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More than just a game

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Photo: picture alliance/ZUMAPRESS.com/Fabio Teixeira

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Photo: picture alliance / PIXSELL / Emica Elvedji

To ensure children can keep up in primary school, pre-school education is essential in Zambia and elsewhere, p. 22.

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Photo: Rawtime

Title picture by János Bayer (see p. 4).

The men's football World Cup is one of the few truly global events of our time. While multimillionaires compete for the title on the pitch and tickets for the final fetch six-figure sums, fans from low-income countries are often left on the sidelines. At the same time, football unfolds its social power far from the FIFA stage: on football pitches around the world, it keeps young people away from drugs and violence, fosters a sense of community and bridges ethnic and, increasingly, gender-based divides. As part of the "Sport for Development" approach, football has thus also played an important role in development cooperation for decades.

ARTIST

János Bayer

is a photographer and video producer who runs his own media agency in the German city of Kaiserslautern. The cover photo and the image at the start of our focus section were taken in 2023 at the community sports ground in Juja, Kenya, where he volunteered to support the NGUVU Edu Sport project (see Alba Nakuwa's article on p. 45) and took professional photographs. He has since also produced a short film for NGUVU and revamped the project's website.

Rawtime Media Agency

Photo: Rawtime

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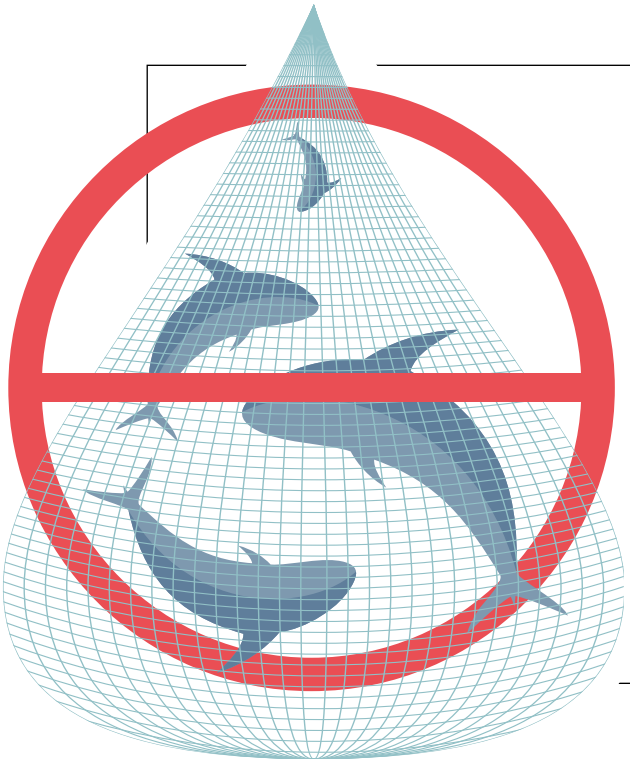
of the world's 15 fastest-growing economies are currently in Africa. At the same time, the balance between development funding and foreign direct investment is shifting: in 2024, the latter totaled $ 97 trillion and exceeded the overall volume of development funds – even before the USAID cuts – by around a third.

Several indicators also suggest that African investors in particular are increasingly investing their money within the continent. Last year, for example, 45 % of all venture capital commitments were attributable to them. So, while capital appears to be available, it remains crucial that structural political problems are addressed at the same time – so that growth is broad-based and does not primarily benefit elites.



Good news

With the World Trade Organisation (WTO) *Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies*, the first WTO agreement with an explicit focus on sustainability came into force last September, following its ratification by two-thirds of the member states. The agreement primarily aims to curb harmful subsidies that encourage overfishing and illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing. It is binding only for countries that have ratified it. However, these include some of the world's largest subsidisers, such as the EU, China and the United States. Other key players in the fishing industry, such as India and Indonesia, are not on board.

Xiomara Acevedo Navarro (white blouse, hair down) at the TAFF conference in Santa Marta, Colombia, in April.

Photo: Barranquilla+20

CLIMATE ACTION

“We don’t want another endless process without real implementation”

Many climate activists have been frustrated with the established multilateral processes for tackling climate change for years. The First Conference on Transitioning Away from Fossil Fuels (TAFF), held in the Colombian city of Santa Marta in April, raised hopes that a new kind of climate diplomacy outside the COP system could be established. Colombian activist Xiomara Acevedo Navarro, who attended the meeting, says she felt represented to a certain extent but is still disappointed by the outcome.

XIOMARA ACEVEDO NAVARRO IN AN INTERVIEW WITH LEON KIRSCHGENS

You have been involved in climate activism for many years. How did you end up participating in the Santa Marta conference?

I'm from Barranquilla in Colombia, and I've been working on climate and environmental issues for more than 10 years now, basically for half of my life. The work of Barranquilla +20, the civil society organisation I founded, combines local community initiatives with international climate advocacy. At the local level, we support projects led mostly by women and schools, such as wetland preservation, water governance initiatives and agroecological orchards. But we also endeavour to strengthen the voices of social movements, especially women and youth movements, in global decision-making spaces. That's how we became interested in the conference in Santa Marta – for many organisations and activists, it felt like a potentially important political moment.

> "Unlike at many COPs, the governments that usually block stronger language on fossil fuels were largely absent."

Why did the TAFF conference feel so important to you politically?

Because many of us have been frustrated with the COP process for years. Under the UN climate framework, fossil fuels are still rarely addressed directly as the core driver of the climate crisis. Every year, there are negotiations and declarations, but there is very little concrete action on fossil fuels themselves. So, when Colombia and the Netherlands announced a separate conference focused specifically on transitions away from fossil fuels, many activists embraced this as something new that focuses directly on this key issue. And the fact that more than 50 countries voluntarily decided to participate was crucial. It means that these countries are at least willing to openly discuss this urgently needed transition. That already changed the political atmosphere compared to many COP negotiations.

How did you prepare for the conference as a representative of civil society?

Our work started long before the conference itself. Together with women's organisations and youth movements, we arranged consultations and discussions to develop our own positions and demands. One important topic for us was ensuring that care was recognised as a pillar of any just transition. We wanted to bring perspectives linked to gender, care work and climate justice into the process.

The participation process was quite difficult. There were assemblies, sectoral dialogues, consultations and parallel meetings almost every day. If you missed one activity, you sometimes risked not being represented in another. Many people found it exhausting, especially activists who had travelled long distances to attend the conference. And honestly, at times it felt overwhelming. Civil society groups were constantly being asked for declarations, proposals and inputs. But in the end, many of us were still left wondering how much influence those contributions actually had on the final outcomes.

The aim of the conference was not to produce yet another declaration, but to develop promising solutions and a process for their implementation. What do you think about the outcome?

I expected something more ambitious for such an important historical moment. Of course, I understand that it is difficult for countries to agree on concrete measures. But after bringing together more than 50 countries willing to discuss fossil fuels directly, I had hoped for clearer political proposals. Instead, many things still feel unclear. There is talk of a roadmap, scientific panels and thematic working groups. But we still do not really know what the final political outcome of this process is supposed to be.

What are the biggest unanswered questions for you?

For me, the central questions are: What exactly is the roadmap? What are countries actually committing themselves to? And what will implementation look like? But these questions remain unanswered. And this uncertainty also created frustration among some civil society groups. After all, we had spent enormous amounts of time contributing ideas and participating in consultations.

Some observers described Santa Marta as more open and creative than a typical COP. Did it feel different to you as well?

In some ways, yes. The countries attending were at least openly discussing fossil fuels, science and decarbonisation. And unlike at many COPs, the governments that usually block stronger language on fossil fuels were largely absent. That reduced some of the tensions you normally see during climate negotiations. At the same time, I would not romanticise the process too much. From the perspective of civil society participation, it still felt very structured and limited in many ways. There were differences, but not necessarily as radical as some people have described them.

Did you notice tensions between countries from the Global North and Global South?

Not in the same way as during the COP negotiations. Since this conference was basically an invitation to countries already willing to engage on fossil fuels, many of the usual geopolitical conflicts were less visible. The tension I noticed more was actually between this process and the UN climate framework itself. I had the impression that some people within the UN system were asking themselves how this new process could fit into the existing climate architecture. There seemed to be a concern that climate politics might move to some extent outside the traditional COP structures.

> "I think this kind of conference is important precisely because it exists outside the traditional UN climate negotiations."

Did you personally still feel represented as part of civil society?

To some extent, yes. Before the conference, the Colombian government organised several preparatory activities, and some institutions genuinely tried to engage with social movements. I was invited to contribute to discussions on gender and climate issues, for example. And during the conference itself, some of the official civil society interventions reflected demands that feminist and women's movements had collectively developed beforehand. So, in that sense, I did feel represented. But at the same time, one short intervention cannot represent all women and movements globally. So, of course, it still felt insufficient.

Despite your criticism, do you still think this kind of conference makes sense?

Yes, definitely. I think it is important precisely because it exists outside the traditional UN climate negotiations. At the same time, we do not want another endless multilateral process full of declarations and promises but without real implementation. Many people in civil society are tired of that dynamic. We already have the science. We already know governments need to act urgently. The real question now is whether countries are actually willing to move from discussions to implementation and structural change.

A second TAFF conference is scheduled for 2027 in Tuvalu. What will determine whether it becomes meaningful?

I think trust will be decisive. If countries manage to turn this process into concrete measures and implementation, then it could become politically important. But if it simply turns into another slow diplomatic process without tangible outcomes, many people will lose confidence very quickly. So, the next phase will be crucial. People are watching closely to see whether this becomes a genuinely new political space – or simply another conference cycle.

LINK

Thompson, S., and van Cronenburg, F., 2026: Santa Marta explained: What happened at the first conference on transitioning away from fossil fuels. Sciences Po.

photo: loss and damage youth coalition

XIOMARA ACEVEDO NAVARRO
is a Colombian climate activist. She founded the civil-society organisation Barranquilla +20, which aims to include women and youth in climate justice processes.

xio.acevedo@gmail.com

Photo: picture alliance / ZUMAPRESS.com / Fabio Teixeira

Women protest against femicide in Rio de Janeiro in December.

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

When women must arm themselves, the state has failed

In Brazil, record numbers of femicides, violence in intimate relationships and gaps in the protection system show that the urgency of tackling violence against women goes far beyond symbolic gestures and formal laws.

BY THUANY RODRIGUES

Every year, March brings with it speeches, flowers and public tributes to mark International Women's Day. Yet Brazil faces a reality that cannot be glossed over by ceremonial gestures. According to the "National Map of Gender-Based Violence" published by Brazil's Senate, 1561 cases of femicide were recorded nationwide in 2025 – the highest figure since the crime was legally classified as such in 2015. This figure equates to almost four women killed every day.

> "The authorisation of pepper spray appears to be an emergency measure, whilst structural safeguards continue to fall short."

National data shows that most of these crimes are committed within intimate relationships. The Brazilian Public Security Forum reports that more than 70 % of femicides are committed by current or former partners. Many of these killings take place in the home, often following a documented history of abuse.

The scale of the crisis is highlighted at regular intervals by new horrifying reports. At the end of January 2026, a 17-year-old girl was gang-raped in a flat in Copacabana, Rio de Janeiro. Five young men are alleged to have been involved: four adults – two aged 18 and two aged 19 – as well as a 17-year-old who was identified as the victim's ex-boyfriend. According to investigators, he exploited their former relationship and her trust to persuade her to go into the flat. The suspects have turned themselves in, but the investigation is ongoing.

In February, a woman was stabbed more than 30 times after rejecting a man's advances. She survived, having been in a coma. Following the attack, videos began circulating on TikTok in Brazil showing men hitting and stabbing shop mannequins, accompanied by the slogan: "Training for when she says 'no'." In November 2025, a 31-year-old woman was run over by an acquaintance in São Paulo and dragged for almost one kilometre. She lost both legs as a result of her injuries and died weeks later due to complications. In another case, a 71-year-old woman was sexually assaulted by the driver on a city bus in Rio de Janeiro.

The consequences extend far beyond the immediate victims. Between 2021 and 2025, 660 children in the state of Rio Grande do Sul lost their mothers as a result of femicide – a stark reminder of the intergenerational trauma caused by gender-based violence.

SALE OF PEPPER SPRAY BY LAW

Brazilian law provides for prison sentences of 20 to 40 years for femicide, and recent legislative changes have expanded protective measures, including firearms restrictions, restraining orders and electronic monitoring of perpetrators. Nevertheless, the gap between the legal provisions and their actual enforcement remains a cause for concern. On paper, the perpetrator is not allowed to approach the victim. In practice, however, monitoring is not always consistent and violations are not always dealt with promptly.

This, again, has led to measures such as those taken in the state of Rio de Janeiro, where a law was recently passed allowing the sale of pepper spray in pharmacies specifically as a means of personal protection for women. The initiative was presented as a way of offering women more options for self-defence in their daily lives.

But this law also reveals a troubling contradiction: if women have to arm themselves in order to feel safe in public spaces, institutional protection has already failed. The authorisation of pepper spray appears to be an emergency measure whilst structural safeguards continue to fall short.

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AS A GLOBAL EMERGENCY

International organisations classify gender-based violence as a global emergency. A research report by UN Women estimates that around 50,000 women and girls were killed in the domestic sphere in 2024 – accounting for around 60 % of all intentional homicides of women and girls. This means that on average 137 women and girls are killed every day by a member of their own family.

Brazil is a prime example of this global crisis. In many cases, a formal complaint is followed by legal proceedings resulting in a clear ruling that holds the perpetrators to account. On paper, protection is in place. In reality, however, court decisions on femicides are not always enforced. Not all perpetrators are subject to effective electronic monitoring. Not all women receive continuous support from protection networks. Not all receive a rapid response when violations are reported.

Furthermore, data suggests that gender-based violence in Brazil goes largely unreported. A study conducted by a consortium of three universities found that up to 98.5 % of

cases of psychological violence, 75.9 % of cases of physical violence and 89.4 % of cases of sexual violence are underreported. This situation is often linked to fear of reprisals, emotional or financial dependence on the perpetrator and a lack of trust in the institutions. As a result, many cases remain hidden, and the official data reflect only a fraction of the reality.

> "137 women and girls are killed every day by a member of their own family."

All this leads to a sense of impunity for perpetrators. If a perpetrator assumes that law enforcement is lax, that the authorities will be slow to respond and that the victim will be left to fend for herself if she decides to report the crime at all, the risk of the violence recurring increases. Formal prosecution does not automatically translate into tangible safety. And it is precisely in this tension between legislation and implementation that many tragedies unfold, not only in Brazilian families.

THUANY RODRIGUES
is a journalist in Brazil.
thuanyrodriigues@gmail.com

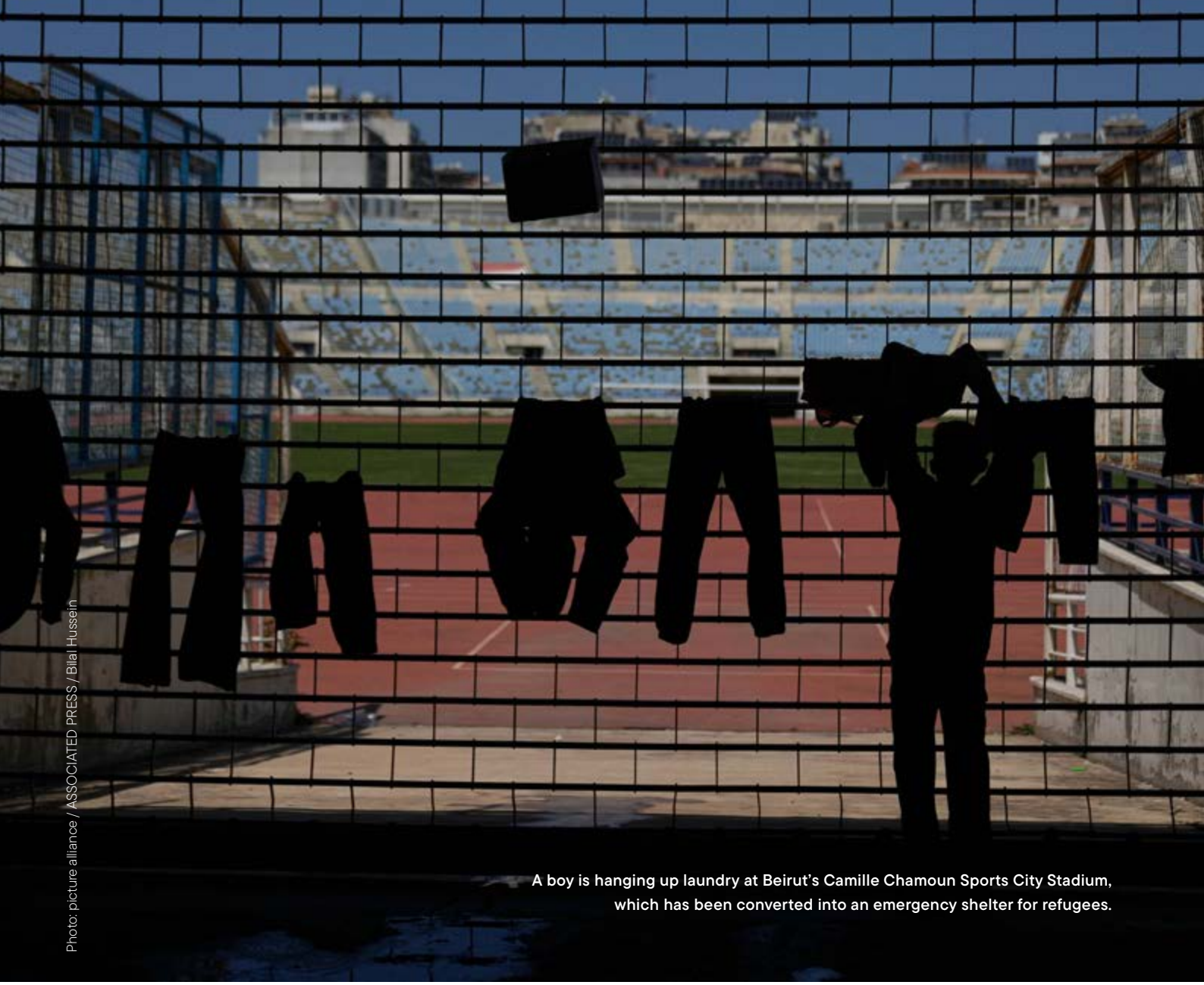


Photo: picture alliance / ASSOCIATED PRESS / Bilal Hussein

A boy is hanging up laundry at Beirut's Camille Chamoun Sports City Stadium, which has been converted into an emergency shelter for refugees.

CONFLICT

Life in war-torn Lebanon: refuge in a football stadium

Once a venue for football and other events, Beirut's Sports City Stadium now shelters families displaced by war in southern Lebanon. Their lives reflect both the scale of the country's humanitarian crisis and the limits of state support.

BY ALI AWADEH

Zeina Sarhan marked her 67th birthday in a tent. She spent the day with her 60-year-old sister, Hosna, inside a plastic-sheet shelter at Beirut's Camille Chamoun Sports City Stadium. Hosna has shared her life for 45 years and still prepares her morning coffee just as she used to at home. Neighbours from the adjacent row of tents came to sit with them as well. Children darted along the running track, threading their way between lines of stretchers. Near the entrances, women distributed food they prepared on shared stoves.

The complex, which can accommodate more than 49,500 spectators, normally serves as a venue for football matches and national events. It has now taken on a completely different role and houses around 1500 displaced people. After Israeli airstrikes on Lebanon began in the latest escalation involving the Lebanese Shia militant group Hezbollah, the stadium was turned into a refuge for families forced to flee the south of the country. It is one of hundreds of collective shelters currently in operation across the country, many of which are overcrowded and lack adequate sanitation facilities.

Zeina and Hosna Sarhan come from Al-Duwair, a village in southern Lebanon. Two years ago, their family home was destroyed during the Israeli invasion. Afterwards, they fixed up a small house their father had built decades earlier and stayed there together until fighting resumed this year. Displaced once more, they spent several nights sleeping by the roadside before eventually reaching the complex, where they found shelter. "Everything is provided here, even medicine," Zeina Sarhan says. "We are grateful, but it's not home."

Although a ceasefire came into effect on 16 April, Israeli attacks continued. By the end of April, 2576 Lebanese had been killed and 7962 injured, according to the country's National News Agency.

SHARING A TENT WITH STRANGERS IN THE STADIUM

The two sisters are among the more than 1.2 million people displaced in Lebanon, roughly a fifth of the country's population. They do not know what lies ahead. "Even if there is a ceasefire, we cannot return to our village. It's dangerous," Zeina Sarhan says.

Huda Zein El-Din, 42, is from the southern village of Safad al-Battikh. She exchanged a 250-square-metre house with a garden for a tent she now shares with strangers. "They have become my family," she says, "because we share the same loss." Once the ceasefire came into effect, she briefly ventured back to her village and collected her gold and savings. A few days later, renewed Israeli threats drove her out once again. She says she has neither grown used to life in a tent nor does she wants to. But she has decided that wherever she finds an apartment, she will take one of her tent neighbours with her.

Mohammed, a young man with autism, was taken to Sports City from Beirut's southern suburbs. Repeated explosions just a few hundred metres away left him deeply distressed. It took weeks of support from paramedics and shelter staff before he slowly became accustomed to the noise.

> "Fouad Ezzedine and his brother Mohammed began collecting donations from friends to make sandwiches for people sleeping rough."

MANY DISPLACED PEOPLE LACK A SOURCE OF INCOME

For others who have found shelter in the stadium, the biggest disruption has been financial. Abu Ahmed Koudami, 60, arrived with his son from the southern village of Jouaiya, while his wife and daughter went to stay with his sister-in-law. The first days were difficult, he reports: rain seeped into the tents, and nerves were strained, though conditions later improved.

"We are villagers, there is no work for us in Beirut," Koudami says. Most displaced people have no source of income. Many have sold their gold or whatever possessions they still had in order to get by. The escape was sudden, Koudami adds, and no one had been prepared for it.

Naji Hammoud, the complex's stadium director, says Sports City is being expanded to accommodate another 1000 people. The government has reserved one wing for people with disabilities, with accessible corridors and bathrooms, while the Lebanese Red Cross is on site every day to provide medical care for all displaced residents. "Most residents stayed during the ceasefire because they have nowhere else to go," he says. "Families fear the war could return at any moment."

DEVASTATING ISRAELI AIR STRIKES ON LEBANON

As of late April, the government's Disaster Risk Management Unit (DRM) listed 626 official shelter centres housing 119,623 displaced people. "The remaining 85 % are in rent-

ed homes or staying with relatives, in conditions that are unstable," says Nasser Yassine, director of the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies.

A report by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) states that more than 1400 buildings have been destroyed since 2 March. Particularly devastating was a strike on the Qasimiyeh bridge, a key route linking southern Lebanon with the rest of the country. Its destruction has hampered humanitarian access to areas south of the Litani River. In addition, 161 attacks on healthcare facilities were recorded by mid-May, in which 110 healthcare workers were killed and 252 injured.

SCHOOLS HAVE BECOME SHELTERS

According to the UNHCR, more than 390,000 children are among the displaced. The Ministry of Education has attempted to offer a combination of face-to-face and distance learning, but as of 2024, Save the Children had recorded nearly 500 schools that had been converted into emergency shelters, suggesting that these measures have had only a limited impact.

Minister of Social Affairs Haneen Sayed told the press at the end of March that international aid was covering only about 30 % of Lebanon's needs. She added that during the 2024 war, which lasted just over two months, the UN raised $ 700 million to help Lebanon deal with the humanitarian fallout. As the country enters the second month of a new war, it has received only $ 30 million from the UN's latest appeal. Donors have pledged another $ 60 million.

> "I've lived through enough wars to know that what comes next is rarely peace."

The Lebanese Institute for Market Studies estimates Lebanon's direct and indirect financial losses from the war at an initial $ 5 billion as of the end of April. But the figures remain preliminary. Large parts of the south are still under Israeli control, and the full extent of demolitions, detonations and ongoing strikes there has yet to be assessed.

CIVIL SOCIETY INITIATIVES ARE DISTRIBUTING MEALS

Civil society is stepping in to fill some gaps. Barzakh, a cultural centre in Hamra, suspended its arts programme and began preparing 2000 meals a day for displaced families, relying on volunteers and private donations.

The model spread across Lebanon. Fouad Ezzedine, 28, and his brother Mohammed, 25, began collecting donations from friends to make sandwiches for people sleeping rough. Within a few weeks, the initiative was distributing hundreds of meals a day, with some shops providing food free of charge. "We've managed to help dozens of families," says Fouad Ezzedine. "Why can't the state do this on a large scale?"

Nimr Al-Hajj Hassan, 45, has also made the crisis his mission. He drove back and forth between Tyre and the southern villages, and later between Beirut and the south, to collect belongings for families who had fled too hastily to pack their things. The requests increased over time. He cleared out fridges, locked doors and changed locks. "Sometimes I thought I wouldn't come back," he says, referring to the drones in the sky and the nearby attacks.

STAYING AS AN ACT OF RESISTANCE

It is hard to say how many residents are still in Lebanon's south, but there were quite a few people there at the beginning of May. Some could not afford the rent elsewhere. Others refused to leave their land. Hassan from Toul, who

asked not to reveal his surname, saw a shell hit the building next to his, yet stayed where he was. At the start of the war, he had stockpiled three months' worth of food for himself, his wife and his 27-year-old daughter. "If we leave, who will look after the village?" he says.

The more the neighbourhood emptied, the greater his role became. He checked on damaged houses, secured broken doors and fed the stray cats and dogs that had been left behind. The paramedics stayed in touch and helped wherever they could. "What I'm doing is a form of resistance," he says. He sees his presence as a way of supporting the families who also refused to leave the area.

Ali Moussa, 66, is one of them. However, when the latest war broke out, health problems forced him to make repeated trips to medical centres. Both he and his mother need medication for high blood pressure and diabetes respectively. The state network of clinics, which provide free medication to patients with chronic conditions, enabled them to cope, he says.

Moussa still has shrapnel from the civil war between 1975 and 1990 lodged in his body. In 1980, a grenade killed his friends right next to him, and he says he can still feel it. "I've buried so many people that I can't count them on my fingers," he says. "I've lived through enough wars to know that what comes next is rarely peace."

This story was published in collaboration with Egab.

ALI AWADEH
is a Lebanese journalist specialising in political, environmental and human rights issues.
aliawadah84@gmail.com

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ENGAGEMENT GLOBAL gGmbH
Service für Entwicklungsinitiativen
Friedrich-Ebert-Allee 40
53113 Bonn
Phone: +49 (0) 2 28 2 07 17-0
Fax: +49 (0) 2 28 2 07 17-150
engagement-global.de

ADVISORY BOARD:
Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. Kai Ambos, Selmin Çalışkan, Prof. Dr. Anna-Katharina Hornidge, Prof. Dr. Katharina Michaelowa, Bruno Wenn

PUBLISHER:
Fazit Communication GmbH
Executive directors: Jonas Grashey, Hannes Ludwig

ADDRESS OF THE PUBLISHER AND EDITORIAL OFFICE:
Pariser Straße 1, D-60486 Frankfurt am Main, Germany
This is also the legally relevant address of all indicated as responsible or entitled to represent them in this imprint.

EDITORIAL TEAM:
Eva-Maria Verfürth (EMV, editor-in-chief, responsible for content according to Germany's regulations)
Editorial staff: Dr Katharina Wilhelm Otieno (KO, editor), Jörg Döbereiner (JD, managing editor), Maren van Treel (MVT, social media editor), Dagmar Wolf (DW, assistant)
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Phone: +49 (0) 69 75 91-31 10
euz.editor@dandc.eu

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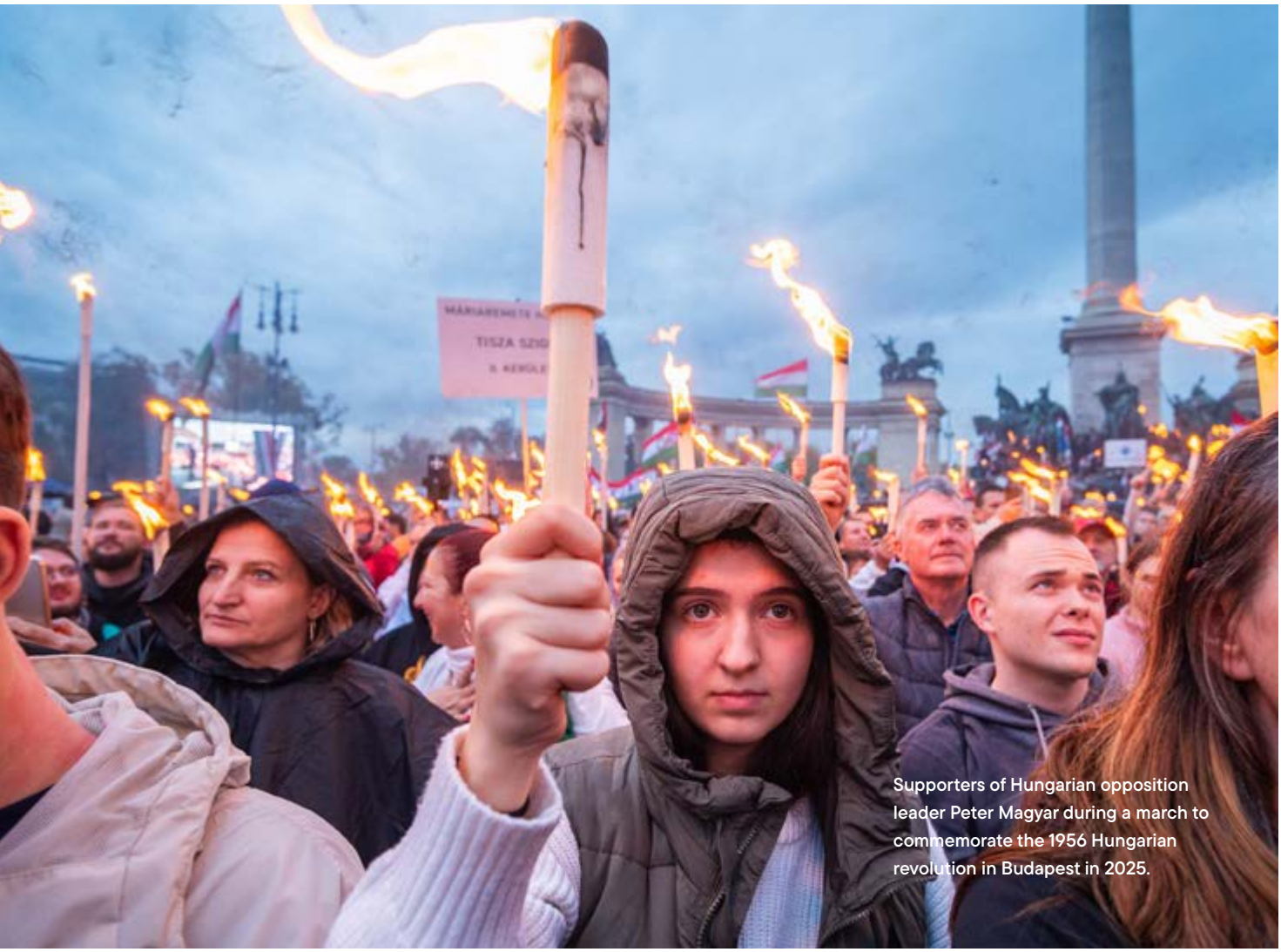

Photo: picture alliance/ZUMAPRESS.com/Daniel Alfoldi

Supporters of Hungarian opposition leader Peter Magyar during a march to commemorate the 1956 Hungarian revolution in Budapest in 2025.

DEMOCRACY INDEX

The path to autocracy is reversible

Given the rise of China, Donald Trump's re-election and the consolidation of Vladimir Putin's rule, the world appears to be experiencing a new era of authoritarianism. And indeed, research institutes are witnessing a growing shift towards autocratic rule worldwide. However, it's not time to write democracy off quite yet.

BY MARIUS MONIAK

In its Freedom in the World report, US-based Freedom House warns of a "Growing Shadow of Autocracy", while the Gothenburg democracy research project V-Dem concludes that 74 % of the world's population now live in autocratic systems. Only a minority of around 7 % still live in liberal democracies.

> "The rise of China has prompted some to claim that autocracies are able to govern more efficiently than democracies. The BTI 2026 busts this myth."

Military coups in Burkina Faso and Niger, authoritarian restructuring in Georgia and El Salvador and a collapse in democratic values in the US since Donald Trump was re-elected for a second term are all contributing to this development. India, too, has long ceased to be regarded as the world's biggest democracy; the V-Dem report classifies the country as an "electoral autocracy".

According to the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI 2026), 52 states now rank among the "hard-line autocracies" in which basic rights are systematically restricted.

AUTOCRACIES ARE ON THE RISE, YET RESISTANCE IS GROWING

Though new autocracies are emerging and consolidating their hold on power, more and more autocratic governments are facing sweeping resistance from their own populations. Recent years have seen new political movements form, especially in the Global South and Eastern Europe.

In Sri Lanka, mass protests against mismanagement and corruption eventually led to new elections and a democratic transition of power. Despite massive repression, student protests in Bangladesh in 2024 brought about a change of government and new elections in 2026. In Nepal and Mongolia, too, young protest movements against corruption and authoritarian tendencies achieved far-reaching political change. These movements have come to be known internationally as "Gen Z protests".

Recently, a broad-based political movement in Hungary triggered a change of government that just a few years ago seemed unthinkable in Viktor Orban's "electoral autocracy" – as V-Dem categorised the country.

The protests are directed against corruption, poor governance, the arbitrary exercise of state power, inequality and the wasteful use of resources. Though autocracies may appear and present themselves as efficient and strong, the BTI 2026 says that many of those who live under these systems have the opposite experience, prompting them to clearly express their discontent.

BUSTING THE EFFICIENT AUTOCRACY MYTH

In Serbia, the roof of the Novi Sad railway station collapsed in November 2024, killing 15 people. The station had only reopened four months earlier following renovation work. More than 100,000 people subsequently took to the streets to campaign for democracy and protest against the authoritarian government's abuse of power and corrupt practices. The anti-government demonstrations are still ongoing and are seen as part of the Gen Z protests.

The rise of China has prompted some to claim that autocracies are able to govern more efficiently than democracies. The BTI 2026 busts this myth: China lags behind the great majority of democracies in terms of steering capability and resource efficiency. Among the states of the Global South and Eastern Europe, China ranks 25th (steering capability) and 29th (resource efficiency), putting it behind the Republic of Moldova, Botswana and Ukraine. In Europe, only Bosnia, Belarus and Russia score less well than Serbia. Singapore, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar are the only autocracies in the BTI 2026 that can hold their own with most democracies on the aforementioned criteria.

In autocracies, it is loyalty that is rewarded in patronage networks – not the efficiency and effectiveness of political action, explains the BTI. This leads to corruption, inequality and rampant mismanagement, with, in some cases, catastrophic consequences for society. The Gen Z protests are the population's way of demanding change and a transition of power.

MASS MOVEMENTS DESPITE MASSIVE REPRESSION

Many autocratic governments respond harshly to opposition. Employing everything from social media bans and force – including the use of firearms – to clamp down on protesters, no small number of such states have been successful in quashing demonstrations. The most violent repression was meted out to the anti-government movement in Iran in January 2026. Within just a few days, tens of thousands of people are estimated to have been killed and tens of thousands more arrested. This repression resulted in the world's highest death toll since the Rabaa massacre of Muslim Brotherhood supporters in Egypt in 2013 and the suppression of the Arab Spring by the army and intelligence agencies in Syria in 2011/2012.

By contrast, the anti-autocracy protests in Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh – despite repressions that entailed several hundred deaths in total – led to transitional governments that were able to stage democratic elections. In Hungary and Poland, an alliance of political opposition and broad-based mass movements resulted in the sitting government being defeated in elections even though the freedom of the press and of the judiciary had been curtailed for years.

These examples make it clear that even entrenched processes of autocratisation that have been underway for years do not make resistance impossible. In countries such as Serbia, Georgia, Kenya, Peru and Indonesia, protests continue even as their systems of governance become increasingly autocratic.

International attention is currently focused on autocratic actors like Trump, Putin and Xi Jinping. Less notice is paid to the fact that mass movements against autocratic rule are simultaneously celebrating a revival worldwide, as the BTI 2026 highlights. In the shadow of autocracy, resistance is emerging in many parts of the world.

MARIUS MONIAK
studies medicine and peace and conflict studies in Frankfurt am Main. He wrote this article as an intern at D+C's editorial office.

euz.editor@dandc.eu

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Photo: Jannis Düngemann

Street markets in Senegal are huge and virtually unregulated: the young voters who elected the new government work predominantly in the informal sector.

WEST AFRICA

Why Senegal could serve as a role model

Despite the current government crisis, Senegal has demonstrated in recent years that democracy and social stability can flourish even in a volatile region. An examination of the political landscape, national security and civil society reveals how Senegal differs from its neighbours.

BY JANNIS DÜNGEMANN

The security situation in the region around Senegal has been extremely tense for some time. In Mali, its neighbour to the east, jihadist groups control large parts of the country. While Mauritania to the north is more stable, its desert is used as a transit route by groups based in Mali. To the south lie Liberia and Guinea, which have been destabilised by international drug trafficking and past civil wars. Countries further east, such as Burkina Faso and Nigeria, are likewise highly unstable because extremist groups are engaged in conflicts both with one another and with the governments in their respective countries.

Democratically elected governments are few and far between in this region, which has seen a series of coups since 2020: two in Mali in 2020, one each in Guinea and Sudan in 2021, two in Burkina Faso in 2022 and in Niger and Gabon in 2023.

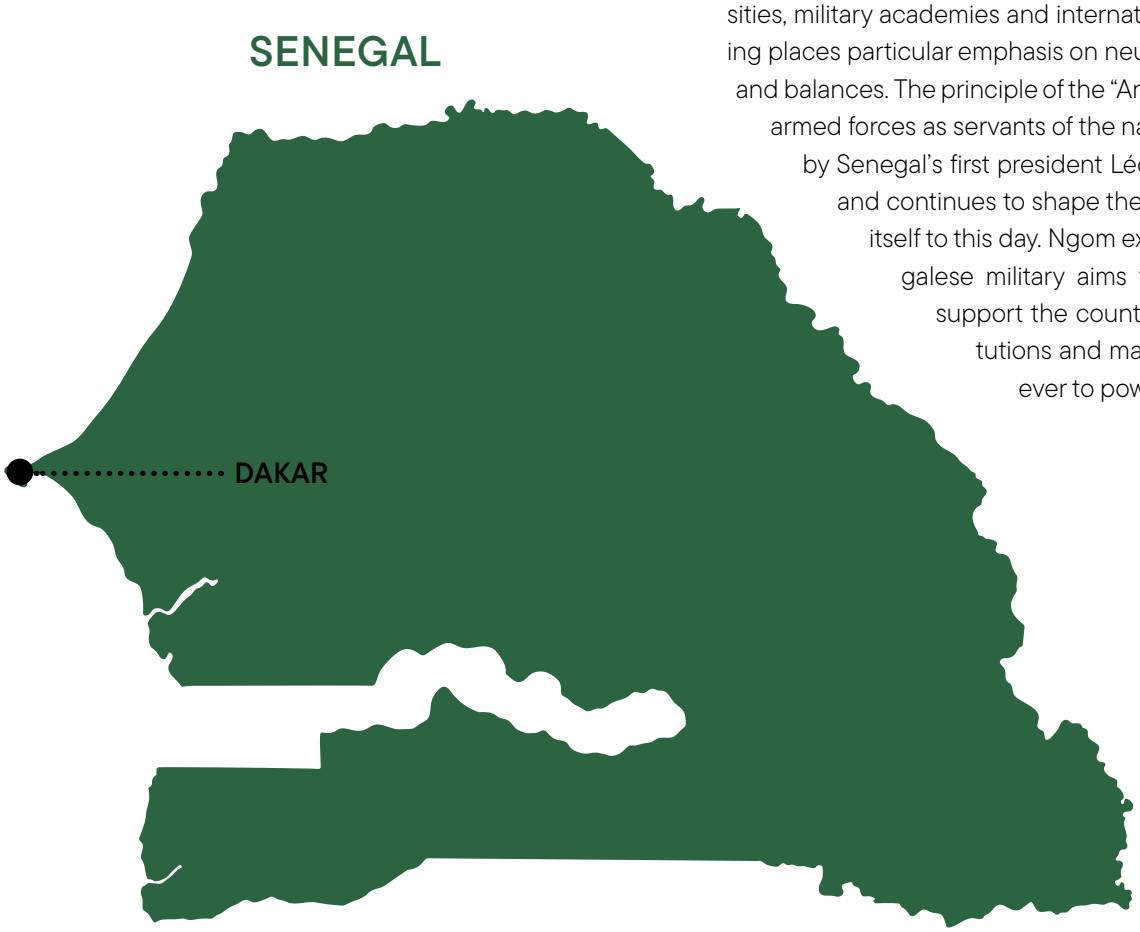
Saliou Ngom, a colonel in the Senegalese army and vice president of the Commission for Military History, views this fraught environment as the greatest threat to Senegal's national security. The armed forces are currently focusing above all on securing the country's borders, he explains. However, Senegal safeguards its territory not only at its own borders but also on a global scale, as is particularly evident from its high level of participation in international missions. Last year, the country was the 14th largest contributor of troops to UN peacekeeping operations. Ngom believes such international cooperation makes sense because terrorism cannot be tackled by one country alone.

Senegal's capacity to fight terror abroad implies that its society is relatively stable and at significantly less risk from extremism than in other states. So how does the country differ in this respect from its neighbours?

SENEGAL'S ROBUST CIVIL SOCIETY AND "INTELLECTUAL ARMY"

Senegal has a robust civil society whose religious makeup is characterised primarily by Sufi orders. These Islamic brotherhoods are groups of believers who are often interconnected and take an active part in society through their involvement in education and business. The leaders of the orders tend to play a central intermediary role in conflicts. Over 95 % of the population is adherent of this conservative yet highly tolerant interpretation of Islam. Because the Sufi orders dominate society, jihadism has been virtually unable to gain a foothold there.

Asked what sets Senegal apart from its neighbours, Colonel Ngom stresses the way its soldiers are trained: "The Senegalese army is an intellectual army. We all come from universities, military academies and international missions." Training places particular emphasis on neutrality and on checks and balances. The principle of the "Armée-Nation", with the armed forces as servants of the nation, was established by Senegal's first president Léopold Sédar Senghor and continues to shape the way the military sees itself to this day. Ngom explains that the Senegalese military aims first and foremost to support the country's democratic institutions and makes no claim whatsoever to power for itself.



> "In electing Faye and his government, the Senegalese people expressed their unequivocal rejection of France's interventionist policy."

ELECTION YEAR 2024 – AN ACID TEST FOR INSTITUTIONS

The country's stability proved its worth in the 2024 presidential election. With less than three weeks to go before the election, longstanding President Macky Sall announced that it was to be postponed indefinitely. Sall blamed the delay on disputes over the election process. The country's civil society and international observers viewed this as an attempt by Sall to extend his term in office beyond the constitutional limit.

However, in a judgement that was unprecedented in West African history, the Senegalese Constitutional Council ruled that the president's decision was unconstitutional and demanded that the executive set a new date for the election. The subsequent landslide victory of opposition leader Bassirou Diomaye Faye, who had been imprisoned until shortly before the election, was testimony to the electorate's desire to bring about a paradigm change in Senegalese politics: the new administration had campaigned on a left-wing, pan-African and sovereignty-focused ticket.

BARCELONA OR DEATH

According to Colonel Ngom, "Sovereignty" is also the name of a naval operation in which the Senegalese armed forces are currently engaged. One major challenge faced by Senegal and other coastal states in West Africa is the exploitation of the oceans by the international deep-sea fishing industry – especially by fleets of European, Russian and Chinese fishing vessels. These fleets, some of which operate quite legally under official partnership agreements, but often under the guise of other activities and usually in a manner that is highly damaging to the environment, are decimating fish stocks and destroying both local fisheries and entire ecosystems.

More than half of Senegal's fish populations are facing collapse, which would trigger ecological chain reactions. Fish prices in the country have skyrocketed, with the cost of a crate of sardines soaring tenfold in some cases. In Senegal, people get 70 % of the animal protein they need by eating fish. Jobs are no less important: around 2 million people work in the fishing sector, either directly or indirectly. The consequences for food and income security in Senegal are therefore serious, and one of the main reasons for illegal migration to Europe. People in fishing villages can frequently be heard saying "Barça ou Barsakh" – (migration to) Barcelona or death.

In a bid to tackle the negative consequences of overfishing, the new government has reversed the previous administration's approach and implemented far-reaching reforms. These include publicly disclosing all fishing licences that are issued and having the navy monitor the country's own economic zone more closely. Furthermore, a fishing treaty with the EU expired in November 2024 that both sides regarded as unfavourable. Senegal accused European fishing fleets of catching many times more than the permitted quotas, while the EU complained that Senegal was not taking resolute enough action to combat illegal and unregulated fishing, especially by Asian trawlers.

FRANCE: THE "BAD GUY"

The new government isn't just keen to establish genuine sovereignty in its own waters, however. Senegal experienced a prolonged and brutal colonial history. The French colonisation of Senegal began in the 17th century when trading posts along the coast were established – primarily to serve the slave trade. With the exception of a handful of urban areas, the majority of the population was subject to rigorous colonial oppression until the country gained independence in 1960.

As vice president of the Commission for Military History, Colonel Ngom particularly studies the crimes committed by the French colonial rulers during the Second World War. "I always focus on France, not on other European countries. France is the bad guy," he says. Even after attaining official independence in 1960, Senegal continued to be heavily influenced by French postcolonial power structures. "We have never been independent," says Ngom. "But now we want to be."

Indeed, France did maintain its influence in Senegal by pursuing a policy of close ties. France kept military bases in the country and intervened when this was deemed necessary. The administrative and justice systems re-

flected the French model. This influence is clearly evident in economic terms to this day: Senegal's currency – the CFA franc – is pegged to the euro and French companies are active in key sectors such as telecommunications, construction and infrastructure.

> "The country's economic stagnation is attributable first and foremost to a lack of industrialisation."

In electing Faye and his government, the Senegalese people expressed their unequivocal rejection of France's interventionist policy – a message that had very direct consequences. Last year, France withdrew the last French soldiers from the country.

When asked whether Senegal might seek closer ties in future with countries such as Russia and China – as many of its neighbours have – Ngom's response is noncommittal. However, he does stress that Senegal will take decisions about international cooperation autonomously: "We are free to say: that's our partner. We can choose our partners ourselves. Sovereignty is our top priority, especially with the new administration in the country."

BIG AMBITIONS, BIG OBSTACLES

This ambitious vision of national sovereignty is hampered by huge structural and financial challenges, however. Though the government wants to regain control of critical resources and reduce its dependence on foreign countries, its room for manoeuvre is significantly curtailed by a substantial legacy of debt left behind by the previous government (which it had failed to disclose), pressure from international donors and dependence on multinational agreements. Corruption also remains extremely widespread in many areas, posing an obstacle to fair competition, planning certainty and independent government agencies.

The country's economic stagnation is attributable first and foremost to a lack of industrialisation: Senegal exports cheap raw materials and imports expensive finished products as well as basic foods, making it susceptible to global price shocks. In addition, it suffers from high energy costs and a massive informal sector that generates virtually no tax revenue.

In spite of all this, the country is undergoing a process of political transformation and shows promising potential to serve as a prime example of African sovereignty. Expectations are extremely high, especially among the young population, who primarily voted for Faye.

JANNIS DÜNGEMANN
is a political scientist and freelance author specialising in international topics.

jannisduengemann@yahoo.de

LITERACY

Better early childhood education for Zambia's future

While Zambia's education system has made significant progress, there is a lack of provision for early childhood education. One particularly important step would be to empower parents to help their children take an interest in reading and writing from an early age.

BY DIANA SAKALA

Photo: picture alliance / PIXSELL / Emica Elvedji

Pre-school education is essential to ensure that children can keep up in primary school.

In her first few days at school, Chanda was absolutely thrilled, like so many children: she held a pencil in her hand for the first time, got to explore a new environment and made new friends. A whole new world opened up to her at her rural school in the Nakonde district in northern Zambia.

But Chanda's optimism soon gave way to deep uncertainty: she realised she was finding it very difficult to keep up. "I did not understand what the teacher was saying at first," Chanda recalls quietly. "I wanted to answer, but I did not know the words." It turned out that she was ill-prepared for the linguistic and written demands of formal schooling, particularly when it came to the English language.

In Zambia, Chanda's story is only too common. Countless children enter the classroom full of enthusiasm and eager to learn – only to discover that they are completely overwhelmed. Across many areas of rural Zambia in particular, pre-school children are getting little or no prior exposure to reading and writing. When they start school, they lack the foundations for learning effectively. Compared to other pupils, these children immediately fall behind – a disadvantage that can persist throughout their entire school career.

WHEN CHILDREN DON'T UNDERSTAND THE LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION

Judith Zulu, a Year 1 teacher with more than 22 years of experience in rural schools in northern Zambia, observes a consistent pattern: when they start school, many children are only fluent in the language spoken at home. It is in the classroom that they first come into contact with English. Instead of immediately engaging with new subjects, they must first learn basic English, which hinders their progress.

In Zambia, depending on the definition, there are between 20 and more than 70 languages. English, the former colonial language, is the official language and dominates both the business world and the education sector.

Zambia has made notable progress in expanding access to education in recent years. Primary education has been free since 2018 and secondary education since 2021. Although early childhood education programmes are provided by the state and civil society organisations, they reach only a fraction of children. According to UNICEF, in 2019 only 37 % of Year 1 learners had received pre-school education.

PARENTS LACK TIME TO SUPPORT THEIR CHILDREN

Children with a weak educational background often come from families where parents and other carers had little access to early childhood education themselves. In poor families in particular, many parents are often unable to support their children's pre-school learning simply because they lack the time – for instance, because they have to work in the fields or do other informal work.

Many also see literacy training as the school's responsibility rather than a process that begins at home. Without intervention, this cycle can repeat itself generation after generation. Time and again, classrooms are packed with eager but unprepared learners.

The consequences are far-reaching. Even in mathematics and science, understanding depends on literacy skills in English. If schools fail to bring pupils up to an adequate language level at an early stage, every new subject will pose a challenge.

Over time, children's self-confidence wanes, their opportunities diminish and their dreams are shattered. Human resources that Zambia urgently needs for its economic growth are thus lost at an early stage.

> "It is now crucial for Zambia to involve parents and carers more closely in their children's pre-school education."

EARLY INTERVENTION YIELDS THE GREATEST SUCCESS

It is therefore of central importance to intervene. Measures taken in the earliest years yield the greatest returns, as research and practice in early childhood education consistently show. If children are exposed to stories, language-rich interaction and basic reading and writing activities even before they start school, they are more likely to succeed and remain interested in learning.

In Zambia, various organisations have demonstrated how community-based approaches can expand access to early learning in underserved areas. These include the civil society organisations Zambia Open Community Schools (ZOCS) and Lubuto Library Partners. The latter plays a significant role in fostering a culture of reading: it creates easily accessible library spaces where children come into contact with books and reading and writing activities from a very young age.

"Zambia must continue to close its educational gaps: for the sake of the children's future but also for that of the whole country."

It is now crucial for Zambia to involve parents and carers more closely in their children's pre-school education. If they could be encouraged to more actively support early learning at home, this could have an enormous impact: literacy skills would no longer be confined to the classroom but would become part of the child's everyday environment. This would boost both the children's self-confidence and their long-term educational outcomes.

PATHWAYS TO BETTER EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Progress begins with small but deliberate steps: storybooks that are written in familiar local languages; books that have both English and local-language translation for better understanding; the promotion of simple digital learning aids and community-based reading activities. Such pre-school literacy initiatives are important first steps towards fixing an educational system that often fails to start early enough. Without them, the significant gap between well- and poorly prepared pupils will never close. This is particularly true of places with scarce resources, such as rural Nakonde.

However, it is true that parents and carers, if they are to take a greater interest in their children's pre-school education, must have sufficient time and resources to do so. Stronger social security systems would be a step in the right direction, for example.

In Zambia, many dedicated educators, parents and local communities are already doing their utmost to give children the best possible chance of a good education. They should be supported by further targeted programmes for early childhood learning. Zambia must continue to close its educational gaps: for the sake of the children's future but also for that of the whole country.

LINKS

Zambia Open Community Schools (ZOCS)
Lubuto Library Partners

DIANA SAKALA
is an educator and education consultant dedicated to improving literacy and expanding access to quality learning opportunities in Zambia.

sakalad4@gmail.com

ARTS

“Too often, projects start by chasing money and then lose their core purpose”

Kibera Arts District (KAD) is a community-based arts project in Nairobi that uses art to drive systemic change in Kibera, one of East Africa’s largest slums. KAD runs galleries and studios, promotes creative work and opens up opportunities for local residents. Some of their artworks have already featured on the front covers of D+C. KAD’s aim is not only to support artists but also to foster a broader sense of shared commitment within the East African and international art scene. To this end, KAD is planning something big this year: Kenya’s first art biennial. We spoke to Patrick Othieno and Jamey Ponte, the project’s founders, about their work and their plans.

PATRICK OTHIENO AND JAMEY PONTE IN AN INTERVIEW WITH KATHARINA WILHELM OTIENO

What gap in East Africa’s art landscape are you trying to fill?

Jamey Ponte: From the start, we saw a lack of real collaboration. For many years, both the community and the wider art scene in East Africa did not seem ready for a project like this. Too many artistic projects were driven more by funding applications than by a genuine shared purpose, and Kenya’s previous regimes were not necessarily sympathetic towards the arts scene. There was a great deal of arrogance.

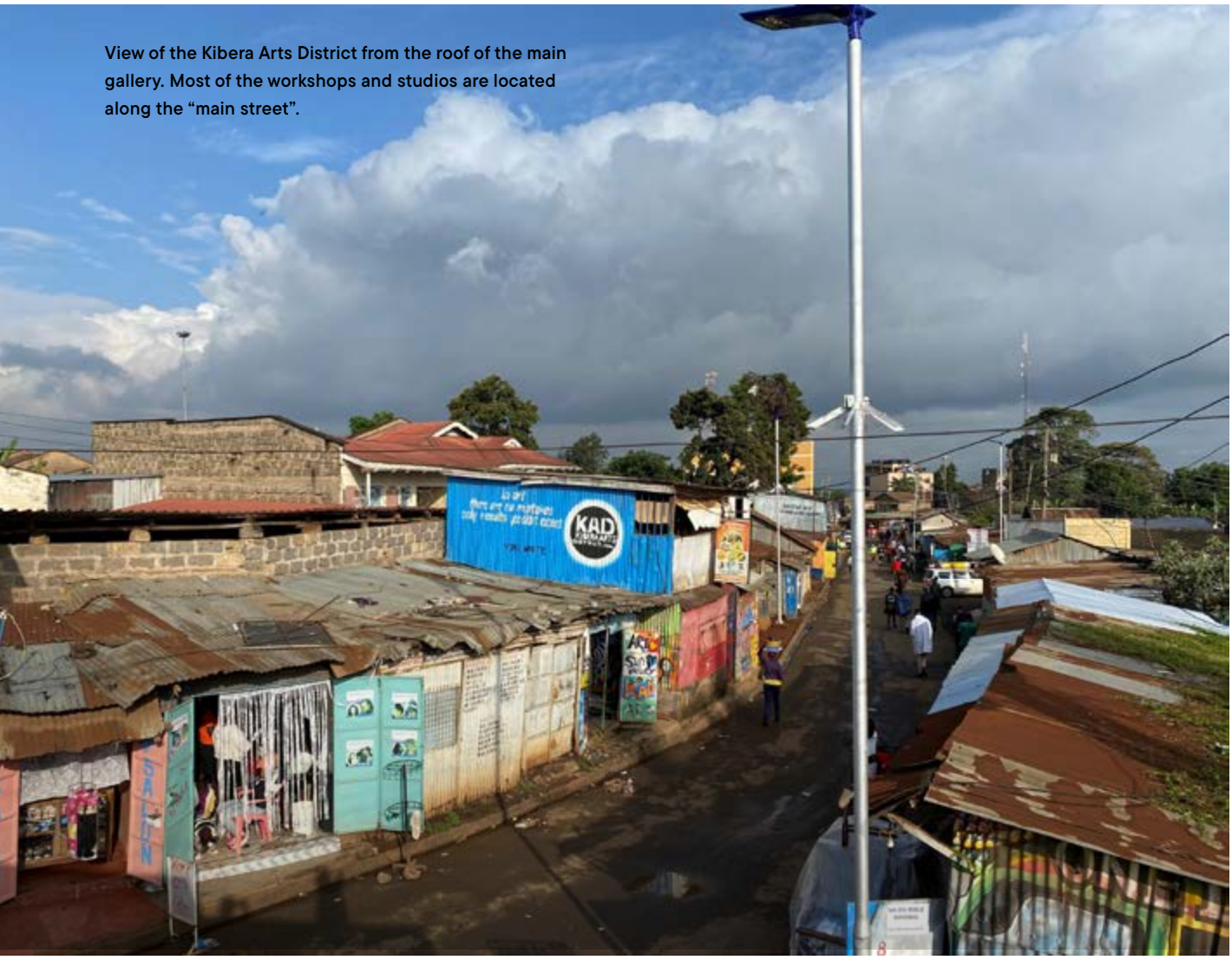
That began to change when we saw new spaces bringing together artists from different classes, backgrounds and training paths. We realised there was finally enough openness and energy to build something collective. KAD grew out of that moment, after we had been thinking about the project for around 15 years. But we did not want to impose it on the community. We wanted people in Kibera to be ready to lead it themselves.

How did the project actually begin?

Ponte: We wanted to start by building a gallery in Kibera. Covid-19 delayed everything, and funding collapsed. But when we returned to the plan in 2022, community leaders insisted that we should not build a temporary iron-sheet structure. They wanted a permanent building. That was a major step and also a risk, as it was the first permanent building in this area. But it showed how strongly the community believed in the project.

How important was the community in making the project work?

Patrick Othieno: It was essential. After all, we are doing “community-based art”. We regard this as an art form in its own right, just like “painting” or “sculpture”. KAD was never meant to belong solely to the two of us. The idea was always to sow a seed that the community would nurture and help to grow – under its own leadership.



View of the Kibera Arts District from the roof of the main gallery. Most of the workshops and studios are located along the "main street".

Photo: ko

"Art was always a key component of this, as activism needs language, images, design and performance to communicate."

That is also why the project has survived and grown faster than we expected. The community supports events, helps with security, contributes to cleaning and organisation and takes responsibility for the space. KAD works because local people see it as their own.

Kibera is often portrayed mainly through poverty and stereotypes. How do you navigate that?

Ponte: I have lived here for almost 20 years. Kibera is a complex place, and the stereotypes are true insofar as poverty, insecurity and marginalisation do indeed exist here. But that is not the whole story. Our aim is not to "fix" Kibera in some abstract way. We want to confront the reality in Kibera, one person at a time, and show that change is possible.

At the start, we concentrated our workshops along a single street, just under a kilometre long. It used to have a high crime rate, with many vacant or unused business units and hardly any sense of safety or pride. Today, most of these spaces are active businesses; the street is cleaner and has been tarmacked. This was also the first street that had solar-powered streetlamps in Kibera. I am sure this has also contributed to the fact that there has not been a single police operation in KAD for almost two years.

However, whilst art was the means for this change, it was the people who drove it forward. Technically speaking, we are not a non-profit organisation; we see ourselves as a movement. And that is why our success is not measured by more profit-

able businesses in the area or greater security, but by the fact that the people of Kibera are more self-confident and prouder, and they believe in themselves and their neighbourhood.

Othieno: And that is particularly remarkable when you consider that Kibera was one of the places hardest hit by the violence that followed the 2007 elections, which brought Kenya to the brink of civil war. I was born in Mathare, another large slum in Nairobi, and moved from there to Kibera. And in many places like Kibera and Mathare, people are still traumatised by the events of 20 years ago. But that also means that today's community leaders are doing their utmost to prevent such things from happening again. At least, that is what we hope and what we've also tried to nurture with "House of Friends".

What is House of Friends?

Othieno: KAD actually sort of grew out of House of Friends, which itself emerged after the 2007–2008 post-election violence. At that time, many children had lost their parents, and there were numerous external groups trying to help without really understanding how Kibera worked. Local leaders began sending them to the place where Jamey and, partly, I lived, as we have backgrounds in activism and human rights work. Over time, the community began to refer to the place as the "House of Friends". Eventually, House of Friends became a safe space for community work, youth support and activism. It grew organically out of local relationships and years of work in Kibera.

How did activism shape your path into art?

Ponte: Initially, our work had a much more direct political focus. Following the violent riots that erupted after the elections, House of Friends became involved in peace campaigns and in the areas of human rights and governance. Art was always a key component of this, as activism needs language, images, design and performance to communicate. Having a background in graphic design and advertising myself, this was always clear to me. Patrick acts more as a manager for the creative people he has met through his activism.

That is how art became central for us, and we started to call ourselves "artivists". We began to see it as a way to engage people, create dialogue and build community without losing the social-justice focus. We sometimes joke that this is our retirement, because it is less dangerous than some of the activism we used to do.

Why did you decide to do a biennial and why now?

Ponte: At first, the idea of a biennial began almost as a joke. We spoke about doing a small "Kibera Arts Biennale" at a time when Kenyan artists were starting to appear in events like the Venice Biennale. But behind the joke was a serious ambition: to build something that could eventually grow into a citywide and national platform.

> "The stronger the community's ownership, the less likely it is that others can define it from outside."

In the end, we decided to go straight to "Nairobi Arts Biennale". We felt the movement was growing faster than expected and that the time was right. We were also responding to a moment of deep global uncertainty. I feel that humanity has just reached the lowest point I have ever witnessed in my lifetime.

Economic conditions are shifting; Kenya is feeling those changes strongly, and funding streams have become far less reliable. For us, those are not reasons to wait. On the contrary, it seemed like exactly the moment when the arts community needed to step forward instead of standing still.

Othieno: That is also why the lack of funding did not stop us. Of course, a project like this needs money, and we believe support will come. But we did not want to build the biennale around fundraising alone. Too often, in Kenya and elsewhere, projects start by chasing money and lose their core purpose in the process. We wanted the arts community to claim ownership first.

What should a biennial make possible that single exhibitions or festivals cannot?

Ponte: A biennial creates a larger framework. It is not just a single event but a platform that can strengthen networks, raise standards and build lasting momentum. For us, it is also a way to say that Nairobi's art scene has reached a new point. Nairobi is the strongest arts hub in East Africa, but compared with major cities elsewhere on the continent, it still has ground to make up. The biennial is a way to change that.

What role does artivism play in the biennial?

Othieno: Artivism is at the core of it. We see art as a way to use one's own voice and speak about social justice, peace, inequality and the realities people face in their communities. The biennial is meant to give artists space to use their voice in that way.

Ponte: The theme, "Our Art, Our Future, Your True Experience", reflects that thinking. It starts with artists taking responsibility for their own scene. It asks what future they want to build. And it invites audiences into something real rather than polished or pretentious.

> "The project is rooted in relationships that go back many years."

How will you make the biennial accessible?
Othieno: The basic principle is that there will be no general ticketing barrier. Most venues and installations should be accessible free of charge, at least part of the time. Some venues, such as museums, may still charge their usual entry fees, and some special events may have their own pricing.

We are also working on practical access. That includes mapping venues, planning transport options, as traffic in Nairobi is a problem, and possibly creating an app and partnerships to help people move between sites more easily. Accessibility is not only about cost but also about safety, navigation and feeling welcome.

How do you prevent the biennial from becoming a form of poverty tourism or contributing to gentrification in certain neighbourhoods?
Ponte: For us, that starts with the fact that we are not outsiders using the community as a backdrop. We live here, work here and are accountable here. The project is rooted in relationships that go back many years.

Othieno: We also talk openly with the community about these issues. People understand that visitors may arrive with limited knowledge or problematic attitudes, but the response is to engage them and shift the narrative. That is part of the work. In our view, the stronger the community's ownership, the less likely it is that others can define it from outside.

What would count as success for the biennial?
Ponte: In some ways, it is already a success because of the momentum it has created. The real achievement so far is that artists, venues, hotels, curators and community actors have all started to see it as theirs.

Looking ahead, success means broad participation across the arts ecosystem and across social groups. It means East African artists taking part, Nairobi audiences showing up and the event feeling genuinely open to different communities. Even a relatively small number of international visitors who come specifically because of the biennial would matter, because every major platform has to start somewhere.

PATRICK OTHIENO
is an activist with a focus on managing and organising communities and has nearly 15 years of experience in East Africa in the fields of systemic change, social justice, the environment and wildlife. He is the co-founder of House of Friends Kenya (HOF) and the Kibera Arts District (KAD).

patothieno491@gmail.com

JAMEY PONTE
is an "artivist" and co-founder of House of Friends Kenya (HOF) and the Kibera Arts District (KAD). With over two decades of experience in East Africa, Ponte has pioneered the use of art as a tool for systemic change, social justice, the environment and wildlife.

jamey@houseoffriendskenya.com

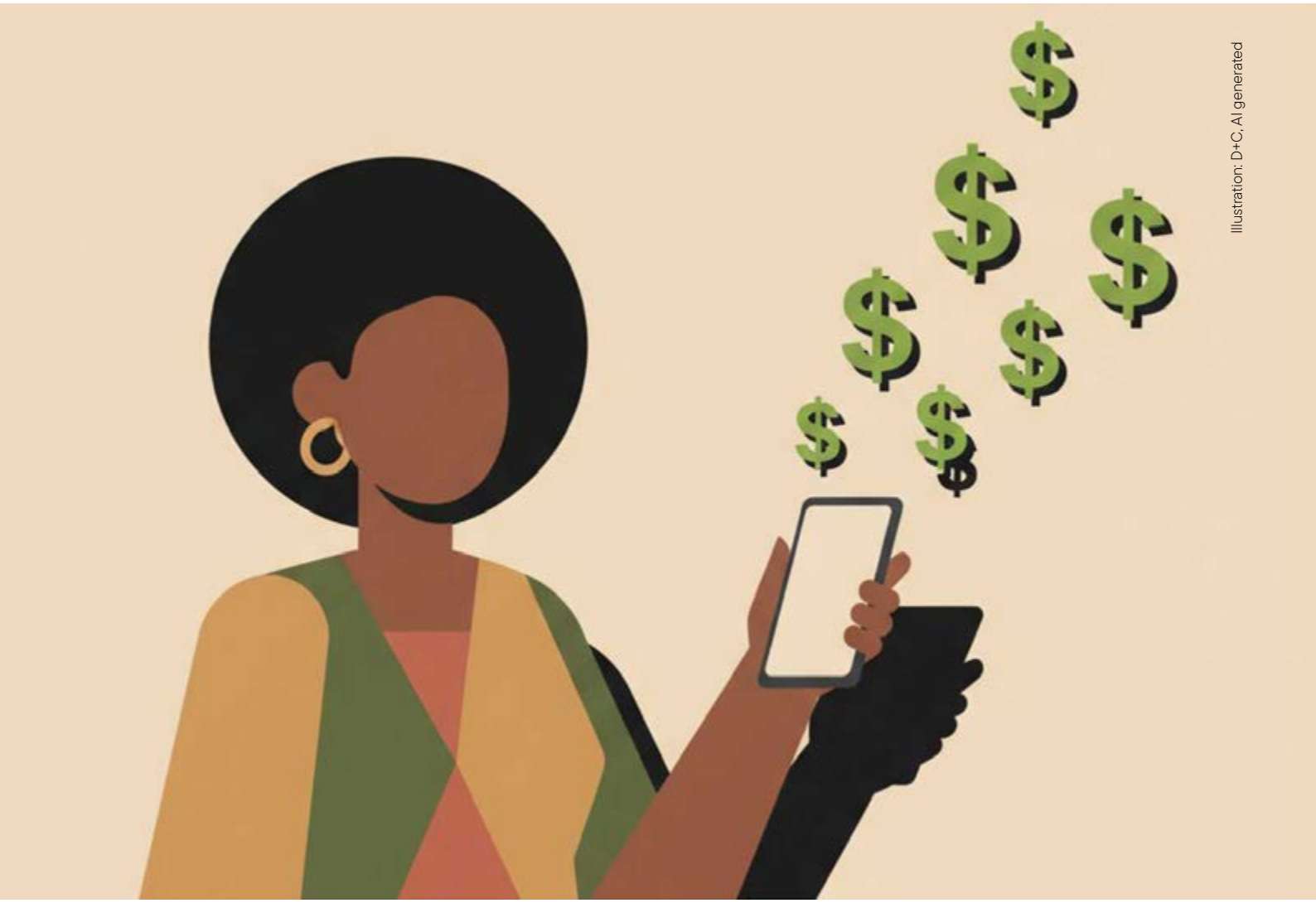


Illustration: D+C, AI generated

DIGITALISATION

How young Zambians build careers on social media

Online platforms are reshaping Zambia's labour market, offering new paths to entrepreneurship. But while content creation is booming, uneven access to platform monetisation restricts the young creators' potential.

BY DERRICK SILIMINA

As the sun rises over Zambia's capital Lusaka, Tabo Daka scrolls through her phone and uploads a new outfit. Within minutes, her content reaches thousands – boosting not only her own profile, but also small boutiques along Cairo Road, one of Lusaka's busiest streets. "I depend on platforms like TikTok, Facebook and Instagram to connect directly with my audience," says Tabo, who specialises in streetwear and regularly collaborates with brands. "They engage with my content and, in turn, help promote my work."

Her routine reflects a broader shift in Zambia. As internet infrastructure expands – from fibre-optic networks to wider mobile coverage – more and more young people are using digital platforms not just to communicate, but to earn a living.

What was once a marginal "creative economy" discussed in policy circles, has become a source of income for many content creators. With just a smartphone, they produce, distribute and monetise content without relying on traditional media structures. "As a fashion content creator, I can create and share content directly from my phone," Tabo says. "I don't need film crews or broadcast equipment."

A NEW CLASS OF DIGITAL ENTREPRENEURS

Others are building similar careers. Travel vlogger Queen Licah documents her journeys across Africa, sharing videos of landscapes, culture and everyday life with a global audience. "I capture everything myself," she says. "I explore places, meet people and create memories one vlog at a time." Like many creators, she sees digital platforms as a pathway to income and international recognition.

The shift is set to create a new class of digital entrepreneurs. Social media platforms allow creators to turn cultural expression into income, while reducing barriers that once limited access to markets. "Marketing budgets that once went to international agencies are now going to local creators," says Lusaka-based marketing expert Innocent Daka.

A FULL-TIME JOB WITH LITTLE INCOME YET

However, monetisation remains a major challenge. Despite generating significant online traffic, many Zambian creators cannot access direct platform revenues such as advertising payouts, as Zambia is not always included in supported regions.

For creators like Ken Dumbo, a prominent social media influencer based in Lusaka who has built a following of nearly 100,000 people, the gap is clear: while content creation is already a full-time job for many, earnings often depend on indirect income such as brand deals rather than platform payments.

ZAMBIA'S POLICYMAKERS TRY TO ENABLE MONETISATION

This has prompted political attention. In November 2024, Zambia's parliament discussed measures to enable monetisation on platforms like Facebook, YouTube and TikTok, and the government is now updating the Independent Broadcasting Authority Act to recognise digital content as a formal economic sector.

Experts believe, however, that regulation alone may not solve the issue: monetisation depends largely on platform policies and audience reach, not direct government negotiation. Instead, they argue, the priority should be creating an environment in which creators can grow sustainably and access global markets.

DERRICK SILIMINA
is a freelance journalist based in Lusaka, Zambia. He focuses on Zambian agriculture and sustainability issues.

derricksilimina@gmail.com

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More than just a game

Photo: Janos Bayer

The world's greatest game

The men's football World Cup is one of the few truly global events of our time. We take this year's tournament as an opportunity to ask what's so special about this particular sport that both divides and unites the entire world – and that inspires young people on football pitches from Brazil to Botswana.

BY KATHARINA WILHELM OTIENO

In the World Cup final on 19 July, just outside New York, multimillionaires will face off on the pitch, revered as demigods. It's possible that some of those who watch the action unfold will have paid over $ 2 million for their tickets. In late April, that was the price quoted for one ticket on the official resale website of world football's governing body FIFA. The original price was $ 8860.

To put this into context, the annual per capita gross national income in Senegal is $ 1680. If Senegal reaches the final, fans from there could find it difficult to come and cheer on their national team – though not only for financial reasons. In January, US President Donald Trump announced that people from 39 countries, including Senegal, would be banned from entering the US to attend the World Cup.

The bans were initially lifted again in mid-May. However, people from the 47 countries that are taking part in the tournament alongside the US, making this World Cup the biggest ever, may not learn whether they will actually be allowed to enter the country until they arrive at the airport.

FIFA President Gianni Infantino calls the World Cup "inclusive" nonetheless. He had already displayed his lack of judgement in December when he awarded Trump the newly created "FIFA Peace Prize" in a grandiose ceremony. Less than three months later, the award-winner started a war.

THE TWO FACES OF FOOTBALL

I already watched a final last year. It was to decide which of Kenya's regional teams would be promoted to the third league. The mood certainly did not need to shy away from comparison with the spectacular World Cup events that we can expect to see in the USA, Canada and Mexico. Every time a goal was scored, fans stormed the pitch, which had been turned into a mud bath by the rain. The entire arena was a cacophony of screams of jubilation, outbursts of anger and vuvuzelas.

For the players, it isn't even just about winning. On the day, I was supporting the NGUVU Homeboyz – a team created by a social sports project for which I volunteer. The young men from deprived backgrounds play to stay away from drugs and crime, but also because the project provides them with hot meals and vocational training (see articles on p. 42 and p. 45).

Using sport as a tool for social development is nothing new in development cooperation. The "Sport for Development" approach works with any sport – but football projects are at the forefront around the world.

A sport that many people can agree on is a good thing in today's divided world. As the articles in this edition show, the appeal of football consistently manages to bridge ethnic divides and, increasingly, gender divides as well. And if you've ever watched a regional league match on some dusty pitch somewhere, you'll know that football doesn't need any FIFA glitz and glamour to have impact.

KATHARINA WILHELM OTIENO
belongs to the editorial team at D+C and works partly in Nairobi.
euz.editor@dandc.eu

Stories from the world of **football**

AFGHANISTAN

A success for Afghan women's football

Photo: picture alliance / ASSOCIATED PRESS / Mosaab Elshamy

Members of the Afghan women's team celebrate a goal in October 2025. At the time, the team was still competing under the name "Afghan Women United".

FIFA has officially reconised the Afghan women's football team. As well as improving the team's prospects, the decision also gives the team a chance to draw attention to the oppression of women in Afghanistan.

BY ISAH SHAFIQ

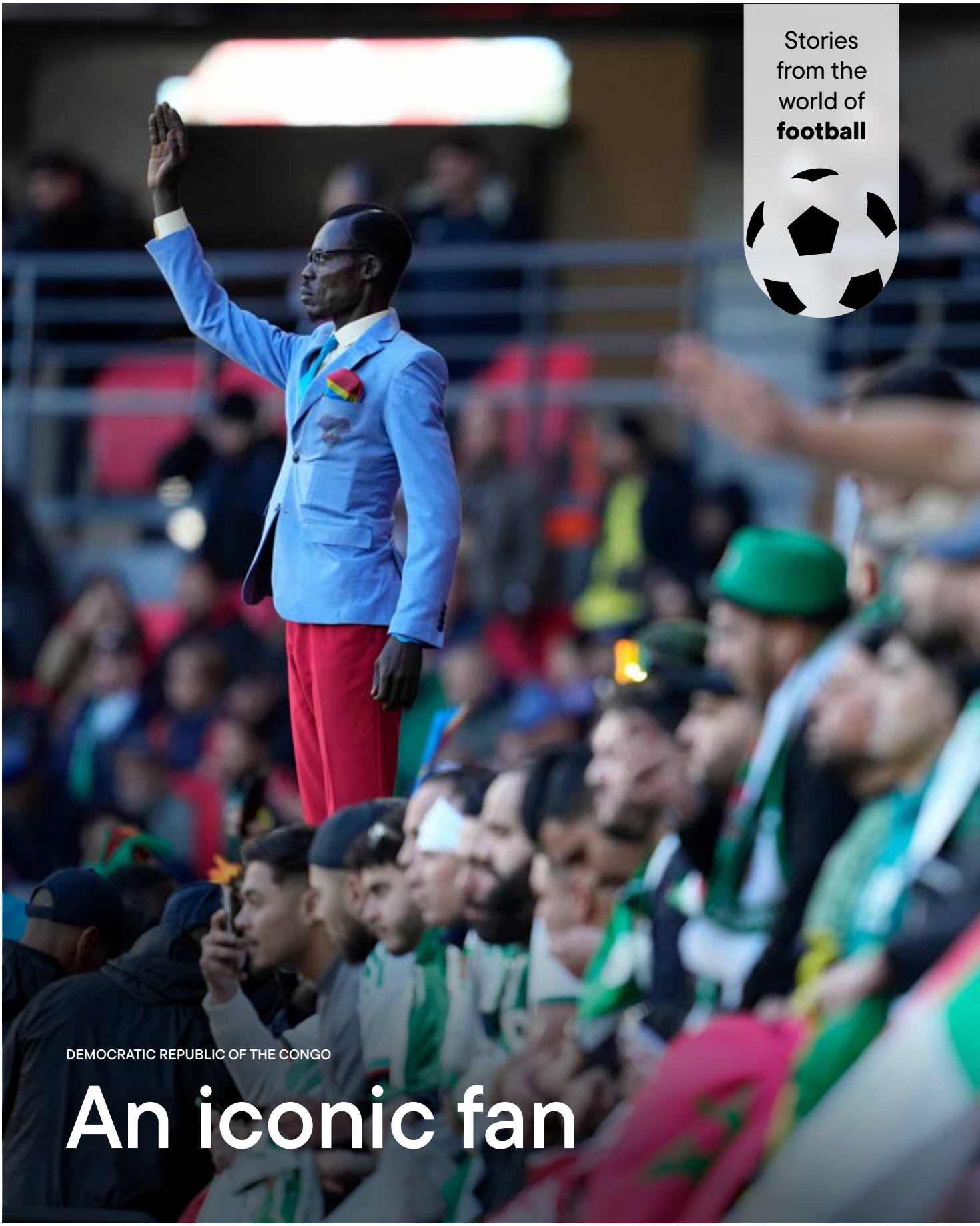
FIFA, world football's governing body, hasn't exactly shown itself to be the most ardent defender of human rights in recent past. When it decided in April to recognise a team of refugee Afghan women as their country's official national team, however, the association did nonetheless set a precedent: for the first time, it has given its seal of approval to a national squad without the consent of the member association in question.

"A hard slap to the face of the Taliban" is how national goalkeeper Elaha Safdari described the decision in an interview with Deutsche Welle. Her team had already taken part in a minor tournament in Morocco during the FIFA United Women's Series in 2025 – as they had not yet been fully recognised as a national team, however, they competed under the name "Afghan Women United". But now the team has the chance to qualify for major tournaments such as the World Cup, the Asian Cup or the 2028 Olympic Games in Los Angeles.

From a purely sporting perspective, in other words, the decision is already an important step. Nonetheless, the players are keen to stress that women in Afghanistan continue to face massive restrictions and repression. The team's presence can thus also serve as a platform for drawing continual attention to what is happening in the country. No matter how many states may be seeking pragmatic diplomatic means of engaging with the regime at the moment, such a state of oppression must never be normalised.

ISAH SHAFIQ
is a student of political science at Goethe University Frankfurt and a student assistant at D+C.
euz.editor@dandc.eu

Stories from the world of **football**



DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

An iconic fan

Photo: picture alliance / ASSOCIATED PRESS / Mosa'ab Elshamy

Michel Nkuka Mboladinga at the DRC Africa Cup match against Algeria.

At the Africa Cup in January, one Congolese fan attracted everyone's attention. Michel Nkuka Mboladinga stood motionless through all his team's matches and imitated the pose of Patrice Lumumba – the national hero who helped end Belgian colonial rule in 1960. His homage sent a clear message: the Democratic Republic of the Congo needs peace.

BY KATHARINA WILHELM OTIENO

Despite the fact that the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) was eliminated in the round of 16 of the Africa Cup (AFCON) in January, everyone will remember Michel Nkuka Mboladinga. Throughout all of the matches, including extra time, the team's fan stood motionless in the stands on a stool draped with the Congolese flag, his right arm raised in the air. Mboladinga was imitating the pose of the statue of Patrice Lumumba on his mausoleum in Kinshasa – and became the symbol of the tournament.

> "Only when the national team of the DRC was eliminated by Algeria in extra time did Mboladinga break off his performance."

He always wore a colourful suit ensemble of blue, red and yellow – the colours of the Congolese flag – and his hairstyle and glasses made him look almost identical to the real Lumumba.

In interviews, Mboladinga explained that his appearances are intended as a homage to Lumumba and stand for values like dignity, freedom and national sovereignty. He was also thinking about his team: "I remain still to give strength to the team, to give energy to the players," Mboladinga told the Associated Press.

Only when the national team of the DRC was eliminated by Algeria in extra time did Mboladinga break off his performance and let his tears flow in the stands.

SIGN OF PEACE

For many, Lumumba remains the national hero of the DRC. In 1960, he helped end Belgian colonial rule, became the first prime minister of the newly independent country and was considered one of the most promising political figures in Africa. But less than a year later, he was killed during a conflict with a secessionist movement supported by Belgium. The country descended into a decades-long dictatorship that exploited its vast natural resources – much like colonial rulers had done before.

At the tournament in Morocco, Mboladinga was accompanied by hundreds of Congolese fans. "He is sending a clear message at both the local and international level. The open palm is a sign of peace, and we need peace in our country," Jered Bitobo, the head of communications of a well-known supporters' group, told the news agency AFP. The country's resource-rich east has been disputed for decades, and the conflict has escalated again in recent years due to clashes between the Rwanda-backed rebel group M23 and the Congolese army.

KATHARINA WILHELM OTIENO
belongs to the editorial team of D+C and works partly in Nairobi.
euz.editor@dandc.eu

Stories from the world of **football**

PEACEBUILDING

Didier Drogba's famous speech

Photo: picture alliance / ASSOCIATED PRESS / Themba Hadebe

He fought for his team and his country: Didier Drogba at a match against Benin in 2008, when he was captain of the national football team of Côte d'Ivoire.

In 2005, Didier Drogba used Côte d'Ivoire's first World Cup qualification to call for peace: the football star urged his fellow citizens in the war-torn country to forgive each other. His words actually helped bring the parties to the conflict closer together – an impressive example of the unifying power of football.

BY ISAH SHAFIQ

"Men and women of Côte d'Ivoire, from the north, south, centre and west: Today we showed that all Ivorians can live together and work towards a shared goal." These were the first words of the speech Didier Drogba made to his nation on 8 October 2005 during a live broadcast by the state television network of Côte d'Ivoire from the locker room of the Al-Merrikh Stadium in Sudan. Shortly before, the former FC Chelsea striker and his national team had qualified for the World Cup for the first time.

> "Drogba's words – which were replayed on television for weeks – supposedly really did help bring the parties to the conflict closer together."

Drogba followed this introduction with an urgent appeal: "Today we beg you on our knees – forgive, forgive, forgive." By that point, the civil war that had been raging in Côte d'Ivoire for three years had claimed approximately 4000 lives and displaced over a million people. In 2002, after years of political tension, a failed coup attempt had sparked an armed conflict between government forces and the rebel groups that controlled large parts of the politically and economically marginalised north.

Drogba's words – which were replayed on television for weeks – supposedly really did help bring the parties to the conflict closer together. A year and a half later, following a lengthy negotiation process, a peace agreement was signed that outlined concrete steps towards the country's reunification.

Shortly afterwards, the national team stepped back onto the stage. It arranged for a qualifying match against Madagascar to be moved to the northern rebel stronghold of Bouaké. It was a symbolic decision: For the first time in years, balls flew through the air there instead of bullets. Although the conflict would escalate again a few years later, Didier Drogba's appeal demonstrated the unifying power that football can unleash.

ISAH SHAFIQ
is a student of political science at Goethe University Frankfurt and a student assistant at D+C.

euz.editor@dandc.eu

FIGHTING AUTHORITARIANISM

Egypt's Ultras as part of the revolution

Stories from the world of **football**

Photo: picture alliance / ASSOCIATED PRESS / Khalil Hamra

Ultra fans of Al Ahly protest against the government in Tahrir Square in Cairo in September 2011.

The football fans of Al Ahly played a decisive role in the resignation of Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak in 2011: they fought fierce street battles against the authoritarian regime in Tahrir Square. They ended up paying a high price.

BY MARIUS MONIAK

Football is political. Many leaders use sporting events to burnish their image and demonstrate power and unity. The Ultras fan scene, however, often sees the stadium as an autonomous zone that eludes state control.

In 2011, in the middle of the Arab Spring, the organised fan scene of Egypt's record-holding football champions, Al Ahly, became a pillar of the Egyptian revolution. When pro-Mubarak militias on horses and camels attacked demonstrators in Tahrir Square on 2 February, the Ultras stood in their way. The ensuing street fights lasted for days; around 150 active football fans lost their lives in the course of the 2011 revolution. Mubarak resigned on 11 February. The revolution was briefly victorious.

> "Under the current head of state, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, Egyptian football is once again supposed to serve as a spectacle and offer no room for resistance."

Almost a year to the day later, the Ultras' political influence in Egypt came to a sudden end. On 1 February 2012, at a match between Al Ahly and Al Masry in Port Said, armed men pushed into the block of Al Ahly supporters. The floodlights were turned off. The police did not intervene. 72 people lost their lives in the violence and mass panic, most of whom were Al Ahly fans.

Following the Port Said disaster, football matches were played in empty stadiums for several years, and the Ministry of Interior took control over entry to the stadiums. The Ultras scene experienced a decline and many factions dissolved. To this day, there are allegations that the former military council allowed or even instigated the violence in order to crush the Ultras' participation in the resistance. Many Ultras were sent to Egypt's notorious prisons.

Under the current head of state, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, Egyptian football is once again supposed to serve as a spectacle and offer no room for resistance. But politics has not disappeared entirely from football. In the 2018 presidential elections, over five percent of voters cast symbolic votes for football star Mohamed Salah – who wasn't even on the ballot.

Egypt isn't an isolated case: active fan scenes also became conspicuous political actors during the Maidan protests in Ukraine in 2013-2014 and the uprisings against Brazil's former president, Jair Bolsonaro, in the stadiums of São Paulo.

MARIUS MONIAK
studies medicine and peace and conflict studies in Frankfurt am Main. He wrote this article as an intern at D+C's editorial office.

euz.editor@dandc.eu

FEMALE EMPOWERMENT

Women's football blossoms in the desert

Rael Lomoti established the first girls' football team in Turkana, one of Kenya's poorest regions. Both on and off the pitch, the Desert Roses are all about breaking with patriarchal norms – and fighting for a brighter future.

BY KATHARINA WILHELM OTIENO

"Lionel Messi", replies Lilian Kandali, when asked to name her favourite footballer. The 14-year-old has been playing for the Desert Roses for five years and now captains her age group's team.

It all began in 2017 in Lodwar, Turkana County's largest town with a population of around 80,000. Having started out with just one girls' team, the programme now has more than 3500 female members. These days, there are 18 Desert Roses teams for different age groups: training takes place after school from Monday to Friday, right across the county in northern Kenya.

Turkana is a barren region, many swathes of which are desert-like. Farming there is extremely difficult, so the Turkana people, who have lived in the region for centuries, have for the most part remained livestock herders to this day.

Rael Lomoti and members of one of her Desert Roses teams on their way to a match.

Photo: Moses Mbotela

In this way of life, it is above all women and girls who shoulder the main burden, as they are expected to tend the livestock from an early age. "Girls born in a village in the Turkana Desert still have few prospects," says Rael Lomoti, the founder of Desert Roses. She explains that many girls are married off at a very young age. The Turkana still measure a woman's "worth" in terms of livestock – the number of animals paid to the bride's family upon marriage.

DISCOVERED BY A NUN

Lomoti, now 31, is herself a Turkana. It was by no means a carefree childhood that enabled her to embark on a different path, however. When she was just six, her parents left the Turkana region during a particularly severe drought, taking her and her four siblings with them to Nairobi in search of work. Lomoti's mother died soon after. Her father managed to keep the family afloat by working as a day labourer – but didn't earn enough to provide properly for the children or enable them to attend school regularly.

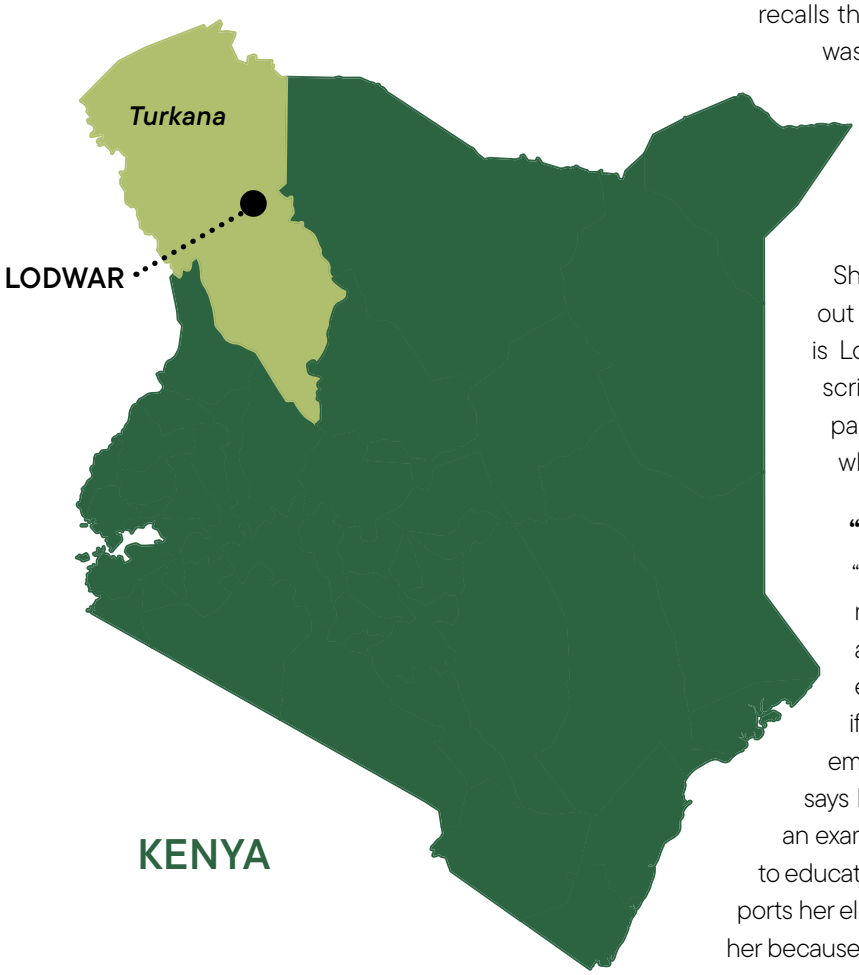
As Lomoti sees it, football played a crucial role in ensuring that the family did not slide completely into poverty following her mother's death. Her talent was evident from an early age: in Juja, a town not far from Nairobi, she regularly played for the school team. This brought her to the attention of Sister Luise Radlmeier, a German nun who ran an orphanage and various social programmes there. Girls playing football was by no means the norm in late 1990s Kenya.

> "I was told that football isn't for girls, that these are Western practices that have no place in the world of the Turkana."

Radlmeier took Lomoti under her wing and became an important mentor for her. Inspired by the nun's community work, Lomoti did a degree in social work at a university in Nairobi in 2014. When Radlmeier died nine years ago, Lomoti took a decision: "I wanted to go back to Turkana and help my own community through sport – which had also changed my life."

FOOTBALL OFFERS EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

This decision led to the Desert Roses. At first, she encountered resistance from the Turkana's traditional leaders. "I was told that football isn't for girls, that these are Western practices that have no place in the world of the Turkana," recalls the defensive midfielder. For Lomoti, however, it was always about more than just training: "Football is a means to an end, a way to bring girls together in a safe space, to teach them values and, above all, offer them educational opportunities."



She refused to give up – and specifically sought out men who would support her idea. One of them is Loroo Esekon Emmanuel. An engineer, he describes himself as Lomoti's "ambassador", accompanying her even today to meetings with Turkana who hold particularly traditional views.

"SHE CAN BUY THE GOATS HERSELF"

"We Turkana need a fundamental change of mindset. Girls are still regarded merely as a way of accumulating more livestock through bride prices – yet our entire region could be a lot better off if girls received education and could seek gainful employment and thereby support their families," says Emmanuel. In debates, he likes to cite Lomoti as an example. "I tell people that football opened up paths to education for her, and that she is now the one who supports her elderly father – nobody has to pay a bride price for her because she can buy the goats herself."

Meanwhile, the Football Kenya Federation has appointed Lomoti as the women's representative for the Turkana region. In this capacity, one of her jobs is to organise the youth teams for boys and girls.

> "Initially, there was some scepticism about the project in the community – but most people now have realised how far football can also take girls."

There are also success stories among the players: 56 girls from the programme have been awarded sports scholarships to attend a prestigious school in Kenya. Talent scouts regularly drop by during training sessions, on the lookout for gifted players.

One of the families that have benefited is Iyanae Martha's: her daughter was granted a scholarship. "I've got five children and would never have been able to send any of them to such an expensive school," she says, adding that she's particularly proud that one of her girls was picked for this honour. Initially, there was some scepticism about the project in the community, she explains – but most people now have realised how far football can also take girls. "I wish the project had already existed during my childhood," says Martha. "What Rael is doing is giving hope to all Turkana women."

TEAM MEMBERS RECEIVE SANITARY TOWELS

Even those who don't end up with a scholarship get support with their education. "All our team members receive learning materials, sanitary towels – which still pose a major challenge, as thousands of girls and women find it difficult to get hold of sanitary products, clean water and information about menstrual hygiene – and jerseys. In addition, 120 particularly vulnerable girls are supported by our feeding programme," reports Lomoti.

Aside from providing football training, the teams' 18 coaches also run workshops – on subjects such as women's rights or political education – and discussion sessions. As frequently as she can, Lomoti organises Saturday tournaments in Lodwar that give the various Desert Roses teams the chance to compete against each other. Boys can play too: in each age group (13-, 15- and 17-year-olds) there are now also Desert Roses teams for boys.

DONATIONS HAVE DECLINED

At the same time, the financial side of things has become more difficult. Lomoti says that donations have declined sharply as a result of the global crises – meaning that not all girls can be provided with books this year. "I would also really like to be able to distribute sanitary towels, but there's just not enough money at the moment."

Many of the girls – including Mary Lokaale Ewoi – hope to become footballers or coaches themselves one day. "Football gives me a sense of purpose and something I can focus all my attention on," says the 17-year-old. Captain Lilian, meanwhile, has other goals. What she really values about Desert Roses is the reliable access to school books the team gives her – she wants to go to university and perhaps become a doctor.

LINKS

Turkana Desert Roses

Rael Lomoti's book "Roses Will Rise" is available from the civil-society organisation Vice Versa.

KATHARINA WILHELM OTIENO
belongs to the editorial team of D+C and works partly in Nairobi.

euz.editor@dandc.eu

Photo: Rawtime

Whenever the NGUVU Homeboyz play, the whole town crowds around the pitch.

COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS

How a football project is changing lives in Kenya

Across Kenya, grassroots sports organisations – often with a focus on football – have been working for years to support disadvantaged young people where the state has failed to do so. As public funding for large development organisations dwindles, their role is becoming increasingly important. Our author Alba Nakuwa works part-time for one such project and reports on its work.

BY ALBA NAKUWA

NGUVU Edu Sport ("NGUVU" means "power" in Kiswahili) exemplifies how the role of small grassroots projects is changing – and how their burden keeps growing. It began by focusing on football, mentorship and educational support, but the local community's mounting hardships and growing despair have prompted the organisation to expand its services. Today, NGUVU also helps cover basic necessities such as food, housing and medical care.

Founded 12 years ago in Juja, a city in the Nairobi metropolitan area, the project initially offered talented but vulnerable boys a place to play football. From the outset, it also aimed to foster values such as self-confidence, respect and tolerance. Later, NGUVU formed a girls' team and expanded to include other activities, such as dance.

As hardship grew amid extreme weather events and the global economic downturn after the Covid-19 pandemic, NGUVU adopted a more comprehensive approach. The donation-funded project began supporting not only the children in its teams but also their families – helping them pay rent, cover medical bills or put food on the table in times of need.

This is why football has always been more than just a sport for the beneficiaries of this community-based organisation: it has offered them a path to education, stability and new opportunities.

> "Football here is not just a sport or a pastime. It keeps young people on the pitch instead of out on the streets."

EDUCATION AND SPORTS

Susan Naboi remembers how difficult and uncertain life was before she joined the organisation. School fees, uniforms and even basic learning materials were often unaffordable. "Sometimes I had to go to school on an empty stomach, and yet I was still expected to achieve excellent academic results," she recalls. She adds that there were hardly any opportunities after school to play football or get together with peers in a safe environment.

As a South Sudanese refugee, Susan could not be sure that she would be able to complete her education. Thanks to NGUVU, however, she now sees new prospects for her future. Susan is studying sports science at the country's largest university, while also playing for the university's women's football team and the NGUVU girls' team.

John Eketo plays as a goalkeeper for the boys' team, NGUVU Homeboyz FC. He grew up in a single-parent household and watched his mother struggle to raise him and his siblings on her own. She found it a constant challenge to pay their school fees and cover basic necessities, and he often felt uncertain about his chances of continuing his education.

With the organisation's support, however, he has been able to pursue his studies without interruption. "Being part of this programme is a privilege for me," he says. John is currently completing a diploma in electrical engineering and hopes to secure employment or start his own business once he finishes his studies.

Football still plays a central role in his life. The NGUVU Homeboyz train four times a week, and most Sundays they play a match. These days, the team competes in Kenya's third-highest league and is a source of pride for the whole town – very few teams from the area have ever made it that far.

On match days, crowds gather at the sandy pitch on the edge of town, which turns into a muddy field when it rains. People from all over Juja come to watch, and for away games, anyone who can manage the cost tries to travel along.

FOOTBALL MEANS SAFETY

"Juja has a high crime rate," says the project's head coach Fredrick Owuor, who grew up in the town, as did the other three coaches. "Football here is not just a sport or a pastime. It keeps young people on the pitch instead of out on the streets, where they might come into contact with drugs, become victims of crime or – driven by poverty – end up turning to crime themselves."

When they are training or playing matches, his boys are safe, he adds. The programme also gives these young men structure and a sense of belonging in a daily life that otherwise offers few prospects for many of them.

This is even more true for girls. In Juja, teenage pregnancies are common, especially in vulnerable families, and young mothers have little chance of escaping the cycle of poverty. This is why it is particularly important for young women to have safe spaces in which to exercise and connect. Such opportunities can be critical for building self-confidence, navigating social pressures and staying in school.

BECAUSE OF THE "MZUNGU"?

During league matches, the NGUVU Homeboyz often hear from other teams that they have only got this far "because of the mzungu". In East Africa, "mzungu" is a collective term for white people. The reference is to Lothar Firlej, a former coach with the German Football Association (DFB) and a sports teacher from Germany. He founded NGUVU Edu Sport after spending some time working for a Catholic religious order in Kenya.

> "The blend of sport and social work fills gaps that families and public institutions struggle to address on their own."

Firlej merely smiles at such allegations: "It's the boys who have to play, after all." For the 64-year-old, results are not what matters most. "The programme is also about teaching young people important values they will need for their future – teamwork, respect, a sense of responsibility and discipline."

In addition to the sports programme, NGUVU regularly offers workshops led by the coaches or external facilitators for children and young people – for example on violence prevention, gender roles, responsible media use or first aid.

STEPPING IN WHERE THE STATE IS ABSENT

NGUVU is an example of how grassroots sports initiatives can contribute to broader development goals. By helping young people to stay in school, such programmes improve their future employment prospects and economic opportunities. Across Kenya, similar local initiatives are quietly taking on tasks that go far beyond talent development. They fill gaps in the public social welfare system, particularly in areas with many low-income households.

In this context, football is becoming a pathway to social protection where the state is absent. For young people like Susan and John, it is largely community organisations that step in to provide essential support such as help with education, medical care or nutrition – services that should be the responsibility of the state. For a range of reasons, including resource mismanagement and high debt-servicing costs, it often fails to do so. In places like Juja, the blend of sport and social work therefore fills gaps that families and public institutions struggle to address on their own.

NGUVU is just one of many organisations in Kenya that work in similar ways. Today, the programme supports more than 80 young players across three teams as well as, to a lesser extent, their siblings and other family members, bringing the total number of young people receiving support to over 300. In addition, 200 older people take part in a fortnightly programme for senior citizens that was launched three years ago. However, maintaining this model remains an ongoing challenge.

It is not surprising therefore, that many grassroots sports initiatives are founded or run by Westerners, as local communities often lack the financial capacity to maintain such programmes. While successful Kenyan initiatives do exist too, they tend to work in a less holistic way. Many programmes rely on donations from and partnerships with Europe or the US, which are often easier to secure when a founding member already has established personal connections.

For NGUVU, as for many other grassroots initiatives, the growing uncertainty surrounding funding is limiting both the number of beneficiaries and the continuity of the support that can be provided. "The need is growing, but resources have tended to dwindle in recent years," says Firlej. As a result, the project has to make increasingly difficult decisions about who to support. "People in the community know what we do, and requests from families not yet in the programme have been endless since we decided to no longer focus only on football," he adds.

This highlights a key tension: while community organisations can be flexible and responsive, they cannot replace the scale and stability of public systems. Still, Firlej does not regret expanding the sports project to include support for basic needs: "It's clear that you also have to focus on the bigger picture – nobody can play football on an empty stomach."

LINK

nguvuedusport.org

ALBA NAKUWA
is a South Sudanese freelance journalist based in Nairobi, Kenya. She works part-time as a coach for the NGUVU girls' team.

albanakwa@gmail.com

GEN Z

“Hospitals before stadiums”: Morocco’s youth protests over football

Morocco is investing heavily in sports infrastructure: as one of the hosts of the 2030 FIFA World Cup and also for the Africa Cup of Nations earlier this year. At the same time, hospitals and schools continue to struggle with chronic shortages. The digitally connected youth movement “GenZ 212” is protesting against this imbalance, vocally questioning the country’s development priorities.

BY SALMA MANSOURI

What began as anonymous online discussions escalated in September 2025 into fierce political protests in several cities across the country. The “GenZ 212” movement, named after Morocco’s country code +212, is driven by fundamental social issues: inequality, public services and what “national progress” actually means for Morocco.

The young demonstrators are particularly frustrated by the gap between Morocco’s international ambitions and the often harsh realities of everyday social life. They are questioning the priorities according to which state funds are spent.

Their criticism focuses on investment in major football events: the Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON), hosted by Morocco between December 2025 and January 2026, and the 2030 FIFA World Cup, where Morocco will act as a co-host alongside Portugal and Spain. At the same time, Morocco’s education and healthcare systems are underfunded. There is a shortage of medical equipment and healthcare professionals. When eight women died following caesarean sections at a hospital in Agadir in September, a wave of anger erupted.

> “What message do massive investments in sports infrastructure send to young people, many of whom describe their future as increasingly uncertain?”

Photo: picture alliance / Hans Lucas / Issam Zerrok

GenZ 212 protests in front of the Moroccan parliament in Rabat in October 2025.

ORGANISED ON ONLINE PLATFORMS

Like many other Gen Z movements, GenZ 212 is loosely organised in the digital space. Hundreds of thousands of users soon gathered on the platform Discord. A new generation articulated their political and social demands there – and brought them to the public's attention. Slogans such as "hospitals before stadiums, health before sport" echoed through Morocco's streets.

The government, however, had already presented the AFCON 2025 in the run-up to the event as a success story: a symbol of Morocco's rising regional influence. According to the government, the competition generated the equivalent of 1.5 billion euros and tis already covers 80 % of the infrastructure costs for the 2030 World Cup.

HIGH YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT

But what message do massive investments in sports infrastructure send to young people, many of whom describe their future as increasingly uncertain? According to the Moroccan authority HCP (Haut Commissariat au Plan), 2.9 million Moroccans aged between 15 and 29 are neither in work nor in education or training. Youth unemployment varies regionally between 28 % and 40 %. This generation – frustrated and under severe economic pressure – saw the AFCON 2025 less as a cause for celebration than as an expression of a distorted reality.

"We are not troublemakers," says 22-year-old Achraf (name changed), an engineering student in Rabat. "We just wanted to ask for basic rights. We are not against foot-

“The Moroccan Association for Human Rights (AMDH) has documented numerous human rights violations in connection with the GenZ 212 protests.”

ball or big events, but not when women are still dying in hospitals, not when the health system is chaotic and not when education is deteriorating.”

Achraf cites the imbalance in society as the source of his frustration. “We only asked for dignity, for a Morocco where people are equal,” he says. “It is strange that in 2026 we are still asking for these things, while billions are being spent on international events.”

Achraf points out that many young people were arrested and sentenced in connection with the protests. “For what? For asking questions about our own country.” He also criticises the demolition of homes in Rabat and Casablanca in the run-up to the AFCON 2025 and the World Cup.

CRITICISM OF MOROCCO’S HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

From Casablanca, 25-year-old Asmae (name changed) describes a similar sense of disconnection between Morocco’s international ambitions and everyday reality. “What we are asking for is balance,” she says. “The same determination that builds stadiums should also build hospitals, schools and local infrastructure.”

For her, the issue is not only economic but also geographical. “Everything is concentrated in a few big cities,” she says. “If you need a medical procedure, you often have to go to Rabat or Casablanca. In emergencies, that is not always possible.”

For Asmae, GenZ 212 does not reject development or major national projects but is trying to redefine what belonging means. “We are asking for fairness, transparency and dignity,” she says. “Education, healthcare and opportunity should not be luxuries – they are rights.”

SHRINKING PUBLIC SPACE

For lawyer and human rights advocate Sara Soujar, the current wave of Gen Z protests is part of a long-term development in the struggle for public freedoms in Morocco – from the pro-democracy “February 20 Movement” during the Arab Spring of 2011, through protests in the Rif region in 2016-2017, to other regional mobilisations. Soujar argues that the underlying dynamics have remained largely unchanged. She views the Gen Z movement as a “natural continuation of Morocco’s history of protest.”

In Soujar’s view, years of officially announced reforms have not led to an expansion of public space. Instead, she describes a persistent pattern of restrictions on freedom of expression, organisation and peaceful assembly. “Both the public space and civil society space remain subject to various forms of restriction,” she criticises.

Soujar argues that the Gen Z protests fall within the scope of the constitutionally guaranteed freedoms of expression and assembly. “The debate should focus on ensuring respect for fundamental rights and restoring trust between the state and society,” she says.

THOUSANDS OF ARRESTS

The Moroccan Association for Human Rights (AMDH) has documented numerous human rights violations in connection with the GenZ 212 protests. According to the association, more than 2000 young people, including minors, were arrested – in some cases arbitrarily. Criminal proceedings have been initiated against more than 1400 individuals.

According to AMDH president and lawyer Souad Brahma, the documented violations include excessive repression, arbitrary arrests and restrictions on freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. She says testimonies collected by the association refer to serious psychological violence during detention. Journalistic coverage of the protests has also been restricted, according to the AMDH. Overall, the association criticises that the Moroccan authorities tend to prioritise containment and control when dealing with public dissent, rather than addressing the social demands.

“A PREDICTABLE EXPLOSION”

For economist Najib Akesbi, the wave of protests is the result of decades of accumulated imbalance, following per-

> “Young Moroccans still yearn not so much for sporting spectacle as for dignity, equality and a future worth living.”

sistent economic and social distortions, as he explained during a conference meeting last year. Seventy years after Morocco’s independence in 1956, per capita GDP stands at around $ 4000 – an insufficient level, according to Akesbi. Morocco currently ranks 120th out of 192 on the Human Development Index.

According to Akesbi, the current wave of protests is characterised by its generational consciousness and digital identity, with young people speaking as an entire generation with its own vision of the future, rather than as isolated social groups.

FAR-REACHING REFORMS ARE LACKING

“Each time, the same pattern repeats,” explains Akesbi, referring to protests in Morocco since the 1960s. “Social frustration builds, people protest, and the response returns to control rather than reform.”

According to Akesbi, at the heart of the matter lies a “crisis of trust”. Successive governments, he says, have repeatedly promised reform in education, healthcare and governance – without, however, delivering structural change. The system has not evolved significantly, he states.

Akesbi describes Morocco’s economic model as fragile. “We depend on things we do not control – rain, tourism, foreign investment,” he explains. “That is not sovereignty.” With regard to young people, Akesbi is particularly critical of the fact that the economy is not creating enough jobs. “So you have a generation that is educated but excluded,” he says.

THE 2030 WORLD CUP IS JUST AROUND THE CORNER

The protests of autumn 2025 showed where this lack of prospects can lead. Now that the AFCON 2025 is over, Morocco is preparing for the 2030 World Cup. For the Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis (MIPA), this is a “monumental financial undertaking and an equally significant opportunity for economic advancement”. It remains to be seen just how strong the upturn will actually be. The costs for Morocco are estimated at between $ 5 and 6 billion.

Whilst football infrastructure in Morocco continues to improve, the younger generation’s fundamental demands for improvements in education and healthcare remain unmet. Where will this development lead? One thing is certain: young Moroccans still yearn not so much for sporting spectacle as for dignity, equality and a future worth living.

This story was published in collaboration with Egab.

SALMA MANSOURI
is the pseudonym of a Moroccan journalist who wishes to remain anonymous for obvious reasons.

euz.editor@dandc.eu

FANDOM

From football rivalry to kinship

Kenya is home to numerous ethnic groups whose differences and rivalries have often fuelled conflicts. Drawing on many years of ethnographic research, cultural anthropologist Solomon Waliaula examines the sense of brotherhood between two neighbouring communities and the role that football plays in this. He found that fan culture in particular helps construct social identities and create urban cultures that blend indigenous cultural systems and popular culture.

BY SOLOMON WALIAULA

Photo: Kelly Ayodi

Matches between Gor Mahia (green jersey) and AFC Leopards remain a highlight of the Kenyan football season.

The Luo and the Luhya are two of Kenya's larger ethnic communities. Though both are originally rooted in neighbouring regions in western Kenya, they belong to different linguistic and cultural groupings: the Luo are Nilotic, while the Luhya are Bantu. Among other things, this means that their languages differ fundamentally. In earlier periods, relations between the communities associated with these larger groupings were sometimes marked by conflict. To this day, some of their members prefer to deal with people from groups within their own extended ethnic family, for example in social, political or professional contexts.

> "Yet rivalry served not only to divide; it also connected. Each side needed the other as an opponent."

Nowadays, both the Luo and the Luhya live in Nairobi and other urban areas. In the 1950s and early 1960s, many young people from western Kenya – most of them men – moved to Nairobi to look for work in the growing city. The colonial state restricted African political organisation, so many migrants formed welfare and community associations instead. These groups often reflected their shared language, region or origin. Football became one of the main public arenas in which such communities could organise themselves and gain visibility.

It was in this setting that the football clubs later associated with Gor Mahia FC (the Luo team) and AFC Leopards (the Luhya team) first emerged. On the Luo side, one club, Luo Union, quickly became the main focal point. On the Luhya side, the picture was more fragmented because the Luhya are not a single homogeneous group but a broader cluster of communities. Several clubs existed initially, including Marama FC, Bunyore FC and Samia United.

HOW ETHNIC BELONGING SHAPED KENYA'S FOOTBALL HISTORY

That difference mattered. When the first Kenyan National League was founded in 1963, seven of its 10 teams were based in Nairobi and were made up of members of the Luo and Luhya tribes. While the Luo largely rallied behind one club, the Luhya were spread across several smaller teams. Luhya leaders therefore pushed for a merger in order to create a stronger team that could compete more successfully. This led to the formation of Abaluhya United FC, later AFC Leopards. The club was meant to bring together different Luhya sub-groups within one shared sporting institution.

Despite being the main Luo club, however, Luo Union was not without internal tensions. Political rivalry between the two major Luo leaders of the time, Jaramogi Oginga Odinga and Tom Mboya, briefly spilled over into football and caused divisions. In time, these tensions were overcome and the club re-emerged as Gor Mahia. The name has deep cultural significance, as it derives from the nickname of a legendary medicine man from Luo mythology.

THE STADIUM AS A RITUAL SPACE

Both clubs went on to dominate Kenyan football and became famous across East Africa. They also came to symbolise larger communities. Matches between Gor Mahia and AFC Leopards transformed stadiums into ritual spaces. The deep-seated rivalry between the two teams played out against a backdrop of carnival-like, ritualistic fan culture characterised by singing, dancing and the proud display of ethnic identity through symbols and mythology. The fans integrated the global cultural phenomenon of football into the politics of ethnic identity in a relatively young, independent country that was also in the midst of state-building and a struggle for political power.

In the era of Kenya's second president Daniel Arap Moi (1978-2002), both clubs depended heavily on political patrons from their ethnic communities. Because football was not yet fully professional, players often needed jobs outside the game, and influential supporters helped them secure employment in the civil service, parastatals and private companies. Though such patronage served the clubs, it also benefited politicians, who gained visibility and support through association with popular teams.

> "The antagonism of earlier decades has softened."

Yet rivalry served not only to divide; it also connected. Each side needed the other as an opponent. Social identity was expressed as distinct from that of the rival team through fandom, as well as through songs, dancing, verbal sparring and provocative banter. This is where football assumed a socially unifying role. It provided a common stage on which differences could be expressed without necessarily breaking broader social rules.

Furthermore, Luo and Luhya met in the stadium not only as distinct ethnic groups but also as direct participants in the same ritual performance of identity. This sometimes sparked tension and provocation, but it also created certain bonds of familiarity.

> "Luo and Luhya met in the stadium not only as distinct ethnic groups but also as direct participants in the same public ritual performance of identity."

POLITICAL ALLIANCES AND GLOBAL SPORTS TV

Since the 1990s, their relationship has further developed in this direction. The return of multiparty politics opened new channels for ethnically shaped political mobilisation. At the same time, structural adjustment programmes reduced state employment and weakened the patronage networks on which many clubs had relied. Gor Mahia and AFC Leopards became more professional in formal terms, but they also became more financially unstable.

Two further developments around the turn of the millennium also reshaped fandom. One was the emergence of new political alliances that brought Luo and Luhya into closer cooperation. From the early 2000s, they rallied behind the same person: opposition leader Raila Odinga from western Kenya.

The other was the spread of global sports television, which broadened the horizons of Kenyan fans. Many young people began to support European clubs alongside local ones. As a result, football fandom became less narrowly tied to ethnicity and more open to multiple influences. This mirrors the fact that many younger fans have grown up in mixed-ethnicity urban and suburban areas and developed a broader understanding of ethnic identity.

"IN-LAWS"

All of this is visible in the relationship between the supporters of Gor Mahia and AFC Leopards today. The antagonism of earlier decades has softened. It is now common to see Gor Mahia fans dance to the signature Isukuti rhythms associated with AFC Leopards supporters, or to find supporters of one club standing in sections traditionally linked to the other.

One telling sign is the name the fans often use for one another nowadays: mashemeji, meaning "in-laws" in Kiswahili, one of Kenya's official languages. On the one hand, the word reflects the long actual history of intermarriage between the Luo and Luhya communities in western Kenya. On the other, it expresses a form of social solidarity that has emerged from decades of shared football culture and the more recent political circumstances.

Gor Mahia and AFC Leopards are about more than just famous football rivalry, in other words. They illustrate how sport can highlight social differences whilst simultaneously keeping them within a shared public framework. Football doesn't make ethnic identity disappear and can sometimes even reinforce it. Yet, by embedding differences within shared rituals, familiar roles and repeated encounters, it can also transform rivalry into solidarity. This is precisely why football can act as an integrative force: it creates emotional bonds and a broader sense of belonging that even rivals ultimately share.

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SOLOMON WALIAULA
is an associate professor of literature and cultural studies at Maasai Mara University, Kenya.
solomonwaliaula@gmail.com

The coaching staff of the Tanzanian men's national team at the Africa Cup of Nations qualifier.

Photo: Carolin Braun

INTERNATIONAL FOOTBALL

"The first thought is: We need a man for this"

The German sports scientist and football coach Carolin Braun was most likely the first woman ever to be on the coaching staff of a men's national team — in Botswana. Today she works for FIFA. We spoke with her about diversity in football, global imbalances in international tournaments, a rebooked return ticket and why it was in Botswana, of all places, that a woman was first able to join the men's national team.

CAROLIN BRAUN IN AN INTERVIEW WITH EVA-MARIA VERFÜRTH

Germany has been discussing the first female head coach in the men's Bundesliga for several weeks now. In Kenya, a woman has been coaching in the Kenyan Premier League for the first time for two years. Female coaches in men's football remain a genuine rarity. You were the first ever female assistant coach of a men's national team. What brought you to Botswana?

I was working at the Technical University of Munich when an exciting project in Botswana was advertised. I applied, but I didn't really think I'd get the job, as it was a men's football project. In the end, the Botswana Football Association (BFA) was given the opportunity to choose from three candidates, and the other two were men with strong qualifications. I assumed that would be that. But the BFA chose me. And I thought: if they're that open-minded, I'm even more interested. From 2019 to 2022, I was posted to Botswana through a joint project by the German Olympic Sports Confederation (DOSB), the German Football Association (DFB) and the Federal Foreign Office (AA).

But that wasn't about the national team at first?

No, not at all. My job was to support football development, scout and nurture talent, train and educate coaches, and I also supported women's football. Thanks to my experience and my UEFA A licence, which qualifies me to work in professional football, I became an instructor for CAF, the Confederation of African Football. I focused on training programmes for coaches who would otherwise have no opportunity to attend courses. I travelled extensively throughout the country, sometimes driving for up to 11 hours to reach some of the locations. It was during that period that the men's national team changed coaches. The new head coach, Adel Amrouche, approached me several times about joining his staff, but I always declined. I already had a role that was very important to me. Joining the national team was never my goal and, looking back, I'm not sure I ever actually said yes.

So how did it end up happening?

I was travelling abroad with the women's national team. When I was about to fly back, the team manager told me that my ticket had been rebooked: "You're now flying directly to the men's national team, who are currently holding a training camp in Egypt." He wouldn't let it go because he thought it was a good idea. I laughed, and then, of course, I was happy to join in. I ended up doing both jobs on many days: first I'd teach an eight-hour coaching course, and then I'd join the national team.

How did the players and the fans react?

The players might have looked a little surprised at first, but the coach made it clear from day one: Caro is the assistant coach, end of story. Then we were on the pitch and none of it mattered anymore. When you're focused on your work, everything else falls away. We prepared together for the Africa Cup of Nations and World Cup qualifiers. Fans had mixed reactions – some celebrated it while others found it strange. In any case, the media attention was enormous.

> "Even in Germany and other European countries, we're still a long way from having women coach men at the national team level – in fact, almost everywhere in the world."

What was your biggest footballing success during your time in Botswana?

Qualifying with the women's national team for the Africa Cup of Nations, for the first time ever. I was with the coaching staff as technical adviser, on the bench and at every training session.

Was there ever any question of you taking on a formal coaching role with the women's team?

I definitely wouldn't have wanted that. There was already an established coaching team in place, and someone – a Botswanan coach – would have had to step aside.

If you hadn't come in from outside, could a Botswanan woman have become assistant coach of the men's national team at that point?

With the men's team? No, absolutely not. But that doesn't just apply to Botswana. Even in Germany and other European countries, we're still a long way from having women coach men at the national team level – in fact, almost everywhere in the world. It just happened to work out in this particular case: the right time, the right place and a coach who wanted support.

You'd already worked as a coach educator in Gambia and Namibia before. Coming in as a European,

with all the colonial history that implies, must have rubbed some people up the wrong way. How did you handle that?
You need a lot of empathy and understanding of how to conduct yourself in each situation. I always made it clear that I was there to collaborate, not to set the direction. In meetings with officials, I would often say early on: "I know – I'm too young, I'm a woman, and I'm a foreigner." If I said it with a bit of humour, people would smile, the ice would break, and we could actually start talking.

Your most recent position was assistant coach of the men's national team in Tanzania under Adel Amrouche...
We qualified for the Africa Cup of Nations for only the third time in the country's history. That was a huge success. In early 2024, we played in Côte d'Ivoire against teams such as Morocco, with players like Bono – Yassine Bounou – and Achraf Hakimi.

Yet you didn't continue on that path but moved to FIFA instead. What do you do there?
I lead the Stream Expertise of the "Talent Development Scheme" – essentially talent development on a global level. I have a large team of experts who work with the associations around the world. We focus on elite development in both major footballing nations and countries that have not yet achieved much success at the international level. The last few World Cups have been dominated by European teams and a few top nations like Brazil and Argentina. Our goal is that at World Cups – at senior level, but also at U17 and U20 – there is truly a diversity of countries from all regions in the semi-finals and finals.

FIFA has a troubled reputation and calls to boycott men's World Cups are a fixture of the tournament cycle. What's it like working there?
These debates tend to overshadow the work of FIFA's sports sector. Our talent development programme involves 200 of FIFA's 211 member associations. Each association has a contact person who works with them on a long-term strategy, supports their scouting, focuses on ensuring quality and challenging match opportunities as well as the best training environments. Some projects also receive funding.

We also run "Knowledge Exchanges", where we bring together a group of associations from the same region so they can learn from each other. Recently in Mexico, for example, we had the USA, Honduras, Guatemala, Canada, Curaçao, Spain and others participating. It is interesting for smaller associations to see that others face similar problems, just on a different scale. FIFA, in turn, brings a wealth of expertise to the table. April Heinrichs, for instance, captained the US to its first-ever Women's World Cup victory and later won Olympic gold as a coach.

> "That assumption – that a man must be better, regardless of qualifications – is widespread in many places."

April Heinrichs is one of the more well-known names in women's football, but men still dominate the conversation. Why does promoting women in the sport matter?
Honestly, I find it disheartening that in 2026 we're still having this discussion. Football is for everyone, and that should be it. But we're not quite there yet, and so targeted support is still necessary. Take the Women's Bundesliga, for example: there simply aren't enough female head coaches. This has a real effect: girls either give up on becoming coaches or don't even start in the first place. You really have to want it to keep pushing through despite everything.

What was it like when you were a child?
There weren't any girls' clubs back then. I played with the boys and cut my hair short because all the boys had short hair. I was the only girl in my team, and none of the other teams had any girls either. There's more access now and more role models, but still not enough. Depending on where you are, there are still a lot of prejudices.

What was it like in Botswana?
The senior women's head coach there had been in the job for 10 years, while also working as an air conditioning installer. She barely earned anything from football – the equivalent of 10 dollars a day, and only when we were in training camp. During our time together, we had good players and qualified for the Africa Cup of Nations. That's when some people immediately started saying: We need a man now, someone with more experience. Even though she had dedicated herself for 10 years, at the moment success came, she was supposed to step aside. Yet the man being proposed didn't have a higher coaching

Photo: Carolin Braun

Training course in Mahalapye in eastern Botswana.

> “These girls deserve support. It takes so much energy to see this through.”

licence or a stronger track record either. That assumption – that a man must be better, regardless of qualifications – is widespread in many places.

What happened in the end?

The coach wasn’t replaced straight away but was later demoted. Nevertheless, she’s still there. A lot of women have remarkable staying power, even though the conditions are so difficult. I once travelled with the U17 girls’ team to a match in Eswatini. The bus driver had never been outside Botswana before and got terribly lost; we ended up in some really dangerous areas. The nine-hour journey turned into 24, with no food and a bus that was falling apart. This kind of thing simply wouldn’t have happened to the boys’ team. These girls deserve support. It takes so much energy to see this through.

CAROLIN BRAUN
leads the expertise of FIFA’s Talent Development Scheme. From 2019 to 2022, she worked for the Botswana Football Association and served, among other roles, as assistant coach to the men’s national team.
Instagram | Dr. Carolin Braun

FIFA

Does international football need to reinvent itself?

Virtually no other event brings the entire world together quite like the men's football World Cup. But the tournaments are hardly models of best practice: they contribute to human rights abuses, exacerbate climate impacts and increase political tensions. Huge sums of money are spent in ways that are completely non-transparent. What is wrong with the system of international football – and what could be done better?

BY ALINA SCHWERMER

Photo: picture alliance/ASSOCIATED PRESS/Evan Vucci

There is so much out there these days – since last year, there has even been a peace prize awarded by the football association. FIFA President Gianni Infantino and US President Donald Trump at the award ceremony.

One scene from December 2025 encapsulates all that's wrong with international football better than almost any other: FIFA President Gianni Infantino presenting US President Donald Trump with a peace prize created especially for him. "You can always count on my support and the support of the entire football community," purred Infantino. Even some FIFA officials later let slip that this made them feel ashamed.

The prize had been conjured up at short notice and involved neither clear-cut criteria nor a jury – but it flattered the US president. Shortly afterwards, the US threatened to annex Greenland, kidnapped Venezuelan President Maduro and launched a war of aggression against Iran. Officially, FIFA is politically neutral. However, in awarding the peace prize it really threw this neutrality overboard like never before.

International football has been losing credibility for a long time. Its World Cup events generate not only global euphoria but also vehement protests and frustration. "Football is for people, FIFA is for profit" is a slogan in the protest scene. But what form might international football "for people" take?

EVERY TOURNAMENT IS OVERSHADOWED BY DEBATES ABOUT BOYCOTTS

The challenges facing international football can be viewed in two ways: from either a geostrategic or a systemic perspective. In geostrategic terms, both national and international sports associations profited hugely from the relatively peaceful era following the Second World War. This stability is increasingly crumbling, however. The Uppsala Conflict Data Program recorded more armed conflicts in 2024 than at any time since the Second World War. Though the money-printing machine that is the men's World Cup is comparatively crisis-resistant, it is also feeling the impact of these growing international rifts: until shortly before the 2026 World Cup, for example, it wasn't clear whether the Iranian team would be granted visas to enter the US.

What is more, FIFA itself keeps manoeuvring itself into situations that trigger debates about human rights and integrity in international football. Trust in the organisation has been eroded by its decisions to award World Cup hosting rights first and foremost to influential states willing to invest large sums of money – recent examples being Russia, Qatar, the USA and Saudi Arabia – regardless of their human rights stance. The Human Rights Framework laid down for the 2026 World Cup is de facto not being implemented. Infantino took office in 2016 to reform and modernise FIFA following the 2015 corruption scandal. The accusations of corruption persist, however. Many national associations are financially dependent on FIFA, which almost inevitably leads to manipulation and corruption when it comes to elections and the awarding of World Cup hosting rights.

The skyrocketing costs of the tournaments have also sparked protests at the local level – most recently in Morocco and Mexico. Major infrastructure projects are in line with FIFA's rules, yet without considering the needs of local people. They consume scant resources in regions that can ill afford to spare them. And in this era of climate change, it's sheer madness in any case to keep staging ever more extravagant championships.

The actual business of organising the competitions can hardly progress at all these days amid the endless debates about boycotts: Should teams from Russia and Israel be allowed to take part? What should be done to prevent human rights from being violated in host countries like Qatar? What is the appropriate response if the US imposes visa restrictions? Wherever the tournaments are held, they face opposition. Football is staggering under its own gigantic weight.

> "Amateur clubs are the best example that motivation doesn't depend on money."

Almost all the national associations bury their heads in the sand and hope the storm will pass. So, the players bear the full brunt instead, as the German team experienced in Qatar. Since homosexuality is outlawed in Qatar, the German Football Association (DFB) wanted to make a stand after coming under considerable pressure from critical fans. However, when FIFA refused to permit the German captain to wear a rainbow armband or to allow the "OneLove" logo to appear on the armband (and the DFB failed to raise any serious objection), they decided that the team would instead make a gesture: during the team photo, the players held their hands in front of their mouths to indicate that they had been gagged. Not only did this earn them criticism and mockery from many sides; it seems there were conflicts within the team, too.

TOP-FLIGHT FOOTBALL IS RICH BECAUSE OTHERS ARE LEFT TO PAY THE BILL

The situation can also be examined in terms of the system itself, however – a perspective that has shifted somewhat out of focus in recent years. These days, nobody seems bothered any more by the fact that Cristiano Ronaldo became football's first billionaire or that the English Premier League spent £ 3 billion on transfers in the summer of 2025.

This highlights some fundamental flaws in the capitalist system. Private equity firms, dubious sovereign wealth funds, major oil and gas companies and individual billionaires are investing more and more in football. None of this money is neutral: some of it comes from investors in the oil and arms industries and leads to workers being exploited and climate change exacerbated. Top-flight football is rich because others are left to pay the bill.

This also has consequences for football: as club ownership becomes increasingly polarised, so too do the national leagues. The top-tier clubs thrash all the other teams ever more dramatically, at both national and international level. Meanwhile, continents like South America and Africa find themselves at the back of the global race. Supplying top players seems to be their foremost purpose – extractivism exemplified, just as in the rest of the world's markets.

The pyramid system of promotion and relegation also means clubs have to spend ever larger amounts of money just to remain at the same level. Once international tournaments reach the quarter-finals, the only teams left in the running tend to be the handful of usual suspects from Europe and a small number of South American countries. Though never exactly a poster boy for equal opportunities, football today conveys a new ideology: it's all about watching superstars running rings around their opponents.

Such ludicrous sums of money aren't even necessary: women's football, which these days is absolutely on a par with the men's game in athletic and professional terms, manages perfectly well with just a fraction of the money.

UTOPIAN VISIONS OF FOOTBALL

There were already attempts over a century ago to completely rethink football: in the 1920s, international workers' football was established in Europe. Conceived as an alternative to "middle-class" football, it even boasted its own European championships. Footballers in Germany were organised within the Workers' Gymnastics and Sports Federation (ATSB), which had socialist and communist leanings. Sport here revolved around solidarity and international understanding. Fair play was taken seriously, and ATSB-specific rules were established to protect players against injury. When the Nazis came to power, the movement was disbanded in Germany: only the more middle-class German Football Association (DFB) was allowed to continue to operate; today it is the world's largest sports association and the umbrella association for German football.

A more intelligent structure would also make sense today. Leagues offering different approaches to football could exist side by side: one could still be all about winning and losing, another would perhaps involve cooperative football and a third might see three teams on the pitch rather than just two. One thing is certain: association football in its current form by no means accommodates everyone with all their different needs.

The most important thing that needs to change, however, is the way football is financed. To endure, international football cannot continue to be based on growth and excessive wealth. Instead of simply watching the matches, society itself should have the chance – for example by taking part in councils – to actively negotiate the funds channelled into football. They could then decide how much funding is really necessary and at last foster all those things that don't interest investors at all: social engagement, sustainability, inclusion and novel ideas about how the game is played.

Amateur clubs are the best example that motivation doesn't depend on money. Perhaps football doesn't even need to involve remuneration. This would be an opportunity for the footballers themselves to embrace other spheres of activity at the same time, thereby broadening their horizons.

Football also urgently needs fixed climate budgets, with emission caps set for each individual player. After maxing out their "climate credit card" in any particular year, they would not be permitted to generate any further emissions.

IS A DIFFERENT TYPE OF FOOTBALL POSSIBLE IN PRACTICE?

Probably not within the confines of the existing world of Infantino, Trump and the billions spent on keeping the system up and running. Ultimately, the calls in many countries to boycott major tournaments like the World Cup are testimony to a lack of alternative options: if one has no say in how things are done, one can at least opt out of the whole business. They reflect a world that has been taught not to believe in utopia anymore.

However, another problem is that we see the key actors in international football as being the big clubs and officials. That's why a better version of international football isn't possible within these structures. What we can do is come up with an alternative vision – so let's do just that.

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Photo: Marcus Simaitis

ALINA SCHWERMER
is a freelance journalist and author, including for the German daily newspaper taz. She published Futopia, a book about utopian visions of football, in 2022.

alinaschwermer@taz.de