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FOCUS

Early childhood

What happens in the first eight years after birth shapes a person's physical, mental, emotional and social development. It determines what can happen later in life. Parents and other caregivers are crucial. The outlook is good when they manage to create an environment in which a child feels safe because its needs are taken care of, so it can confidently explore the surrounding world. For our species to have a promising future – and to achieve the UN's Sustainable Development Goals – we need as many children as possible to thrive in such an environment.

Title: A baby receives a polio vaccine in Malawi.

Photo: picture-alliance/ASSOCIATED PRESS/Thoko Chikondi





 Our focus section on early childhood starts on page 21. It pertains to the UN's 2nd, 3rd and 4th Sustainable Development Goal (SDG): Zero hunger, good health and well-being and quality education. It also has a bearing on other SDGs.

A good start

A person's development in early childhood sets the stage for what will happen later in life. UNICEF defines „early childhood“ as the first eight years. In this time, the foundations of people's physical, mental, emotional and social development are laid.

These are the years in which children's brains are particularly sensitive to various stimuli. What they experience and observe shapes how their brains develop, and that has a bearing on what kind of person a young human being will become. Healthy development requires a healthy environment. However, many children are exposed early on to violence, abuse or parents' quarrels. The resulting trauma and stress haunt many people for all their lives. It is hard to find professional psychological support in many places, and in countries with low average incomes it is often impossible.

Prevention is better than therapy. Parents and other caregivers bear an enormous responsibility. They must be empowered to take good care of their children. That includes a broad range of things, including:

- tender physical contact,
- fostering a sense of security,

“Indeed, too many young lives end before they really get started. That happens in the bloodshed of Sudan, Yemen, Palestine or Ukraine for example, as well as in South Asian floods or East African drought.”

- space, time and freedom to play,
- age-appropriate challenges and tasks,
- a safe home and
- a healthy diet.

The idea is neither to pamper children, nor to overburden them with complex education programs. In many societies, raising children is still a community affair. The young ones are included in group settings and expected to fulfil duties that prepare them for their adult lives.

All new-born babies are equal – equally helpless, hungry and dependent on being protected. Without support, babies, toddlers

and young children cannot survive. Accordingly, the persons who take care of a child are crucially important for that child's entire life.

In our time of multiple crises, even the best parents are often overburdened. Floods wash away homes. Drought and food price inflation make healthy diets unaffordable. Diseases and epidemics particularly affect children because their immune system is still developing. Proper sanitation and hygiene are essential. In too many places, however, the water infrastructure remains inadequate. War and violent conflict deprive masses of young children of everything they need – their parents, their homes, their friends and their schools.

Indeed, too many young lives end before they really get started. That happens in the bloodshed of Sudan, Yemen, Palestine or Ukraine for example, as well as in South Asian floods or East African drought.

If masses of young children cannot grow up to become responsible adults, the UN's Sustainable Development Goals will prove unachievable, and our species will lack a livable planet in the future.



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At the Public Prosecutor General's Office in Mexico City, murder victims' families demanding justice put up portrait posters of those killed.

RULE OF LAW

“Hugs instead of bullets”

Initially, Mexicans had high expectations of the current government. It sought to reduce crime and insecurity in the country through prevention work, but it has not been successful so far. With crime rates high and prosecutions low, people's confidence in the state and its institutions is waning further.

By Virginia Mercado

When President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's administration took office in 2018, it promised “hugs instead of bullets”. The motto stood for a new response to organised crime and the rampant violence that haunts the country. At least rhetorically, the new government took a different tack from previous ones, which had focused primarily

on confrontation and militarising the fight against organised crime. Its approach also differed radically from that adopted further south in El Salvador, where President Nayib Armando Bukele Ortiz is taking tough, headline-grabbing action against drug trafficking and gang violence. Videos circulating on social media show suspected gang members imprisoned en masse.

A different solution was sought for Mexico. “We want peace,” López Obrador proclaimed. Instead of the “war on drugs” that his predecessors waged, he wanted to create educational opportunities and prospects for young people. Instead of spectacular arrests, he wanted falling crime rates to be his measure of success. Such rhetoric was one of the reasons he was elected.

Unfortunately, the Mexican public's high expectations have yet to be met. The number of unpunished crimes is rising. Distrust of the justice system and the level of public dissatisfaction is rising accordingly. At the end of the last legislative period in 2018, public confidence in the Public Prosecutor General's Office had reached an all-time low, with just over half of the population (57.5%) having “some” or “a lot” of confidence in the institution. After the new government took office, the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) found that the figure initially rose, peaking at 65.8% in 2021, but has been falling again since then. That slide could continue through to the end of the government's term of office.

There are several reasons why people distrust the justice system. Two stand out in particular: The first is the inefficiency of law enforcement. Many Mexicans believe that rule of law is successful only if crime is punished severely; very few believe in rehabilitation or social reintegration. The second

reason is corruption: people have the feeling that only a minority are ultimately held accountable by the law.

NOT ENOUGH PERSONNEL, NOT ENOUGH TRAINING

One of the main reasons for the inadequacy of law enforcement is that the judicial system is overburdened and under-resourced. As a result, many criminal proceedings are dropped and offenders acquitted. According to INEGI, over 2 million preliminary proceedings were opened across the public prosecution system in 2019, which meant a massive workload for the limited number of public prosecutors. On average, 290 cases landed on each prosecutor's desk. Since then, the situation has deteriorated further. As the Global Impunity Index for Mexico shows, the number of public prosecutors per thousand registered offences fell from nine in 2018 to 8.58 in 2022.

The picture is not much better when it comes to security agencies. Mexico City is the federal state with the most favourable manpower level: 3.7 police officers per thousand population. In the most populous state, Estado de México, the figure is just 0.9 officers.

There is also a shortage of properly trained personnel. It starts with the first investigators on the scene. Many of them have only a low level of education – usually secondary school qualifications –, and they are paid poorly for dangerous work. Their action is often guided by the widely held notion that anyone who breaks the law has no rights. If, however, they arrest a suspected person without following all required procedures, the suspects must be acquitted. That is especially the case when security forces commit human-rights violations during an arrest.

CORRUPTION AND IMPUNITY

Another cause of impunity is corruption. Its range is wide, from bribes for the cover-up of minor offences to large illicit payments in cases of serious malfeasance involving government officials and private-sector companies. Those who can afford a good lawyer or have connections inside the judiciary often escape punishment. The result in many cases is impunity for the privileged, and that, in turn, breeds a sense of injustice among the general public.



Most crimes are not reported in the first place because people feel that “nothing will be done”, so offenders will not face justice. Fear of retribution matters too. The National Survey on Victimization and Perception of Public Safety suggests that more than 90% of crimes went unreported in 2021. That included serious crimes like kidnappings, where the estimated number of unreported cases is 98.6%.

Even if a crime is reported and investigated, there is only about a 50% chance of successful prosecution, as surveys tell us. However, photographs and videos showing criminals in the act are widely shared on social media. They boost the public's sense of frustration with authorities that fail to bring offenders to justice despite clear evidence.

COUNTERING THE CARTELS

One of the main criticisms levelled at the present government is that drug cartels are able to operate with widespread impunity. Video footage from September 2023 shows residents of a municipality in Chiapas apparently welcoming gunmen from Sinaloa cartel for “saving them” from another cartel. State authorities are barely present in such areas, so it seems that no one can stand up to a criminal organisation except another criminal organisation. The slogan “hugs instead of bullets” is no longer only belittled by the opposition. It is losing credibility among the government's supporters.

Impunity and corruption are nothing that started in the current legislative period. A particularly sensational instance of both was the case of “supercop” Genaro García Luna. He was one of the highest-ranking officials in the war on drug gangs as Mexico's secretary of public security from 2006 to 2012 under President Felipe Calderón. He stayed close to President Enrique Peña Ni-

eto's government from 2012 to 2018. He is now on trial in a US court, charged with collaborating cartels and protecting them. He obviously used his time in office to commit crimes from the highest echelons of power with complete impunity. His former bosses say they knew nothing about his illicit dealings, even though the “war on drugs” that he conducted was clearly ineffective.

Another crucial matter is the independence of judges. President López Obrador has recently been voicing more and more criticism of the judicial authorities, denouncing their privileges and condemning corruption. One such case was when the navy reported that half of the people it arrested for drug trafficking or fuel theft between 2021 and 2023 had been released on court orders – and some went on to re-offend. The full truth, however, is that such orders often result from investigative shortcomings. They may often be the consequence of pressure exerted on judicial staff by organised crime. It is common knowledge that gangs intimidate judges, for instance by threatening their families and friends. At least eight federal states are considered a high-risk environment. Anyone working on organised crime cases there needs special protection.

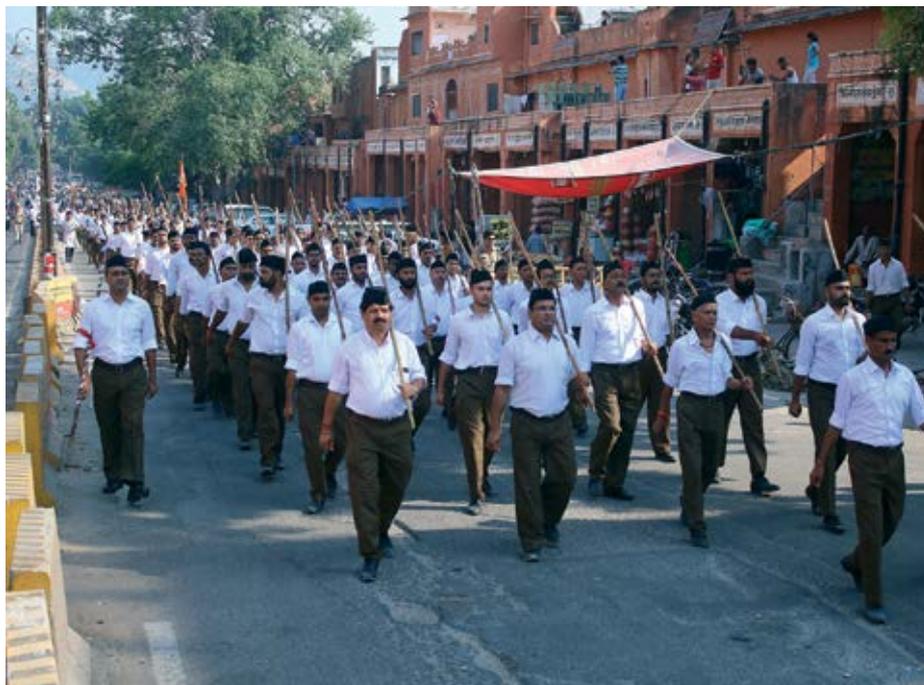
Fighting crime is a massive challenge for Mexico. The people long for an end to the violence and insecurity. So, they obviously turn their eyes to El Salvador: Might its approach work? Would it be appropriate for Mexico? Is any price too high for finally putting an end to crime?

What these people tend to disregard is that repressive crackdowns on gang violence have a considerable price, with human-rights violations being tolerated and innocent persons ending up in jail. Do we really want to accept that as collateral damage? Most people in Mexico still favour less draconian approaches. They may not worry much about human rights in principle – but they do not trust the security forces. Accordingly, they do not want to see them empowered to take even more arbitrary decisions.



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RSS activists marching through Jaipur in 2022.

GOVERNANCE

India's Hindu-supremacism

Many western observers fail to understand how authoritarian the ideology of India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi is. They would have a clearer idea if they knew more about the RSS, the Hindu-supremacist organisation that Modi is a member of.

By Suparna Banerjee

RSS stands for Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, which means national self-help organisation. It was founded in 1925 by Keshav Baliram Hedgewar in the city of Nagpur. He was inspired by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar who had developed an ideology of Hindu nationalism. The RSS was modelled on the Italian fascists and later, as they became more powerful, on the German Nazis. Mussolini and Hitler were seen as heroes. The idea was to create an Indian cadre organisation that would span the subcontinent and promote the idea of a Hindu nation living in accordance with traditional norms. Those norms, of course, included the rigid and oppressive caste system.

The RSS was started in the same decade as the Muslim Brotherhood was launched in Egypt. The motivation was similar. In both cases, conservative members of the educated middle classes were upset about the corruption of Britain's colonial rule. They did not want to be contaminated and hoped that emphasising religious values would inoculate society. Impressed by right-wing movements, they wanted to organise members in a similar way. They promoted social work to uplift the poor and spread their ideology.

Today, the RSS has 4 million to 5 million members. Its men are known to do regular paramilitary exercises dressed in brown slacks and wielding long bamboo sticks.

The RSS doctrine includes the following principles:

- India belongs to the Hindus.
- Hinduism is not simply a religion, but even more a way of life.
- Every religion should have complete freedom to practice its faith according to its rules and traditions.

- The implication is that everyone who resides in India must accept the norms, values and history of Hinduism and should also be willing to make sacrifices to protect it.

RSS rhetoric can sound noble and harmless. The ideology, however, is neither. Its focus is on oppressing minorities. The worst hit are India's Muslims, but Christians feel repression too. To some extent, the RSS appreciates indigenous religions like Sikhism and Jainism, but those who adhere to these faiths are often upset about how the RSS declares their belief systems to be variants of Hinduism and expects all of them to stick to the latter's traditions.

Given that the RSS emphasises nationalism, one might think it was actively involved in the independence struggle. It was not, but actually supported the colonial government to some extent. The reason was that the RSS did not like Mahatma Gandhi's vision of an inclusive nation in which all religious communities would enjoy equal rights. At the same time, it was appalled by the idea of creating Pakistan as a country for Muslims. Unable to create a mass movement for its Hindu-supremacist vision, it did not become involved when Gandhi launched civil-disobedience campaigns in the 1930s that then led to the successful Quit India movement of the 1940s.

In early 1948, not even six months after the colonial power had left, Nathuram Godse murdered Gandhi in Delhi. He was a former RSS member who felt that the independence leader had hurt the Hindu-supremacist cause and who was angry because of the subcontinent's partition.

The assassin was put on trial, sentenced to death and hanged. For a brief period, the RSS was banned, and the Congress party stayed the dominant political party for the next decades.

The RSS kept spelling out its discontent with the secular state. For example, it opposed India's tricolour flag. The background is that its green stripe symbolises Islam, the white one Christianity and the orange one Hinduism. The lion sculpture in the middle of the flag stands for the ancient Asoka empire which was Buddhist and covered most of South Asia. The flag thus gives no indication whatsoever of Hindu dominance. Early on, the RSS stated: "The word three is itself an evil, and a flag having three colours will certainly produce a very

bad psychological effect and is injurious to a country.”

A LARGE NETWORK OF ORGANISATIONS

The RSS is the core of Sangh Parivar, a large network of organisations. To a large extent, the affiliates do what the RSS expects them to do. The BJP is the political party that represents the Sangh Parivar. Some of its top officials are RSS members, including most prominently Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself.

Other RSS influenced organisations are active in cultural and social affairs. In a country where basic necessities are unaffordable or inaccessible to masses of people, the network’s social programmes and educational efforts matter in particular. They inspire loyalty among those who benefit. At the same time, they give the entire network a positive reputation. Perhaps most important, they spread the RSS ideology. The Sangh Parivar permeates all sectors of Indian society, apart from non-Hindu faith communities.

About 80% of India’s 1.4 billion people are Hindus, while 14% are Muslims. The rest

belong to other religions. Hindu-supremacism has a long history of violence against minorities. Muslims are most affected (see box), but others are sometimes targeted too.

Because of deadly riots in Gujarat in 2002, when Modi was chief minister there, the USA denied him entry for several years. As prime minister, however, he is no longer ostracised, but courted by western governments who see him as a potential ally against China.

Civil rights are not guaranteed in contemporary India. Some journalists and civil-society activists have been murdered. Aggressive trolling on social media serves to silence people.

Moreover, Muslims are increasingly at risk of violence. Lynchings occur regularly, and large-scale Islamophobic riots can erupt any time. The last major incident of such bloodshed was in Delhi in early 2020.

The RSS is doing what it can to impose the Hindu-supremacist rule it aspires to. So far, it has not fully succeeded. Its affiliate, the BJP, has been the strongest party in recent years, but it still faces serious challenges. Several large states are run by other parties, which have formed an alliance to

contest the national elections next year. Nonetheless, Modi’s BJP won several recent state elections.

On the other hand, the BJP has been building strong relations with India’s corporate leaders, including in the media business. Especially the influential private TV channels support Modi. To some extent, efforts to align the non-political military to the RSS agenda have been making progress. There is some support for Modi in the judiciary as well, though Supreme Court rulings do not always turn out as he would like.

The future of India’s democracy is in the balance. If the RSS gets its way, the secular constitution will become obsolete. Minorities, which have long suffered marginalisation, will lose even the legal claim to equal citizenship. Since the Hamas attacks in Israel on 7 October, Hindu-supremacist propaganda is once again casting all Muslims anywhere as reckless terrorists.



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Deadly riots

The RSS does not accept Indian Muslims’ religious faith to be genuine, arguing that they descend from people who were forced to convert from Hinduism to Islam. It fails to acknowledge that, at the time, many conversions may actually have been voluntary. In Mughal times, influential members of Indian society probably converted to Islam either out of personal conviction or in order to find favour at the imperial court. Islam is a rather egalitarian religion so it may well have appealed to people from the lowest and most oppressed castes. On the other hand, caste systems mark contemporary Muslim communities too, so

conversion is no way to escape one’s caste fate.

The RSS is obsessed with trying to erase Muslim influence from contemporary India. It argues that school education has been downplaying the relevance of Hindu kings and rulers for a long time. In its eyes, secular, leftists and Marxist intellectuals dominated India’s education system in the post-independence era. The RSS claims that they wanted to keep Hindus powerless. Now that the BJP is running the central government as well as several state governments, there is a trend of history books being rewritten. Not all information is fact-based, of course. Some



Muslim-owned shops burning in 2002 in Ahmedabad, Gujarat.

books now claim that the RSS contributed to the freedom struggle, though it really did not do so.

The RSS has a track record of stoking of violence. In the early 1990s, it supported a campaign to build a Hindu

temple on the location of Babri mosque in Ayodhya. It claimed that the Mughal Empire had torn down a Ram temple to build the mosque. In late 1992, a huge Hindu-supremacist mob descended on Ayodhya and demolished the mosque. In response, deadly riots erupted across South Asia, affecting not only India, but Pakistan and Bangladesh too.

Ten years later, the state of Gujarat became the scene of similar massacres. The riots began when a train with Hindu pilgrims from Ayodhya was destroyed in a fire blaze. Hindu-supremacists immediately blamed the Muslim community. At the time, Narendra Modi, India’s current prime minister, was this state’s chief minister. He failed to step in and stop the violence. SB



US president visiting Israel's prime minister in October: Benjamin Netanyahu (left) never wanted the two-state solution Joe Biden (right) demands.

JEWISH VOICES

Israel deserves solidarity, Netanyahu not so much

Hamas terrorism is entirely unacceptable. This Islamist outfit is not a liberation movement. It is sacrificing thousands of Palestinian lives after brutally murdering and kidnapping Israelis. Israel deserves solidarity. At the same time, prominent Jewish voices are expressing stringent criticism of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Endorsing universal principles such as peace, pluralism and the rule of law, they deserve attention.

By Hans Dembowski

Netanyahu has been controversial among Jews for a long time. In recent years, his governments only had rather slender parliamentary majorities, and recurring general elections did not change that.

The British journalist Jonathan Freedland belongs to those who find fault with Netanyahu. He argued in his Guardian column (17 November 2023) that leftists are wrong to believe Hamas is fighting for Palestinians, since “it does not mind if its own people die”. The author points out that this terrorist organisation used its funds not to

provide basic services to people in Gaza, but to build a huge tunnel network for its own exclusive use.

He then goes on to state that western policymakers often misunderstand the character of the “most right-wing government” in Israel’s history: “It includes junior ministers who fantasise about flattening Gaza with a nuclear bomb or repopulating it with the Jewish settlements that were uprooted in 2005.”

Freedland’s conclusion is: “Washington, Brussels and London currently back Israel because they agree that no peace is possible without the removal of Hamas. They are much less clear that no peace is possible without the removal of Netanyahu and his henchmen.” Freedland is adamant that Netanyahu does not want the two-state solution western leaders keep insisting on.

DWINDLING APPROVAL

Many Jews – whether in Israel or not – may disagree with Freedland to a greater or smaller extent. It is noteworthy, however,

that Israelis are not rallying in Netanyahu’s support, though they are eager to eliminate Hamas. The prime minister’s support has dwindled to a mere 20% in opinion polls.

The background is that Netanyahu is a typical right-wing populist whose propaganda defines the nation as a homogenous group which supports his world view. He reminds Washington Post columnist Jennifer Rubin of former US President Donald Trump (30 October 2023): „These are men who continually insist only they speak for the country, only they can shield it from harm. They dehumanise and demonise any opposition and cannot display a modicum of empathy. And when their own incompetence leads to avoidable deaths (e.g., a Hamas attack, a raging pandemic) they deflect and cast blame elsewhere.”

It fits the picture, Rubin argues, that Netanyahu pretended that only failures of the military and the secret service made the deadly pogrom on Israeli territory possible. His propensity to put his career first has been evident for a long time. Rubin quotes historian Ruth Ben-Ghiat, who told her: “Netanyahu displays the classic strongman attributes of self-preservation. He was laser-focused on ‘judicial reform’ to the detriment of national security.”

UNDERMINING THE SUPREME COURT

Indeed, Netanyahu’s core ambition in the months before the monstrous Hamas violence was to eviscerate Israel’s Supreme Court, relying on the tiny parliamentary majority of his right-wing coalition. Earlier this year, Noah Yuval Harari wrote in the Guardian (7 March 2023): “If these laws are passed, the government will have the power to completely destroy our freedom. Sixty-one members of Knesset (Israel’s parliament, with 120 members, D+C/E+Z) could pass any racist, oppressive and anti-democratic law they think of.” Netanyahu did nothing to find compromise in spite of weekly mass protests, which included military reservists refusing to serve. It obviously matters that he wants to avoid prison but knows that an independent judiciary will most likely find him guilty of corruption once he leaves office.

On the other hand, Netanyahu has a long track-record of discrediting and silencing opponents. Sigal Samuel, a novelist and journalist, pointed out on vox.com

(1 November 2023): “One strategy has been to brand absolutely any criticism of Israel antisemitic. Many Jews disagree with that characterization, noting that although anti-Jewish hate is all too real – we’re seeing it surging today – it doesn’t help Jews or anyone else to use it as a shield for everything Israel does to Palestinians.”

Michelle Goldberg made a similar point in her New York Times column (20 November 2023): “I’ve long argued that anti-Zionism and antisemitism aren’t the same thing.” The international explosion of anti-Jewish violence occasioned by the war in Gaza forced her to reckon with how often anti-Zionism and antisemitism are intertwined: “Abhorrence of the Jewish state slips easily into abhorrence of Jews.”

The depressing reality is that Jews, wherever they live and whether they have Israeli citizenship or not, are being held accountable for whatever the Israeli government does. The irony is that, though Netanyahu claims to speak for all Jews everywhere, he does not consistently denounce antisemitism. Guardian columnist Freedland argued this case in Britain’s Jewish Chronicle (28 September 2023).

Freedland criticised the prime minister for having paid a courtesy call to billionaire Elon Musk in spite of the plutocrat’s aggressive stance towards the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), a civil-society organisation. Freedland wrote: “Accusing a Jewish group of singlehandedly plotting to tank X/Twitter’s value – a task in which Musk, thanks to his own comically bad handling of the site, needed no help – draws itself on antisemitic myths of shadowy Jewish power.” Musk has since posted further antisemitic messages, encouraging others to do so too. However, he promised to stem Hamas propaganda on his platform, and was thanked by Netanyahu when visiting Israel.

In his article, Freedland listed several other instances of Netanyahu cosying up to Jew-haters abroad. He explicitly named right-wing parties “in Romania, Sweden, Finland and Germany” with a track record of holocaust denial and antisemitism. According to Freedland, the trade-off is quite simple for Netanyahu: “He’ll shake hands with these parties, so long as they issue a lip-service statement opposing antisemitism – even one that does not fully reckon with the truth of the Holocaust – thereby handing them the prize of Israeli-sanctioned public

legitimacy. In return, as (the Israeli newspaper) Haaretz reported, ‘these parties support Israeli settlements in the West Bank.’”

GROWING TENSIONS IN WEST BANK

Israeli settlers have been causing increasing tensions in the West Bank for a long time. Among Palestinians, the fear of permanent displacement has spread. As Vox-author Samuel elaborated in another post (27 October 2023), this fear has three main drivers:

where more than 700,000 Israelis now live in areas the UN and US agree are occupied territories. Despite that, the Israeli government authorized thousands of new homes for settlers and opened up new areas to construction, while bulldozing thousands of Palestinian homes and schools and further restricting Palestinian movement.”

Sanders noted that legal experts speak of “illegal annexation” and warned that violence has kept escalating for months: “Before 7 October, 179 Palestinians had been



Rally in defence of the Supreme Court in Tel Aviv in February.

“The first is ingrained in Palestinian memory: In 1948, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were permanently expelled during the first Arab-Israeli war, and intermittent displacements have continued ever since, as Israel has sought to maintain a Jewish majority in the state by pushing Palestinians out.” The second driver of displacement fear was the increasingly expulsionist rhetoric of some Israeli leaders in recent months. The third is what the Israeli defence establishment has been saying since 7 October, demanding “to make Gaza smaller, if not permanently impossible for Palestinians to live in, let alone one day build a state in.”

US Senator Bernie Sanders assessed the situation similarly in the Guardian (2 November 2023): „This year saw record Israeli settlement growth in the West Bank,

killed in 2023, which made it the deadliest year in two decades. Since 7 October, 121 more Palestinians have been killed in the West Bank, including some by settlers. These tensions were part of why so much of the IDF (the Israel Defence Forces, D+C/E+Z) was deployed in the West Bank, rather than on the border with Gaza.” The reduced presence of troops on the southern border obviously helped Hamas to carry out its atrocious pogrom.

In the New York Times, the journalist Peter Beinart assessed West Bank Palestinians’ fate in a similar way (14 October 2023): “For more than half a century, they have lived without due process, free movement, citizenship or the ability to vote for the government that controls their lives. Defenceless against an Israeli government

that includes ministers openly committed to ethnic cleansing, many are being driven from their homes in what Palestinians compare to the mass expulsions of 1948.”

APARTHEID ACCUSATIONS

For these and related reasons, the international non-governmental organisations Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International accuse Israel of apartheid. The legal term means that different laws apply to different people on the same land with the purpose of systematic oppression and domination. The Israeli civil-society organisation B’Tselem uses it too. A document it released in November 2021 pointed out: “Roughly 15 million people, about half of them Jews and the other half Palestinians, live between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, under a single rule.” B’Tselem states that the perception of a democratic state being separate from only temporarily occupied territories is wrong. “All of us, Jews and Palestinians alike, live in this area in a binational reality, under a single regime. About half of the population – all the Palestinians who live in this area, whether they are citizens, permanent residents or subjects – are either fully or partially excluded from this decision-making process.”

The full truth is that Netanyahu has been pitting Hamas against the Palestinian Authority for a long time, doing what he could to boost the former and weaken the latter. Jewish Currents, a periodical based in New York state, reported the following (10 October 2023): “In March 2019, Netanyahu told a meeting of his Likud party’s Knesset members that ‘anyone who wants to thwart the establishment of a Palestinian state has to support bolstering Hamas and transferring money to Hamas. This is part of our strategy – to isolate the Palestinians in Gaza from the Palestinians in the West Bank’.”

Ezra Klein is another New York Times columnist. He has been using his podcast to assess the current crisis from various angles. He is furious about the vicious terrorism of Hamas and how some people not only celebrate it, but openly accuse all Jews of complicity with Netanyahu, whom he himself deeply resents.

In the episode of 17 November 2023, Klein pointed out that different generations of Americans see Israel in a different light. To people of Biden’s age, it is still a weak

and vulnerable country that was founded by people who escaped the holocaust. His own generation’s experience is different, Klein stated: “We only ever knew a strong Israel, an Israel that was undoubtedly the strongest country in the region, a nuclear Israel, an Israel backed by America’s unwavering military and political support.”

What alienated many young Americans, including Jewish ones, was that Israel kept moving further right, according to Klein: “Extremists once on the margin of Israeli politics and society became cabinet ministers and coalition members. The settlers in the West Bank ran wild, functionally annexing more and more territory, some-



times violently, territory that was meant to be returned to Palestinians.”

Angry about growing anti-Jewish sentiments and violence internationally, Klein nonetheless argued that rallies in support of Palestine are not simply expressions of anti-semitism. In his eyes, many participants are plainly appalled by the large number of Palestinian civilian deaths in Gaza. To summarise the sources quoted so far, Netanyahu’s policies are polarising at the national level and aggressively expansive towards the occupied territories. He has shown little concern for the rule of law, pluralism and peace with Palestinians.

This is why UN Secretary-General António Guterres (the only non-Jew to be quoted in this essay) said that the Hamas attacks did not happen “in a vacuum”. In re-

sponse, Israel’s government demanded his resignation.

In this complicated setting, Jewish Netanyahu-critics have messages western governments should heed. David Levy, a former Israeli diplomat, called for a ceasefire in the New York Times (8 November 2023): “It has been said many times that what Israel needs from its friends and supporters is to be pulled back from the precipice. America’s guaranteeing of Israeli impunity and unwillingness to meaningfully address Palestinian suffering has for too long failed Israelis and Palestinians alike.”

Senator Sanders wants a ceasefire too. He wrote in his Guardian piece: “Like any other country, Israel has the right to defend itself and destroy the Hamas terrorists who attacked them. But it does not have the right to kill thousands of innocent men, women and children in Gaza. It does not have the right to endanger the lives of millions of Palestinians – half of whom are children – by shutting off water, food, fuel and electricity.”

Thomas Friedman warned in his New-York-Times column that Netanyahu’s credibility rests on a rather shaky foundation (25 October 2023): “If Israel is asking its best allies to help the Jewish state seek justice in Gaza while asking them to look the other way as Israel builds a settlement kingdom in the West Bank with the express goal of annexation, that is strategically and morally incoherent.”

In a later column (14 November 2023), Friedman demanded that the White House change its course. It should not only verbally endorse the two-state solution that Netanyahu always did his best to prevent, he argued, but actually propose a plan for achieving it: “It is time for President Biden to create a moment of truth for everyone – for Netanyahu, for the Palestinians and their supporters, for Israel and its supporters and for AIPAC.” AIPAC is the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, a lobby organisation. Friedman insisted that Biden “needs to make clear that America will not be Netanyahu’s useful idiot”.



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The dates indicated in the
essay are when the articles
quoted appeared on the

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Karim Khan, the International Criminal Court's prosecutor, visiting President Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah in early December.

PALESTINE/ISRAEL

“The rules of international humanitarian law are absolute”

The war in Gaza raises difficult questions regarding war crimes and crimes against humanity. Whether someone is responsible and guilty in legal terms cannot be determined from afar, as Kai Ambos, professor of criminal and international law, explained in a D+C/E+Z interview.

Kai Ambos interviewed by Hans Dembowski

Karim Khan, the chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) has admonished Israel and Hamas to adhere to international humanitarian law (IHL) or otherwise expect indictments. Does the ICC actually have jurisdiction?

Yes, it does. Palestine joined the ICC in 2015, giving it jurisdiction regarding crimes perpetrated on Palestinian territory (the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip). Whether Palestine is indeed a state remains

disputed, but the ICC's competent Pre-Trial Chamber accepted its status as a state in 2021 for the purpose of the Rome Statute. Therefore, the ICC can investigate cases relating to genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes in Palestine. It can indict people, adjudicate and ultimately impose sentences. Moreover, the ICC has jurisdiction regarding crimes perpetrated by Palestinian citizens abroad – for example, by Hamas fighters in Israel, even though Israel is not an ICC state party.

Khan recently travelled to Israel and Palestine. Arabs accuse him of having focused primarily on the Hamas attacks and thus having distracted attention from the genocide they claim is going on in Gaza. Does their claim have any substance? The number of 18,000 dead in nine weeks does seem disproportionately large.

It is easy to use legal terms for inflammatory political rhetoric, but much more difficult to make a sound legal assessment. It would be more promising to look for war crimes first. Whether a specific military attack is disproportionate depends on the rules of IHL. There is no mathematical formula, but the assessment depends on the concrete circumstances of every single military operation. Thus, while a hospital or any other medical facility enjoys special protection under IHL, it may turn into a legitimate military target if it is used for military purposes. The question then becomes whether the attack is still proportionate. Whether this is the case cannot seriously be assessed without being on the ground. Only then one can obtain sufficient knowledge of the relevant facts.

When it comes to genocide, it is important to prove the perpetrator's special intent to destroy a particular protected group. Is a certain rhetoric of Israeli leaders legally relevant in that regard? I am thinking of phrases like “human animals” or “flattening Gaza” as well as proposals to drop an atomic bomb or to make a life in the area impossible by other means. Omer Bartov, a scholar who grew up in Israel and specialises in the Holocaust, warns that genocidal

action often follows when such language is used.

Bartov chooses his words carefully. He warns of possibly impending genocide without claiming it is happening already. Some statements of certain Israeli policymakers are indeed worrisome. Yet, while they may be relevant for proving the necessary specific intent, they cannot automatically be attributed to the persons who are taking the military decisions.

It was Yoav Gallant, the defence minister, who spoke of “human animals”.

Yes, unfortunately, and he also spoke of totally shutting the Gaza Strip off from water, electric power et cetera. In terms of IHL, that statement was unacceptable. It is illegal to take such action and punishable as a war crime. Whether declaring a group of people to be “human animals” implies genocidal intent, however, depends on a number of issues. One is whether Gallant was referring to all Palestinians in the Gaza Strip or only to the Hamas fighters.

Isn't it obvious that Hamas is committing war crimes? Fighters are hiding behind civilians, they have taken hostages, they hit residential areas in Israel with missiles...

Well, what happened on 7 October certainly violated international law in many respects. Crimes against humanity have been committed, including killings, rapes, abductions et cetera. Moreover, Hamas, a non-state party in this conflict, does not adhere to IHL, according to which combatants must be distinguishable from civilians, for example by wearing uniforms. The use of so-called human shields amounts to a war crime, especially when the persons concerned did not volunteer for that dangerous role. At the same time, however, the fact that Hamas is breaking the law does not allow Israel to do the same. The IHL rules are absolute and do not depend on how other parties in a conflict are behaving. Concretely speaking, this means for example that civilian persons who are being abused as human shields still enjoy immunity from attack, i.e., the attacking party – Israel – must do the very best possible to ensure they are not harmed.

The slogan “from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free” is often shouted during rallies. Pro-Israeli voices claim that it is

genocidal because it denies Israel's right to exist as a state. In Germany, it has been forbidden since mid-November.

A more nuanced approach is necessary here. Whether the slogan expresses genocidal intent depends on how one interprets it, which in turn will depend on who is interpreting it from which perspective. Someone who uses the slogan might say it is merely meant as a provocative response to Israel exerting military control from the Jordan to the Mediterranean since 1967. The focus would thus be on the Palestinian right to self-determination, but neither challenge Israel's right to exist within the pre-1967 borders nor target Jews as such. At the same time, someone who shouts the slogan may indeed have genocidal intent, but the slogan itself does not necessarily prove the mental state of the person shouting it. Another matter is whether it is possible to effectively fight against certain opinions, however awful or misleading they may be, by legally criminalising or prohibiting them. I have serious doubts in that respect. For example, demanding a commitment to Israel's existence from migrants who want to become German citizens will probably result in lip service, given that these people just want to be naturalised and would formally commit to everything to achieve that. But this kind of commitment is not real, but merely opportunistic. So, what does a state gain by demanding it?

Another much heard term these days is “apartheid”. Does it apply to Israel, or does it simply serve antisemitic propaganda?

This is another quite complicated question. I have just written a book on that in which I did my best to elaborate what apartheid means in historical and legal terms. After defining apartheid as a legal concept, the next question is whether the Israeli practices in the Occupied Territories, especially the West Bank, amount to apartheid fulfilling the legal criteria. Unfortunately, there are several reasons to think they do. This debate is not new, however. It has been going on in the UN, civil society and among scholars for decades. It will not go away by calling it antisemitic. We should not forget that some Israeli scholars and intellectuals speak of apartheid themselves. Examples include the human-rights organisation B'Tselem or people like Amos Goldberg, who made the

case in the German newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung on 23 August 2023. In discussing in depth the legal dimensions of the concept, my goal is to come to a more rational debate.

Is building permanent settlements in the West Bank a war crime?

Well, such settlements violate IHL because an occupation is supposed to be temporary and creating facts on the ground by establishing highly sophisticated and solid settlements is incompatible with such a temporary nature. According to the Roman Statute of the ICC, building permanent settlements for people of the occupying nation on occupied land is therefore a war crime. This was actually the main reason why Israel voted against the Statute in 1998. The West Bank settlements, moreover, lead to the fragmentation of what is supposed to become the territory of a future Palestinian State, so they ultimately make the two-state solution that everyone is now speaking of again impossible.

There is a tendency in Germany to accuse anyone of antisemitism who expresses criticism of Israel, and critical voices from Israel hardly get any attention.

This is true, unfortunately. However, one must not overlook that the most profound criticism of Israeli policy typically comes from Israel itself. That is true in the apartheid debate, but also applies to discussions regarding the occupation policy's legal and ethical implications. Anything we say in Germany concerning these matters has mostly been said by colleagues in Israel earlier, and often in a better and more precise manner. It is therefore essential to preserve Israel's democracy and its culture of public debate. By contrast, prohibiting specific views or making them taboo tends to be counterproductive.



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Sign to mark an “unmarked site of suffering”.

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Silence is not golden

Survivors and veterans from all parties to the conflict are gathering today at sites of the Bosnian War. Together, they want to send a message of justice and reconciliation in a country that is still torn apart.

By **Martina Rieken**

For the first time since his release almost 30 years ago, Marijan Krajina enters an abandoned warehouse in Kaćuni, a small village in the municipality of Busovača in central Bosnia and Herzegovina. He was imprisoned in the dilapidated building for 76 days during the civil war at the beginning of the 1990s. Marijan Krajina experienced unimaginable suffering here. He and his son, both Croatian civilians, were arrested

for no reason by Bosniak soldiers. They were brutally mistreated in the old grain warehouse in Kaćuni. Krajina is visibly upset as he talks about his experiences. “The worst thing was that I had to listen to my son’s screams from the next cell,” the former primary school teacher recalls. He says that he just wanted to die. Appalling stories can be heard at this inhospitable place. Marijan Krajina had never wanted to return.

“But I did,” he says after leaving his former prison. An enormous weight seems to fall from his shoulders. “I want everyone to know what happened here. I want something this terrible to never happen again.”

About 50 people have come to Kaćuni with Krajina. They are veterans and survivors from all parties to the former conflict,

accompanied by peace activists and local and international journalists. The visit to the former warehouse in Kaćuni is part of a peace campaign by the Centre for Non-violent Action (CNA). CNA has worked closely with the Centre for Training and Networking in Nonviolent Action – KURVE Wustrow for over 20 years in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia within the framework of the Civil Peace Service (CPS).

Kaćuni is one of five stations, along with Tarčin, Žepče, Derventa and Doboj, that the survivors are visiting on this weekend in March 2023. The participants place roses, hear harrowing stories, mourn and give each other courage. Then they affix a blue sign with the inscription: “Unmarked site of suffering – at this site, during the past war, people were subjected to inhuman acts. By not letting these events be forgotten, we stand in solidarity with all victims. May it never happen again to anyone.” CNA has already identified over 130 such places. The markings show respect to victims and their families and serve as

a visible symbol for justice, reconciliation and peace.

After Marijan Krajina has shared his memories, a man steps out of the crowd. His name is Edin Ramulić, and he is a veteran of the Bosniak army, whose soldiers tortured Marijan Krajina on this site. He asks for forgiveness on their behalf. “I didn’t know that such terrible things happened here,” Ramulić says later. “Marijan reminded me

“The fact that former enemies can reach out to one another at sites of war crimes shows that there is a path to reconciliation, however rocky it may be.”

of my father, who had a similar experience. I am the only male survivor of my family. I experienced the horrors of war as a soldier, prisoner and family member. Right after the war I became a peace activist.”

SHOCK AND MOURNING

At the next station, in the village of Tarčin, about 30 minutes by car from Sarajevo, the Serbian Slobodan Mrkajić recalls his ordeal. He spent two years in a total of six camps. In Tarčin, his torturers extracted his teeth with tongs used for making horseshoes. His injuries will always be visible. It is almost a miracle that he survived. The group is silent after his story. Many people are stunned, some are crying. Together they fasten red roses to the fence of the former camp.

“We come to these places. We come in peace to remember the victims of the war and thereby show cross-border solidarity. Veterans and survivors who used to be enemies are setting an example of reconciliation and dialogue,” says Nenad Vukosavljević, co-founder of CNA. “They recognise that terrible suffering occurred on all sides.”

The peace campaign by CNA and CPS requires a confrontation with the past, which rarely happens in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but is necessary for a peaceful future. The society has still not recovered from the atrocities of the war.

Bosnia and Herzegovina was a constituent republic of Yugoslavia that wanted independence. From 1991 to 1995, the three

largest ethnic groups in the country were locked in a bloody conflict. Many Bosnian Muslims backed an independent state, while some Bosnian Serbs called for a union with Serbia, and Croatian Bosnians wanted to belong to Croatia. The wounds are deep on all sides to this day.

DIVIDED SOCIETY

Nowadays, the people still live ethnically, religiously and spatially separated. Even children are taught separately. Each group maintains its own version of the past and often disputes that its side committed war crimes. The rest is silence. Thus, the enemy image of the respective “other” is preserved and passed on to the next generation. The division in society is also reflected in politics. Politicians block each other on many issues, thereby exacerbating tensions in the country. The economy is in decline due to complicated regulations and widespread corruption. As a result, more and more young people in particular are emigrating.

The last stop of the peace campaign is the iron bridge over the Bosna River, on the outskirts of the city of Doboj in north-east Bosnia and Herzegovina. Here, 13 civilians were shot to death for no reason in June 1992. Their dead bodies were thrown in the Bosna. There are no survivors to tell the tale. Therefore, it is even more important that they are not forgotten.

After the meeting, the campaign’s participants publish an emotional appeal to the public in many European media. Their statement reads: “Deeply convinced that all victims deserve equal respect, with our joint visit to sites of suffering, including former detention sites, we want to express human decency, share in the pain and provide encouragement and support to each other.” Against the backdrop of their own experiences, they warn of the tragic consequences of war and make a plea for understanding. “Without denying our differences, we believe that mutual respect and understanding (...) can create space for dialogue where we can hear each other with open hearts,” the declaration continues. “We believe that our right to freedom and peace can only be achieved by working together, crossing the borders that have separated us since the war and by learning from our painful past.”

The fact that former enemies can reach out to one another at sites of war

crimes shows that there is a path to reconciliation, however rocky it may be. “It helps us to talk about what happened,” one of the veterans says, “but they don’t want us to be here together”. He means politicians. None of the local politicians they have invited has appeared. The peace campaigns of CNA are tolerated, but not supported.

A few weeks after the campaign, CNA receives a complaint. Five associations from Busovača claim that there was no camp in Kačuni where people were hurt, but that Bosniaks were tortured and killed at other sites in the area. CNA responded by referring to statements from victims and offering to discuss which unmarked sites of suffering the authors of the complaint would like to identify. Only through dialogue, CNA believes, can such resentment be dispelled.

CNA has been confronting the past and advocating for dialogue between different groups since 1997. In its offices in Sarajevo and Belgrade, a total of 11 people, including two CPS employees, work together



in multi-ethnic teams. The goal is to process experiences, achieve reconciliation and develop an inclusive culture of memory. The latter is necessary to help create a notion of a shared state. In addition to its memorial campaigns, CNA is also working to systematically document, research and regularly publish the insights it has gathered in books, exhibitions, websites and seminars.

LINKS

<http://onms.nenasilje.org>
www.ziviler-friedensdienst.org



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Not enough money for tea farmers

Tea is grown in various parts of Burundi, and it is a significant export commodity. The country has six processing centres. But tea growers are unhappy about the price they receive for their product. They are calling for more money.

Germaine and Pascal have been farming for years. They grow a variety of crops, but their mainstay is tea. The couple lives with their five children in Kayanza Province in the north of Burundi. For the last six years, they have taken their green tea leaves to the Rwegura tea factory for processing.

Pascal complains that it is hard to make a living from growing tea. “We can feed our children and send them to school, but the kilo price is still too low.” It has been increased twice in the last nine years and currently stands at 280 Burundi francs. Translated into euros, that is around 9 cents. It leaves Pascal struggling to make ends meet: “Our costs are higher than our income. The price has to be raised.”

In Mugamba, a rural commune in Bururi Province in the south of Burundi, 40-year-old grower Colette feels the same way. She is even considering giving up growing tea altogether because it is no longer profitable. “I would rather grow something else that I can harvest quickly and easily.”

Colette explains that there are various traders for tea. She and her neighbours sell to a state tea company, which provides them with subsidised fertilisers and other agricultural inputs.

Private companies in the tea sector do not do that. Instead, they pay the farmers a higher price for their tea: 300 Burundi francs a kilo (almost 10 euro cents). But Colette is tied to the state-owned company and feels “the state should support us better and increase the kilo price”.

Representatives of the tea workers’ union agree. They appreciate the support the state provides for tea growers but insist that the government must fulfil its promise to raise the price of leaf tea and coffee. The union’s president says: “We danced for joy when we heard that prices were going to be increased. But we are still waiting for it to happen.”

Burundian tea – like the country’s coffee – is highly valued on the international market. It is sold at auctions in Mombasa, Kenya. Over the years, however, the annual volume of tea that the country produces and exports has steadily declined. To promote tea growing, experts suggest expanding the area under cultivation, providing farmers with better training and raising the kilo price.



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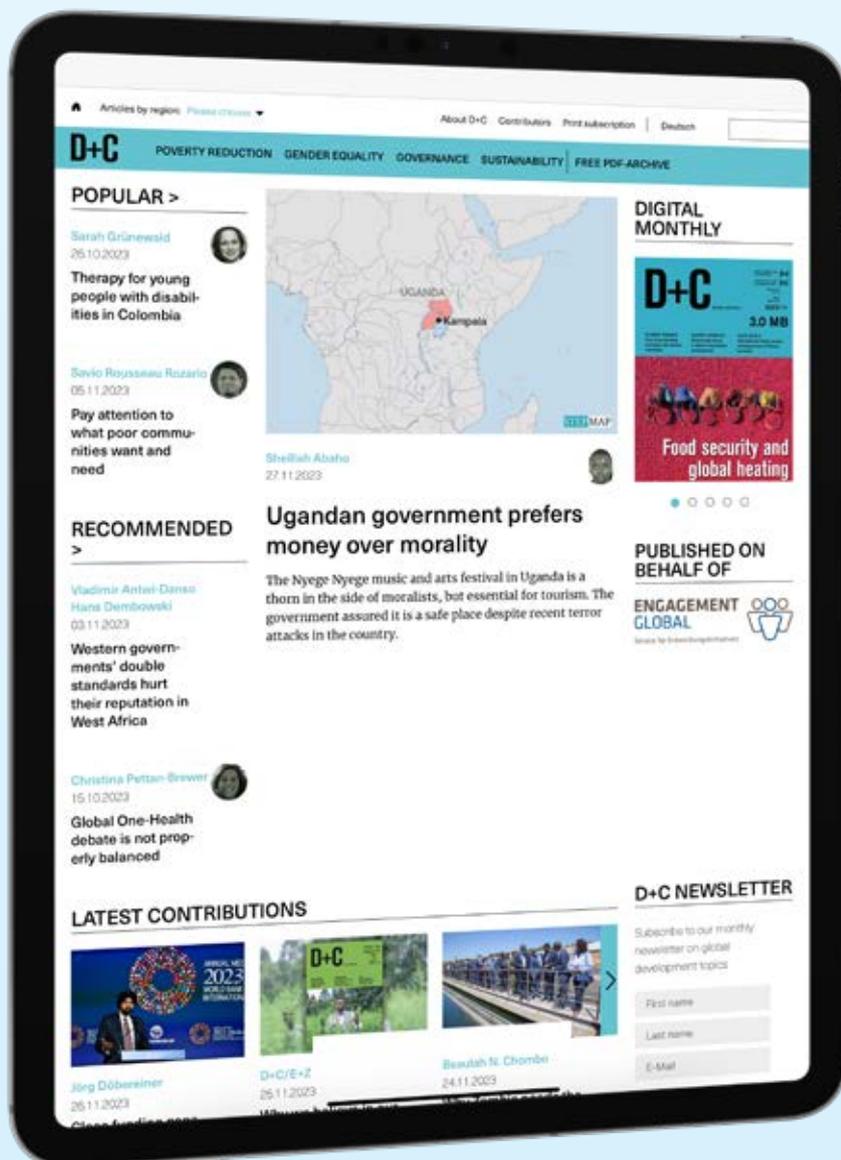
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CLIMATE NEGOTIATIONS

Too little, too late

The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was adopted by the international community at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Three decades later, we see it has not delivered what it was supposed to deliver.

By Hans Dembowski

Greenhouse-gas emissions have kept increasing, reaching yet another record high in 2023. Global temperatures also reached a new record level, and the impacts of climate change are felt around the world as we see an increasing number of extreme-weather disasters.

The original idea was that the UNFCCC should stop this deadly trend. Adaptation to a warming climate was initially left off the agenda, because it was not supposed to become necessary. It did, so, not quite 20 years after Rio, adaptation became an important topic of climate summits. Measures – and funding – again proved to be insufficient, so now a Loss and Damage Fund had to be launched, and it will require much more money than it has so far. Had emissions been reduced as intended, money would neither have been needed to make infrastructure climate resilient nor

for compensating the harm done by extreme weather.

The UNFCCC did make a difference. Without it, our situation would be even worse. Its consistent pattern, however, is “too little, too late”. That proved true once more at the Dubai climate summit in December. It did not decide to phase out fossil fuels, but only to transition away from them. That is better than nothing, but it does not suggest that we will see the decisive action that we so urgently need. It is more likely that matters will keep getting worse and we don’t know when – or even whether – they might start getting better again.

It is easy to blame the high-income nations. Yes, they are guilty of doing “too little, too late”. They still are reducing emissions too slowly and are too stingy when it comes to the financial support less fortunate countries need to cope with damages and adapt to warming. The full truth is that low-income countries have contributed very little to cause climate change but are especially vulnerable to its impacts.

Middle-income countries, however, must bear some of the blame too. Indeed, their responsibility for the escalating problems is growing from year to year. It is striking that we have not seen a coherent and

ambitious climate agenda being launched by the BRICS, the group of large emerging markets that includes Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa and claims to speak for the global south. Three members – Russia, India and China – are among the top five emitters in absolute terms. Two of them have disproportionately large carbon footprints per capita.

On average, every Russian emits an annual 13 tons, slightly less than people in the USA do (14.4 tons). China’s per capita carbon footprint is 8.9 tons, which is almost twice the global average and slightly above the German figure of 8.2 tons. These numbers are unsustainable.

Russia is not known for environmental efforts, but it did attack Ukraine. The war is as carbon intensive as it is bloody. It is also diverting both western attention and funding from climate action. In a similar way, China’s sabre rattling has triggered an expensive arms race. Those resources would be better invested in climate action. Not only Taiwan has reason to worry. Vietnam, the Philippines and other countries bordering on the South China Sea resent Beijing’s overbearing attitude too.

At their most recent summit in South Africa, the BRICS decided a few other countries to their group, including three petrostates: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Iran. This choice shows that they are quite eager to keep accessing and using fossil fuels, but much less interested in democratic governance. Saudi Arabia (17 tons of carbon emission per year and person) and the UAE (22 tons) are high-income countries. Claims that they represent the global south are awkward, to put it mildly. The BRICS have failed to explain how their closer alignment with OPEC, the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, will help climate-vulnerable communities in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Too little, too late. If the international community is to keep global heating below 1.5°C, we must escape this pattern. Western high-income nations must do more, and so must each and every government that claims to represent the global south.



They claim to speak for the global south: Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping in Beijing in October.



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DEVELOPMENT FINANCING

Wrong priorities

The German government is planning to cut funding for development cooperation and humanitarian aid. This sends out an alarming signal.

By Åsa Månsson and Lukas Goltermann

The German government's plans for the 2024 state budget envisage cutting the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development's budget by more than 900 million euros compared to 2023. Moreover, the Federal Foreign Office's budget is likely to lose around 400 million euros for humanitarian aid. Predating the recent fiscal challenge, plans had been announced to cut funding for development cooperation by almost a quarter and for humanitarian aid by around 30% in this legislative term.

These plans sharply contrast with the increasing demands in development policy, humanitarian aid and international climate funding. The list of global challenges is long, and progress towards achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) remains meagre. Humanitarian aid needs are surging, exacerbated by the climate crisis that is severely impacting people worldwide. Food insecurity and hunger are plaguing millions. These issues have become worse in Haiti, Yemen, Afghanistan and Somalia in particular.

At the same time, many countries in the global south face tight budgets due to the pandemic and other challenges. Almost half of the world's population lives in nations spending more money on debt interest than on education or healthcare. This precarious situation calls for greater international cooperation and financial aid. Additionally, escalating tensions from the Israel-Palestine conflict are a growing concern globally and regionally.

This makes the planned cuts to German official development assistance (ODA) all the more worrying. They raise doubts as to whether the governing coalition of Social Democrats, Greens and Liberals will be able to meet the funding targets outlined in their coalition agreement. These goals include at

least 0.7% of gross national income (GNI) for ODA, including 0.2% for the poorest countries – plus additional funds for international climate financing.

In the past two years, Germany achieved its 0.7% target for two main reasons. Firstly, during the pandemic, the federal government used a small portion of its significant rescue funds to assist countries of the global south coping with the pandemic. Secondly, it reported more and more funds as ODA to the OECD which do not benefit the global south at all, such as the costs of accommodating refugees in Germany.

As we have reached the halfway mark of the SDGs, it is crucial for the German government to step up its efforts. Failing to meet the 2030 Agenda would disproportionately affect people in the global south. Rather than financially undermining development and humanitarian aid, the German government must take decisive action to address the global food crisis, growing inequality, humanitarian emergencies and the pressing challenges of climate change.

In the upcoming 2024 budget, funding for civil society projects is set to be pro-

tected from cuts. This takes into account the crucial importance of these projects in achieving the SDGs and acknowledges their value. Civil-society organisations (CSOs) are indispensable in combating inequalities and championing democracy, human rights and peace. Nevertheless, Germany falls way below the OECD average for CSO funding, which is around 14% of bilateral ODA.

In 2021, VENRO estimated that around 31 billion euros are missing for German development funding and humanitarian aid to meet crucial targets within the current legislative period. Unfortunately, the current government plans do not suggest that this gap will be bridged in the foreseeable future. It becomes all the more important to fight for an allocation of appropriate financial resources for Germany to meet its obligations in tackling global challenges and supporting the socio-ecological transformation.



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Global needs exceed available resources: displaced people in Yemen.

Letters to the editor



DECAYING RURAL AREAS

Hans Dembowski: “Integrated rural development matters more than ever” (D+C/E+Z Digital Monthly 2023/11, editorial, p. 3)

Integrated Rural Development was a buzzword in Nepal as well – in the 1980s, as you mentioned. It is no longer the case.

The situation has worsened in preceding decades. Frequent political upheavals, together with overall economic downturn, led the majority of the rural population to urban areas for personal safety and for employment opportunities. The Maoist rebellion (from 1996 to 2006) aggravated the situation furthermore. After the 2006 truce, young men and women began leaving the country in search of employment in the labour markets of the Gulf countries and Malaysia.

The flow continues even today – with 1500 to 2000 people leaving Nepal every day. Although a majority of them send remittances and do come back for a brief

respite of a couple of months, they do not return to villages to till or tend farmlands they owned (some were made landless by the Maoist rebels).

Net result: Nepal’s fertile lands and farmlands remain barren. And villages have virtually become a shelter for aged parents and grandparents. There are no government policies that give incentives to people to cultivate their lands and grow grains and fruits. In the absence of young people, old people are dying without proper care and funerals or cremation.

Dhruba Adhikary, Nepal



ECOSYSTEMS AND BIODIVERSITY

Min Qingwen and Gua Xuan: “Interplay of culture and nature” / Interview with Melissa de Kock: “The basis of our existence” (D+C/E+Z Digital Monthly 2023/08, p. 23 / p. 27).

I read the articles with great interest. However, multiple use in rice fields (rice, poultry, fish) is not a Chinese



Harvesting rice in Lalitpur, Nepal.

singularity. It is documented for Java, for example. All examples are presented in an ecologically idealised and harmonised way. The authors do not ask the question as to why these systems were created and what work is required to maintain them. It is no coincidence that many of these traditional agro-ecosystems are threatened by decay, even though they are actually highly efficient.

It is not enough to look at Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS) purely from an ecological point of view; economic conditions and working conditions in particular must also be discussed. The latter is crucial, for example, in assessing how and whether the terraced landscape in Shexian can or should be preserved.

Regarding the interview with Melissa de Kock: ecosystems must not be equated with biodiversity. In nature there are numerous functioning ecosystems with few species. Optimal grow-

ing conditions all year round result in ecosystems that are rich in species but poor in individuals, such as tropical rainforests. Under extreme growing conditions, on the other hand, ecosystems can develop that are species-poor but rich in individuals, such as the larch taiga.

Species-rich natural ecosystems are not the only way to produce oxygen. Replacing the species-rich tropical rainforest with a species-poor but individual-rich monoculture of oil palms would of course be an ecological disaster. But the oil palms would also produce plenty of oxygen through photosynthesis. However, oxygen from photosynthesis is only available for us to breathe if the carbon equivalent has been permanently removed from the natural cycle and stored in carbon-containing sediments. Otherwise, the oxygen from photosynthesis is used up again when the biomass decomposes.

Dr Artur Behr, Hermannsburg

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FOCUS

Early childhood

Giving advice to young mothers in Senegal

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How preschool education benefits migrant families in Germany

By Leon Kirschgens (p. 32)



LOCAL HEALTH EXPERTS

Engagement for healthy babies and mothers

Northern Senegal, on the border to Mauritania, is only poorly developed. Early and forced marriage, as well as female genital mutilation (FGM), are widespread. These practices often create problems for women and girls during menstruation and childbirth. They need advice on child and maternal health, which is provided by health consultants, so-called Badianu-Gokhs. Dédé Fall is one of them. In this interview, she discusses what babies in the region often lack and the advice she gives to young mothers.

Dédé Fall interviewed by Sabine Balk

In Senegal, women typically have multiple children and live in the same house as their mother and other female relatives. One would think that women would pass on their knowledge about periods, childbirth and infant care to their daughters. Why are health consultants like you needed?

In Senegal, there is an enormous need for advice and female advocacy. There are various reasons for this. The topics of menstruation and sexuality, for example, are still fraught with taboo and a great deal of shame. There is widespread ignorance regarding the care and feeding of babies and small children. Of course, some young women are better informed than others. It depends largely on their relationship with their mother. Some can talk to their mother about anything, and some have no access to her or are ashamed to talk to her. These girls need experienced outsiders like us to explain everything to them and answer their questions.

How do you reach the people?

International non-governmental organisations have many programmes aimed at education and counselling. But the people they employ are foreign to the region and therefore do not enjoy local people's trust. Conversely, we Badianu-Gokhs are women who come directly from the same cities or districts as the people seeking advice. We are chosen by local leaders like the head of the neighbourhood, the imam and representa-



A young mother with her baby in the city of Podor, Senegal.

tives of women’s organisations. We have known the people in the neighbourhood for years. We are related to many of them and are also perceived as relatives. That is what is crucial about the Badianu-Gokhs’ approach.

What kind of questions do you typically get?

We have a lot of very young girls here who become unintentionally pregnant at 15 or 16. They hide their pregnancies for as long as possible. We want to empower these girls and explain what to expect during birth and what is important for the baby. We also help them talk to their families.

Young girls whose bodies have not yet matured can experience complications during childbirth, like failure to progress during labour, bleeding or others. There are also girls whose genitals have been circumcised, which is a situation that requires special expertise in obstetrics. We explain to expecting mothers what they might face and what they can do in case of problems. If medical treatment is needed, we refer them to the appropriate physicians.

These girls, who are practically still children themselves, often hide their pregnancies and bind their stomachs. As a result, they have very small babies weighing only two to three kilos at birth. Fortunately, these children are usually healthy, but they require special attention to ensure that they develop normally.

What exactly do these babies need?

They need nutritious food above all. The first choice, as we tell the young mothers, is always breast milk. However, some cannot nurse or do not have enough milk to satisfy their babies. Then we show the mothers how to prepare suitable baby food from local grains like millet, rice or couscous. Since we do not have baby bottles, babies receive liquid porridge right from the start. It works very well.

Administering vitamin A is also an essential part of infant nutrition here. We explain to the mothers that all of the children here receive too little vitamin A. Many children are malnourished due to a lack of fruit and vegetables. They are not hungry, but they are missing essential nutrients like iron, zinc or vitamin A. Experts call this “hidden hunger”. Malnutrition slows physical and cognitive development. People feel the effects for the rest of their lives. They

are more susceptible to infections and have a harder time concentrating.

In addition to educating the mothers about nutrition, we also explain to them the importance of immunisation and encourage them to have their babies receive all the standard vaccines against diseases like diphtheria, pertussis, tetanus, polio, tuberculosis and hepatitis B.

What other advice do you give young mothers in Podor about their babies?

Proper hygiene is important. For those who can afford it, it has become fashionable to use cheap disposable diapers or plastic pants made in China. They contain plastic and chemicals that do not allow any air to reach the baby’s bottom. Moreover, they often do not create a tight enough seal and the baby’s waste leaks out of the sides. All of these issues can irritate the baby’s skin.

“We explain to the mothers that all of the children here receive too little vitamin A. Many children are malnourished due to a lack of fruit and vegetables.”

These diapers are also very bad for the environment. We advise women to use traditional cloth diapers. They are cheap, breathable and therefore good for the baby’s skin. They are also environmentally friendly. Of course, they require a little more work, because they have to be washed.

In addition to hygiene, there is another important point: we ensure that all of our clients’ babies are officially registered and

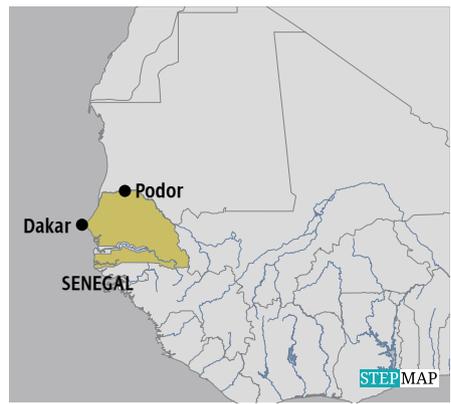
receive a birth certificate. We make it clear how important it is to have this document. Without a birth certificate, children cannot be registered for school or exams. They lack important rights like the right to vote, the right to receive social services and others. In Senegal, there are thousands of pupils every year who cannot be admitted to final exams because they lack identification papers.

What kind of advice do you give regarding menstruation?

The topic still carries a lot of shame and taboo. Girls will not even talk to their mothers about it. Many girls have pain or miss class because of their periods. We explain how they can go to school despite being on their period. Important aspects are protective pads and functioning school toilets. If girls have pain, we refer them to a physician. I also want to emphasise that we warn the girls about early pregnancy and explain the risks. We educate them about contraception too. We hope these measures will prevent some early pregnancies.

Where do you offer your services, and who finances the Badianu-Gokhs?

At the moment, we provide counselling in the library of the Racine Cheikh Sow primary school in the centre of Podor. However, we are hoping that a health and counselling centre will be built soon. Senegalese activist Mariame Racine Sow, who lives in Germany, is driving this project forward. She is currently looking for a construction site in Podor and is hoping to gather the necessary funds from governmental and non-governmental organisations or foundations. She also financed some of our courses on menstruation through donations from the Schmitz-Foundations. Our work is partially financed by Senegal’s Ministry of Health. Sometimes the people who come to us leave a small donation. Generally speaking, however, our pay is very low.



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CHILDREN'S HEALTH

Immunisation is crucial

In the past 30 years, the mortality rate for children under five significantly dropped worldwide. Achieving the global target of less than 25 deaths per 1000 live births by 2030 hinges on various factors, including the pivotal role of vaccination in preventing childhood diseases.

By Benjamin M. Kagina

The total number of deaths in children under the age of five witnessed a substantial decrease from approximately 13 million in 1990 to five million in 2020, as reported by the World Health Organization (WHO). This means a 60% reduction in the mortality rate for children under five worldwide, declining from 93 deaths per 1000 live births (1990) to 37 (2020). The global aim of bringing the mortality rate for children under five below 25 deaths per 1000 live births in the next six years is aligned with the 3rd UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG3): good health and well-being.

Several factors are important for the continued improvement of children's health and a further decline in mortality rates. SDG2, focused on achieving "zero hunger" by 2030, aims to address malnutrition, which the WHO identifies as linked to about 45% of all child deaths. Despite a steady global reduction in stunted children under five years old from 1990 to 2020, approximately 149 million children were estimated to be stunted in 2020, emphasising the ongoing impact of malnutrition.

The WHO recommends exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life, as it provides all the nutrients necessary for infant growth and development. In low-income countries, mothers are often malnourished themselves. In this case, it is more cost-effective and healthier to provide the mother with more food to restore breastfeeding than to expose the infant to the risks associated with breastmilk substitutes. Later, a balanced diet of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean proteins, low-fat dairy products and healthy fats is critical for physical growth, cognitive development and

the immune system. Only with a healthy diet are children able to learn, to be productive and create opportunities to gradually break the cycle of poverty and hunger.

Moreover, hygiene practices play a vital role in preventing the spread of infectious pathogens. Teaching proper hygiene habits early on, such as covering the mouth and nose with a tissue or an elbow when coughing or sneezing and washing hands regularly with soap and water, can reduce the risk of common childhood infections, including diarrhoea. Diarrhoeal diseases are the second most common cause of death – after pneumonia – in children under the age of five. Outbreaks of cholera and typhoid are also preventable through good hygiene.

GLOBAL HEALTH THREAT

This in turn depends on access to clean water and sanitary facilities. Safe water supply and sanitation can furthermore help lower the risk of antibiotic-resistant pathogens by not only reducing the need for antibiotics, but also the risk of spreading infectious diseases in the community. The

global prevalence of bacterial antimicrobial resistance (AMR) is alarming and now recognised as a global public health threat.

Early detection of signs of illness in children is crucial to prevent complications and improve health outcomes. This can also help identify underlying health issues that may not be immediately apparent, such as developmental delays or behavioural problems, and allow for timely intervention. In this context, the Integrated Management of Childhood Illness (IMCI) strategy formulated by WHO and UNICEF focuses on the care of children under the age of five. The strategy aims to reduce missed opportunities for early detection and treatment while incorporating prevention and health promotion as an integral part of care. Among other things, it helps to increase vaccination coverage and improve health knowledge as well as home care practices for small children.

CAREGIVERS ARE KEY

The strategy relies on the knowledge and socio-economic skills of the caregivers. Caregivers can be parents, other family members or professionals. The interaction between caregiver and child is a key factor for the healthy growth and development of children. Positive relationships with caregivers are vital for brain development, well-being and mental health of young children. Caregivers must therefore be provided with



Child immunisation in Sierra Leone.

the necessary resources to offer children a nurturing environment from the outset.

This includes, for example, knowledge about the benefits of immunisations (see box below) so that children are vaccinated on time and the vaccination schedule can be adhered to. Vaccines stimulate the immune system to produce immune molecules, such as antibodies, that fight the specific infections we are immunised against. This helps to protect children from vaccine-preventable diseases (VPDs) such as measles, polio and diphtheria. Globally, there are currently vaccines available to prevent around 25 diseases. Some of these VPDs can be fatal, especially for young children.

Vaccination is therefore particularly important for children under the age of five, as they are more prone to infectious diseases due to their developing immune system. A two-dose measles vaccination is highly effective. Effectiveness of the vaccine to prevent measles has been reported to reach

up to 94% according to a paper published in the *Journal of Infectious Diseases*.

Despite the documented benefits of vaccination, regional disparities in access remain a problem that affects the reduction of under-five mortality rates. This is compounded by other factors such as socioeconomic conditions, healthcare infrastructure and cultural beliefs. The Covid-19 pandemic further exacerbated the problems by disrupting health services, straining healthcare systems and diverting scarce resources. The same applies to conflicts and the impact of the climate crisis. According to a UNICEF report, 12.7 million children in Africa alone have missed one or more vaccine doses in three years, with 8.7 million of them not having received a single dose. Nigeria and Ethiopia are the two countries with the highest number of children who do not receive the basic routine vaccinations every year, with more than 2.2 million and 1.1 million children respectively.

In conclusion, while various factors contribute to children's health, vaccination stands out as a key factor, providing long-term protection, preventing the spread of infectious diseases and ultimately saving lives. In addition, vaccines contribute to cost savings in the healthcare system as they prevent expensive treatments and reduce resistance to antimicrobial agents. If there are concerns or questions about vaccination, consulting with a healthcare provider is critical.



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Preventing deaths

Vaccination stands as a highly effective public health measure, playing a crucial role in shielding children from life-threatening vaccine-preventable diseases (VPDs) and contributing to the substantial global decline in under-five mortality rates. The initiation of the Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI) in 1974 by the World Health Organization (WHO) has since significantly propelled to this reduction through its comprehensive immunisation programmes. When the EPI was introduced, children in all countries received vaccines that protected them against just six VPDs. By 2022, according to the WHO, the EPI had evolved so that children in most countries could be routinely immunised against up to 12 diseases.

Beyond individual protection, vaccination fosters community immunity by ensuring high vaccination rates within a community, shielding vulnerable members from infectious diseases. Community immunity is achieved when almost all eligible persons are vaccinated. High vaccination

rates are particularly critical for those who cannot receive vaccines due to various reasons, such as old or very young age. Vaccinating pregnant women is particularly beneficial, as it gives their children immunity and protects them in the crucial period before they are eligible for vaccination. For example, vaccination against tetanus has been recommended during pregnancy since the 1960s. Studies have shown that

this has contributed in part to the near eradication of the disease worldwide. In addition to the tetanus toxoid vaccine, pregnant women should also be immunised against whooping cough, diphtheria and influenza.

Maintaining high immunisation rates is essential to prevent VPD outbreaks, not only among children but also older age groups. Vaccination campaigns, complementing routine immunisation services, play a key role in raising public awareness about the benefits of vaccination and ensuring access for children who may have missed vaccines as per the national EPI schedule.

Globally, the continuous increase in vaccination coverage since introducing the EPI signifies improved accessibility to vaccines for children across the world. According to the WHO, vaccines contribute to preventing an estimated 2 to 3 million deaths annually. BMK



A health worker administers polio drops during a vaccination campaign in Karachi, Pakistan.



Play is an essential part of learning.

CHILDHOOD ANTHROPOLOGY

Culture shapes early childhood

While some societies invest significantly in early childhood education, cultural variations in learning and parenting persist across the globe. In this D+C interview, cultural anthropologist David Lancy argues that globalisation and the market economy are changing parenting patterns in all cultures.

David Lancy interviewed by Katharina Wilhelm Otieno

How does culture shape early childhood?

Culture has played a significant role in shaping early childhood practices throughout history. In many cultures, the infant is not considered fully human until the achievement of milestones like speech and locomotion.

Cultures have various mechanisms that accompany the different stages of childhood, such as rituals. One of their purposes is to ease the burden of childcare, especially in societies where infants are rather seen as non-persons. Parenting can therefore be “detached”, as one of my articles has noted, as a counter-narrative to the assumption that attachment between child and parent requires effort. Many societies believe that this happens naturally. Young children are innately attracted to their elders because

they are the ones who have food and other treats.

Interestingly, modern society has developed a culture of its own surrounding childcare with toys, books, rules and institutions. Especially in WEIRD society, we have organised our lives around children and childcare.

What do you mean by WEIRD society?

WEIRD is a term social scientists have been using a lot lately to make a distinction. It stands for Western Educated Industrialized Rich Democracies. That term is nothing short of brilliant but needs to be tweaked to fit reality. There is, for example, a great deal of common ground between western (Euro-American) and East Asian pedagogical practices. “Industrial” might be better replaced by “post-industrial” since WEIRD pedagogy is most evident in the so-called knowledge economy. “Rich” is misleading too, because the communities that have fully embraced WEIRD pedagogy are more likely to be middle class. And they aren’t all democracies by any means; one finds WEIRD enclaves in every country in the world, regardless of politics. Nevertheless, I have come to value and use the term because of its traction.

In WEIRD society, we tend to have fewer children, partly so that we can focus more on the few we have. We invest a lot in early childhood care and education in all areas of life. A hundred years ago, this was still different in the societies we call WEIRD.

How important is early childhood education?

Early childhood education is a relatively recent concept, and the idea of training mothers from different cultures in early childhood education workshops should be approached carefully. WEIRD ideals of early childhood education may significantly differ from those in other parts of the world.

Instead, it might be more effective to focus on women’s education earlier in their lives, before they become mothers. Studies have shown that even just a few years of schooling can lead to changes in maternal behaviour. They had fewer children and took better care of them, for example when they got sick – they were able to decide when it was time to go to a clinic, and they could also articulate and interpret symptoms.

The focus on women is due to the fact that dozens of studies have shown that in many societies, fathers are largely absent from childcare, at least in the child’s early years. In WEIRD culture, however, fathers are expected to be involved.

What does learning in childhood mean in different cultural settings?

Learning isn’t confined to institutionalised schooling; it takes various forms in different

cultures. Play is an essential part of learning in many societies, as it allows children to practice scaled-down versions of the skills they will need in adulthood. Make-believe activities, mimicking daily tasks like cooking or herding cattle, play a crucial role. Children often learn by observing, listening, copying and playing, forming what I termed an “everyday classroom”. While western societies place a significant emphasis on structured learning in institutions, many cultures have traditionally relied on children’s natural curiosity and exploration.

Anthropologists are always on the lookout for cultural universals. Can something universally “human” be discerned in all cultures? What are commonalities between cultures?

First of all, all children are born hungry and needy. They cannot survive on their own in their first years in this world. Therefore, in all societies, infants are nursed on demand in response. As a result, all children bond freely with their family and others around them from a very early age. They want to be long and fit in.

Another universal need is autonomy. Children all over the world want the freedom to try things out and explore the world. Very young children are naturally curious and inquisitive.

The differences lie in how societies respond to these very young children – how urgently do their needs need to be met? Between cultures in Africa, Latin America and Asia, there are more similarities than differences. Most societies see childcare as a shared task. This can mean that the whole community is involved in raising children from an early age.

However, this does not necessarily mean that much attention is paid to the infant in many societies around the world. There is not a lot of playing with infants, there is not a lot of talking to infants, there is not a lot of teaching behaviour where the adult is trying to teach the child something.

What differences in early childhood education and childcare are there across cultures?

If we include WEIRD societies in the comparison, there are a lot of differences. Some parents in WEIRD societies shower their children with love, affection, entertainment, gifts and treats from an early age. Other societies may differ in that aspect. An-

thropologists have records of mothers seeing no point in giving their young children the best parts of the meal. They argue that they are not yet old enough to appreciate it and that the best parts should therefore go to the elders, as they have earned it.

“I don’t believe that traditional ways of bringing up children are somehow holding them back. Economic opportunities and employment prospects play a crucial role in overcoming any cultural barriers.”

In WEIRD society, we tend to anticipate every need of the child. In the rest of the world, it is much more about letting the child discover the limits of his or her power. If a child plays with a dangerous toy, such as a knife, WEIRD parents will be very worried that the child will get cut. In other societies, they argue that this is part of the learning process.

What role do siblings and peers play in early childhood?

Historically and in many contemporary societies, children spend a significant amount of time in the company of their siblings and peers, especially after around 18 months of age. So, the child leaves the nest very early and goes out into the world, surrounded by other children.

Recent research shows that children are not only raised by adults. Instead, adults play a rather minor role at certain times in a child’s life. It is then children who educate and care for other children. In some societies, adults are merely role models and providers in terms of basic needs. Above all, caring for siblings is something that is found in many communities around the world. That older siblings care for younger ones to some extent seems to be universal.

However, with shrinking family sizes and increased institutionalised education in WEIRD societies, there is a reduced opportunity for children to interact with other children outside of structured settings.

Cultures, after all, are changing. How do parenting patterns shift with globalisation?

This is really difficult. I would like to cite a very insightful study by Barbara Rogoff

and others. They studied, among others, indigenous Mexican immigrant communities in the United States. The extent to which traditional child-rearing values persisted among those communities seemed to depend on the degree to which children remain involved in subsistence or family labour. The type of economy in which the community participates, whether predominantly monetary or subsistence-based, matters too.

If children are involved in these activities from an early age, the time a child spends in institutional education will be limited and traditional educational values prevail. However, as families transition to middle-class or urban settings and become more integrated into the market economy, they tend to adopt WEIRD values that prioritise institutionalised education.

Do traditional parenting values hinder a child’s preparedness for the globalised world and multicultural societies?

I don’t believe that traditional ways of bringing up children are somehow holding them back. Economic opportunities and employment prospects play a crucial role in overcoming any cultural barriers. Most parents, even those who adhere to traditional cultural values, are motivated to provide education and better opportunities for their children.

Capitalism and globalisation are realities that people around the world have to face. Poverty is another one. Families, even those who hold to traditional values, are willing to take chances and send their children to school and urban areas to have better economic prospects and actually have them earn real money that they can send back to their families in the village.

BOOK

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A child in a Syrian refugee camp.

INTERNATIONAL REPORTS

Life's foundation

The first 1000 days of a child's life are crucial. Children's development in early childhood was analysed from different perspectives in 2023, marking the midway point towards achieving the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. All of these goals have a bearing on early childhood.

By Roli Mahajan

Each year, about five million children lose their lives before reaching the age of five according to the seventh annual Goalkeepers Report from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Three out of four of these fatalities happen in the first year of a baby's life, while 2 million babies never get the chance to take their first breath. Despite

some progress since the mid-2010s, the decline in these deaths is not happening fast enough.

The authors emphasise that early childhood is pivotal for human development, influencing lifelong health, education and ultimately economic outcomes. However, millions of children worldwide lack access to basic healthcare, nutrition and education, putting them at risk of preventable illnesses and even death.

Amidst these challenges, the report highlights innovations in maternal and child health that could save 2 million lives by the decade's end. These innovations include digital health tools, new vaccines and improved maternal and neonatal care, aiming to ensure children receive necessary

care and support even in challenging environments.

Furthermore, the report underscores the need for increased investment in early childhood education. Despite proven benefits, many children, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, still lack access to quality preschool programmes.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Another notable report, UNESCO's Global Report on Teachers, published in November, emphasises the crucial role that educators play in promoting inclusive and good early education for all. The report reveals the scarcity of qualified early childhood teachers in many countries, leading to poor-quality education and limited access to early childhood programmes.

In some regions, such as sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean and the Small Island Developing States (SIDS), the number of qualified teachers in pre-primary education is less than 75%. However, there

are large differences between countries, with some doing well (over 90% qualified teachers) and others struggling (less than 50%). Even in industrialised countries such as Australia, graduates are reluctant to accept jobs as pre-school teachers, so there is a greater risk of a teacher shortage at this level.

The Global Report on Teachers emphasises the importance of early childhood education – it is the foundation for lifelong learning and development. This education must be inclusive and equitable, catering for children from different backgrounds and with different abilities. The report moreover recognises the role of parental and community engagement in supporting children’s learning and development and calls for concerted efforts to engage these stakeholders.

NURTURING CARE

The involvement of various stakeholders in early-childhood development aligns with policies such as the 2018 Nurturing

Care Framework for Early Childhood Development, launched by WHO, UNICEF, the World Bank Group, the Partnership for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health and the Early Childhood Development Action Network.

At its core, the Nurturing Care Framework highlights the importance of a supportive ecosystem for children’s growth, beginning in the home. 2023’s five-year evaluation of the framework revealed a 48% increase in the number of countries with a national policy or action plan for Early Childhood Development (ECD).

Countries such as Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria focused on caregivers of children to help them deal with stress and learn how to support their children’s needs in a humanitarian context. In India, a more inclusive approach involved providing peer support to parents and stakeholders of children with developmental needs. Bangladesh integrated responsive feeding into a parenting programme to address wide-

spread malnutrition and household food insecurity among caregivers of children under age three.

LINKS

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UNESCO, 2023: Global report on teachers: Addressing teacher shortages.

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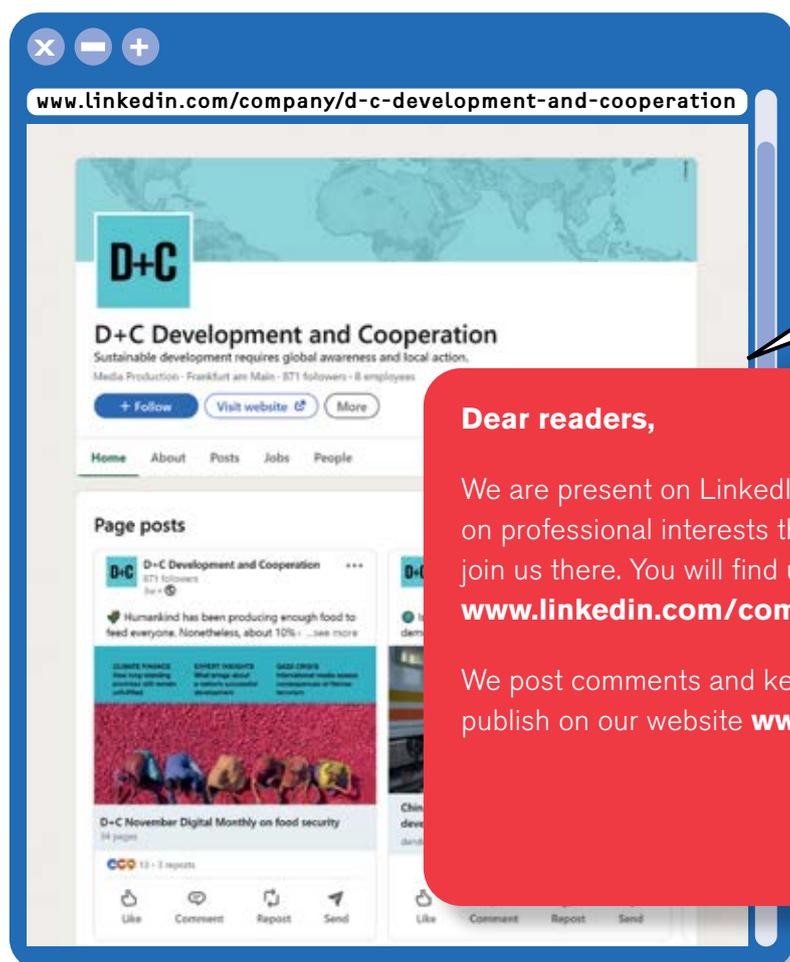
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An SOS mother in the Gwagwalada Children's Village in Nigeria.

CHILD AID

“You have to hold them close”

Many children in low-income countries are orphans or have no one to look after them. They are dependent on outside help. International aid organisations are often a lifeline for them. Jane Nafula, an SOS mother at the SOS Children's Village in Nairobi for 30 years, spoke to D+C/E+Z about the realities of caring for vulnerable children.

Jane Nafula interviewed by Katharina Wilhelm Otieno

What do children need in their early years for a healthy and happy life?

First and foremost, young children need a stable caregiver who feels connected to them. This person is the central figure in the first years of life. Infants and toddlers

depend on other people to survive and fulfil their basic needs, like food, shelter and safety.

As an SOS Children's Village Mother, you are such a caregiver. What is important for the children in your care during their early childhood?

I currently have nine children under my care. Making them feel safe is my top priority. I must make it possible for them to bond with me, even if I am not their biological mother. With babies, this requires physical contact.

You have to hold them close, hug them, carry them. For infants, this is vital, especially if they come from places lacking this kind of care.

Besides that, I am responsible for the children's health. This includes regular medical check-ups and adherence to the immunisation schedule, which is particularly important for very young children.

When it comes to nutrition, a balanced diet is crucial. This means that protein, carbs and vitamins must be included in the menu.

What challenges do children in low-income countries like Kenya face and how does this affect their early years?

The biggest problem, of course, is poverty and everything that comes with it. Sub-standard housing in overcrowded places without proper infrastructure – especially without sanitation – is not a good situation for children to grow up, let alone young children. This leads to diseases, malnutrition and makes any healthy development impossible. On the contrary, it ultimately leads to the death of the child.

Poverty also results in a lack of adequate care. In the worst cases, children in

Kenyan slums do not even have a caregiver. All too often, the pressures of poverty lead to caregivers neglecting their children or arguing in front of the child. There are also many cases of abuse, even sexual abuse, at a young age. These children will suffer from trauma and stress, perhaps for the rest of their lives.

What are cultural factors that influence childcare and early childhood development?

In Kenya, there are more than 40 ethnic groups. Their cultures and beliefs differ to some extent, and this applies to their childcare practices as well. Some of them are very harmful to the child, such as female genital mutilation (FGM), which is unfortunately still practised in some communities.

Other practices harm children's development more implicitly. Some communities believe that children should be seen but not heard. They do not show them much affection, teach them to keep their problems to themselves and to be quiet, especially in front of their elders. This affects the children's self-esteem from an early age, as they have no one to turn to with their worries.

Other cultures still believe that girls should not go to school and that their only purpose is to be married off one day. They only allow boys to be formally educated.

In some parts of Kenya, there is, moreover, little knowledge about proper health-care for children. When a child is sick, they are not taken to the hospital but given herbal medicine, for example, which is sometimes not effective.

SOS Children's Villages focus on family-based care. How does this approach contribute to a nurturing and stable environment for children in their early years?

Family-based care means that the children have a long-term caregiver. There are around ten to 15 houses in each Children's Village. Ten children and their caregiver live in each house – in Kenya this is always a female caregiver. This means that the children grow up in a family environment, with siblings and a mother, under one roof. And that is what children need from an early age: a stable environment with familiar faces – a family.

As an SOS mother, I understand my children because I have been with them for most of their lives. I know them individually, with all their strengths and weaknesses.

And the children are attached to me, even those who are already grown up.

Which educational opportunities does SOS offer children right from the start and how does this prepare them for a better future?

SOS provides placements in good kindergartens and all the necessary materials. Here in Nairobi, we have a public kindergarten on our premises where all the young children from the Children's Village go.

In this kindergarten, they are placed in play groups where they can explore things in a playful way, be it by painting, drawing or playing with materials. There are as well

“The community is our social safety net.”

first lessons in which the children are read to, for example. Besides, we have plenty of toys in the house and a playground in the Village, so that the children have lots of opportunities to play outside the kindergarten. This is very important at this stage of life for the development of the brain and for familiarising them with different materials, tools, numbers, letters and their own abilities.

Furthermore, as soon as we as caregivers realise that a child is challenged at this point in their development, we take them to the right specialist and walk the path with the child until we see where they can fit in.

What role does community support and engagement play in addressing the needs of children in low-income countries?

The community is indispensable for us. It is usually social workers from the community who identify children in need and send them to us. It is also the community that witnesses abuse and reports it. Occasionally, we receive donations of clothes or food from the community too, which we distribute in the Children's Village. The community is our social safety net.

How does your Village engage with the local community?

Families from the community have recently started living in the Children's Village. We have rented out some family houses to them, and in return the SOS families who

lived there have moved out of the Children's Village and into the community. This was a big step that offers the children many opportunities for interaction.

Moreover, the children from the Children's Village regularly interact with children who are supported as part of SOS's other main programme, the Family Strengthening Programme (FSP). Here, the children are supported within their families of origin in the community. And then, of course, they also mingle with the community at school or church.

This is very important, as it is the only way for them to learn what life is like outside of SOS. In the Children's Village, they only know our SOS setting – one mother, ten children. Through contact with the local community, they learn about the struggles of other families, their way of life and more about Kenyan culture in general.

Thinking long-term, how does the care provided in early years impact children as they grow up?

When the children move out of SOS, they have been given the foundations for a stable and healthy life: they had a roof over their heads, food, clothing, medical care and education right from the start. This means they should have what it takes to continue their journey, find a job, start a family and become a contributing member of their society.

Do you believe the SOS model can serve as an example for childcare worldwide?

Absolutely. There are so many children around the world who have been abandoned, orphaned or whose family cannot look after them. They need a place they can go to, a safe home they can retreat to. And in this home, they know that there is someone who will accept them and look after them from the very beginning. These are the SOS caregivers. It's a very special role. But I believe that there are people all over the world who have the gift of being able to care for children who are not their own. With SOS, they can use this gift to improve the lives of children.



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LANGUAGE LEARNING

Neglected language support

Inclusion and educational success depend heavily on language acquisition. However, language support remains limited in many German nursery schools. This particularly affects children with a history of migration.

By Leon Kirschgens

Children have the right to education and free development. Mastering a language early on creates future opportunities. However, in the German pre-primary system, shortages of nursery places and qualified staff means teachers often have no time for anything that is not absolutely essential. Although targeted language support does exist, it is rare.

In 2016, the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth initiated a language-education campaign in nursery schools. This year, 6000 nursery schools, accounting for one in ten of Germany's pre-primary facilities, formed part of the programme. The initiative aims to support all children, with a specific focus on those from non-German speaking house-

holds or educationally disadvantaged families. It provides funding for qualified staff positions within the participating nursery schools and for external advice and training too.

One of the nursery schools benefiting from this programme is the St. Fronleichnam pre-primary centre in the city of Aachen. According to its director Martin de Lange, 90% of the children that attend it do not speak German as their first language. To help them learn German, the nursery teachers talk to them during everyday activities, for example when they are playing, eating or romping around in the garden. They also communicate with gestures and facial expressions and encourage the children to put their thoughts into words by asking open-ended questions. "It is the only way children can experience language as meaningful," says Gabriele Grobusch who works as an advisor supporting language-focused nursery schools in Aachen.

Despite understaffing, some nursery schools might lose their language specialists soon. In many cases it is still uncertain

whether their contracts will be extended. Federal funding for the programme ended in June 2023 and responsibility shifted to the federal states. All of the states have agreed to cover costs until the end of this year. However, plans for 2024 remain uncertain. Martin de Lange's pre-primary centre is affected too. The relevant federal state, North Rhine-Westphalia, has announced its intention to continue the programme through 2024. However, at the time of writing in mid-November, an official funding commitment is still pending.

The end of the funding programme at federal level has also been criticised for another key reason. "Axing a programme that is so effective – in contrast to many others – sends out a dire signal," says Grobusch. "It appears there is a lack of recognition regarding how much equal opportunities and participation depend on the early years in crèches and nursery schools and no understanding of the fundamental role played by language."

UNEQUAL OPPORTUNITIES IN GERMAN NURSERY SCHOOLS

Children from challenging backgrounds face the biggest disadvantages. They often come from families lacking education and financial resources. A history of migration is frequently a factor. The children's environment often cannot help them overcome their language deficits.

The inequality of opportunities reveals an even more fundamental weakness in early childhood care in Germany, according to Grobusch. She claims that not enough importance is attached to nursery schools' educational mission and individual support for children's educational and developmental processes. "It is about stimulating curiosity before they start school," says Grobusch. "Language is key to that. Children need it to build stable social relationships, acquire a sense of self-efficacy and develop skills."

The "IQB-Bildungstrend 2022", a study examining schoolchildren's achievement levels in Germany, highlights the impact of language deficits. It finds that children with a history of migration, especially first-generation immigrants who moved to Germany, tend to perform below their peers in 9th grade German. The authors link this disparity to language deficits which in



Teaching language skills in the nursery school St. Fronleichnam in Aachen, Germany.

part stem from the youngsters' educational background and the limited use of German within their families.

Despite all the criticism, Grobusch notes a positive change of attitude in Germany in recent years. Multilingualism is now increasingly recognised and promoted as an opportunity for children. "For a long time, speaking a foreign mother tongue was seen as an obstacle, raising concerns that both languages wouldn't be mastered well," says Grobusch. Today, she encourages parents to speak the language in which they feel confident at home, typically their native tongue. "It is the only way they can offer the children a rich language experience. The children learn to value the family language and thus acquire skills in both languages," she explains.

Some parents do not even apply for a nursery-school place for their children, even though it became a legal entitlement in Germany a decade ago for every child over

the age of one. There are various reasons for this, such as reservations about the German pre-primary system, concerns about the system's compatibility with their cultural background or financial barriers due to attendance fees. "A fee-free year would be a great incentive, especially for families for whom the attendance fee is one of the deciding factors in sending their child to nursery in the first place," says Diemut Kucharz, professor of primary education at Frankfurt's Goethe University. If fees were charged in the second year, parents could still take their child out of nursery. "However, the hurdle is then significantly higher, especially if the first year shows how useful nursery school attendance is, both for the parents and for the child," says Kucharz.

Language-support programmes beyond nursery school can offer valuable assistance too, especially within the children's families. For instance, the so-called "Rucksack project" trains parents with a history of

migration to become "neighbourhood parents". After several months of training, they, in turn, teach other parents how to raise their children multilingually and to sing, read and play together in the family's native language. The topics covered by the parents at home are then addressed in German at nursery schools.

Nursery school director Martin de Lange hopes that language support and inclusion will continue to improve in Germany. "We are still only a tiny minority of nursery schools that have a language specialist and can focus on language support," he says. "Yet it is so fundamental for society that support of this kind should become standard for all pre-primary facilities."



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Why pre-school education matters very much

In high-income countries families tend to be small, so children do not have many siblings to play with. They benefit from interaction with peers, which they get a lot of in a daycare centre. The peers they meet share their interests, they learn to cooperate and how to build relationships.

Many people live in urban settings with limited opportunities for kids to spend time outside. A good daycare centre has outdoor facilities where the young clients can play, run around and climb on a jungle gym. This is good for their physical and mental health.

Many parents need two incomes. Accordingly, they need a place where they know their offspring is taken good care of while they are doing

paid work. In public debate, the need to liberate women to pursue a career in spite of having children is often emphasised, though conservatives often expressed the fear that this means

that mothers will neglect their children. The general experience, however, is that it does not hurt the young ones to be separated from their parents for some time every day and that they get used to it fast. They need their moms and dads, but not all the time. Extended regular exchange with persons of their own age group is very important, however.

Finally, good preschool facilities play an important role in preparing children for school. They stimulate them in many different ways. Telling stories, playing games, painting pictures – all of this teaches kids things that will prove useful later. Kids from migrant families, for example, learn to speak the local language as their second mother tongue. More generally speaking, a well-run daycare centre will offer more options and stimuli than individual parents normally do. Especially children from economically deprived families benefit.

The general experience in all advanced nations is that social inclusion works best if it starts very early in life. In 2013, Germany therefore introduced a right to preschool education from a child's first birthday on. Enabling mothers to work, of course, is part of social inclusion too.



Children and a caregiver play in a German daycare center.

D+C/E+Z

In Mexico, protesters are calling for the government to strengthen law enforcement.

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