the most disadvantaged to advocate for their own rights, is now underway. We're also working on getting some new laws passed to protect children. And I'm also going to train the unit's assistant, Naomi Kisting, as a trainer so that she can continue the work I've started. There is still much to be done.'

But Anne knows better than anyone else just how vital the work is and what a difference it makes to the lives of ordinary women. That's where her motivation comes from.

Lucy Cathcart was CIIR's membership coordinator. She visited Namibia in September 2004.



Lucy Cathcart/CIIR

Anne Rimmer (right) with her colleague at the Gender Research and Advocacy Project, Naomi Kisting.

Wonders to behold

God's precious gift of biodiversity must be protected, writes Edward Echlin

THE WHOLE BIODIVERSE EARTH praises God, as in the psalmist's concluding words: 'Let everything that breathes praise the Lord. Praise the Lord.' (Ps. 150:6) And biodiversity is exciting. As Annie Dillard says, 'If we were to judge nature by its commonsense or likelihood we wouldn't believe the world existed. In nature improbabilities are the stock in trade. The whole creation is one lunatic fringe ... No claim of any or all revelations could be so far fetched as a single giraffe.'

Jesuits Peter Henriott and Roland Lesseps call food 'a global common good' not to be hoarded or violated. Every food variety has distinctive genes making pink grapefruits, woolly sheep, even trees that bear apples. Their genes, said John Seymour, 'are what makes them *them*.'

The entrepreneurs at multinational corporations, and their scientists, say genetic manipulation is necessary to 'feed the world'. In fact it is not. Despite decades of rampaging chemical agribusiness, deforestation, lorry and air food miles, unnecessary air travel (sometimes by self-styled 'environmentalists'), migrations and population growth, the earth – through repentant, sustainable, regenerative husbandry – can still feed its humans.

Different cultures, in varied ecosystems, can assist each other to live sustainably and locally with proven sustainable methods. Europeans owe a debt to indigenous people who gave us potatoes and sweet corn. I select and save seeds from my blight resistant tomato plants. For these I am indebted to Meso-Americans. I don't need to genetically modify (or mutilate) my tomatoes. They produce delicious yellow currant-sized tomatoes outdoors into November.

I also grow a scrambling bean, for

eating fresh or dried, which Cherokee Indians trained up sweet corn, the beans fixing nitrogen for the corn, the corn reciprocating as a biodegradable beanpole. I imitate the Indians by training Cherokee beans up my cordon apples. I also propagate, by cuttings and suckers, from successful fruit bushes. Even if they are 'patented' (how can anyone 'own' the rights to a berry?) I share rooted cuttings and suckers with other growers.

We can, and should, remunerate indigenous growers by encouraging them to preserve their precious, hereditary soil and plant wisdom, growing local varieties organically on family farms and holdings. We can also share with them varieties we have selected and grown here, such as, for example, Tom Putt multi-use apple, and Josephine de Malines, a New Year pear. We can also share technological discoveries, such as a stainless steel version of the ancient, sustainable herbicide (or weedkiller) called a hoe.

According to the United Nations FAO (Food and Agriculture Organisation), 75 per cent of agricultural biodiversity was lost last century. Many of our hereditary food varieties come from Mesopotamia. Ironically, occupiers now hinder Iraqis from saving seed, making them dependent on American corporations.

A biotechnology website, calling itself 'Truth about Trade and Technology', alleges that the Vatican is 'one of biotechnology's best friends'. This may be true of the US Embassy, some uninformed curia officers, and biotech financed scientists at the Pontifical Academy of Science. Other Vatican personnel, however, along with Christian environmentalists and NGOs everywhere – and with Genewatch, Irish Seed Savers, the NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) Commission for



Mark Howard

Environmental Cooperation, and IUCN (World Conservation Union) members from 140 countries (including 77 states and 114 government agencies) – demand precaution before releasing modified organisms into the earth community.

The introduction of exotic plants into island ecosystems – such as the British experience with rhododendrons and Japanese knotweed – and the Mexican experience of cross border contamination by genetically modified

How can you hold a moonbeam in your hand? Or 'own' crystal lemon cucumbers?

American maize demonstrate the wisdom of the precautionary principle before introducing foreign organisms into the environment.

The US Embassy to the Vatican, biotech corporations and their ingenuous enthusiasts should consider the harm to small growers, in developed and developing worlds, of pirating, modifying, and patenting indigenous food. How can you hold a moonbeam in your hand? Or 'own' crystal lemon cucumbers?

As God's representatives on earth we endorse the precautionary principle, selecting, saving, and propagating seeds and plants without genetic mutilation, even if business interests invite us to make their ways our own.

Edward P Echlin is visiting scholar, Sarum College, Salisbury; honorary research fellow, University College of Trinity & All Saints, Leeds; and author of The Cosmic Circle, Jesus and Ecology (Columba Press, 2004).

CIIR environmental calendar 2005



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- > to order a 2005 CIIR environmental calendar

Each month of this attractive desktop calendar features a striking image of our fragile and beautiful earth, allied to a hard-hitting message about environmental damage and vulnerability.

And at the end of each month, you don't just turn the page. Each image is designed to be detached and used as a postcard – send it to your friends and spread the message about our shared responsibility to protect the environment.

CIIR environmental calendar 2005 now only £3.50 inc p&p each. Send cheques payable to CIIR to:
CIIR Calendar Offer, Unit 3, Canonbury Yard, 190a New North Road, London N1 7BJ



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Please return this form to: CIIR, Freepost ND 6366, London N1 7BR