

Games and competitions were used to enthuse an international gathering of reproductive health suppliers in the shadow of the planet's highest mountain. **Rob Spalding** started at base camp

NO MOUNTAIN TO CLIMB

Some 350 delegates from all over the world trekked to the capital of Nepal, Kathmandu, last March for a momentous meeting at the foot of Everest, the world's highest peak. The 19th General Membership Meeting of Reproductive Health Supplies Coalition (RHSC) was the latest of four organised by Italy-based AIM Group International.

But the Coalition's choice of venue had nothing to do with scaling peaks. The South Asian country was carefully selected because it has recently put in place national legislation to improve women's health. And that meant the visiting expert speakers and attendees were sharing knowledge with an eager and well-versed local community.

The event featured highly interactive participation. During plenary sessions, breakouts and working groups, attendees enthusiastically dissected the results of previous strategies and put in place goals for the future. A fully-participatory experiential group game was specially devised to facilitate hands-on learning. The 'Beer Game'

found no difficulty in involving the entire audience in creating a four-stage supply chain for oral contraceptives.

Guaranteeing smooth running in any

Wherever they were, delegates were encouraged to do their own thing



destination unrehearsed in catering for international professional groups, takes delicate handling. "We had to carefully select all our suppliers and double check that we shared the same expectations," explained Lisa Stern, project manager from the AIM Group's Vienna office.

Nepal is a safe and peaceful place. The Nepalese people live in harmony and treat their often harsh living conditions with a smile. The destination inspires and there were many opportunities to add a unique local taste to the meeting. "The association asked us to find ways to encourage motivation and fresh ideas among participants," said Stern. "So we suggested organising morning yoga sessions in the garden, with a local yoga expert. This new feature was really appreciated."

Kathmandu comes with fine cuisine, exciting sightseeing, engaging activities and friendly people, all neatly wrapped in a relaxing, natural environment. "Truly, it's a new meeting destination to further explore and return to," concluded Stern. Plus, of course, it has that fabulously-named hotel, the Yak & Yeti, where almost all the delegates stayed.

Kathmandu was not picked because it is a crowd-puller. It is not the aim of the Coalition to annually increase the number of participants at its members meeting. Each is invited after a very careful selection process. This time they were from 39 different countries, with only a few – from Africa – having some difficulty meeting Nepalese visa requirements.



The RHSC is based in Brussels. It's where all the big decisions are made, overseen by an executive committee of leaders in the RH community. Its 474 member organisations can access contraceptive issues through nine working groups, and a secretariat, also headquartered in Brussels, with team members in Washington DC, Lima, Dakar and Seattle.

Most of the delegates represent stakeholders in

networking and best practice sharing.

Lisa Stern, as an 'outsider', was in a privileged position to judge proceedings. "The entire conference was very unique. The delegates were like a big family, very close to each other and 100 per cent dedicated to what they were doing. And what they were doing was, almost literally, 'fighting' for all people in low and middle-income countries to be able to access and use affordable, high-quality supplies to ensure their better reproductive health."

When the last delegate had departed and the halls swept clean, what was left for the Nepalese? A treasure-house of knowledge, it would seem. Local not-for-profit organisations like USAID Nepal, UNFPA, Safe Motherhood Network Federation Nepal and Radha Paudel Foundation were involved, not least in defining the scientific programme, as speakers, exhibitors and delegates. It was a two-way thing: the plenary was opened by the Secretary of Nepal Ministry of Health and Population and the visitors shared information and practices with local health care centres.

Eighty-five per cent of participants said they had forged new partnerships and the same percentage made new contacts. The Central African Republic's Minister of Health found the help he needed and now the RHSC will be supporting CAR. ■

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reproductive health suppliers, including some from private foundations, low and middle-income country governments, civil society, inter-governmental and non-governmental organisations and the private sector.

The conference was divided in two parts, and attendees into different working groups, to discuss current issues, exchange experiences and find solutions. Part two took the form of plenary sessions during the last two days, accompanied by 12 parallel sessions.

To promote interaction, rigid theatre-style seating was banned. Instead, interactive formats in an informal environment, along with the social programme, facilitated