

Working hard for a better life

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Photo: dpa / Associated Press

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Photo: Ngabonziza Bonfils



Cover: “Labor Day” by Rwandan artist Ngabonziza Bonfils (see p. 4).

Worldwide, people with low incomes fight under the most difficult conditions for an opportunity to support their families or send their children to school. They migrate, start small businesses and work in mines, factories or on plantations. Whether a job presents an opportunity or a risk depends to a large extent on working conditions. However, the global labour market is shaped by old power relations. Far too often, countries in the Global South deliver commodities and cheap labour, while profits and value creation remain in the North.

Art about community, women and nature

The cover image of this issue shows the painting “Labor Day” by Rwandan artist Ngabonziza Bonfils. He also created the painting “Empty Baskets” which is featured at the beginning of this issue’s focus section. Here he introduces himself and his art:

“My name is Ngabonziza Bonfils, and I was born in Rwanda, where I still live. I mostly create African Folk Art or Naïve Art. My art is like a bright cloth made of stories about community, the strong women of Africa and how people and nature live together peacefully. I use strong colours and shapes. I want to make the women in my art look powerful.

Through my art, I want to share stories that everyone can understand and help people from different places appreciate the beauty and strength of the African spirit.”

Photo: Ngabonziza Bonfils



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The good news

The number of climate lawsuits has increased significantly in recent years. **According to a Columbia Law School report cases rose from 884 in 2017 to 2540 by 2023.** Indigenous communities, in particular, are increasingly utilising legal action to enforce environmental rights. This trend indicates that courts are playing an increasingly important role in climate protection. Two examples of success from the past year: In October, India’s Supreme Court declared a clean environment a fundamental right. In April, the European Court of Human Rights ruled against Switzerland for insufficient climate protection measures and reaffirmed that climate change is a human rights issue.



Behind the scenes

For the focus section of this issue, we spoke with informal workers in various countries about their lives and their work. Lucy is a street vendor and sells snacks in a town near Kenya’s capital Nairobi. She talked to our editor Katharina Otieno, who ate one of Lucy’s famous potato samosas right after their conversation.



Laughing at power

Can a joke make a dictatorship crumble? In one episode of the podcast “**Your undivided attention**”, Srdja Popovic vividly explains how activists can become pranksters in order to defeat dictators or more generally achieve change. Popovic also contributed together with Sophia McClennen to our April Monthly on the power of humour.

You can find it [here](#).

Listen now



Distributing food to earthquake victims in Mandalay, Myanmar in early April.

EMERGENCY AID

Humanitarian aid should not be driven by politics

In crisis situations like the aftermath of the earthquake in Myanmar, help must be rapidly administered. Organisations with an established presence in the region are better able to respond under such exceptional circumstances. Yet their efforts are increasingly hindered by sweeping cuts to development funding in many countries.

BY MARVIN FÜRDERER

More than 3700 people have so far been confirmed dead in the catastrophic earthquake that struck Myanmar on 28 March, with over 4800 injured and many still missing. Since large parts of the affected region are still difficult to access, the true death toll may eventually turn out to be much higher. Nine million people are particularly affected by the disaster.

The 7.7 magnitude earthquake transformed the fragile situation in Myanmar into a full-blown humanitarian crisis. Even before the disaster, some 20 million people were dependent on humanitarian aid – according to UN estimates, roughly 15 million of them were struggling to adequately feed themselves and their families.

Myanmar is marked by poverty, hunger, conflict and political isolation. In February 2021, the powerful military overthrew the elected government of Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi, plunging the country into a civil war that continues to this day. Following the earthquake, both the military government and parts of the armed opposition announced a temporary ceasefire to facilitate rescue, clean-up and rebuilding efforts. The war-weary population, along with aid workers, received this news with cautious relief. Amid all the suffering, it is an important signal that the military government publicly admitted that it was overwhelmed by the disaster and asked for international assistance.

In past years, Myanmar has not been at the centre of international attention, as aid organisations in the country are well aware; they receive significantly fewer private donations than other crisis regions. The drastic cuts to US-American development and disaster assistance have exacerbated the situation. The UN World Food Programme has already had to cancel programmes in Myanmar as a result. But humanitarian aid should not be driven by politics or media attention. It must reach people in the very places where their suffering is most severe.

“The situation in Myanmar lays bare the consequences of deep cuts to development budgets in the US and other donor countries. If programmes are cut or withdrawn in regions already facing acute hunger, lives are put at risk.”

LONG-TERM COOPERATION PAYS OFF IN A DISASTER

To respond swiftly and effectively in an emergency, it is crucial to rely on established local structures. Welthungerhilfe has been active in Myanmar since 2002 and works closely with monasteries, village committees and numerous volunteers. Many of our colleagues come from regions affected by the earthquake. Thankfully, no lives were lost within our team.

The impact is enormous, however. Our office in Mandalay was severely damaged; as a result, many of our colleagues are now sleeping in a monastery's prayer room – without air conditioning, at temperatures exceeding 45 degrees Celsius. Others are travelling through the worst-affected areas to distribute water, food and hygiene items, as well as cash, enabling people to buy what they need in the markets still operating. Their work is being hampered by destroyed infrastructure, aftershocks and extreme emotional exhaustion.

Since the work of Welthungerhilfe in Myanmar focuses on long-term development and cooperation, additional support is needed in an exceptional situation like this. Emergency Response Teams are deployed on demand and work closely with experienced local staff to deliver rapid relief. Under such circumstances, the trust and networks which have been created in the country over many years are worth their weight in gold.

The situation in Myanmar lays bare the consequences of deep cuts to development budgets in the US and other donor countries. If programmes are cut or withdrawn in regions already facing acute hunger, lives are put at risk. These measures exacerbate hunger instead of ending it, as the 2nd UN Sustainable Development Goal aims to do by 2030. When disaster strikes, the damage of past budget cuts suddenly becomes brutally clear: Essential support systems are no longer there to respond. The richest countries must therefore urgently reconsider what it means to meet their global responsibilities.



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POVERTY REDUCTION

Time to set a limit on extreme wealth

Recent developments in the US and elsewhere show that ultra-rich individuals are a risk to democracy, society, the economy and the environment. Just as we have a poverty line – under which no one should fall – we now need an extreme wealth line: a limit above which no individual should rise.

BY OLIVIER DE SCHUTTER



Photo: dpa / ASSOCIATED PRESS

Donald Trump and Elon Musk in front of the White House in March – a textbook example of the merging of power and wealth.

In the five years since taking up my role as the United Nation's poverty expert, the world's five richest men have seen their net worth rocket from an already absurd US \$ 340 billion to a frankly sickening \$ 1.1 trillion. This, while the wealth of almost five billion people has fallen over the same period.

The number of people living under the World Bank upper poverty line of \$ 6.85 a day – 3.5 billion people, almost half the world's population – has barely changed since 1990.

Clearly the doctrine we have all been brought up on – that economic growth is the answer to poverty, unemployment and a whole host of other social ills – has been working well for the Musks and Zuckerbergs of our world. But the rising tide has not lifted all boats: Rather it has propelled an elite few onto superyachts, leaving inequality, poverty and environmental collapse in their wake.

This economic dominance is easily converted into political influence, allowing the ultra-rich to block progressive policies that could close this vast wealth gap, and to protect their own interests – Donald Trump and Elon Musk parading a Tesla outside the White House being a textbook example for the ages. In a country in which approximately 10 million children live in poverty, Americans, like the rest of us, have been conned into thinking that making it easier for the elite to make more money is in their best interests.

We must not continue to fall for this trick. Extreme wealth creates, not solves, extreme poverty. It redirects scarce resources and production away from essential social services, and towards the lavish whims of the rich. It fuels climate change, which impacts people in poverty more than any other group. And it undermines democracy.

“Extreme wealth creates, not solves, extreme poverty.”

Just as we have a poverty line – the line below which society has decided no one should fall – we need an extreme wealth line. A limit beyond which society decides no one should rise because of the risks to democracy, society, the economy and the environment. A limit beyond which accumulated wealth is evidently a result of policy failure, of cronyism, corruption or monopoly power and will buy you too

much political influence or create too much environmental damage. Setting a wealth limit would be a crucial step in ensuring wealth serves society, rather than distorting it.

Research on an extreme wealth line from the New Economics Foundation and Patriotic Millionaires shows that public support for a threshold on harmful wealth is growing. Across the board, participants interviewed for the study viewed extreme wealth as a systemic failure.

“Setting an extreme wealth line would be a complex undertaking – but one that would spark a much-needed debate on how much wealth is too much.”

Setting an extreme wealth line would be a complex undertaking – but one that would spark a much-needed debate on how much wealth is too much. As a policy tool an extreme wealth line could be used to provide a reference point for progressive taxation that shifts the tax burden away from workers (income tax) and households (VAT) to those who own the vast majority of the world's land and financial assets; reallocating the wealth they have amassed over the years towards financing poverty-busting social services.

As an example, a modest three percent tax on the wealth of all billionaires and centi-millionaires – who would undoubtedly sit above the extreme wealth line – could generate up to \$ 690 billion a year. As shown in my latest research, this is more than twice the amount needed to provide basic healthcare and other essential services to the 26 poorest countries in the world.

For too long we have been told that there is no problem the world is facing that cannot be solved by economic growth. We must remember to ask how much growth, at what cost and for whom? Otherwise, we risk a poverty-riddled future

on a ravaged planet, alongside increasingly obscene rich-lists and more dangerous billionaires in government.

In my work to uncover new ways to eradicate poverty that go beyond economic growth it is becoming increasingly clear that the redistribution, not the creation, of wealth should be where we focus our energy. And an extreme wealth line would give the economic elite fewer places to hide as we do so – even those sitting in the highest echelons of power.

LINKS

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We invite people who work in different sectors and live all around the world to contribute to D+C/E+Z. The editors request that no unsolicited manuscripts be sent, but proposals for contributions are welcome. After editing manuscripts according to journalistic standards, we ask the authors to approve the final texts before publishing their items. As we edit interviews for clarity and brevity, we also ask our interviewees for approval of the final manuscripts to ensure we do not distort their message. That is standard practice in German journalism.

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Demonstrations against Elon Musk and his “Department of Government Efficiency” (DOGE), which USAID has fallen victim to.

DEVELOPMENT POLITICS

Global voices on ending USAID

On 1 July 2025, USAID is officially to be dismantled. Since President Donald Trump froze the funds of the US development agency at the beginning of the year, we have been receiving messages from various parts of the world. The senders want to describe the situation in their countries, discuss the way forward – or simply express their shock. We want to offer the various voices a platform to summarise their thoughts in short statements.

Write us at euz.editor@dandc.eu

The freezing of USAID has plunged Tanzania's civil-society sector into crisis and interrupted health, education and human-rights programmes. Thousands of jobs are at risk, and vital services – such as free HIV drugs – have been cancelled, pushing marginalised populations further into need. The decision highlights the vulnerability of projects dependent on foreign funding. It has also led to calls for greater financial independence through the mobilisation of local resources. As Tanzania, like the continent as a whole, seeks solutions, the future of millions of people hangs in the balance, highlighting the human cost of abrupt policy changes.

Kizito Makoye, journalist, Tanzania

In early March, refugees in Kakuma camp in Kenya clashed with police officers during protests after food supplies were cut to 40%. These extreme cuts by the World Food Programme (WFP) are a result of the cutting of the USAID programme by Donald Trump. The US was a major donor of the WFP.

Food was scarce already for several years, with food ratios cut to 60% last year. But now things have taken a dangerous turn. Mavoo, a TikTok influencer from the camp, aired the demonstrations live. In the videos, protesters are seen holding up signs calling for food and water. Also, the refugees carried empty cooking pots after the WFP discontinued the supply of cooking oil and beans completely. The peaceful protests escalated when police intervened,

reportedly using tear gas and live ammunition leaving four refugees and a local government official injured. Amid all of this, the population in Kakuma camp and Kalobeyei settlement is growing due to the crises happening in Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Alba Nakuwa, journalist, from South Sudan

In Zimbabwe, the cuts in USAID funding are refocusing attention on the strength of the government's social-protection initiatives, while testing the resource-mobilisation capacity of local responders. In fact, the current direction is actually in line with the localisation agenda of the United Nations. Media reports have emphasised the disruption to sectors that provide basic needs, such as the aid-dependent health sector, and agricultural and food-aid programmes. The arbitrary cuts have also led to increased job insecurity, particularly in the international development sector.

Alundrah Sibanda, humanitarian aid and international development professional, Zimbabwe

January began with terrible news that cut off life and air for NGOs, partners, the community and beneficiaries of US-AID projects. We hope that everything can be saved. As a partner of USAID, we funded a project to strengthen mental health in Cambodia. The executive order of US President Trump is a challenge, especially for very remote communities. We are struggling with the negative effects of the USAID funding freeze. This will further divide the world and endanger world peace. We are grateful for USAID's role as a humanitarian organisation, peacemaker and promoter of community resilience. Please don't take that away from us!

Lemhuor Bun, mental health counsellor, Cambodia

The end of USAID has had a profound impact on the reproductive health of women in Africa and Asia. In total, MSI Reproductive Choices has lost \$14 million in funding because it refused to comply with the rules and regulations of the Trump administration. This funding must now be replaced by other funds, as must a further \$6 million for services previously provided by UN organisations, state health systems and other organisations. One of the countries most affected by the cuts is Zimbabwe, where a combined \$6.5 million in USAID funding has been cancelled. Only by filling these service gaps in a timely manner can a significant increase in unintended pregnancies, unsafe abortions, and pregnancy-related deaths be avoided.



Photo: dpa / ZUMAPRESS.com / Gent Shkullaku

In February, people demonstrated in front of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in Washington against the government to support employees who had to vacate their offices.

Across Africa, where I lead MSI's work expanding access to lifesaving sexual and reproductive healthcare, the USAID cuts led by the world's richest man are devastating for women living in the poorest communities of the continent. Denied this lifeline, women will no longer be able to safely space their pregnancies, pushing them further into the cycle of poverty, while those in the most desperate circumstances will be left with no option but to risk their lives by resorting to unsafe abortion.

Carole Sekimpi, Senior Director for MSI Africa Reproductive Choices

NGOs in Colombia are increasingly alarmed by significant cuts to the USAID budget, which will directly affect hundreds of social organisations that depend on US funding. The total amount of the cuts has yet to be officially confirmed. In 2023, USAID allocated nearly \$ 400 million to Colombia.

The effects are already being felt. Among the hardest hit are programmes that provide psychosocial and legal support to victims of the decades-long armed conflict between guerrilla groups, the Colombian government, various paramilitary groups and drug gangs, which has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives; as well as initiatives to replace the illegal economy in rural areas; and protection and rapid response mechanisms for threatened community leaders and human-rights defenders. Several NGOs running these projects report hiring freezes, they tune down their objectives and, in some cases, may have to suspend their activities if they don't find alternative sources of short-term funding.

“The US budget cuts highlight the dependence of Colombia’s social sector on international financial support.”

It is estimated that more than 200 organisations that have received USAID funding over the past five years to implement peace and development projects are now facing severe financial uncertainty. “It’s not just the money, it’s the signal it sends,” the coordinator of a women’s empowerment project in Catatumbo told me. She said: “These programmes are crucial where the state is weak. We are talking about support for communities that have suffered decades of violence and abandonment.”

The US budget cuts highlight the dependence of Colombia’s social sector on international financial support. The challenge now is twofold: for organisations to diversify their sources of income and for the Colombian government and international actors to assess how to mitigate the impact on vulnerable populations and to ensure the implementation of the peace agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC guerrillas. Key aspects of the agreement signed in 2016 depended, in part, on these funds.

Leonardo Jiménez García, consultant in communication for social change processes and lecturer in communication and social research methodologies.

The US funding cuts are not only a breach of international solidarity – they are dramatically worsening existing crises and putting millions of lives at risk worldwide. In our project country Uganda, HIV could spread unchecked; in Afghanistan, cases of polio could rise again.

As a Germany-based organisation, we see it as our duty to stand in solidarity. Now, more than ever, Germany must live up to its responsibility as one of the world’s largest donors and act as a reliable partner. Sustainable development benefits us all.

Hila Limar, chairwoman of the board of Visions for Children e. V.



Photo: dpa / ASSOCIATED PRESS / Sunday Alamba

Health workers talk to a girl before she is vaccinated against cervical cancer at a health centre in Ibadan, Nigeria.

HEALTH

A preventable disease

Low-income countries bear the greatest burden of cervical cancer. These countries currently account for 94 % of all deaths from the disease. This is tragic because cervical cancer can be very easily prevented. There is a plan to eliminate the disease globally – but this requires local awareness and international solidarity.

BY FRANK EKOW BAIDEN

Lena is a 44-year-old fishmonger from Kenya. She was diagnosed with cervical cancer last year, after months of pain and bleeding. Before the diagnosis, she had never heard of this type of cancer. Lena's daughters, aged 18, 22 and 24 years, didn't know about it either. It was only when their mother started treatment that they learned that there are ways to detect and prevent the disease very early on.

Cervical cancer is caused by a persistent infection with the human papillomavirus (HPV). There are several subtypes of this virus, but most cases of cervical cancer are caused by subtypes 16 and 18. These are known as high-risk subtypes.

The infection is acquired through unprotected sex, and it is the persistent infection with the high-risk subtypes that leads to cervical cancer. Such infection can occur as early as the teenage years. Therefore, cervical cancer prevention measures must start early, ideally before the first sexual intercourse.

HPV TESTING

The early changes caused by HPV on the cervix are not a cause of cancer. They can be removed with minimal treatment. However, if left untreated, they can lead to cancer over time. The long time between the appearance of

changes and the development of cancer offers the opportunity to carry out screening tests to recognise and treat abnormalities.

There are two approaches. The oldest is the Pap smear. The Pap smear is based on the detection of abnormal cells on the cervix by examination under a microscope. The newer approach, recommended by the WHO, is to use DNA-based HPV tests for screening.

Normally, the body's own immune system is able to clear an HPV infection without cancer developing. Except in cases where the immune system is weakened, as in the case of an HIV infection, the mere detection of an HPV infection on the cervix does not mean that there is a risk of cancer. Rather, it is the continued infection with the high-risk subtypes that should give cause for concern.

In most high-income countries, cervical cancer screening has been integrated into primary healthcare and health insurance. In Germany, the screening programme combines Pap smears and DNA-based HPV tests. Women between the ages of 20 and 34 receive an annual Pap smear and women aged 35 and above receive a Pap smear and HPV test every three years. In the UK, every woman who is registered with a general practitioner is automatically invited by post. Invitations are sent every three years to people aged 25 to 49 and every five years to people aged 50 to 64.

Lena's daughters have not yet been tested because the Kenyan health insurance does not pay for screenings – and it also does not cover two of the three chemotherapies that Lena needs because she has not paid enough into the system.

HPV VACCINATION

HPV vaccination, the other important measure to eliminate cervical cancer, is free of charge in Kenya – but Lena and her family had never heard of it. The vaccination prevents new infections. It does not treat existing ones. It works best if it is administered before exposure to HPV has occurred. Different countries have different age limits for when girls (and in some countries boys) are eligible for the HPV vaccine. This is determined by studies on when girls typically start having sex.

According to the WHO, the HPV vaccination coverage by age 15 for females in Europe and the Americas was 30% and 67% respectively in 2023. These vaccination coverage rates still leave plenty of room for improvement. However, they are significantly higher than the rates in Africa and Southeast Asia, where the averages are 15% and one per-

cent respectively. Again, a lack of information about the vaccination and the disease is a major problem.

The “Global strategy to accelerate the elimination of cervical cancer as a public health problem” is led by the WHO and is based on the realisation of the 90-70-90 plan by all countries by 2030. This plan calls for 90% of all girls to be fully vaccinated with the HPV vaccine by the age of 15, 70% of women to be screened with a high-level test by the age of 35 and again by the age of 45, and 90% of women with cervical pre-cancer or invasive cancer to receive effective treatment.

Realising the 90-70-90 plan, together with other strategies, will prevent more than 74 million cases of cervical cancer and over 62 million deaths over the next 100 years. Unfortunately, with the current level of screening and immunisation, Africa and Southeast Asia will not be able to eliminate cervical cancer by 2100. The rest of the world will also need to do more if the global plan is to stay on track. Greater global solidarity is needed, in addition to comprehensive education and information campaigns about this disease.

“Only 17 African countries have introduced HPV-based screening for cervical cancer, although not nationally. In these countries, the screening coverage rate is just 11%.”

AFRICA'S HURDLES

Only 17 African countries have introduced HPV-based screening for cervical cancer, although not nationally. In these countries, the screening coverage rate is just 11%. Similarly, only 28 countries in Africa have included HPV vaccines in their routine vaccination programmes, with only four of them reaching 90% coverage by 2023. In the words of the WHO Regional Director for Africa, Matshidiso Moeti, “the burden of cervical cancer in Africa is a stark illustration of the impacts of global inequities, which exacerbate barriers including scarce resources, lack of prioritisation by funders and ultimately, limited capacity to manage the threat.” African health ministers and partners meeting in Brazzaville, Republic of Congo, last August emphasised the urgent need for equitable access to affordable HPV vac-

cines and HPV DNA testing to accelerate progress towards elimination. There is also a lack of suitable distribution mechanisms in the countries.

Moreover, it is important to bear in mind that the current routine immunisation system was set up to deliver vaccines to very young children who can be reached relatively easily through clinics that implement the global Expanded Program of Immunization (EPI). These programmes have not been particularly successful in delivering vaccines to children older than one or two years. The recent challenges with malaria vaccine introduction highlight the challenges the EPI system faces in delivering vaccines to older children and adults. More opportunistic routes need to be explored, such as through general practitioners and maternal health services. A new and distinct EPI is needed to focus attention on how to effectively deliver HPV and other vaccines to older children and adults.

The pooled procurement approach used by UNICEF on behalf of GAVI, the Vaccine Alliance, is an approach to address the affordability challenge for low-income countries. This strategy has significantly reduced vaccine prices, enabling over 16 million girls to be covered with HPV vaccines by the end of 2022.

However, the approach lacks a sustainable financing mechanism and remains fragile. Ultimately, African countries need to develop the capacity to produce their own HPV – and other – vaccines. Currently, only about one per cent of Africa's vaccine needs are met by production on the continent. This leaves Africa precariously dependent on global supply chains and their uncertainties.

We know enough about cervical cancer to be able to eradicate it. We have the technology, and we can manufacture the tools. With some adjustments to our delivery mechanism, we should be able to reach women and girls everywhere with the life-saving services needed to prevent and ultimately eliminate the disease as a public health problem.

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HEAD OF STATE

Ambivalent message

Droupadi Murmu is the 15th President of India. She is the second woman and the first Adivasi to hold this office. That she was elected was a sign of inclusiveness, but also divisiveness.

BY ARUN P. GHOSH



Photo: dpa / Sipa USA / Hindustan Times

India's President Droupadi Murmu.

Droupadi Murmu became president in 2022 as the candidate of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). She had previously served as state legislator and state minister in Odisha as well as governor of Jharkhand. In India, governors are representatives of the central government. They monitor state affairs, but normally do not wield executive power. Murmu belongs to the Santals, an Adivasi tribe whose

people live in Eastern India as well as in Bangladesh and Nepal. That she became head of state in a country that is marked by caste hierarchies and racial stigmas was a proud moment for Adivasis who have historically been marginalised. Her role is largely ceremonial, since the president does not wield much power in India. Nonetheless, it is a sign of inclusiveness that a Santal woman has risen to it.

However, there is a divisive aspect to her presidency too. Murmu owes her political career to her membership of the BJP, which claims that India is a Hindu nation. The BJP belongs to a network of Hindu nationalist organisations which is called the Sangh Parivar. According to its ideology, all people residing in India have roots in Hinduism, though, in the course of history, some converted to other faiths. The Sangh Parivar promotes the idea of ghar wapsi, which means “returning home” and is about everyone in India accepting their supposed Hindu heritage.

“The president often reiterates her commitment to Savarna Hindu orthodoxy, which includes the caste order of mainstream Indian society.”

In recent years, the BJP has stepped up efforts to convince Adivasis that they are in fact Hindus. This claim is anything but obvious. Adivasi communities have historically lived outside mainstream society in rural and forest areas in villages of their own. They speak distinct languages and have long suffered discrimination similar to Hinduism’s lowest castes, the Dalits. Typically, Adivasi tribes have cosmological myths that have been passed on from generation to generation. On the other hand, many Adivasis have joined religions that are based on holy scriptures, including not only Hinduism, but Christianity as well.

SHOWCASING THE HINDU FAITH

Murmu proudly showcases her Hindu faith. She says she is a devout vegetarian, for example. She belongs to the Brahma Kumaris, a spiritual group that was established in the 1930s and is especially popular among women. She did not inherit her faith as members of Hindu castes do.

The president often reiterates her commitment to Savarna Hindu orthodoxy, which includes the caste order of mainstream Indian society. She is sometimes seen sweeping a Shiva temple at the crack of dawn in the Mayurbhanj Dis-

trict of Odisha. She has attended religious events at the controversial Ram Temple in Ayodhya, which was inaugurated three decades after the demolition of the Babri Masjid mosque by Hindu extremists.

Murmu supports the official line of BJP on issues like Hindi as the national language. This seems awkward as Adivasi languages are typically not related to Hindi.

Though the constitution defines India as a secular nation, Murmu likes to practice her religion ostentatiously. Pictures taken of her during Hindu rituals are used to spread the message that Adivasis are actually Hindus since the president is one herself. That message disregards the multitude of Adivasi cultures.

In various socio-economic conflicts, moreover, Adivasi groups are still being marginalised. Many major mining and infrastructure projects affect their livelihoods in remote areas. Again and again, entire villages are displaced. When Murmu was chosen to be the BJP’s presidential candidate, people hoped she would play a role in supporting Adivasi communities. Those hopes have not come true.

Droupadi Murmu’s role as president is thus ambiguous. On the one hand, she represents the entire nation and is the first Adivasi to do so. On the other hand, she has adopted a Hindu identity, which does not reflect the multitude of Adivasi cultures.

ARUN P. GHOSH

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Photo: dpa / ASSOCIATED PRESS / Silvia Izquierdo

Brazil's President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva shakes hands with China's President Xi Jinping at the G20 Summit in Rio de Janeiro in November 2024, where Brazil proposed a global wealth tax.

FINANCIAL JUSTICE

A global minimum tax rate for the super-rich

Taxes and fiscal policies play a crucial role in development financing. The wealthiest individuals are undertaxed, research suggests. While there are viable ideas for introducing a global wealth tax, the biggest obstacles to its implementation are geopolitical.

BY ANDRÉ DE MELLO E SOUZA

It has been widely recognised that progressive taxation is a fundamental element of democratic societies. A progressive tax system means that those who enjoy higher incomes and wealth contribute more to the provision of social and public goods, which are drivers of economic growth. It also strengthens social cohesion and confidence in democratic norms and institutions.

Yet, the available evidence shows that the wealthiest individuals generally pay a smaller share of their income in taxes than other social groups, a phenomenon known as regressive taxation. This applies regardless of country-specific tax systems and enforcement policies. Regressive taxation occurs when the income tax system fails to effectively tax these individuals. The civil-society organisation Oxfam estimates that, in Group of 20 (G20) countries, the top one percent of wealth now accounts for 31 % of total wealth, up from around 26 % in 2004.

G20 LEADERS' PROPOSAL TO TAX THE ULTRA-RICH

The G20, which now actually comprises 21 members including the African Union, is currently considered the most important forum for international economic cooperation, and, in particular, tax reform. Brazil held the G20 presidency from December 2023 to November 2024. During that time, the country proposed a global wealth tax. The proposal was approved by consensus and included in the Leaders' Declaration of the 18th G20 Summit in Rio de Janeiro in November 2024.

The G20 leaders stated (G20 2024): "With full respect to tax sovereignty, we will seek to engage cooperatively to ensure that ultra-high-net-worth individuals are effectively taxed. Cooperation could involve exchanging best practices, encouraging debates around tax principles and devising anti-avoidance mechanisms, including addressing potentially harmful tax practices."

There are many policies that countries can adopt independently to increase the taxation of the wealthiest individuals. Nevertheless, international coordination is crucial to ensure an effective minimum tax rate for the super-rich. The G20 proposal promotes progressive taxation by making it more difficult for these individuals to evade and avoid taxation by shifting their assets globally. It also aims to reduce tax competition between countries – the so-called race to the bottom – and support the fight against inequality.

According to French economist Gabriel Zucman, the current effective tax rate of ultra-high-net-worth individuals is equivalent to 0.3 % of their wealth. A study led by Zucman

“Given the incentives to conceal wealth, countries need to exchange more information. The decrease in banking secrecy over the years has favoured such cooperation.”

and commissioned by the Brazilian government found that if the rate were raised to 2 %, \$ 200-250 billion in tax revenue would be raised every year from about 3000 billionaire taxpayers globally. Including centi-millionaires would add another \$ 100-140 billion.

Zucman's proposal would not require a multilateral treaty. Implementing countries could adapt it using a range of domestic mechanisms, including a presumptive income tax, an income tax based on a broad notion of income or a wealth tax. National sovereignty would therefore be respected. Such flexibility in tax system design tends to encourage more countries to participate.

TACKLING INCOME TAX FAILURES

Nonetheless, Zucman claims that a presumptive tax is preferable because, as recent research shows, there is a considerable gap between the economic income and taxable income of the wealthiest individuals. The assumption is that billionaires who report low taxable income – and therefore pay little in income tax – earn an economic income that the tax system is not taking into account. Conversely, those who already pay two percent of their wealth in income tax would have no additional tax to pay. The proposed minimum tax for billionaires would thus simply compensate for income tax failures.

In 2021, over 130 countries committed to a common minimum tax of 15 % on multinational companies in an agreement brokered by the OECD. This agreement demonstrat-

ed that innovations in international cooperation previously seen as naively idealistic can be put into practice in a short time. It also made it easier for those countries to meet the technical and political requirements of the global wealth tax.

A major technical challenge to implementing Zucman's proposal is measuring the wealth of ultra-high-net-worth individuals. However, since most countries have an inheritance tax, there are a number of methods that are already being used to achieve this. And since much of billionaires' wealth is tied to their assets in multinational enterprises, country-by-country reports on these firms can be extremely helpful.

“The biggest obstacles to implementing a global wealth tax are geopolitical. Countries may resist having to change their tax systems in order to adopt a global common tax standard for billionaires.”

EXPANDING INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

Given the incentives to conceal wealth, countries need to exchange more information. The decrease in banking secrecy over the years has favoured such cooperation. In addition, the multinational tax has increased transparency and helps to prevent the concealment of corporate assets.

However, the biggest obstacles to implementing a global wealth tax are geopolitical. Countries may resist having to change their tax systems in order to adopt a global common tax standard for billionaires. During the Rio de Janeiro G20 Summit, Argentine President Javier Milei threatened to reject any communiqué that included the wealth tax. The US under Joe Biden also showed reservations towards the proposal.

More importantly, since his inauguration earlier this year, US President Donald Trump has not only disavowed the OECD global multinational tax deal, but also threatened to retali-

ate against any country that complies with it by imposing the 15% minimum tax on American corporations. As he relies on the support of big tech industry billionaires like Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos and Mark Zuckerberg, there can be little doubt that the current US president will do everything in his power to resist a global tax on the wealthiest individuals.

LINK

G20 Rio de Janeiro Leaders' Declaration, 2024:

gov.br/planalto/pt-br/media/18-11-2024-declaracao-de-lideres-g20.pdf



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INFLATION

Malawi struggles with rising costs of essentials

The increasing costs of essential goods remain a major problem in Malawi. As households struggle to cope with inflation, the country has been rocked by protests and public outrage in recent months.

BY CHARLES PENSULO

Malawi's economic outlook has been difficult since several years. A severe drought in 2024 worsened the macroeconomic imbalances and contributed to repeated crop failures and high food prices. According to the World Bank, 70 % of the population are living in extreme poverty, and food insecurity continues to obstruct poverty reduction efforts. Additionally, global prices for basic commodities have soared since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Like other countries, Malawi depended heavily on grain imports from Ukraine before the war, making it particularly vulnerable to global supply shocks.

The situation has led to anger and despair among Malawians. Prices for essential goods such as maize and cook-

ing oil have increased immensely. Street vendors and traders took to the streets in protest. A bag of maize, Malawi's staple food, now costs over 100,000 Kwacha (\$ 58), which exceeds the country's minimum monthly wage.

INFLATION, IMPORTS AND INFORMAL MARKETS

Stafford Mtanja, 27, a father of three, regularly shops at Limbe market in Blantyre. "We can no longer afford three meals a day. A loaf of bread now costs 2,700 kwacha (\$ 1.60). The only relish we can manage is soya chunks, with just one tomato. Tomatoes have become too expensive," he says. Looking visibly tired, he adds: "We're surviving by doing piecework, but no matter how much I try, the money isn't enough to feed my family."



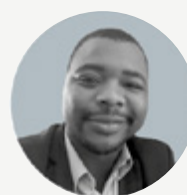
Bertha Bangara-Chikadza, President of the Economics Association of Malawi (ECAMA) notes that the country's ongoing foreign exchange shortage has added to the difficulties. The country relies heavily on imports, making access to foreign currency essential. But because demand is higher than supply, the black market for foreign currency has flourished, which in turn is driving up the prices of essential goods. "The gap between the black-market rates and the rates of the formal financial sector has widened because the regular institutions have been unable to meet the high demand for foreign exchange. People have turned to the informal markets instead," explains Chikadza.

The government has made attempts to bring inflation under control and to stabilise the currency situation. It has launched a crackdown on illicit forex trading, and large sums of cash were confiscated from private hoarders.

HOPING FOR RECOVERY WITH NEW REFORMS

Yet challenges remain. Malawi's geographical location as a landlocked country makes it dependent on its neighbours. The recent violence in Mozambique has disrupted trade routes and affected fuel imports, which in turn had effects for prices and transport.

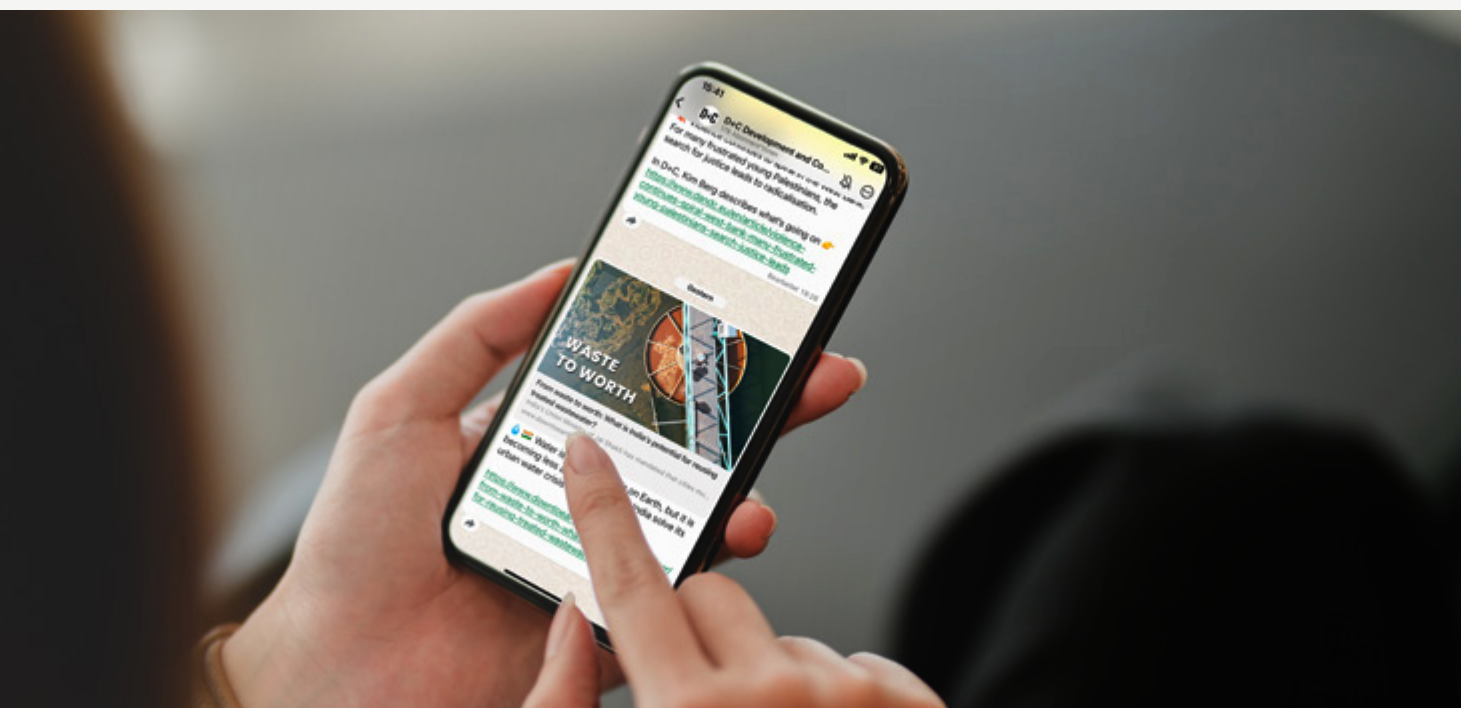
Malawi's Finance Minister Simplex Chithyola Banda recently outlined a series of measures to stabilise the economy in his presentation of the next national budget. These include renewed efforts to dismantle black-market currency networks, a ban on the import of non-essential goods that could be produced domestically and a range of incentives to support local businesses and encourage production.



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LABOUR RIGHTS

Working hard for a better life



Artwork: Ngabonziza Bonfils

"Empty Baskets" by Rwandan artist Ngabonziza Bonfils.
For more information about the artist, see page 4.

OUR VIEW

What makes a good job

Worldwide, people in precarious jobs are fighting for a better life. Their stories underscore the importance of fair working conditions – and international accountability.

BY EVA-MARIA VERFÜRTH

Many years ago, I met a woman who really impressed me. I was in Guatemala at the time and had been invited to an exam celebration for student nurses. Out of all the young graduates, only one wore indigenous attire. I learned that she had come from her village to the city years before, without money or secondary school qualifications, to work as a domestic labourer. She went to school on the side and finally completed a training programme. At the ceremony, her parents had tears in their eyes: They knew their daughter would earn a good living.

Many domestic labourers in Guatemala – typically young, indigenous women – still work under precarious conditions. They are poorly paid, lack protections and are often the victims of racism and violence. Nevertheless, they accept these jobs because they offer a small chance to improve their lives. Worldwide, people with low incomes fight under the most difficult conditions for an opportunity to support their families or send their children to school. They migrate, start small businesses and work in mines, factories or on plantations. Some make it, like the nurse from Guatemala; many don't.

Whether a job presents an opportunity or a risk depends to a large extent on working conditions. That is true of both formal and informal employment: No matter if someone is a salesperson or a factory worker, it makes a difference whether they are able to save money, have time for further education or rest, are shown respect and receive medical care when they are ill. These things are easier to achieve as a collective: Domestic workers in South and Central America have organised across national borders, women working in the informal sector in India are joining forces, and in Bangladesh the textile workers' union is strong. Together, they are setting wage floors or establishing microinsurance schemes.

But their scope of action remains limited. The global labour market is shaped by old power relations. Far too often, countries in the Global South deliver commodities and cheap labour, while profits and value creation remain in the North. The digital economy has not changed this dynamic: Large tech companies outsource time-intensive activities to low-wage countries. There, people screen violent videos or feed information to AI systems – for a few dollars a day, often without protections.

Whereas US President Donald Trump sees this, absurdly, as a disadvantage for the USA and wants to recall these jobs, in Europe, awareness of suppliers' working conditions is growing. As of 2023, the German Supply Chain Due Diligence Act has required companies to investigate the conditions of their suppliers; next year the EU Supply Chain Act should follow. It remains to be seen what the law can actually achieve; its impact will depend largely on how it is written.

In Kenya, meanwhile, Meta could already be held accountable for exploitative working conditions at one of its service companies. There, content moderators have filed complaints about being required to screen traumatising content on Facebook. At the end of 2024, a court ruled that their lawsuits are admissible. They will not cost the company much: Meta has already moved its content moderation out of the country and the employees have been fired. But the message is clear: Even large corporations should no longer be able to simply outsource accountability.



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INFORMAL SECTOR

Voices

_____ Kenya



_____ Uganda

For our focus section, we interviewed people in various countries who work in the informal sector and talked to them about their lives and their work.



Mexico _____



_____ Ghana

“On a bad day,
my earnings are
just enough to
pay my boss.”



Photo: Ronald Ssegujja Ssekandi

Baker with his motorbike.

Baker

Baker rides a motorcycle taxi in Kampala. He has to pay commission on his earnings because the bike doesn't belong to him – but given the unemployment rate in Uganda, he's happy to have a job at all. He spoke to Ronald Ssegujja Ssekandi.

Who are you?

I am Baker Obua. I ride a commercial motorcycle taxi known locally as a “boda boda”.

Where do you live?

I live in Gayaza, a suburb of the Ugandan capital Kampala.

How does your average day look like?

I wake up every day at five-thirty to get my children ready for school. I then take them to school on my motorbike. Then I get ready and drive to the commercial motorcycle park, where I wait with other drivers for customers. I usually have breakfast around nine-thirty and lunch at one-thirty. These mealtimes can depend on how much work there is. If a customer has to travel a long distance, for example, I may have

a break later or not at all. I have to pick up my children from school around four-thirty and take them home. After that, I continue my work until about nine o'clock, when I finish for the day and drive home.

What do you like about your situation?

Considering the unemployment rate in Uganda, I feel lucky to have this job. I get to see a lot of the city and go to many different places when I drive customers to their destinations. I also get to talk to people while I drive them around. This makes me feel like I'm part of their lives and helps me forget my worries and problems. I also get to manage my own time at work. If I'm tired, I can rest and continue working later.

How can your situation be improved?

The motorbike I ride belongs to my boss. Every day, I have to pay him a commission on my earnings. On a bad day, my earnings are just enough to pay him, and I have nothing left for myself. So, if I could buy and own a motorbike, my situation would improve significantly.



Photo: Roli Mahajan

The person in the picture is a domestic helper working in India. It is not Reba.

Reba

Reba is a domestic worker in Kolkata. She uses the money she earns to pay off debts she had to take on when her husband was seriously ill and to pay for private tutoring for her son so that things will be better for him. She spoke to Roli Mahajan.

Who are you?

My name is Reba. I am from a small village in the Sundarbans south-east of Kolkata. People in my village traditionally collect honey. However, due to different circumstances, I ended up coming to Kolkata. My husband is a construction worker. My son is nine years old and goes to a public school nearby. I work as a maid in about eight houses near Kolkata Airport.

Where do you live?

I live in a room on rent in Kolkata. It is just one room; bathroom and toilet are used on a sharing basis and located outside in the common area. When we have guests like my mother or someone from the village, it gets a bit crowded, but for three people the room is okay. We cook, eat and sleep there.

“I just want my son to study well and live a better life than I do.”

What does your average day look like?

I wake up around five in the morning and prepare my child for school. I start work at the first house around eight. I cook and help with other kitchen work. In some houses, I do the cleaning. I finish work at around five in the evening, then I walk for about 30 minutes to reach home. Then I bathe, check on my son and cook.

What do you like about your situation?

I am not sure. My husband got really sick about a year ago. I had to borrow money to look after him. I camped at the hospital. Now he is well again. Right now, I am just happy that my family is okay and not sick.

How can your situation be improved?

There is so much that can be done. Maybe I should win a lottery and just be successful in paying off all the informal loans that I had to take while I was nursing my husband. I could not work then. I hope my son studies and does not get into bad company. In addition to public school, he attends a private tuition class, but I don't know if that is enough. I just want him to study well and then live a better life than I do.

Lucy

Lucy sells snacks in front of a university near Kenya's capital Nairobi. She started with nothing but a handcart and has now built up a whole stand with some seating. She spoke to Katharina Otieno.

Who are you?

My name is Lucy, I am 29 years old, and I am a food vendor. I have a small stall where I sell snacks, mainly samosas, sausages, eggs and bhajia, which are spiced potatoes. I started seven years ago with a small handcart, and now I have expanded to a wooden stall with a signboard, some space to sit and a place to cook during the day. I am the owner of my stall and have an employee – a sister of mine who helps me. This is also her permanent workplace.

Where do you live?

I live right here on the street, not far from my stand. It's a one-bedroom flat that I share with my husband, our little daughter and another sister, my little sister.

What does your average day look like?

I get up at four in the morning, say my prayers and then start preparing my ingredients for the samosas. I cook the green grams and potatoes. That takes about four hours. By nine o'clock, I'm ready to start my work at the stall. Normally I don't really take a break. I close my shop around ten o'clock in the evening, so I'm home by ten thirty at the latest. After dinner is ready, I take a shower and go to sleep. Sometimes I eat dinner myself, sometimes I just prepare it for the others. I work every day except Saturdays, and on Sundays I get up two hours later. That means I don't open until eleven o'clock on Sundays.

What do you like about your situation?

I chose this job because people eat food every day. It's not like selling clothes, people don't need new clothes every day. And most people like snacks, like sausages or eggs. Especially where I am located – my stall is near a university and the students are my main customers. And I really enjoy cooking.

I make enough money to live on. Sometimes I make a loss, but most of the time I make a profit. I can't complain. My husband is a motorbike rider, so my income is a bit more stable.

What I don't like is getting up so early – but that's necessary to maximise the income. There's also a lot of competition in this field. And if the university is closed for three months, I have to close too. Without the students, the business is not viable. So, I'm thinking about opening something small elsewhere – if my funds allow.

How can your situation be improved?

The government doesn't recognise us hustlers, street vendors. The city council comes and harasses us, they want us to pay taxes even though they know we can't really afford it. I pay some taxes, but they come and want more. They just take a lot of money.

Then they force us to have a business licence and health insurance. That's the right thing to do, but none of us have the money for all these things. But at least I have health insurance. I pay into the state insurance scheme.

This harassment needs to stop, and it needs to be replaced with more support and recognition from the government. Insurance should be largely free, and permits and other things shouldn't be so expensive if they want us to pay taxes.

And if a fire were to break out here, everything would burn down. My stand is made of wood. The government wouldn't pay compensation and the insurance isn't affordable. There was an attempt to set up a savings and credit co-operative to insure us among us vendors, so to speak, but the initiators eventually abandoned it. But that would be something that would also improve our situation. It's just that nobody has the time or the energy to try again.

“Normally I don't really take a break.”

Photo: ko



Lucy at her stall.



“Most of us feel that teaching is our calling.”

Julia

Julia is a teacher in Kakuma, one of the largest refugee camps in the world, located in northern Kenya. The South Sudanese grew up in the camp herself. Now she works in overcrowded classrooms with poor pay and without formal labour protection from authorities such as the Teachers Service Commission of Kenya (TSC). She spoke to Alba Nakuwa.

Who are you?

My name is Julia Marko, I am a teacher by profession. I completed a Bachelor of Education in English and Literature at Kenyatta University.

Where do you live?

I grew up in Kakuma refugee camp. After my studies in Nairobi, I was unable to find formal employment as a teacher. It is not easy for refugees like me to get a job in Kenya. So, I returned to Kakuma and now teach at Blue Light Prince Academy, a donor-funded school in Kalobeyei, a refugee settlement close to Kakuma camp.

How does your average day look like?

My day usually starts at five in the morning, but sometimes even earlier, and I quickly do the housework before going to

work. At seven I pick up my teaching materials and take a motorbike to school, as it is not far from where I live. Classes usually start at eight, so I use the remaining minutes to plan my day. Then I check attendance. Some children are very difficult or have problems at home, and there are days when they cannot attend class or come irregularly.

Officially, the classes end at three o'clock. Even when the bell rings, my work is not done. In the afternoons, I correct assignments, plan lessons and advise children who are struggling with traumas and difficulties at home. Officially, my day at school ends at five o'clock.

The number of students usually ranges from 45 to 60, depending on which classes I am assigned to during the school year. The classrooms are tiny, but we make the best possible use of them.

What do you like about your situation?

I enjoy teaching at the camp because I know how much education can change lives. I grew up here and saw how learning changed people's lives. This inspired me to use education as a tool for change. The camp is multinational, so I can interact with learners from different backgrounds and cultures, and we can learn from each other.

Although I enjoy my teaching work, the challenges are obvious. Most of us refugee teachers are paid as volunteers and usually receive \$60 to \$70 per month in addition to the aid we receive as refugees. Despite the low pay, we have to take care of many students and respond to their different needs. For example, most older learners have no educational background, not to mention the language barrier. As teachers, we have to pay close attention to each student, as not all of them understand the lesson content.

Another challenge is that teachers from the camp do not receive proper recognition from the TSC, even though some of them, like me, have studied at universities and colleges. Without the support of the TSC, we do not receive the same privileges as Kenyan teachers, such as better pay, healthcare and housing allowance.

How can your situation be improved?

I believe that the recognition of refugee teachers requires cooperation between the United Nations and the Kenyan government, by incorporating them into the national education system and creating policy frameworks that support the development of the teaching profession in the camp. Most of us feel that teaching is our calling, and, despite the challenges, we will always return to it. However, if the two parties could find a solution, it would also be a catalyst for many refugees who are interested in becoming teachers.

Loreto

Loreto is a fish butcher at Mexico's pacific coast. He has been doing this work for over 40 years, but now had to stop because he needs retinal surgery. That would cost him more than he earns in a year. He spoke to Pamela Cruz.

Who are you?

My name is Loreto Castillo Crespo, I am 61 years old and I have been a fish butcher since I was 14 years old. However, a month ago I had to stop working due to health problems.

Where do you live?

I live in Rincon de La Playa, San José del Cabo, Mexico. My profession is a family tradition. My parents and grandparents were also fish butchers. This tradition continues, although my daughter is not doing it, but my brothers' sons are.

What does your average day look like?

For years I worked in the filleting area of the La Playa community, where I received the fish, filleted it and packed or bagged it for the customer. Fish filleters depend on tips, which can vary greatly: On some days we earn 100 pesos

(about \$ 5), on others 500 or even 1000 pesos. During the high season from September to March, there is more work and better opportunities to earn money, but in the low season from May to August, when almost no fishing trips take place, we only demand fish as payment, which we can take home to at least feed our families.

What do you like about your situation?

What I love about my work is the camaraderie, being on the beach, being with the other guys all day, we have breakfast and lunch together, we spend time together and have a drink.

How can your situation be improved?

Fish butchers, unlike fishermen, are not members of a cooperative and have no formal benefits such as social insurance or access to medical care. I believe that everyone in my profession should be part of a cooperative. As part of a cooperative, we could register with the tax office and be entitled to state benefits, which are available to fishermen. I had to stop working due to a visual impairment, and I currently need a retinal operation that costs more than I earn in a year.

“My profession
is a family
tradition.”

Photo: Mely Beltrán



The fish filleting area in Rincon de La Playa.

Fouzia

Fouzia works as a load carrier in Accra. The work is hard, but the support of her friends, with whom she shares a room, gives her strength. She is saving to be able to train as a hairdresser. She spoke to Dasmani Laary.

Who are you?

My name is Fouzia Asinbe and I come from Kundugu in the Upper West Region of Ghana. I am 19 years old. I moved to Accra after dropping out of school in the sixth grade of primary school due to financial difficulties. I was unable to get support to buy books or other school supplies. We are five children, two boys and three girls, and after the death of my father, my mother, a farmer, had to provide for us alone. She grows corn, peanuts and various other crops to sustain us. But the situation in the north is very difficult. So, I decided to go to Accra to earn money so that I can enrol in a vocational training programme to become a hairdresser.

I decided to work as a “kaya”, which is what people who transport loads on their heads are called. My friends who came to Accra earlier told me that life here is good. That’s true, but life in Accra is very challenging at the same time. It’s not easy to constantly carry heavy loads. But I am happy because I can pay my rent, buy food and other things I want.

“If you don’t carry the load, someone else will, so I’m just happy to get work.”

Sometimes, however, I walk all day without earning much or anything at all. On a good day, I can earn 30 to 50 cedis (about two to three dollars). I spend some of it on food and save the rest. Sometimes a generous customer will give me 100 cedis (about six dollars) or more.

Photo: Dasmani Laary



Fouzia carries a load on her head.

Where do you live?

We are five girls in a room that we have rented. There is a carpet in the room. We just sleep on mats or cloths on top of it. Each of us pays 70 cedis (about four dollars) rent per week. The accommodation is good, and we feel comfortable. There is a public toilet and a bathroom nearby. Bathing costs three cedis and using a private toilet costs between one and two cedis.

What does your average day look like?

My day starts every day except for Sundays around two or three in the morning, when I wake up with my friends to prepare for work. We take our headpans and walk for about 40 minutes to a large market where we move around in search of customers. The market is busy already in the morning hours.

When a customer needs my help, I carry their things to their destination and take whatever they give me. If you don’t carry the load, someone else will, so I’m just happy to get work.

That’s why I came here – if you can take care of yourself, you don’t have to rely on others or find a boyfriend. The work is difficult, but I’m working my way up bit by bit to make ends meet. I keep a record of all the money I save.

I would also like to mention that we often move around in groups to protect ourselves from bad guys. We spread out

and go separate ways only as soon as we reach the market. I work all day and when I'm tired, I look for a shady place to rest. In the evening, perhaps around four-thirty or five o'clock, we all gather again at one point and go back home. There we sit together and chat, tell each other about the challenges and successes of the day and share memories of life at home.

What do you like about your situation?

Although life in Accra is not easy, I am happy. My friends are always there for me, especially when I have financial difficulties. Sometimes, when I am sick and cannot work, they help me with money for medication. Sometimes it is difficult to buy food. But even when business is bad and we have no money, we meet to talk about life and share laughter and joy. Happiness lies in these moments. We see each other as one. It gives me great joy to tell stories from our past, how we played together at home and how we met again.

How can your situation be improved?

One day, I found myself in a difficult situation. I was looking for customers when I was almost hit by a car. As I was trying to get out of the way, I accidentally bumped into a woman carrying egg crates, causing them to fall to the ground. The woman held on to me and swore she wouldn't let me go until I had paid for the broken eggs. As I was crying, a kind man came to my rescue and paid the woman.

Sometimes kayayei are treated as if we are not human. I sometimes hear insults such as "dirty girl, you don't take a bath". But that doesn't bother me because I know what I'm fighting for. I would also like to say that some people see us as their children and treat us well, giving us gifts and money.

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TECHNOLOGY

How AI exploits

Artificial intelligence (AI) is often seen as a driver of innovation and progress. However, behind these promised benefits lies a reality of exploitation, especially in Africa. Much of the continent's workforce already faces precarious working conditions, and AI supply chains further deepen inequalities. The sector is lacking both transparency and adequate regulation. Workers' rights should be addressed urgently in this evolving technological landscape.

BY FABIO ANDRÉS DÍAZ PABÓN AND AZZA MUSTAFA BABIKIR AHMED



Photo: dpa / AA / Augustin Wamenya

There are also women and children working in illegal cobalt mines in the DRC. Without cobalt and other raw materials needed for hardware, there would be no AI.

In Kenya, thousands lined up two years ago to receive free crypto tokens from Worldcoin, a project co-founded by US tech entrepreneur and OpenAI CEO Sam Altman. In exchange, they had to consent to an iris scan. The Kenyan government eventually halted the practice.

In the same country, Ladi Anzaki Olubunmi, a Nigerian content moderator (see box) for TikTok, was found dead in her apartment. Reports suggested that she had been repeatedly denied leave requests, though Teleperformance – the subcontractor handling TikTok’s content moderation – dismissed these claims as false.

Meanwhile, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, miners extract rare earth minerals under dangerous conditions. Many work in illegal cobalt mines, exposed to toxic chemicals without any protective gear – some of them are children.

What they have in common is that they are part of the supply chain of AI in Africa.

A supply chain can be described as the sequence associated with the manufacturing and delivery of a product or service to consumers. Typically, this involves the role of raw materials, manufacturing and production, and, at the end, distribution and sales, as well as the services associated with the end product. However, when we talk about the supply chain for AI technologies (such as large language models, algorithms or self-driving cars), we neglect the connections that go beyond the collection and analysis of data. We ignore the interconnected stages of AI development, which range from the extraction of the raw materials needed for hardware to the provision of the technology and its use.

Africa remains a continent where labour markets are characterised by informality; 83 % of the workers are employed in the informal sector, according to the International Labour Organization. In the case of the supply chain for AI, the existence of precarious, informal, or exploited labour is rarely explicitly mentioned. This highlights an idealised understanding of how a supply chain works in practice. This is not new or unique to AI – this type of labour is generally seldom visible or problematised.

We need a clear understanding of the specific challenges faced by labourers along the AI supply chain and an explicit examination of how AI systems depend on human exploitation. Beyond exposing injustices, it is essential to support worker-led movements already fighting for fairer conditions here.

EXPLOITATIVE DIMENSIONS

The fact that the exploitative dimensions of the AI supply chain are being ignored reflects a general lack of information about informal, precarious or abusive working conditions, for example in the following contexts:

- mineral extraction for AI hardware, often carried out by workers in dangerous, unregulated conditions,
- content moderation, outsourced to precariously employed workers who endure psychological strain with little support,
- data capture, where private information is collected and monetised without adequate consent or protection, and
- platform economies, for example ride-hailing platforms like Uber and Bolt, where drivers are subject to opaque algorithms and unstable earnings.

AI is often portrayed as a tool for progress, and countless reports praise its benefits without critically examining its

“The rapid expansion of digitalisation is reshaping labour and society worldwide.”

impact on the environment and livelihoods, or its role in deepening inequalities and eroding social contracts. This uncritical optimism masks the real costs of AI-driven systems, diverting attention from the precarious labour and systemic injustices that sustain them.

The reality is that AI supply chains do not serve the interests of vulnerable workers. Instead, they are designed to meet the demands of capital, with little regard for social cohesion, economic fairness or environmental sustainability. The relentless pursuit of profit – without safeguards for the deployment of new technologies – has not only exacerbated existing social injustices but has also introduced new forms of exploitation and harm.

The rapid expansion of digitalisation is reshaping labour and society worldwide. As labour movements lose momentum, we must ask ourselves how workers in AI development supply chains can be supported to benefit from better working conditions, fair wages and reliable insurance. Without systemic change and stronger protection, the risks for workers will become even greater in the future, especially on the African continent.

MOBILISATION AND LEGISLATION

Three key channels can help defend labour rights in the AI supply chain: mobilisation, enforcement of existing laws and new legislation.

Social mobilisation remains a powerful tool in Africa. However, as workers take action against poor conditions, they need support from state institutions that prioritise labour rights over corporate interests.

While AI itself is rarely addressed in African labour laws, existing legislation across the continent already recognises the importance of workers' rights – for example, in the 2019 Abidjan Declaration. However, one thing is a declaration, and another is holding companies and states to account. African countries need to improve their accountability mechanisms to enforce the labour laws that already exist.

In addition, governments must establish clear mandates to:

- build state capacity to assess and understand the impact of AI on their populations,
- regulate data rights and privacy, ensuring that citizens' information is protected and that companies uphold their responsibilities,
- adapt labour laws to account for emerging forms of work, safeguarding service providers who rely on AI-powered platforms or tools for their livelihoods.

AI represents a new avenue of exploitation for Africa, where much of the workforce already operates under precarious conditions. As technology advances, it is crucial to prioritise workers' rights and well-being through mobilisation, stronger labour movements and the formation of unions. Existing labour laws must be reformed to address the realities of AI-driven work, while new regulations are needed to safeguard workers across all sectors. Without such measures, companies will continue to evade accountability, for example through outsourcing on the continent, and AI will only deepen existing inequalities instead of fostering inclusive development.

“Uncritical optimism masks the real costs of AI-driven systems, diverting attention from the precarious labour and systemic injustices that sustain them.”



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Photo: dpa / AA / Gerald Anderson

Mercy Mutemi is one of the plaintiffs' lawyers.

Content moderation

Sifting through the horrors of humanity for less than two dollars an hour

In Kenya, 185 former content moderators are currently suing Meta, the parent company of Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram – and its outsourcing company Sama. They accuse them of violating workers' rights. Many of those affected are severely traumatised.

BY ALBA NAKUWA

While most of us scroll through our Facebook accounts without encountering any obscene content, you can be sure that there is someone out there who views and deletes such content, risking their mental well-being for a living. Behind every deleted video containing violence, abuse or hate speech, or any other content that violates Meta's community standards, is a moderator who, under time pressure and for little money, weeds out the most harmful posts.

In February 2022, Time Magazine first published the story of Daniel Moutang, a former employee of Sama who was fired when he tried to form a union and lead a strike to address issues such as worker exploitation and low wages. The text states that local Sama employees received a net wage of about \$ 1.46 per hour after taxes, based on a 45-hour week.

After Moutang exposed "Facebook's African sweatshop," as the Time Magazine's headline read, more and more deeply distressed content moderators came forward, reporting breakdowns at work after witnessing, for example, a man being dismembered limb by limb in a video. However, these breakdowns could not last long because supervisors regularly ordered them back to their screens, regardless of their mental state.

A total of 144 employees were diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. All diagnoses were made by Ian Kanyanya, head of psychiatric services at Kenyatta National

Hospital. In the case files, Kanyanya stated that the moderators he examined regularly witnessed extremely graphic content, including videos of atrocious murders, suicides, self-harm, explicit sexual content and child abuse.

META IN DENIAL

In a landmark decision, the Kenyan Court of Appeal ruled last September that content moderators can take their human-rights abuse claims against Meta to the country's labour courts. Mercy Mutemi, a Kenyan lawyer representing a group of former Meta content moderators, wrote in Al Jazeera in early April that the content moderators were hired by Sama and worked exclusively as content moderators on Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and Messenger from 2019 to 2023. Meta denies this and insists that they were employed entirely by Sama, which is headquartered in San Francisco.

The outsourcing model has allowed large tech companies to escape legal action. Nerima Wako-Ojiwa, a Kenyan political analyst and civil-rights activist, said on CBS News that Kenya's labour laws needed to be updated to recognise digital work (see main article) – but not only in Kenya. "Because what happens is when we start to push back, in terms of protections of workers, a lot of these companies ... shut down, and they move to a neighbouring country," she told the American news service.



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INFORMAL SECTOR

Joining forces for better working conditions

A union for informal workers – how does that work? An Indian women's movement has the answer: For more than 50 years, the members of the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) have been supporting each other and fighting for better working conditions.

BY THE SEWA EDITORIAL TEAM

Across India, millions of women start their day before dawn, preparing goods, tending fields or setting up market stalls. They work long hours yet earn barely enough to sustain their families. In India, informal workers make up almost 90% of the workforce, but despite being the backbone of the economy, they remain invisible and unheard.

As they lack formal recognition, informal workers are excluded from government support such as health insurance and maternity benefits. Formal banks are also very unlikely to lend to them, forcing informal workers in need of financing to turn to exploitative moneylenders. Climate change exacerbates their plight, with floods, irregular monsoons and extreme heat disrupting their livelihoods. They live in



At the Self Employed Women's Association of India (SEWA), it's all about collective action: voting at a union meeting.

an economy where labour is abundant, and employment opportunities are scarce.

But the story of women working in India's informal sector is not just one of economic hardship – it is a story of courage, resistance, unity and determination. For more than 50 years now, women in India have been teaming up to support each other for more economic security and self-reliance. In 1972, the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) was founded by lawyer and unionist Ela Bhatt. It has become a movement of self-employed women in the informal economy. Today, SEWA has over 3.2 million women members across 18 states in India and a growing grassroots presence in neighbouring Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Nepal. Their goal: to secure their future together, advocating for labour rights, economic empowerment and climate resilience.

THE SECRET OF SUCCESS IS COLLECTIVE ACTION

Organising joint action is the driving force behind all SEWA activities. Members come together in collectives based around their professions and geographical locations. As a group of women with similar occupations, they can be more effective in advocating for their rights. They have a louder voice to speak in politics or to request assistance from donors and supporters.

Although SEWA receives some funding from both Indian and international donors, it also relies on the membership fees paid by the women involved. It is the women them-

selves who decide how the money is spent. SEWA's local groups identify the issues that are having the greatest impact on their lives and take action accordingly.

The issues addressed by SEWA's campaigns are as diverse as its membership. Yet every action must align with its overall principles: Initiatives must create or enhance employment opportunities, earnings or asset ownership for women as well as improve their access to essential services like food, healthcare, childcare and sanitation. They must also foster collective strength, leadership, self-reliance or education.

“The story of women working in India's informal sector is not just one of economic hardship – it is a story of courage, resistance, unity and determination.”

Members of the Self Employed Women's Association work in a variety of sectors: a saltpan farmer in Surendranagar, India.



One of SEWA's recent initiatives was called Pakki Bheet ("solid brick wall"). In August 2024, heavy rainfall caused massive flooding in Gujarat province. Dozens of people died, and tens of thousands of inhabitants had to be evacuated. As many of SEWA's members had lost their homes, the association set up a support scheme. SEWA made permanent yet affordable housing available for them with one condition: The house should be owned and registered in the name of the respective SEWA member – not in the name of any other male member of the family.

The programme was funded by the state government of Gujarat. SEWA hired architects and construction experts to design the houses and trained the association's members in masonry, construction, plumbing and carpentry so that they could build their own houses. As a result, the women have built 6000 new houses in the hard-hit districts of Surendranagar and Kutch. Some of the women who took part in the training have now taken up masonry, plumbing or carpentry as a profession and are providing these services in their villages and surrounding areas.

"Informal workers often have to resort to moneylenders who demand extremely high interest rates."

The SEWA community has been campaigning for decades for some form of minimum income for informal workers, as many of them are paid less than the legal minimum. In sectors as diverse as domestic work, agriculture and construction, collective bargaining can establish a fairer baseline. SEWA members also try to collectively influence pricing in local markets or advocate for a minimum piece rate to protect their livelihoods from instability. Furthermore, SEWA members are trying to set up social-security schemes. For example, they have set up cooperatives to provide full-time childcare for factory and agricultural workers. They are staffed by women from their local communities and the costs are subsidised by community donations, grants and government support. In another example, SEWA's health-care collectives have set up local centres where local women who have been trained at nearby hospitals in basic healthcare, such as taking blood pressure, temperature and vital signs, offer their services.

Back in 1974, about 4000 SEWA members founded the Shri Mahila SEWA Sahakari Bank aimed at improving access to credit and banking services at attractive rates of interest.

Having limited access to formal banking services, informal workers often have to resort to moneylenders who demand extremely high interest rates.

Furthermore, the SEWA community has initiated several women-led enterprises that facilitate market access for self-employed workers. In the 1990s for instance, more than 30,000 women waste pickers in the city of Ahmedabad first formed a local SEWA cooperative and then, in 1995, founded Shri Gitanjali Mahila SEWA Industrial Stationery Producers Cooperative Ltd. Owned and run by its members, the enterprise manufactures stationery products from recycled waste gathered by the collective's members. Then there is RUDI, an enterprise collectively owned and operated by smallholder farmers who sell their produce through a network of female sales agents.

TODAY'S MOST PRESSING ISSUE: CLIMATE ACTION

In 2022, to mark the 50th anniversary of SEWA's foundation, SEWA members decided to address the recurring impact of climate change on their health, livelihoods, nutrition and welfare and collectively launched the Swacch Aakash ("clean skies") campaign. It aims to provide women with opportunities to adapt to and mitigate climate-change impacts. The women began installing green technologies such as biogas plants and cool roofs thanks to the Hariyali Gram ("green villages") initiative, while the Kheti Jhumbesh ("agriculture") campaign saw them engage in regenerative farming, soil restoration and the use of organic fertilisers.

They also set up two microinsurance schemes: The Livelihood Recovery and Resilience Fund provides financing solutions for adaptation and mitigation of climate risks, while the Extreme Heat Income Microinsurance compensates insured SEWA members with a day's wage when temperatures exceed a certain threshold. Both are parametric insurances, meaning that payouts don't require a claim to be made by the insured. Instead, compensation is paid automatically if, for example, extreme heat persists for two days. Each insured woman contributes a small amount each year – and receives direct cash assistance when temperatures soar or natural disasters strike. SEWA's insurance programme has grown rapidly: By 2024 it already covered 50,000 informal workers, ranging from farmers to waste recyclers.

SELF EMPLOYED WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION (SEWA)

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INFORMAL SECTOR

How a community bank helps with climate risks

Climate change poses high risks for farmers in rural India. The Self Employed Women's Association, a trade union for women working in the informal sector, has developed several mitigation and adaptation tools to support them.

BY THE SEWA EDITORIAL TEAM

Erratic weather patterns had devastated her livelihood: Bhavanben Rathod is a smallholder from Naga na Math village in Gujarat's Aravalli district in India. After several extreme climate events had slashed her crop yields and milk production, she was facing severe financial distress between 2017 and 2019. Being a member of SEWA, the Self Employed Women's Association, she went there for help.

SEWA is a trade union for women in the informal sector – an association of women who have joined forces to secure and improve their livelihoods (see main text). The SEWA community has set up a variety of support services for its members, including a community bank. Since it is owned by the cooperative's members and not profit-oriented, it can provide financing solutions at much better conditions than any private lender. SEWA bank offered Bhavanben a fair loan of 100,000 Indian Rupees (about \$ 1170) at a monthly interest rate of 1.5% – far less than the exploitative 12% usually charged by local moneylenders. She invested in a precision pump and diversified into vegetable growing to achieve a more stable income. Over time, this financial boost helped her family move from a makeshift thatched hut into a sturdy concrete home.

In addition to her farm work, Bhavanben struggled with the hardship entailed by traditional firewood cooking, which involves spending long hours gathering wood and poses health risks. When SEWA introduced her to biodigesters, she succeeded – despite some initial hesitation – in setting up a biogas plant. As she now generates enough gas to cook for 10 to 15 people using only cow dung and water, she no longer needs to collect firewood or pay for expensive LPG refills. She also uses the leftover slurry as organic manure, which increases her farm's productivity and generates additional income.

© SEWA



With the help of Sewa, these farmers installed solar panels to generate electricity for their solar precision pumps.

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LABOUR MIGRATION

From Africa to the Gulf

Migrant labourers make up the majority of the working population in the Gulf States. More and more workers are coming to Riyadh, Doha or Dubai from Africa. Their experiences are diverse and range from violence and discrimination to financial independence and personal growth. We spoke with two people who left Kenya for the Gulf.

BY KATHARINA WILHELM OTIENO AND ALBA NAKUWA

As is often the case, it took a large sporting event to draw sufficient attention to glaring injustices. Three years ago, the world watched the men's football World Cup being played in Qatar in stadiums that Amnesty International claims were partly built under conditions similar to forced labour.

In the vast majority of cases, the work was done by migrants – and their labour conditions were often deplorable even before the World Cup. Human Rights Watch reports that in 2019, an estimated 95 % of Qatar's working population

came from abroad. The situation is similar throughout the entire region: According to the Economic Research Forum, migrant labourers made up almost 70% of the workforce in the Gulf States last year.

The workers come from all over the world. At the same time, the share of African migrant labourers has been growing for years in the low-wage sector in particular (construction, security, domestic work, hospitality) – and with it reports of human-rights violations. Employers confiscate passports, wages go unpaid, and food and freedom are withheld as

punishments. Women, who often find employment as domestic workers, in particular report physical and sexual violence. According to a report by the New York Times, 274 Kenyan workers, most of them women, have died in Saudi Arabia alone in the last five years. In Kenya, newspaper reports regularly appear when families receive their relatives in coffins from Gulf airlines at Nairobi airport.

In the Labour Rights Index 2024, Qatar received a score of 47 ("total lack of access to decent work") and therefore is one of the nine countries with the worst working conditions in the world. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) also only received a score of 55.5 ("basic access to decent work").



Restaurant jobs are sought after among African migrants: a waiter at a café in Dubai.

It says something about living conditions in African countries that more and more people are nevertheless deciding to venture a new start in the Persian Gulf. The number of Africans working there can only be estimated, since many are temporarily or irregularly employed, and not all are registered with embassies.

In all the Gulf States, Kenya is among the countries that supply the highest number of African workers. Kenya's Prime Cabinet Secretary, Musalia Mudavadi, mentioned last year that over 400,000 Kenyans are employed there.

D+C spoke to two of them. During those conversations, it became clear that experiences of exploitation are only one side of the coin. For many Africans, migration means a fresh start, opportunity and self-determination. They become the main breadwinners of their extended families at a young age, but at the same time are pursuing their own career goals.

“According to the Economic Research Forum, migrant labourers made up almost 70 % of the workforce in the Gulf States last year.”

Felicitas

Felicitas has lived and worked in Dubai for almost two years. The 28-year-old is employed as a waitress in a five-star hotel there. The Kenyan woman originally had different professional goals: She earned a diploma in civil engineering and afterwards worked at a World Bank-funded building site that was supposed to become a wholesale market. But the Covid-19 pandemic changed the course of her life.

The building site was at a standstill for months, and ultimately her contract was terminated. She had never felt comfortable there anyway. Construction is a male-dominated industry, she explains, and interacting with her colleagues was often difficult: “I was in my early 20s, and the men didn't want to listen to anything I said.” It was a stressful situation that was only made worse by the knowledge that she would never be able to complete a bachelor's degree

without financial support. In Kenya, a bachelor's follows a diploma; without it, she would have a much harder time advancing in the construction industry. So, she decided to look for work abroad.

First, she went to Saudi Arabia, where she worked for five months for a clothing company that made caftans. As an African woman, however, life there was difficult to bear: “As a woman, I couldn't go anywhere on my own, couldn't wear what I wanted and was more or less locked in the house.” When the mall where she worked stopped allowing African employees on the premises, forcing her to work at a private home instead, she decided to return to Kenya.

But since job prospects were still dire in her home country, she followed a friend's advice and took a barista course, hoping that it would help her find work in her new destination, Dubai. About two years ago she travelled to the UAE. Back then, the visa process was less complicated than today. Felicitas could look for work on a two-month visitor's visa. Nowadays people from Africa are subject to greater controls, she reports.

The cost of living is high in Dubai: During her first few months, Felicitas lived in a dormitory and paid around \$100 a month for her bed. Now she shares a larger apartment with a colleague – an improvement that she has her permanent position to thank for. Without it, she also would never have received a permanent visa. In the beginning, she kept her head above water with short-term waitressing jobs. After each contract ended, her visa threatened to expire, and every day a visa is overstayed in the UAE is punished with a hefty fine. She managed to only have to pay ten penalties, she says, before she found permanent work.

Still, the financial strain is high. Felicitas supports her mother, sister and a brother in Kenya, for example by paying school fees. “I am now the breadwinner in my family,” she says. She does not want to return to Kenya permanently. “I don't miss my country,” she says, explaining that the political and economic situation have only gotten worse. She can only imagine returning for a visit at the moment – but she does not have the money for that right now.

She also received important support from African networks in the Gulf: “When someone hears that their restaurant is looking for staff, they pass it on.” Thus, informal chains of referral emerge. Contact with other nationalities is harder, she says; people often live in separate residential areas. She reports that in Dubai, there are clear social divisions between different nationalities. She doubts, for example, that she has ever had contact with native Emiratis, who stand at the top of the country's multinational hierarchy.

Her experiences with racism and discrimination are diverse. “There are moments when I notice that people only see me as cheap labour,” she says. “For example, if I want to buy something expensive in a shop, people look at me suspiciously. And on the bus, people next to me have literally held their noses when I sat down.”

Despite these experiences, she is following her plan: “I don’t want to be a waitress forever. My goal is to save enough money to build a house in Kenya and start my own business – maybe in the fashion industry.” She can also picture working on a cruise ship: “I didn’t leave Kenya just because of money. I like to travel and discover new countries.”

Joseph

Joseph, a 25-year-old Kenyan, works in Doha, Qatar – also in hospitality, or more specifically in a café. He has a professional qualification, too: an IT diploma, which he has not yet been able to apply to his work. For him, migrating to the Gulf State was an attempt to reshape his professional future – and to support his family financially.

“I want to help my siblings and ease my parents’ burden,” he explains. He reports that Kenya and Qatar are very different – not only with regard to economic opportunities, but also culturally. Complying with religious regulations and the general rules for living in Qatar was stressful at first. The long working hours were burdensome, too, as was the psychological pressure to earn and save as much as possible.

He was able to emigrate thanks to a friend in Kenya who supported him during the visa process. Joseph calls for more transparency in visa and application procedures. “A lot of people get cheated by agencies,” he says. In the beginning, he had no networks in Qatar and only had himself to rely on. Only after several failed attempts – including interviews for non-existent jobs – did he find a permanent position.

Joseph is leaving the possibility of returning to Kenya open. “Kenya will always be my home, and I get emotional when I think about my family,” he admits. “I haven’t seen them in three years.” But he also says that living abroad has changed him. He thinks it would only make sense to return if he had an opportunity there.

Joseph also hopes to advance professionally – possibly in the direction of hospitality management. Long-term, however, he wants to make use of his IT skills again or start his own project. For him, as for Felicitas, the Gulf States are primarily a place to save money and prepare for the next step.

“Kenya will always
be my home, and I get
emotional when I think
about my family.”

Both Felicitas and Joseph stress that pay in Qatar and the UAE is unfairly distributed. According to them, employees from Africa receive significantly lower wages than colleagues from other countries – even if the Africans have the same or higher qualifications. “We don’t talk about it openly, but the difference is striking,” says Felicitas.

Names have been changed by the editors.



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Photo: dpa / Photoshot

Cotton harvest in Uzbekistan on the border with Turkmenistan.

FORCED LABOUR

Improving working conditions in Uzbekistan's cotton industry

For a long time, the Uzbek state forced both adults and children to pick cotton. A boycott and international pressure led to meaningful reforms, improving the workers' situation. Nevertheless, labour rights continue to be inconsistently implemented, and there is a risk of backsliding.

BY SHAHIDA TULAGANOVA

Uzbekistan has long been one of the world's largest cotton producers, and the industry has historically played a major role in the country's economy. In 2023, Uzbekistan exported \$ 1.63 billion worth of cotton, making it the country's second-largest export commodity after gold.

However, the cotton industry, labelled as "strategic," has always been under strict government control. For nearly three decades following Uzbekistan's independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, the government forcibly mobilised people, including children, in rural areas to meet state-imposed cotton quotas. The cotton-picking season, which begins in August and lasts until December, saw schoolchildren pulled from classrooms and forced to work in the fields for months, depriving them of education and exposing them to exploitative conditions.

For years, human-rights defenders reported that forced labour was widespread in Uzbekistan's cotton industry and that working conditions were abusive and hazardous. Living conditions were unsanitary, and there were frequent reports of serious injuries among both adult and child cotton pickers. The government imposed daily quotas which required adults to harvest at least 60 kilograms per day, while younger children had slightly lower quotas. Uzbekistan's rigid governance structure meant that local authorities, school principals and teachers who failed to provide a labour force for cotton harvesting were threatened and denied social benefits. Payment for this gruelling work was minimal, and in many cases, workers were not compensated at all.

Cotton farmers also faced significant challenges. The government forced them to cultivate cotton instead of more profitable crops, and state procurement prices were set below market value. The state then resold the cotton globally at a profit. A small elite benefited from this system, while farmers struggled.

INTERNATIONAL BOYCOTT

These exploitative practices led Uzbek and international human-rights defenders, environmentalists and labour-rights activists to form the Cotton Campaign coalition and call for a boycott of Uzbek cotton in 2009. The boycott was endorsed by over 330 global brands, including Adidas, H&M, Levi Strauss and Nike. These companies pledged not to source cotton from Uzbekistan until forced labour was eradicated. The boycott had a significant economic impact, as many global markets refused to purchase Uzbek cotton. Governments and institutions, including the US and the European Union, also imposed restrictions and demanded reforms.

International pressure led to progress. In 2014, Uzbekistan banned child labour. Later, the government initiated reforms in the cotton sector, culminating in the eradication of systematic forced labour by 2021. Independent labour monitoring was introduced, and parts of the cotton industry were privatised to reduce state control. As a result, in March 2022, the Cotton Campaign lifted its boycott, recognising Uzbekistan's significant labour-rights improvements. This was hailed as a successful example of international pressure driving meaningful reform.

“Regional authorities remain reluctant to abandon coercive methods and continue to pressure farmers to meet quotas.”

PRESSURE ON FARMERS CONTINUES

Despite these advancements, significant challenges remain, and labour risks persist. According to Umida Niyazova, director of the Germany-based civil-society organisation Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, “Uzbekistan is still not willing to change its anti-market rules governing its cotton industry. The central government and local authorities continue to operate on a quota system, requiring each region to produce a set amount of cotton and assigning land to farmers specifically for cotton cultivation.”

The ongoing pressure on farmers was evident during a video conference where Uzbek presidential advisor Shukhrat Ganiev threatened regional officials, saying, “I don't care what you do, but you must deliver 11,000 tons of cotton. Don't play with it – otherwise, it will end very badly for you and the regional governor.”

Regional authorities remain reluctant to abandon coercive methods and continue to pressure farmers to meet quotas, despite factors beyond their control. One major issue is a labour shortage in rural Uzbekistan. Poor wages in the cotton sector have driven millions of young men and women to seek better opportunities abroad, particularly in Russia.

Additionally, agricultural land in Uzbekistan is state-owned and leased to farmers under restrictive conditions. The government forces farmers to grow cotton or grain even when other crops would be more profitable. A recent report from the Uzbek Forum for Human Rights states that “farm-

ers are afraid to oppose local officials and agree to take on unfavourable obligations, such as growing silkworm cocoons or agreeing to a reduction of their cotton price for fear that their fields could be destroyed or their land leases terminated.”

THE COTTON CLUSTER SYSTEM

In 2017, Uzbekistan introduced a cluster system to transition from the state-controlled cotton procurement model to a more market-oriented structure. Under this system, private textile companies, known as clusters, were granted control over the entire cotton production cycle, from planting to processing and export. The system aimed to improve efficiency and attract foreign investment.

However, in practice, the cluster system has not delivered the expected benefits. Instead of dealing directly with the state, farmers now sign contracts with private cotton clusters. However, since the government still sets purchase prices below market value, clusters, in turn, pay farmers less than initially agreed upon.

Reports also suggest that certain clusters, with the support of local authorities, have pressured farmers into relinquishing their land, sometimes using intimidation tactics and threats. One farmer reported that her son was beaten, and she herself faced constant harassment from the local police for refusing to cede her land to a cluster.

Furthermore, the government’s decision to dissolve independent cotton cooperatives has raised concerns about farmers’ rights to free association and fair market practices. Without cooperatives, farmers lose bargaining power and are more vulnerable to exploitation by government-aligned clusters.

RISK OF BACKSLIDING

In November 2024, more than a dozen farmers appealed to Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, urging reforms that would grant them the freedom to choose their crops and sell independently on the open market. However, it remains unclear how the government will respond.

Endemic corruption and the lack of rule of law remain significant obstacles. Uzbekistan’s courts are not fully independent, leaving farmers with little legal options. If the government does not genuinely liberalise the cotton sector, which is de jure semi-privatised but de facto under state control, there is a real risk that forced labour practices could resurface to meet state-imposed cotton quotas.

While Uzbekistan has made commendable progress in reforming its cotton industry, true economic liberalisation

and labour-rights protections remain incomplete. Without further reforms, the country risks backsliding into the coercive practices that led to international condemnation in the first place.

LINKS

Cotton Campaign:

cottoncampaign.org/uzbekistan

Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, 2025:

Uzbek Forum’s 2024 Cotton Harvest Report.

uzbekforum.org/uzbekistan-increasing-farmers-autonomy-critical-to-address-forced-labor-risks-and-attract-responsible-sourcing/



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SUSTAINABLE SUPPLY CHAINS

“The law would be gutted before it even came into force”

Can a European law improve working conditions in EU supply countries? The EU Supply Chain Act of 2024 was created to do just that. But now the EU has not just postponed, the EU Commission is also planning to weaken it. This is a concession to business lobbyists, Armin Paasch of the Catholic development agency Misereor explains in an interview.

ARMIN PAASCH INTERVIEWED BY LEON KIRSCHGENS

It was supposed to be an important step for greater international accountability: in May 2024, the European Union passed the “Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive”, or the EU Supply Chain Act for short. In future, European companies would have to assume more responsibility for how their products and their components are manufactured internationally – and under what working conditions. But even after its passage, the law is sparking debate. In early April 2025, its introduction was postponed by a year in order to allow time for further changes.

Mr. Paasch, you wrote an article for D+C in 2024 about how important the EU Supply Chain Act is – and warned that it could be weakened. Now the EU Commission is in fact planning to make significant changes before the law is even in force. What exactly is being amended?

On 26 February, the Commission suggested in the new so-called Omnibus proposal that key parts of the directive be weakened. The due diligence requirements will now only apply to subsidiaries and direct suppliers, which are typically located in the EU and pose the lowest risk to human rights. European companies will only have to concern themselves with indirect business partners if they have plausible evidence of human rights or environmental problems. But by then it is usually too late.

That means that the law will not be applied where it is needed most?

Exactly. Most harm occurs at the beginning of the supply chain, like in mines or on plantations in the Global South. It is precisely these risk areas that would now be excluded. Moreover, the Commission wants to eliminate the civil liabil-



Photo: dpa / zumapress.com / MD Mehedi Hasan

Textile workers protest in Dhaka, demanding payment of their wages before the Eid holidays.

ity provision. That means that people in countries of the Global South will have little hope of obtaining compensation if European companies cause damage by violating due diligence requirements. At the same time, penalties for violations will no longer be tied to corporate revenue as originally planned. Thus it will be significantly cheaper and therefore even easier for large companies to simply write off fines as “operating expenses” instead of actually changing their practices. The law’s climate change provisions are also being weakened: Although companies would still have to draw up plans to adhere to the 1.5-degree goal of the Paris Agreement, they would no longer be required to implement them. The law would be gutted before it even came into force.

What would all that mean for people in countries of the Global South?

It would mean that people suffering under poor working conditions would have even fewer opportunities to protect themselves. European companies would have to take hardly any responsibility.

What could the Supply Chain Act achieve in its current form: Could it truly change conditions or only make it easier to obtain compensation?

A good example is the catastrophic fire in the Ali Enterprises textile factory in Pakistan in 2012. Over 250 people died because emergency exits were blocked and there were no fire safety measures in place. The factory’s biggest client was KiK, the German discount textile retailer. The families of the victims tried to sue for damages in Germany, but were denied because of the short statute of limitations under Pakistani law. And because European clients have so little accountability, their chances of success would have been very low. The EU Supply Chain Act would require companies to, for example, investigate and address fire safety risks. Such measures could have prevented or contained the catastrophe. And when these measures are not implemented and human rights violations or damages occur, victims or their families could sue in civil courts in EU member states. That is the main advantage of the EU directive compared to the German Supply Chain Due Diligence Act, which has no civil liability provision.

So it's not just about compensation, but above all prevention?

Exactly. If companies knew that they could be held liable in European courts, they would have a clear incentive to create better working conditions and not just react when it is too late. But if the new plans restrict the due diligence requirement to direct suppliers, precisely the opposite will happen. In the worst case scenario, companies would even have an incentive to ignore evidence that would require them to take preventive measures.

The main reason that is usually given for weakening the law is that it would create more bureaucracy.

To my mind, this discourse is unfortunately clearly being fueled by trade associations and intentionally exaggerated. Of course implementing laws creates bureaucracy. This kind of thing cannot be done without reporting. Company reports are important because they allow authorities and civil society to examine their work. But they are not the “bureaucracy monster” that large trade associations in Germany claim they are. The due diligence requirements would only apply anyway to very large companies with over 1000 employees and annual sales of € 450 million. If you look at the only available representative survey in Germany, you will see that only seven per cent of German companies reject legal due diligence requirements. Eighty per cent report that they are already fully or partially implementing them. There is absolutely no empirical evidence for the EU Commission's assertion that the Supply Chain Act and other sustainability regulations would endanger the competitiveness of European companies.

That survey focuses above all on the German Supply Chain Due Diligence Act, which has been introduced in stages since 2023. What role is Germany now playing in the reformulation of the EU Supply Chain Act?

In order for the Omnibus proposal to be adopted, it has to be approved by a qualified majority in the EU Council, or, in other words, by two-thirds of governments with two-thirds of the population. That is a high barrier. The French and Spanish governments, for example, are vocally opposed to eliminating the civil liability provision. The acting German government has also expressed reservations. It remains to be seen how the future German government will position itself. In their coalition agreement, the Christian Democratic bloc (CDU/CSU) and the Social Democrats (SPD) announced that they would replace the German Supply Chain Due Diligence Act with a new law that would implement the EU Supply Chain Act in a “low-bureaucracy” and

“If companies knew that they could be held liable in European courts, they would have a clear incentive to create better working conditions and not just react when it is too late.”

“enforcement-friendly” manner. At the same time, they support the “Omnibus procedure” and want to avoid “over-regulation”. What exactly this means, however, remains unclear and will have to be negotiated between the two parties. In the European Parliament, Social Democrats and Greens are fighting efforts to weaken the Supply Chain Act, even though they also voted on 3 April 2025 to postpone its application by a year. In the run-up to this vote, the European People's Party – the largest party in the current European Commission with a Christian Democratic, conservative stance – promised to seek a compromise with Social Democrats, Greens and Liberals regarding substantive changes to the law instead of entering into a pact with far-right factions. We can only hope that this “firewall” will hold and that the efficacy of the Supply Chain Act will not be restricted.

LINK

Verband der Vereine Creditreform e.V., Handelsblatt Research Institute, 2024 (in German): Sorgfaltspflichten in der Lieferkette – Wo steht die deutsche Wirtschaft? research.handelsblatt.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/2024_HRI_Creditreform_LKSP.pdf



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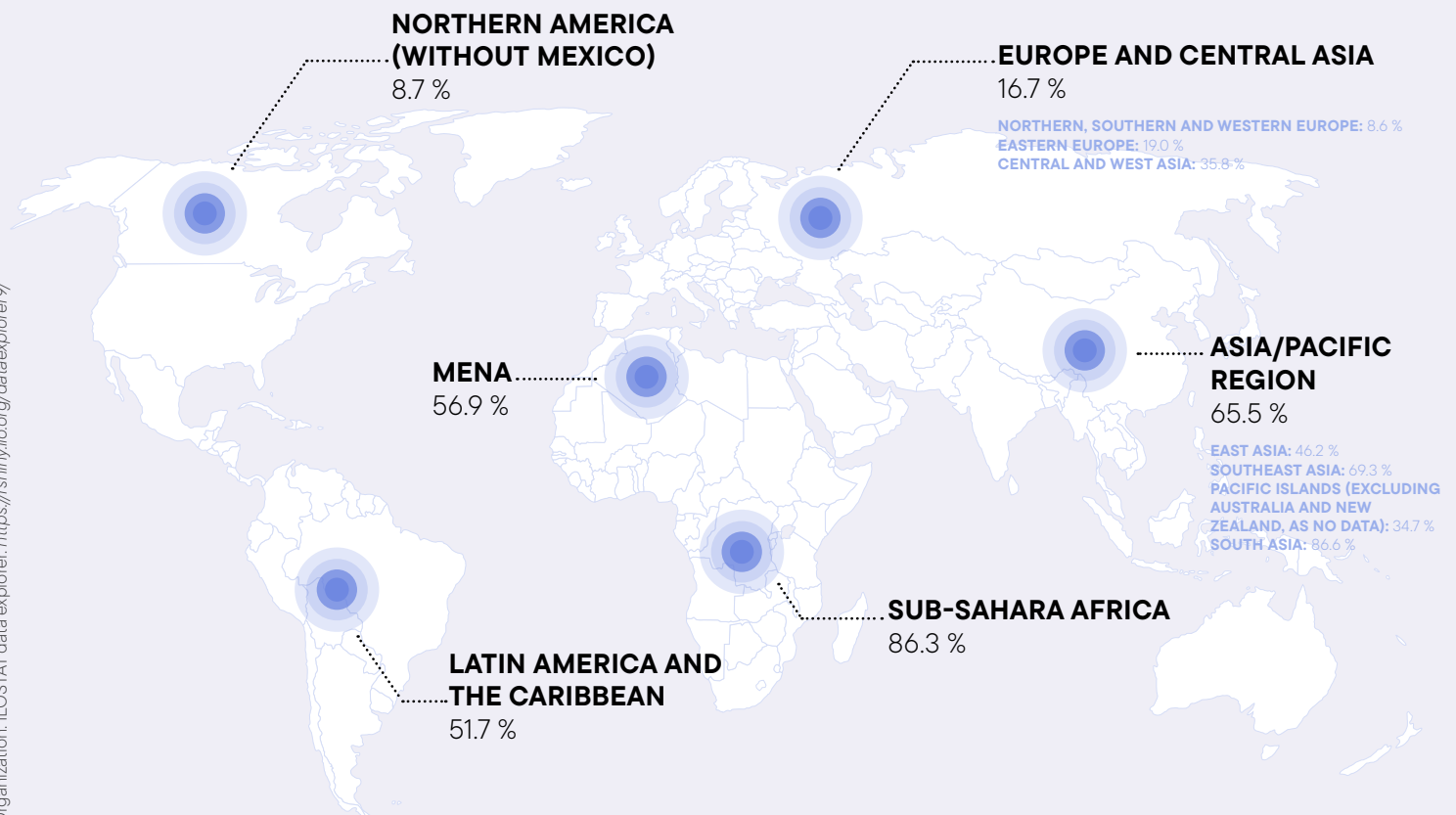
LABOUR AND EMPLOYMENT

Facts and figures: the world of work today

*Legislation, social security, informal employment and migration:
key facts and figures on labour and employment.*

BY ISAH SHAFIQ

PROPORTION OF INFORMAL EMPLOYMENT IN TOTAL EMPLOYMENT (2024)



90 %

of the 187 member states of the International Labour Organization (ILO) have a statutory minimum wage.*

60 %

of a sample of 160 countries adjusted the value of their minimum wages in 2022, but in only one in four countries did these changes result in a real increase in value. In the remaining countries, minimum wage increases did not compensate for inflation.*

Two thirds

out of a sample of 72 countries witnessed reductions in wage inequality since the beginning of the 21st century. The declines have been more pronounced among low-income and lower-middle-income countries. On average, low-income countries display the highest level of wage inequality and high-income countries the lowest. The sample represents about 73 % of wage employees at the global level. Informal sector workers were not included.*

57.8 %

of the world's labour force work in the informal sector. The rate varies widely from region to region. It is particularly high in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, both at around 86 %. In North America and Europe (excluding Eastern Europe), the figure is around 8.6 %.**

4.7 %

of the global labour force are international migrants. Northern America and Europe (excluding Eastern Europe) host almost half of them together.***

59 %

of 145 countries surveyed allow workers to associate with trade unions. However, only 26 % of the assessed countries effectively allow workers the right to strike.****

61 %

of the assessed 145 countries set the minimum age for full-time employment at 15 years or lower.****

35 %

of the 145 countries have no provisions for unemployment benefits. Fifty of them require severance pay on termination of employment; six have no provision for unemployment benefits or severance pay.****

53 %

of the 145 countries assessed have no legislation on parental leave. Another seven countries limit parental leave to four months.****

Sources:

* International Labour Organization, 2024:

[*Global Wage Report 2024-25: Is wage inequality decreasing globally?*](#)

Wage inequality has been calculated on the basis of various indicators, among them the share of workers who are low-paid and the Palma ratio, a measurement of inequality calculated by dividing the total hourly wages of the top 10 % of the wage distribution by the total hourly wages of the bottom 40 % of the wage distribution.

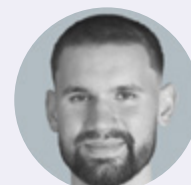
** International Labour Organization: ILOSTAT data explorer.

shiny.ilo.org/dataexplorer9/

*** International Labour Organization, 2024: ILO global estimates on international migrant workers. ilo.org/publications/major-publications/ilo-global-estimates-international-migrants-labour-force

**** WageIndicator Foundation: Labour Rights Index 2024.

[*Labour Law for 135 Countries Covered in One Global Index - Labour Rights Index*](#)



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