The 63rd Annual United Nations Department of Public Information/Non-Governmental Organizations Conference – was held in Melbourne, Australia, from 30 August to 1 September 2010. Titled "Advance Global Health: Achieve the MDGs", it was the first time that Australia hosted the United Nations event. It was also only the third time that the UNDPI/NGO Conference was held outside of United Nations Headquarters.

Pre-Conference Concert (29th/08/2010)

I did not attend this concert since I was living a long way from Melbourne city. However, I was told that it was spectacular and a memorable one. The concert was a welcome for all NGO delegates to the Conference in Melbourne.

On Monday morning, 0900, 30 August 2010, the opening ceremony for the 63rd Annual United Nations Development of Public Information/Non-Governmental Organisation (DPI/NGO) Conference was held in the Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre. There were more than 1,600 participants attending, representing more than 350 NGOs from 70-plus countries, more than 650 were health specialists who represented more than 200 NGOs. And there were more than 100 media outlets in the arena. As the haunting music of didgeridoos filled the large conference hall,
each speaker recognized the “original custodians of this land on which we stand, and all the elders past and present.”

Kiyotaka Akasaka UN Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information

The Opening Ceremony inspired passion toward achieving the MDGs. The opening remarks by United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information, Kiyotaka Akasaka brought more flavour to the conference. ‘Advance Global Health, Achieve the MDGs. The conference got more momentum when invited keynote speakers from the Australian Parliament, UNAIDS, an Aboriginal health advisor, and many more gave their speeches.

While the last four conferences were on human dignity and security, climate change, human rights, and nuclear disarmament, this years’ conference was focussed on global health. The aim of the conference was to provide a venue for NGOs working on the MDGs to collaborate and be effective deliverers of global health programmes thus to reaching the MDGs by 2015. Which was aimed at improving, preventing and achieving good and better health for every person living in the world? The projects of the NGOs presented were diverse and included chronic diseases, blindness, HIV/AIDS, drug use, migration, women empowerment, mental health, maternal and child health and indigenous health concerns.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)
1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
2. Achieve universal primary education
3. Promote gender equality and empower women
4. Reduce Child Mortality Rate
5. Improve maternal health
6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases
7. Ensure environmental sustainability
8. Develop a global partnership for development
One of the favourite speakers during the opening ceremony was Micheal Sidibe, the Executive Director of UNAIDS. He spoke of social justice as being an integral part of attending to any global health need. He also mentioned that the social movement to eradicate HIV/AIDS was the first of its kind; and suggested that this momentum need be continued for other diseases. His finishing talk reminded everyone that MDGs should be looked at as one and not individually as goal 1, goal 2 etc.

Workshops

Workshops were held after morning tea and after lunch.

All workshops were all very interesting and exciting that I really never sat down in one particular workshop for the full sessions. I tried to attend all the workshops to learn as much as I could, as NGOs were very inspiring in the work they were doing to achieve the MDGs and working to sustain and promote good health globally.

There were three workshops I sat down for about half way through were the Catholic Churches’ work in the highlands of PNG; how the church is helping people in remote PNG to fight against HIV/AIDS. I truly admire what the church is doing in that part of the world. Other churches should look at the work the Catholic church is doing and do the same. What I learned from that workshop was that, in Migendie hospital PNG, the sisters of the church set up mens’ clinic, where men go to discuss their problems and get their HIV/AIDS testing done.
Sr. Kiyenga and Sr. from Migendie Hospital, PNG. These are two of the committed Catholic Church workers serving the remote PNG in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

The other inspiring workshop was ‘Nyumbani (means home, in Kenya). This organisation was set by again by the Catholic church to help Children and Families Living with HIV/AIDS. This home was started in 1992 and has come along way in helping the orphans and the affected families. You can read about it more on the following link: www.nyumbani.org

The third workshop was a touching and emotional one; “Slipping through the Crack: Women and Infectious Disease (TB & TB/HIV)”. The speaker was HIV positive and shared true life experiences. She is also the Kenyan AIDS Consortium. Women are vulnerable to any infectious diseases and complications. Because of the traditional role they play as caregivers in the homes, they are often blamed for transmitting TB, and other diseases. TB treatment should be revised and so it will be pleasant medication to take. The treatment for TB is had not been revised since 1960s. Their message was, please revise the treatment regime for TB, and give more funds for TB.

Round Table Discussions.

The round table discussions were made up of several panels or speakers and questions were asked by the audience about specific topics or subjects of interest on the MDGs and the panel answered; but I thought sometimes, these discussions did get rowdy. I guess that is just normal.

The Role of NGOs and Civil Society in Helping Achieve the MDGs

This was an exciting session for me since the panel were all clinician and from across the globe. The panel had an Afghan education programmer, an Australia midwife from World Vision, an African doctor, and a Cuban physician. Although the
panel were from different continents, they spoke one language and commented that primary healthcare has declined in all developing countries, therefore the governments of each country must wake up and conduct programs to address these problem; and NGOs were asked to fill the gap where the governments could not fill.

Dr. Aleida Guevara, the Cuban physician, stated that healthcare is a right to the human race, so the right to life is non-negotiable. She went onto saying that, in order for NGOs to gain community support, an NGO must “NOT SAY, WHAT NEED TO BE DONE, and BUT DO WHAT NEED TO BE DONE”. According to another panel speaker, Dr. Ruth Bamela Engo-Tjega, the African doctor stated that often times because funding donors come from diverse backgrounds and often dictate relations, they segregate the NGOs. I think this is quite true for many developing countries.

Roundtable Discussion – Equity, Rights and Progress toward the MDGs

The main discussions was on data collection, where many times, the data is not accurate because of the many cultural barriers where it is difficult to get the correct information for analysis. There were opponents in data collection, statements such as data are numbers and these are meaningless to the vulnerable communities.

Dr. Claudio Shuftan, member of PHM and an adjunct professor at Tulane University stated that MDGs were ‘quick fixes’ that did not address the root of the problem, human rights violations. He further went onto saying that achieving the MDGs won’t solve the global health issue. Maybe he is correct in saying that the root of the problem is human rights violations, but I don’t know.

Day 2 (01/09/2010)

I met up with a PNG journalist who works with Radio Australia, Melbourne. She decided to do a short interview on air in tok pidgin. What this conference meant to me and also what are some ways I thought would be helpful to women to protect their children from communicable diseases and HIV/AIDS.

PNG Journalist, Melbourne based, Caroline Tiriman (left) and myself.
There were lots of stalls and larger NGOs, such as Save the Children, Rotary International, World Vision, it was just exciting. Meeting with people of different professions and how they view and express their knowledge was just awesome. I just could not stop listening and asking questions. I finally made contact with Rotary International, Save the Children and Breastfeeding NGO.

Day 3 (02/09/2010)

I forgot to mention that security was really tight; similar to that you would get at international airports. ID photo was to be worn at all times while in the conference arena. The registration was fast and efficient, no long queues.

This day was the signing of the Declaration document. Also, at the Declaration. CEO Tim Costello, World Vision called a motion to acknowledge the devastating floods in Pakistan, the delegates responded by giving contributions to go towards the flood victims.

Throughout the sessions, the millennium goals were emphasized over and over again and, although we may not reach the MDGs, we were encouraged to work together to achieve these goals in some way. The issues of population health were to be addressed seriously if we were to reach MDGs by 2015. NGO and UN collaboration was the way to go.

Closing session

The closing ceremony was at hand and was indeed quite emotional. Once again the delegates gathered in the large conference hall, where we faced the lighted boulders each representing or displaying the symbol of an MDG- The red banners changed to yellow as the sun began to set on the closing of our three-day journey. Kiyotaka Agasaka, head of the Department of Public Information, began by stating that, “We respect and acknowledge the custodians of this land and the elders, past and present, on which this conference is held. He went onto saying, “The most urgent task for us is to help quicken the pace of progress in meeting the MDGs. This is not the time to question the validity of the MDGs themselves; it is the time to roll up our sleeves and ensure they are sustainable after 2015.”
Mick Gooda, an aboriginal social justice commissioner and past CEO of the Center for Research on Aboriginal Health, made remarks on the challenges facing indigenous peoples worldwide. “Indigenous peoples are invisible in the original plans for the MDGs.” “We must ‘close the gap to bring indigenous health equality in a reasonable time.’ “Poverty, whether absolute or relative, is everyone’s business.”

Sir George Alleyne, chancellor of the University of West Indies, chairperson of the Department of Medicine and director emeriti of the World Health Organization, in his closing speech stated “There is a causal relationship between complete global health and meeting the MDGs. There can be an improvement in health, without a huge increase in wealth; but global health and MDGs will not be addressed unless we address the noncommunicable diseases, chronic care, and access-to-care issues we face.”

Christopher Varney, a dynamic former U.N. Youth Ambassador, moved all delegates with his passion and dedication, stated: “During our three-day conference, 75,000 children died a preventable death. …We are not gathered here for an end, we are gathered for the beginning of the next five years, and we must ask, how big is your hope?” “Let us resolve we will do everything to empower action for children’s health,” the entire audience stood to show our support and appreciation. He was the other of my favourite speakers at the Conference.

Jeffrey Huffins, chair of the DPI/NGO executive committee, “Nothing will replace the primary importance of people meeting, in person, for good, old-fashioned face time.” He referred to the passionate debates about the Declaration and reminded us that it “has strength only to the extent we are willing to advocate with our organizations.” He also announced that the United Nations had reached agreement with the City of Bonn, Germany, to host the Summit next September, which may carry the theme “Sustainable Societies, Responsible Citizens.”
The last speaker of the night was Conference Chair Mary Norton. She again challenged us to develop an action plan; the NGO Call to Action and resulting Declaration was almost unanimously passed. She stated “We achieved these tasks without allowing the perfect to be the enemy of the good,” She asked each country represented to submit the declaration to their governments for submission to the U.N. General Assembly when it meets to address the MDGs in September this year in New York City.

The three day conference was over, and although exhausted and looking for the last energy to hang onto to return to our various homes, I believe those who attended gained a lot from the sessions and were ready to move forward and face challenges that lie ahead to achieving the MDGs by 2015. Despite a terrible experience encountered at Tiger airways, Melbourne, when travelling back to Brisbane, I will always remember the 63rd Annual UNDPINGO Conference. The conference gave me a vast insight and opened up my mind on the many public health issues happening around the world and what the UN is doing to solve these problems. The conference also made me realised the importance of UN and NGO/DPI having to collaborate to achieve the MDGs. The main emphasis on MDGs 1,4,5,6 is what I think should be addressed vigorously by any NGO/DPI. There is so much poverty in the world today, maternal health is not improving in some developing countries, HIV/AIDS is crippling nations, and child health is worsening too; how can we help to achieve these goals is up to what our organisations can provide.

Finally, I would like to thank the IFUW and AGW Qld for giving me this wonderful lifetime opportunity to attend the 63rd Annual conference in Melbourne, Australia. I cannot express how grateful and honoured I am towards the two organisation mentioned above. A heartfelt thank you to Jennifer Strauss, Jane Baker, Dalma Jacobs and Deborah Haydon and the members of the AGW Qld Br. All you women are champions in your own careers. THANK YOU.
Some photos taken during the closing ceremony.