



News and Reports

First National Conference on Career and Livelihood Planning

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The first national conference of the Indian Association for Career and Livelihood Planning (IACLP) was organised and hosted by the Meghalaya Association of Professional Counsellors (MAPC) and Martin Luther Christian University (MLCU) on November 4th and 5th, 2011, in Shillong.

The theme of the conference was aptly "Looking Within". There were two objectives: The first was to discuss human potential in relation to career and livelihood planning. The second was to examine career development in the context of North East India's indigenous orientations to work and livelihood.

The Conference Chair, **Prof. Glenn C. Kharkongor**, Vice Chancellor of MLCU, Shillong, in keeping with "Looking Within", urged delegates to acknowledge and maximise the use of our own rich cultural resources, in particular, those of Meghalaya. An excerpt from his message:

Meghalaya's indigenous peoples, as other tribal communities in the North East, have old traditions of indigenous knowledge. From generation to generation this oral knowledge has been handed down even when challenged by modern forces of development. The beliefs and practices of classifying forests into sacred forests was an indigenous mechanism of ensuring protection of the environment and mitigating climate change. The practice of mixed cultivation is a method of ensuring that diversity of species support the balance of the ecology as well as ensuring a sustainable food supply. The use of certain medical plants for fishing is an indigenous technique for conserving aquatic life and sustainable use of rivers. Climate and seasons are part of this knowledge, such as the prediction of the onset and severity of the monsoons. Wild fruits and vegetables are the source of dietary staples and micro-nutrients such as vitamins and minerals. Indigenous health care and the use of various medicinal plants are the source of the curing of illness and disease.

Traditional occupations and the conservation of natural resources are integral to many livelihoods in the North East and this heritage has immense potential for modern applications in entrepreneurship and careers.

Dr. Gideon Arulmani, the President of IACLP, in his message stated that the conference theme "Looking Within" moved us closer toward building a culture-resonant careers service for the North East as well as for our country, India. He also framed his message in a series of relevant questions and answers:

How can Career Counselling contribute to social inclusion?

A single, standardised intervention cannot adequately address all career development needs. An inclusive programme would be sensitive to the nuances of culture and socioeconomic status.

How can Career Counselling link human potential with the world of work?

The purpose of career counselling is not merely to respond to the market driven, short-term interests of employers. Career counselling should be a bridge that carries the individual into a person-centred engagement with the labour market.

How can the effects of career counselling be sustained?

Sustainability improves when interventions integrate with local contexts. Indigenous knowledge is not only a repository of ancient practices. It can guide the formulation of research and the creation of relevant applications. Careers programmes that resonate with prevailing practices would be sustainable.

What are the key competencies that career counselling professionals need to have?

- Use qualitative and quantitative data, with longitudinal and cross-sectional information to identify clients' potentials.
- Help clients develop a self-mediated approach to career development rather than passive dependence on system-generated opportunities.
- Develop knowledge of the world of work.
- Build employers' awareness to place the person, not the profit margin, at the heart of employment practices.

The conference participants comprised counsellors, students, lecturers, from various schools, colleges, and universities and experts in the field of psychology and mental health. These participants were from a number of states in India other than Meghalaya such as Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Assam, New Delhi, Maharashtra, and Karnataka. A number of NGO representatives, government officials, policy makers, and bureaucrats attended and conducted the sessions.

The conference was inaugurated by **Ms. Ampareen Lyngdoh**, Hon. Minister for Urban Affairs, Government of Meghalaya. She spoke on the importance of the conference for the youth of the state and region, and drew attention to the important connection between career and livelihood. She placed emphasis on the need for benchmarks and standards in the counselling profession.

The first thematic session was on new directions in career guidance and addressing needs of special populations. There were four presentations in this first session. One of them was **Mr. Carmo Noronha's** talk on *Disability and Livelihood*. He highlighted the importance of self-determination for achieving true equality. He said that, "(t)he human rights approach to development means empowering people to take their own decisions, rather than being the passive objects of choices made on their behalf." He concluded that most urgently of all, it is time for non-disabled professionals to recognise the right of disabled persons to self-determination and therefore to gracefully step to one side, into a role where they, as professionals, are no longer on top but rather on *tap*—as allies.

Also in this first session, **Dr. P. S. S. Sundar Rao**, discussed *Careers and Stigma*, and suggested some ways to overcome stigmatisation such as: providing adequate support in a job to increase self-confidence, providing additional training opportunities, promoting community-based activities, educating employers to make them more employee sensitive, and creating facilities for group counselling of employees.

The second thematic session, also with four speakers, was on entrepreneurship, the market, and local and global economies. The speakers included **Mr. R. M. Mishra**, IAS, who made a brief presentation on the government plans for expanding livelihoods in strategic areas of the state such as the river banks and forest areas. He mentioned that planning, strategizing, documenting, capacity building, and implementing these plans is part of the long-term approach to accomplishing the goal of strengthening the livelihoods of the common people in the state.

Ms. Patricia Mukhim, in her talk on *Women and Entrepreneurship* presented the local and regional economic situation of the women in Northeast India and Meghalaya in particular. She pointed out that the challenges of sustaining the family were particularly overwhelming for women. These challenges include gendered ideologies whereby gender stereotypes persist and encumber women entrepreneurs. A pertinent example she provided was the difficulty that women face in accessing credit. She suggested documentation and thorough study of women's contribution to the economy in Meghalaya.

The third thematic session was on self, family, school and community influences on career development across the life span. In this session, Dr. Gideon Arulmani, described the various influences on career development of Indian youth today. He shared research findings and clinical experiences on the responses of youth and their parents in relation to career interest, career preparation and career beliefs. He strongly positioned the need for career counsellors to take into account both the developmental stage of youth as well as cultural background whilst designing and implementing career-related services.

Prof. Srinivasa Murthy spoke on *Development of Human Resources for Mental Health Care in India*. He pointed out the changing nature of mental health care in India, the tasks comprising the provision of mental health care, the roles for non-physicians in MNH care, Indian experiences, and the way ahead for career counselling.

The fourth and final thematic session was on livelihoods and occupations. An example of a presentation in this session is that of **Mr. Phrangkumar Kharbamon** on *Community-Based Tourism*. He suggested that going the way of community-based tourism in the region, implies acknowledging that tribal people have the right to their lands, they also have the right to decide what happens on their lands, to determine their future and way of life. Rather than patronising tribal people we need to see them on their own terms as dynamic and complex societies. The things they create and produce are to be seen as a way of life and not merely artefacts for the export market. He pointed out that we must not force a traditional lifestyle to make it a product for tourism. We must instead create systems to sustain and preserve a way of life.

There were many other interesting features in the conference. This included the viewing of a documentary film on social media; and, a drama on career- and livelihood-related challenges such as bribery, corruption, addiction, terrorism, and politics. A youth panel discussion also underscored similar issues, that is, issues related to unemployment, and dropping-out in the North-East. It was noted that substance abuse, corruption, and a lack of direction were some of the roadblocks in career development of unemployed, drop-out youth. Sources of livelihoods like silkworm harvesting and silk weaving, fruit and vegetable preservation were being disregarded as career options by youth. Instead, some youth chose to join the underground movement and other unlawful activities. The panel called for partnership among like-minded institutions and organisations in developing strategies to help young people plan their careers and livelihood in ways that uphold their wellbeing. In addition, two survey presentations were made; one on career information and awareness amongst high school students in Meghalaya, and another on traditional medicine as livelihood.

The conference ended with the following recommendations:

- Promote organic local produce in places such as Mawtari Village of Meghalaya State which will generate employment and improve economic condition of people around these areas.
- Preserve natural scenic places and encourage community involvement in the promotion of tourism.
- Strengthen public-private partnership in carrying out programmes and projects related to livelihood and career planning for the youth. Institutions and organisations like MLCU and MAPC should submit specific proposals to the government for capacity building on the related issues discussed.
- Reduce unemployment in people with special ability by increasing their knowledge of available schemes.
- Conduct more baseline surveys and other researches for developing evidence-based intervention for youths who have dropped out of school and are unemployed.

We gratefully acknowledge the sponsors of this first national conference of the IACLP: IACLP, The Promise Foundation, Meghalaya Times, and the United Bank of India.

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