D+C

Liveable cities

Focus: Shaping the future of urban life _____ **Opinion:** What fuels right-wing populism and authoritarianism in South America _____ **Opinion:** Media in the Global North should rethink their reporting on the Global South _____ **Culture Special:** The D+C editorial team recommends books, music and a film _____

Opinion —— 5

Culture Special —— 12

Right-wing populist forces are on the rise in Latin America, for example in Chile.

Photo: picture alliance/REUTERS/Juan Gonzalez

Photo: Kanaval 2023

"Kanaval" – a film about arriving in a foreign country, p. 18.

29 ——— Focus ——— Liveable cities

Artwork: David Amen, original artwork enhanced with AI. Original publication: *rioonwatch.org/?p=63779*

Cover: Artwork by David Amen (see p. 4).

Almost half of the world's population lives in cities. Urban life must improve, especially in view of the advancing climate crisis. The dangers posed by extreme weather events are just as pressing a problem as traffic congestion, air pollution, crime, mountains of waste, and a lack of recreational spaces. However, innovative solutions are emerging every day around the world – waiting to be found and promoted. All city dwellers must be involved in this process, from the center to the outskirts.

ARTIST
David Amen

David Amen was born and raised in Complexo do Alemão, in the North Zone of Rio de Janeiro. He is co-founder of the Roots in Movement Institute (Raízes em Movimento), a community-based organisation where he works as coordinator and producer of the group's Communications and Culture initiatives. He holds a degree in journalism, is a graffiti artist, video maker and works with art and media education in the training of young people alongside social organisations in public spaces and facilities of the favela.

David understands the favelas of Complexo do Alemão as laden with powerful potential and works to unmask false perceptions and guarantee full rights to residents, a hardworking and creative people. Two of his artworks are featured on the cover page and at the beginning of the focus section of this issue. They were produced in collaboration with RioOnWatch, a bilingual (Portuguese and English) news platform from Rio de Janeiro's favelas, for their doubly award-winning series "Rooting Anti-Racism in the Favelas."

Photo: Thais Alvarenga

Learn more at antiracism.rioonwatch.org and raizesemmovimento.org.br

The good news

Finally, international cooperation has scored another victory: negotiations on the UN High Seas Treaty lasted 20 years. After 59 of the 60 countries required had long since signed up, ratification by Morocco and Sierra Leone in September finally enabled the treaty to come into force.

The treaty governs the protection of the high seas, which lie beyond national exclusive economic zones and account for around two thirds of the world's oceans.
It enables the parties to designate marine protected areas on the high seas, where harmful activities such as fishing, resource extraction or shipping can be restricted. Although the treaty is legally binding only for its parties, it establishes globally recognised standards for the protection of the high seas for the first time and generates political, economic and normative pressure, including on states that remain outside the agreement.
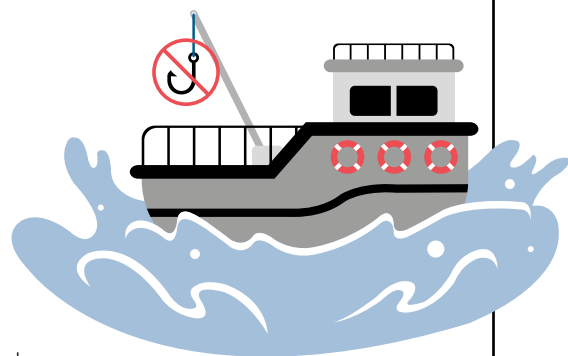
"
We need to move beyond simply talking about FGM
"

The most-read article on our website last year was an interview with a woman whose strength inspires many: Shamsa Araweelo survived female genital mutilation and now uses her experiences to raise awareness of the issue worldwide, train professionals and support other survivors. The Somali woman reaches more than 100 million people on social media.

SOUTH AMERICA

A growing appeal for authoritarian rule

In many South American countries, calls for strongman rule are growing louder. Yet law-and-order policies do not tackle inequality or weak governance. They undermine institutions and make external interference more likely. Is the region opening the door to more foreign influence?

BY PEDRO ALARCÓN AND FABIO ANDRÉS DÍAZ PABÓN

Photo: picture alliance/REUTERS/Juan Gonzalez

A supporter of Chile's far-right president José Antonio Kast holds up a photograph of former dictator Augusto Pinochet Ugarte when celebrating the election win.

South America stands between two electoral super-cycles, and one trend is already emerging: The results of recent national elections in Bolivia, Chile and Argentina point to a resurgence of populism and a shift to the right. Peru, Colombia and Brazil will hold elections in 2026 and may deliver similar outcomes. Several South American countries could be on the verge of an authoritarian turn.

Why is this happening? The example of Peru illustrates the underlying dynamics at work. It shows how enduring inequalities, the deterioration of state institutions and the militarisation of politics fuel support for right-wing populism and authoritarian solutions. Peru has experienced mass protests and political agitation in recent months and will head to the polls in April.

> "The deterioration of state institutions and the militarisation of politics fuel support for right-wing populism and authoritarian solutions."

INEQUALITY LEADS TO INSTABILITY

Peru is a cautionary tale of how economic boom does not equal political progress. The country has had two decades of above-average growth and was invited to apply for membership in the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 2022. The Peruvian Sol was among South America's strongest currencies in 2025, and the country is among the largest recipients of foreign direct investment (FDI) in Latin America.

Yet political instability remains severe. The country has had seven presidents in the last nine years. Peruvian sociologist Julio Cotler has pointed out that local elites have historically benefited from natural resource exports while keeping the gains for themselves. This dynamic has weakened state institutions and reinforced inequalities.

Peru's crisis reflects a failure of political representation. Parliament is dominated by elites defending short-term, vested interests. Lawmakers have granted tax privileges to cor-porations and not regulated mining activities sufficiently, thereby enabling deforestation in the Amazon, instead of combating crime or strengthening state institutions.

Political parties are therefore increasingly seen as drivers of insecurity, corruption and impunity rather than as providers of social protection. This has fuelled widespread discontent and sparked protests, particularly among Gen Z.

PUBLIC PROTESTS USED TO JUSTIFY THE USE OF FORCE

Amid growing public outrage, former president Dina Boluarte was forced to leave office in 2025, and José Jerí took over as interim president. Boluarte's administration had failed to curb insecurity and impunity, while she faced persistent accusations of corruption. Between January and September, it is estimated that around 50 bus drivers were murdered by extortioners and armed gangs, and transport strikes repeatedly paralysed Lima. Boluarte was also never held accountable for the use of excessive force and the deaths of protesters during her rise to the presidency in 2022.

The crisis escalated in October 2025. During mass protests against Jerí's inauguration, a rapper and street artist named Trvko was shot dead by a police officer, which sparked even more outrage. Jerí responded by declaring a state of emergency and deploying soldiers to patrol the streets to fight insecurity – despite evidence from neighbouring Ecuador that such tactics do not have the desired effects. Two years ago, Ecuador's president announced that the country was in "internal armed conflict" and declared a state of emergency. However, the measure failed to reduce murder rates, while human-rights violations by security forces increased.

Security now dominates the political agenda. In the run-up to the 2026 election, some presidential candidates are promising "mega-jails" and even discussing the transfer of prisoners to El Salvador. Proposals include drone surveillance and expanded powers for the armed forces.

Keiko Fujimori of populist right-wing "Fuerza Popular" openly promotes "mano dura" (iron fist) policies. This rhetoric is not unique to Peru. Calls for hardline security measures are gaining traction in Colombia and beyond.

FROM POLITICAL CRISIS TO AUTHORITARIAN REVIVAL

Peru is an example of a broader regional shift: from democratic dysfunction to authoritarian revival. Across the Andes, discontent with politics is fuelling the support for harsh measures and nostalgia for dictatorship. In Chile, supporters of recently elected José Antonio Kast have openly celebrated Augusto Pinochet's legacy in public chants.

Yet while violence is real, security without legitimacy is ephemeral. The authoritarian turn with its calls for stronger security measures does not address the root causes of violence: inequality, institutional weakness and exclusion. Instead, it fosters a dangerous alliance between political and military elites, enabling the violent suppression of dissent in the name of order and security. Militarisation is already intensifying in Peru, Ecuador and Colombia.

As leaders across South America weaken "bloated" state institutions and increase the use of force in the name of security, they create a self-fulfilling prophecy. States become more fragile, and as studies have shown, this makes external interference more likely. If current trends continue, the Andes may see the return of a political order in which domestic and foreign elites rule through force, while demands for justice are met with repression.

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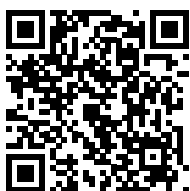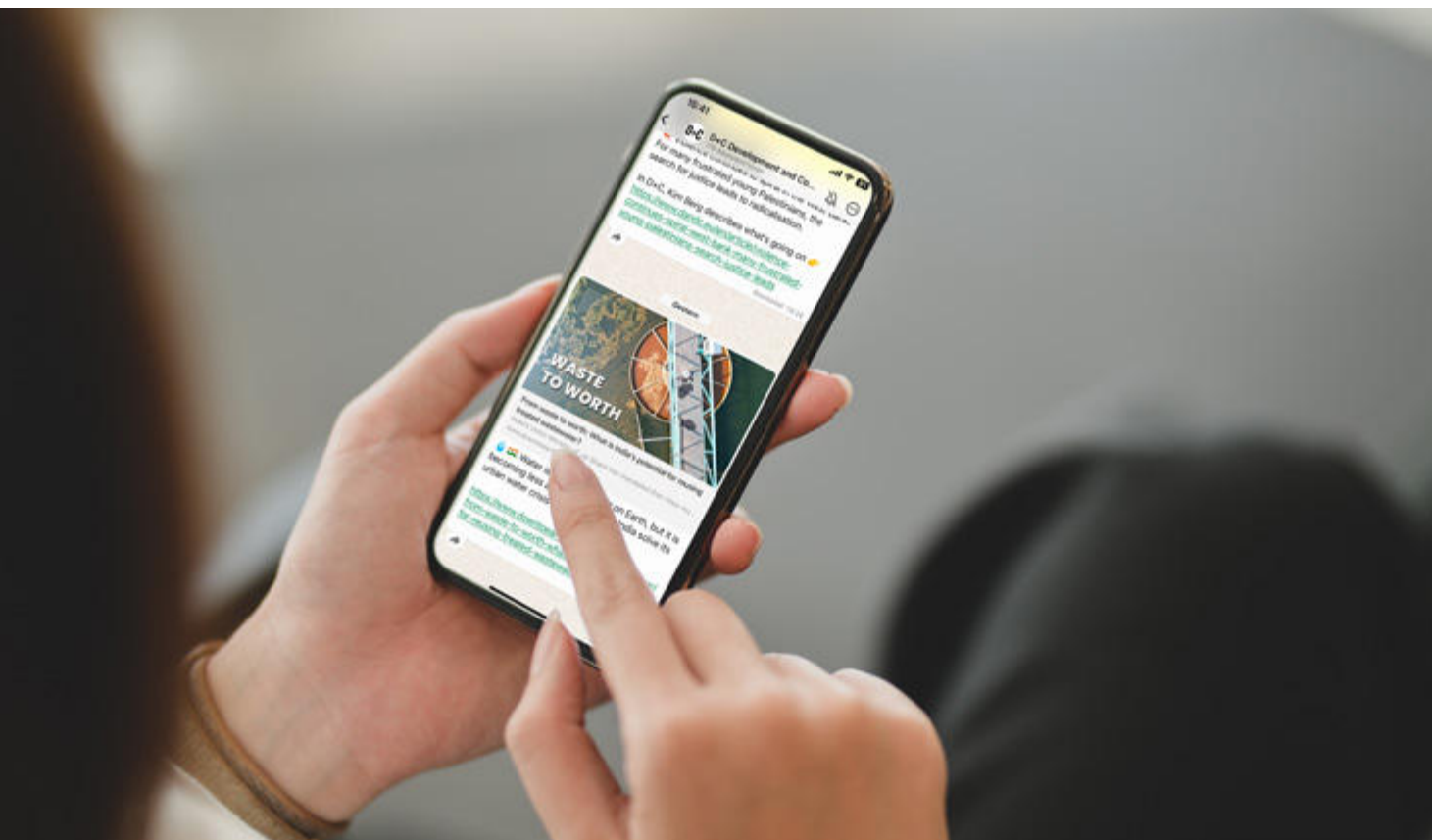
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MEDIA

Prioritising royals over hunger

The 21st century's deadliest war to date began around five years ago in northern Ethiopia. Many in the West have been all but unaware of it — because the Global South hardly figures at all in leading media reports. A broad alliance of organisations and individuals from Germany, Austria and Switzerland is now demanding that more attention be focused on the global reality. After all, what happens in the part of the world where 85 % of humanity lives also has consequences in the West — politically, economically and socially.

BY LADISLAUS LUDESCHER

Many leading media devote only around 10 % of their articles and airtime to the Global South, even though it is home to around 85 % of the world's population. This was the finding of numerous (long-term) studies that investigated, among other things, over 50,000 reports of the "Tagesschau", the German-language news programme with the greatest reach. An analysis of roughly 40 other high-reach media in German-speaking countries (Germany, Austria and Switzerland) confirms the results. In most print media, only around five percent of the pages are devoted to countries in the Global South.

DRAMATIC EXAMPLES OF MEDIA NEGLECT

Reporting on the Global South tends for the most part to neglect or indeed completely ignore key events in these countries. As a result, they are practically absent from the collective consciousness and memory in the Global North. This is particularly true of events in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

EXAMPLES INCLUDE:

- the 2011 famine that killed more than a quarter of a million people, half of them children under the age of five, in the Horn of Africa;

- the war in Yemen that the UN described for years as the "world's worst humanitarian crisis";

- the war in the northern Ethiopian region of Tigray, which resulted in around 600,000 deaths and is considered the 21st century's deadliest war;

- the war in Sudan, resulting in what the UN World Food Programme has called the "world's worst hunger crisis", with roughly 25 million people facing acute hunger.

EXEMPLARY FORMATS HAVE ONLY A FRACTION OF THE REACH

Germany's "Tagesschau" programme devoted more air-time to sport in the first half of 2022 than to all the countries of the Global South put together. That same year, the "ZIB 1" news broadcast in Austria reported more extensively on the British royal family than on global hunger, while the slap Will Smith gave to fellow actor Chris Rock at the Academy Awards received more coverage on the Swiss "Tagesschau" than the wars in Yemen and Ethiopia combined.

In Germany, the "ARTE Journal" TV news programme and "taz" newspaper are prime examples of media that have adopted a different approach to reporting. Both formats dedicate around three times more airtime and column inches respectively to the Global South than comparable media. Reporting in both is characterised by a wider geographical perspective and places sufficient empha-sis on the Global South to ensure that it's not reduced solely to negative narratives such as crises, wars, disasters, disease and corruption. Instead, both media report also on positive stories that showcase the multidimensional nature of African, Asian and Latin American countries. That said, "ARTE Journal" can boast only a fraction of the viewing figures achieved by major news programmes such as "Tagesschau".

MEDIA INFLUENCE AND RESPONSIBILITY

Greater awareness can be generated only if more airtime and articles focus on the Global South. Information programmes such as news broadcasts, in-depth reports and political discussions play an important role in forming public and private opinion. They not only report on and reflect publicly debated issues – they also help determine which issues take centre stage and thus influence to a major extent which problems are addressed politically and for which solutions may then be found.

GLOBAL NORTH

about 15 % of world population
about 90 % of reports

GLOBAL SOUTH

about 85 % of world population
about 10 % of reports
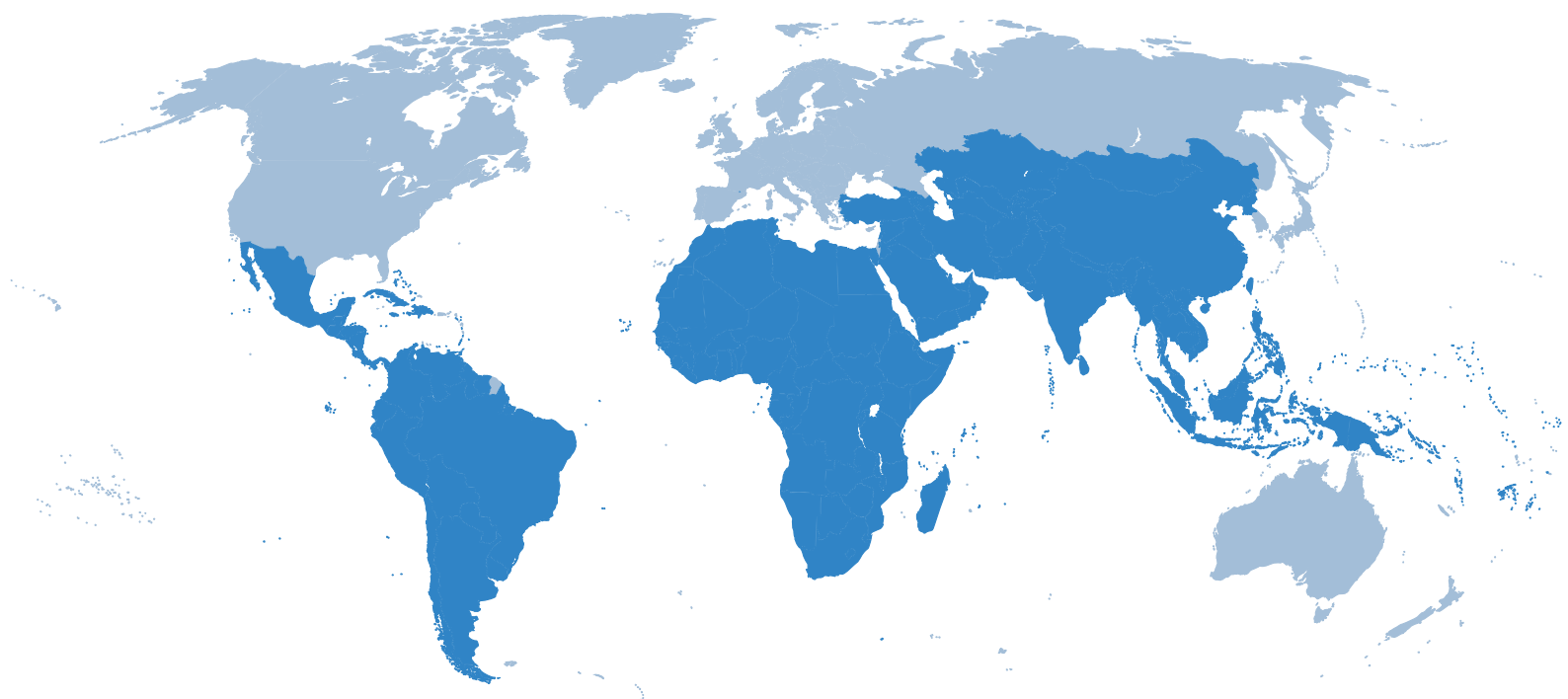
"Tagesschau", the German-language news programme with the greatest reach, devoted more airtime to sport in the first half of 2022 than to all the countries of the Global South put together.

As international funding for development cooperation and to combat hunger is slashed (while hugely stepping up defence spending at the same time), it is paramount to engage in intensive public discussion about these developments – from both humanitarian and geopolitical perspectives. Media could provide a platform for such broad social debate, possibly leading to far-reaching political decisions. This makes it all the more vital for the media to judge events not solely on the basis of their geographic location but also according to human and geopolitically relevant dimensions.

Sociopolitical interest and empathy should not stop at national borders. However, comprehensive and above all consistent reporting is necessary to generate interest in a particular topic. After all, people will only be interested in an issue if they have engaged with it in some form or another beforehand.

The countries of the Global South are characterised by far-reaching developments with great transformative po-

"The people of the Global North cannot afford to remain ignorant of the events and developments taking place in countries that are home to 85 % of the world's population."

tential and will play an even more important role in the world in future – not only in demographic but also in political and economic terms. The people of the Global North cannot afford to remain ignorant of the events and developments taking place in countries that are home to 85 % of the world's population.

"Sociopolitical interest and empathy should not stop at national borders."

Against this backdrop, 1369 individuals and 163 organisations have signed the author's appeal for more media attention to be devoted to the Global South. D+C is also among the signatories. Click here to see the position paper and complete lists of supporters. It is still possible to sign the appeal.

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Culture
Special

Every once in a while, we present books, music, and films that have touched us and that we would like to recommend. The oeuvres are tackling issues of developmental relevance, and we would be pleased if our recommendations inspired you to read, watch or listen to them.

The D+C editorial team

Scene from the music video for "Maandamano" by Bien and Breeder LW.

MUSIC

Dancing under tear gas

For the second year in a row, thousands of young people took to the streets in Kenya in mid-2025 to protest the government and especially the high cost of living. The so-called Gen Z protest movement is also driven by music — there are countless videos that show dancing demonstrators confronting armed police. The soundtrack to both waves of protest has already achieved cult status.

BY KATHARINA WILHELM OTIENO

A letter has come from Jomo Kenyatta and Jaramogi Odinga, who, among others, are considered the founding fathers of independent Kenya. They asked if everything was okay here. "I replied: Kenya is a disaster," sings Bien-Aimé Baraza in the opening lines of the song "Tujiangalie" (which means, approximately, "Let's take a look at ourselves"). The artist who goes by the name Bien is one-fourth of Sauti Sol, arguably Kenya's best-known band. The Afropop group wrote "Tujiangalie" with the rapper Nyashinski back in 2019, but the song could hardly be more fitting for the situation in their country half a decade later.

In what is probably their most political song, Sauti Sol sing about debts owed to China, which are being used to build streets and railroads, and about corruption, poverty and tribalism. They sum up: "We're worse off today than we were yesterday" and "Vision 2030 will probably remain just a story". It's no wonder that "Tujiangalie", even though it strikes a quiet, almost resigned tone, quickly became one of the unofficial anthems of the protests. The band members have shown solidarity with the movement without exception; lead singer Bien even participated in a concert that was organised as part of the demonstrations in 2024 to honour the young people who had been killed in the protests.

"ANGUKA NAYO"

Some songs on Kenya's unofficial protest soundtrack, which encompasses almost all genres and generations, express anger and sorrow; others are decades-old patriotic anthems. Others still capture the youthful spirit of the movement, which – particularly in the beginning – often turned demonstrations into a party. "Anguka Nayo" by the duo Wadagliz Ke is actually a simple party track, but it was reinterpreted by the Gen Z movement. The song's title, which loosely translates to "fall down with it", became a battle cry and expressed the hope that repealing the 2024 tax bill that ignited the protests would also topple the entire government.

youtube.com/watch?v=vQ2L4qcOXVI

"REJECT HIO BILL"

Some songs that were specifically written for or about the protest movement also address finance and legislation. In 2024, Sabi Wu sampled a beat from Kendrick Lamar's diss track "Not Like Us" to write "Reject Hio Bill" ("reject this bill"). Wu told the music magazine Rolling Stone that he improvised the chorus and first verse in less than fifteen minutes. He then uploaded his freestyled version to social media with no intention other than simply sharing his thoughts. It resonated so strongly that Wu decided to finish the song and release it. The rap song's video is also close to the action – it was largely recorded during the demonstrations and is occasionally interrupted when Sabi Wu and the person filming him have to run from the police.

youtube.com/watch?v=cKWEW3pEcMA

"COLONIAL POLICE"

Police violence is addressed in another song that for a long time would constantly pop up in WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram Stories as well as TikTok Shares. It will surely not be remembered for its musical virtuosity or lyrical quality, but it has already become a document of its time not only because of its topic, but also because of how it was made. The song and video were created by "Mr Guy Kenya" using artificial intelligence. The chorus asks: "Are you a police service or a colonial force?" Only one line from the first verse has already aged badly: "In the US, officers took a stand / refused to oppress their own land".

youtube.com/watch?v=ba_YvNWH3_M

"MAANDAMANO"

Sauti Sol lead singer Bien now performs primarily as a solo artist and did not miss the opportunity to contribute his own song to the protest soundtrack, together with Breeder LW. "Maandamano" simply means "protest". The song is a sweeping survey of all the slogans and themes that shaped the protests: "60 years of independence, we were told it was self-rule / Billions and billions were stolen by the same crooks / 'We're paying off our debts' – that's just their excuse / This is generation Z, we can't make the same moves / #OccupyParliament let's go protest / #Tribeless #Partyless – that's what we stand for".

The accompanying video is also composed of protest scenes and social media clips that went viral: in one, protest icon Shakira Wafula holds a Kenyan flag as she screams at a police officer; in another, a protester inhales tear gas from a canister and calls to the police that they should bring him strawberry flavour next time.

But in most clips, the protesters are dancing, sometimes right in front of heavily armed security forces. The end of the video reveals, however, that the party has taken a dramatic turn: the person filming has to hide from gunfire behind a row of concrete pipes. The last few seconds are dedicated to the names of people who died in the protests. There are many.

youtube.com/watch?v=PW2TEmeSWOM

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BOOKS

Moving forward without losing sight of one's roots

Aya Cissoko, the daughter of Malian parents, was born and grew up in Paris. In her books, which are well worth reading, she taps into her own family's history to explore issues such as identity, migration and women's rights – and explains how as a young woman she had to literally fight to survive.

BY DAGMAR WOLF

Photo: picture alliance/SZ Photo/Robert Kluba

Aya Cissoko attends the first meeting of the Parliament of Francophone Women Writers in Orleans in 2018.

Aya Cissoko was crowned World Amateur Champion in French boxing in 1999 and 2003, as well as in English boxing in 2006 before a serious cervical spine injury forces her to abandon her career in boxing. Displaying steely determination and enormous perseverance, she gets back on her feet, studies political science and has since published several books with an autobiographical flavour.

She is born in Paris in 1978; her parents are from a village in Mali. In her first book "danbé", co-authored with youth fiction writer Marie Desplechin and published in 2011, she describes her family's history, her childhood and adolescence in the banlieues of Paris, and how she gets into boxing. "Danbé", meaning "dignity", is a word from the language of the Malinké ethnic group in West Africa.

Her uncle's decision in the 1960s to leave Mali in search of better earning opportunities in France plays a crucial role in determining Aya Cissoko's life path. It's a time when France is sourcing the labour it so desperately needs from its former colonies – including from the Kayes region in Mali, where the earth at the time is too dry to feed everyone, as the author writes.

When her uncle returns to Mali in the early 1970s, Aya Cissoko's father assumes his identity, wishing in turn to try his luck in France and follow in his brother's footsteps there. Among the places he works, under his brother's name, is Renault, where nobody really seems to care that a different person with the same name has returned to the factory. The company appears more interested in the worker than in the human being, which according to Aya Cissoko is true both of French employers and large Malian families.

VICTIMS OF ARSON

Aya Cissoko's father settles in France and marries a 15-year-old illiterate girl from his home village who follows him to Paris. Although the Cissoko family is poor, the author portrays a sheltered childhood full of gentle kindness in the banlieue Les Amandiers. This changes abruptly during the night of 27 to 28 November 1986, when the family is roused from their sleep by a fire in the building. Aya loses her father and her sister in the arson attack – one of several in Paris targeting buildings in which migrant families live. In all, 24 people die that night. The arsonists are never caught. As Aya Cissoko writes, the family was the victim of a crime that went unpunished. She is convinced that the building was set on fire with a deliberate intention to kill.

Her mother Massiré takes a conscious decision to resist the pressure from her extended Malian family, who are urging her to return to Mali. She wants to give her remaining three children the chance to achieve success in the country where they were born and go to school – in France. However, the traditional rules observed by the extended family do not permit a Malian woman to raise her children on her own. Massiré is abandoned by the Malian community in Paris. The small family is left to fend for itself, with illiterate Massiré becoming its head.

MOVING TO THE GHETTO

Along with her mother and siblings, Aya Cissoko is housed in a council flat in the notorious Cité du 140 Rue de Ménilmontant – a neighbourhood that very much has its own rules. There has been a lot of death here, writes Aya Cissoko – by overdose, suicide or murder. She talks of the 140 being her mental prison, rebels against her strict mother and feels desperate and lonely.

Out of sheer misery, Aya Cissoko takes up boxing. The sport teaches her to respect her own body, though also to respect others. It helps her channel her rage. More and more, she comes to find refuge in boxing.

Her relationship with her mother is fraught, however. While she herself sees things through the eyes of a young Frenchwoman, Massiré views them from the perspective of a Malian woman. As far as Aya Cissoko is concerned, her mother is oppressed and exploited by their Malian relatives, who are once again seeking increasingly to impose their rules on the small family. Aya Cissoko writes that her mother has retained her identity as a Malian woman.

Aya Cissoko's novel "n'ba" (meaning "my mother") is published in 2016. A tribute to her mother, who died in 2014, it is a tale of immigration and the female search for identity between cultures. It can teach us a great deal about how West African women in France cope with their everyday lives and integrate into society without losing sight of their roots.

Aya Cissoko details how Massiré rebels against traditional expectations following the death of her husband and refuses to accept the oppression of women. She sees her mother as having advanced Malian culture without breaking with it; Cissoko stresses that it is possible for a woman to be French and Malian at the same time.

KNOWING YOUR OWN STORY

In 2022, Aya Cissoko's book "Au nom de tous le tiens" (meaning "on behalf of all yours") appears. In it, she engages with her African-French identity. The book is also a kind of legacy to her daughter. Without your story you are like an empty shell, she writes, explaining how her daughter embodies a number of different stories: the story of her

Malian forebears, but also the story of the Holocaust, from which the ancestors of her father, an Ashkenazi Jew from Ukraine, had to flee.

In her books, Aya Cissoko repeatedly holds a mirror up to France, a country of immigration and the place of her birth. As a boxer she competed for France and was proud to achieve victory for the red, white and blue flag. At the same time, she always felt that she was not allowed to belong entirely to her own country. All of France's structural racism is concentrated in the story of her family, she writes, criticising institutions and those who represent them: cheap workers who were once useful for rebuilding the country after the war are now perceived as a burden.

If one reads all three of Aya Cissoko's books, some stories repeat themselves, though often from a somewhat different perspective. This does not detract from the reading experience, however – on the contrary, all three works are to be recommended: every page opens up new opportunities to delve more deeply into the fascinating stories of this cultural border crosser.

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FILM

Cissoko, A., Desplechin, M., 2011:

Danbé.
Éditions Calmann-Lévy.

(French version. Bourlem Guerdjou adapted the book for the screen under the title "Danbé, la tête haute"; trailer with English subtitles, youtube.com/watch?v=3PA12Layu84.)

BOOKS

Cissoko, A., 2016:
n'ba. Ma mère. Editions Calmann-Lévy.

(French version; also published in German in 2017 under the title "Ma".)

Cissoko, A., 2023:
Au nom de tous les tiens. Montrouge, Éditon du Seuil.

(French version; also published in German in 2023 under the title "Kein Kind von nichts und niemand".)

Haitian-born Rayan Dieudonné performs the role of 9-year-old Rico.

FILM

A child's experience of exile

"Kanaval" is a powerful film about migration, being foreign and the search for a new beginning, told from a child's perspective. Its emotional impact is deepened by the life story of its young lead.

BY EVA-MARIA VERFÜRTH

Haiti 1975. It's Carnival. Despite his mother's prohibition, 9-year-old Rico slips out his front door on his own and wanders through his small port town. Caribbean rhythms, fantastical costumes, laughter and dancing fill the streets, and Rico's imagination weaves everything into a mystical cosmos. "It's too dangerous," his mother had warned him. "We don't know who is whom tonight." The Car-

nival festivities temporarily suspend reality; they hide social hierarchies and affiliations. But it's just an illusion.

For Rico, this surreal ramble will be the last he takes in his hometown. When he returns home, he sees his mother Erzulie being beaten by the henchmen of dictator Jean-Claude Duvalier. That same night, the pair flee in the di-

Photo: Kanaval 2023

Rico with his mother Erzulie, performed by Penande Estime.

rection of the USA and Canada. Haitian opposition members help them until they find accommodation with a Canadian couple living in the countryside.

The contrast to their homeland can hardly be bigger. Trudging through deep snow, they arrive in a small village that has its own social structures and conventions. While Erzulie struggles with her trauma, which leaves her scarcely able to care for her son, Albert and Cécile tend to him with affection and patience. Albert takes Rico hunting and on snowmobile rides. But whether in the village or at school, Rico is constantly confronted with racism and bullying.

The villagers also direct their snide remarks and taunts at the couple who took him in. With their compassionate natures, Albert and Cécile don't quite fit into the entrenched village community either. We get the feeling that belonging and home have to do not only with the place where we live and grow up, but also with the people who surround us. Albert and Rico form an unusual, unequal, yet special friendship that helps them confront their situation with a shared longing for life's beautiful moments.

OVERCOMING MISFORTUNE

The film's emotional power is conveyed through the atmosphere it creates. Moving music and magical imagery give expression to Rico's inner world. To cope with displacement and trauma, he conjures an imaginary friend, a small boy drawn from Haitian folklore, who helps him through difficult moments and stays with him until fate begins to brighten. Luxembourgish co-producer Neigeme Glasgow-Maeda, originally from Trinidad and Tobago, observes: "Even after experiencing something terrible, people can still find happiness again."

The portrayal of young Rico, through whose perspective the story unfolds, also stands out. Actor Rayan Dieudonné delivers an expressive and authentic performance. Such convincing child actors are rare in international cinema, which makes his casting all the more remarkable. "We found him in a community centre in Québec while he was still a refugee," Glasgow-Maeda explains. The ten-year-old had no prior acting experience, but he brought essential life experience to the role. Like his character, Dieudonné is from Haiti. Together with his family, Glasgow-Maeda recounts, he fled to Venezuela, crossed the continent northwards and finally walked the perilous Roxham Route from the United States to Canada. By the time he arrived, the ten-year-old spoke Haitian Creole, French, English and Spanish. "In many ways," Glasgow-Maeda notes, "he was telling his own story."

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FILM

Kanaval, 2023

Canada, Luxembourg, Haiti, 1 h 52 min.
Director: Henri Pardo.
filmfund.lu/en/catalogue/film/kanaval/

Protests to mark International Women's Day in Santiago de Chile in 2025.

NOVEL

One of many marginalised workers speaks out

In her novel "Clean", Chilean writer Alia Trabucco Zerán gives a maid named Estela a voice. In telling her story, she reveals insights into the reality faced by those who keep daily life running like clockwork for their employers, while they themselves are typically marginalised.

BY JÖRG DÖBEREINER

Estela García is 40 years old and has her own view of the world: of the people, plants and animals around her in present-day Santiago de Chile; of her mother, who lives far away in the countryside; of the well-to-do family of three in whose house she has been working as a maid for years, taking care of the cleaning, washing, cooking, sewing and ironing. Estela has a story to tell, yet for the most part she remains silent, invisible and lonely on the inside – trapped always in her role as a recipient of instructions.

It's not that she's treated unlawfully by the family – he's a doctor, his wife works in a timber company, and their school-age daughter is ambitious. Yet by constantly making her feel inferior, they systematically deny her any real substance or significance: though their daughter's first word is "Nana" – a reference to Estela's role as a nanny – her mother reports to her husband that she said "Mama". When Estela dares to try on a dress belonging to her mistress, she is immediately asked to wash it. If the child uses a grammatically incorrect expression, the maid is blamed and told off. There are also racist elements to this marginalisation: when her mother is putting on her make-up, the girl wants to know why she doesn't lend her cosmetics to Estela – to make her darker skin appear "clean and white".

Estela breaks her silence only when she's arrested, giving an account of the family's home life during an interrogation. She reports to an audience of supposed listeners beyond the walls of her cell, telling them repeatedly to listen carefully and take note of the most important details. It's also as if she is addressing the reader, a literary device that lends the tale huge immediacy and urgency.

One fact that is disclosed right at the beginning of the novel and repeatedly serves as a reference point also warrants a mention here: the girl dies – in circumstances that the book leaves unclear for a long time. The desire to find out how this could have happened accounts for a good part of the novel's tension, especially as Alia Trabucco Zerán keeps giving away seemingly incidental clues. What role might perhaps be played by rat poison and a revolver?

CONSEQUENCES OF SOCIAL INEQUALITY

However, the whole issue of social inequality that the book raises is more important than the matter of "whodunit". Estela represents an entire army of maids who toil to ensure that daily life proceeds as smoothly as possible for their privileged employers in Latin America and elsewhere. On the family's television, workers complain about the tough economic situation in the country. Estela is one of them, but she also wants to be acknowledged as a human being.

Alia Trabucco Zerán uses precise language to expose the hardships of the protagonist's everyday life. Doing the shopping for those better off than herself, sorting through their dirty laundry, cleaning the toilet, day in, day out, while she herself has to make do with a small room with a sliding door: Estela is at risk of losing her sense of her own identity and indeed of reality itself, while the lives of the family she works for spiral headlong towards disaster.

Superficially, the book consists solely of Estela's lengthy monologue in her interrogation cell. However, what is intended as a plea for her innocence ultimately becomes an accusation itself: Estela raises her voice to protest against inhumanity, injustice and being overlooked.

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NOVEL

Trabucco Zerán, A., 2024:

Clean. Fourth Estate. Translated by Sophie Hughes. The original was published in 2022 under the name "Limpia".

A film adaption entitled "Swim to Me" was released in 2025.

NOVEL

How brave women fight back against oppression

In his award-winning debut novel, Itamar Vieira Junior illuminates the lives of Afro-Brazilian farm labourers in the 20th century. At the heart of this family story are strong women characters who stand up to patriarchal violence and injustice.

BY SINIKKA SORIYA DOMBROWSKI

Dry earth, mud huts, barefoot children – life on the fictional estate Água Negra in northeastern Brazil is characterised by hard physical labour, structural oppression and the fight for survival. This is where Itamar Vieira Junior's debut novel, "Crooked Plow", takes place. The geographer and ethnographer was born in Salvador de Bahia in 1979. The book won multiple awards in Brazil and Portugal and was on the shortlist for the 2024 International Booker Prize.

As children, sisters Bibiana and Belonísia discover a knife under their grandmother's bed. They take turns putting it in their mouths, and Belonísia accidentally cuts off her tongue. The first part of the novel is told from Bibiana's perspective, who speaks for her younger sister from that point forward. She learns to read Belonísia's body language and translate it for others.

The girls' uncle also moves with his family to Água Negra. Bibiana is attracted to her cousin Severo and jealous of her sister, who is close to him. This situation leads to a breach of trust, which puts a lasting strain on the sisters' relationship. At 16, Bibiana becomes pregnant with Severo's child, and the young couple leaves Água Negra in search of a better life.

The second part is written from Belonísia's perspective. Tobias, a farm labourer, successfully lobbies Belonísia's father for her hand. But Tobias has a drinking problem and abuses Belonísia psychologically. When he is found dead on the side of the road, she feels relieved. She resolves to live on her own from now on and only returns to her parents' house when her father dies. For Bibiana, too, this provides an opportunity to return to Água Negra with Severo and their son Inácio.

Spirituality plays a major role in the communal lives of the labourers and is presented in the novel as the bearer of their collective memory. An immortal saint named Santa Rita is the narrator of the third and final section. The land has been sold, and the new owner wants to get rid of the farm labourers. Severo and Bibiana encourage the others to fight back. Violent clashes ensue between them and the estate owner.

COLONIAL POWER RELATIONS CAST A LONG SHADOW

Packaged as a family narrative, "Crooked Plow" tells the story of entire generations of Afro-Brazilian farm labourers. In 1888, Brazil became the last country in the western hemisphere to abolish slavery. The former slaves were never properly integrated into society, however, which is still causing inequality in the country to this day. The novel uses individual life stories to show how colonial power structures continued to have an impact throughout the 20th century and into the present.

The sisters embody two different forms of resistance. Bibiana pursues an education and becomes the voice of the community. Belonísia stays behind and endures violence and injustice. Her strength lies in her perseverance. Their grandmother, Donana, serves as an important role model for her granddaughters, who experience patriarchal violence in interpersonal relationships and working conditions as the norm. Her calloused hands are a symbol of the work that the

community's women perform, which is essential to survival. Her knife, which various women use as a weapon against violent men, represents another form of resistance and power that the women seize after a lifetime of oppression.

"Crooked Plow" is a novel that deftly uses the individual life experiences of its characters to paint a larger picture and draw attention to social injustices. It is worth reading both from a literary and political perspective. Itamar Vieira Junior makes tangible the everyday impact of colonial continuities and opens up new perspectives through his unusual narrators. At the same time, he doesn't point the moralising finger but instead makes oppression visible through powerful imagery and gives the people who suffer under it a voice.

NOVEL

Vieira Junior, I., 2023: Crooked Plow.

London and New York City, Verso. Translated by Johnny Lorenz. The original appeared in 2018 under the title "Torto Arado".

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Refugees continue to risk their lives in the Mediterranean Sea.

FLIGHT

A prayer on the night before fleeing across the sea

What must be going through the mind of a desperate father who has been forced to flee his beloved Syrian homeland and expose his small son to the dangers of the sea? That is the question Afghan-American author Khaled Hosseini asks in his brief text "Sea Prayer".

BY DAGMAR WOLF

The night before they flee across the Mediterranean, a father sits on the beach with his young son and tells him about his own childhood and the beauty of his hometown, Homs, before the war in Syria broke out. It had, in "its bustling Old City, a mosque for us Muslims, a church for our Christian neighbours, and a grand Souk for us all," he enthuses. "I wish you remembered the crowded lanes smelling of fried Kibbeh and the evening walks we took with your mother around Clock Tower Square."

But now that time seems like a sham to the father. War is raging in Syria, bombs are falling from the sky, people are starving and being buried in rubble, friends and relatives are dying. These are the memories that little Marwan will have of his homeland.

Father and son await the departure of their boat, together with other Syrians and people from Afghanistan, Somalia, Iraq and Eritrea. Babies are crying. Mourning and melan-

choly mingle with fear of the terrors of the sea and the un-known. All of them have had to leave their countries in search of a new home abroad – well aware that they will be unwelcome guests there. All of them are dreading the sunrise.

The father speaks soothingly to his boy, who is sleeping innocently. "Nothing bad will happen," he says, knowing full well that these are "only words. A father's tricks". The child's faith in him nearly kills him, because tonight all he can think about is how deep the sea is, "how vast, how indifferent". He can't protect his son from it. He can only pray.

INSPIRED BY ALAN KURDI

Khaled Hosseini summarises the existential fears of the father from his perspective. The very brief, emotional text was published with illustrations by Dan Williams; the result is a slim, moving volume. The work was inspired by the death of three-year-old Alan Kurdi, who drowned in the Mediterranean in September 2015 while fleeing the war in Syria and washed up on the coast of Turkey. The image of the little boy on the beach was seen around the world. The book is dedicated to the thousands of refugees who have drowned in the Mediterranean while fleeing war and persecution – and are still drowning, while the world looks away.

Khaled Hosseini was born in Kabul in 1965. After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, he and his family fled into exile in the USA. The physician and author ("The Kite Runner", "And the Mountains Echoed") has been a Special Ambassador for the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) since 2006. He also founded the Khaled Hosseini Foundation, which provides humanitarian aid to people in Afghanistan.

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BOOK AND LINKS

Hosseini, K., 2018: Sea Prayer.

London, Riverhead Books. Illustrations by Dan Williams.

The text is also available at medium.com/we-the-peoples/sea-prayer-14ff-7f564e3a

In 2018, the Guardian produced an animated film version: theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/01/sea-prayer-a-360-story-inspired-by-refugee-alan-kurdi-khaled-hosseini
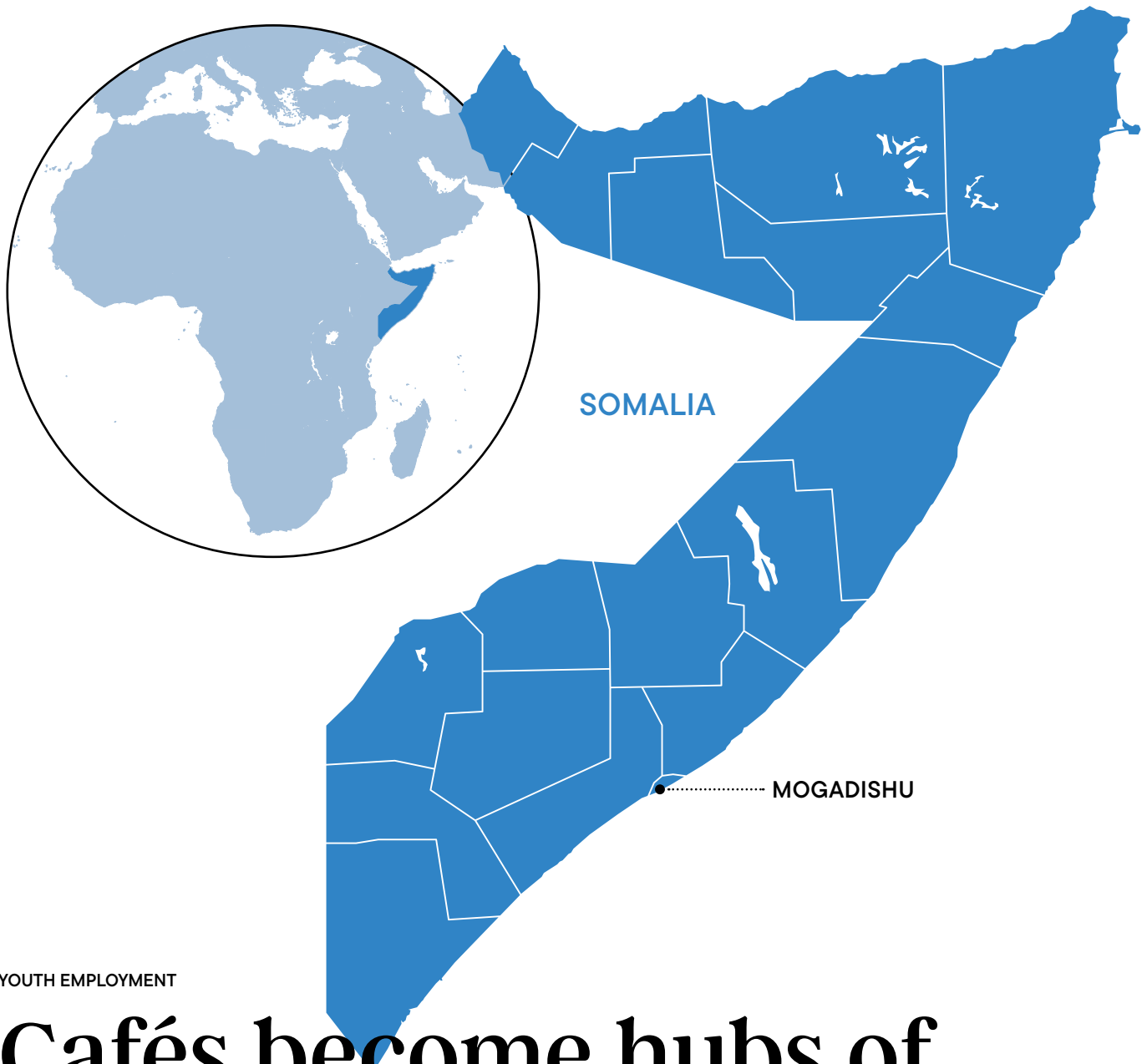
SOMALIA

MOGADISHU

YOUTH EMPLOYMENT

Cafés become hubs of hope for a jobless youth in Somalia

In the country's capital Mogadishu, young people gather in cafés to study, network and build small start-ups. Since formal job opportunities are scarce, these informal "offices" have become spaces of resilience, skill-building and shared ambitions..

BY BAHJA AHMED

At a small café in Mogadishu's Hodan District, the morning sun streams across wooden tables as young people sit with laptops and phones, typing, scrolling and talking quietly. Some send job applications; others polish résumés or help friends write cover letters. They keep a "work routine" in a tough job market, showing ambition and focus.

They might not have formal offices, but in many ways, they are already office workers. For Safiya, 27, a business graduate, the café is her daily routine. "Even if I don't get replies to my applications, I keep learning something new, like digital marketing or freelancing. It keeps me moving," she says.

This is not idleness. Cafés in Mogadishu have become microsystems of ambition and peer support, where young people cultivate skills and exchange knowledge. Around 75 % of Somalis are under 30, and tens of thousands of young people enter the labour market each year. Yet only very few find formal employment. Youth unemployment is at about 34 %, nearly double the national average. While Somalia's GDP grew by four percent in 2024, over half of the population still lives below the poverty line. Informal work makes up more than 80 % of employment.

SHARING IDEAS, CREATING NETWORKS

Therefore, similar to China's "pretend to work" offices, Somalia's cafés have become their version of hope: spaces to rebuild confidence, community and purpose. In a country where jobs are scarce, young people keep up a structure, build skills and nurture shared dreams to give life a sense of purpose and to form networks that could become the backbone of a future job. Every résumé updated, every coding lesson shared and every business idea discussed over coffee is a small act of hope and determination, creating new paths where the traditional system fails.

In one corner, Ahmed, 24, works on a delivery-app idea with a friend. He left college when tuition became unaffordable but now takes short courses in logistics and digital payments. "We're not waiting for the government to hire us; we're creating the system through startups," he says. "The hardest part isn't learning, it's getting seed money and connections. We share online notes, help each other write business plans and sometimes borrow phones for interviews. This café is our office, classroom and safety net."

Abdifatah Mohamed, Director of Employment Policy at the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA), says: "Most formal jobs are clustered in government, NGOs and big companies. Investment in mid-level enterprises is needed. Without it, graduates either wait endlessly or drift into informal work."

Economist Abdirahman Warsame of the Heritage Institute adds: "Young Somalis are creative and resilient. They build networks where the system fails. If linked to structured programmes like UNDP's Shaqo Abuur, which trains youth in digital skills and entrepreneurship, this energy could transform the economy."

As afternoon light softens the café, Safiya closes her laptop. "We don't have many choices, but we still show up. We still believe tomorrow can be better," she says.

BAHJA AHMED
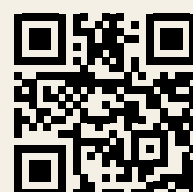is a freelance writer, educator and humanitarian aid worker from Mogadishu, Somalia.

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Liveable cities

Artwork by David Amen
(see p. 4).

OUR VIEW

Cities have many faces

For this edition, we asked ourselves what makes a city liveable. Many of the problems faced by Nairobi – and the ways they are being tackled – are typical of big cities in the Global South. Let's go and explore.

BY KATHARINA WILHELM OTIENO

Nairobi, Kenya's capital, has an estimated 5 to 6 million inhabitants. As such it is one of the 10 biggest cities in Africa, growing steadily by around four percent per year.

Nairobi also has various nicknames. "Nairobbery" is perhaps the best known, with pickpocketing, burglaries and minor muggings being the order of the day. Anyone flaunting their mobile phone or other valuables too conspicuously is seen as having only themselves to blame – the police can hardly be relied on to chase up the crime and prosecute the offender. The small gated community where I live is protected by barbed wire, electric fencing, a security guard and surveillance cameras. I keep a machete under my bed. Those who live in one of the corrugated iron shacks in Nairobi's vast sprawling slums have only the machete.

"Silicon Savannah" is a more flattering nickname that Nairobi has earned for its thriving tech scene. Technology is ubiquitous here, with apps used for everything from dealing with the authorities to making payments, buying tickets, ordering a motorbike taxi or locating the nearest minibus in Nairobi's chaotic public transport system.

The "green city under the sun" is Nairobi's most appealing nickname. And apt too, as Nairobi is criss-crossed and surrounded by woodland and lush vegetation. However, you have to pay to visit urban forests such as Karura Forest or the Nairobi Arboretum – at one to two dollars, the admission fee is as much as many Nairobians earn in a day. Only Uhuru Park, a large and always overcrowded park featuring a lake and playgrounds in the city centre, is free.

COOL RIVER

Originally, the name Nairobi comes from the Maa, the language of the Indigenous Maasai. "Engare Nyarobie" means, roughly translated, "cool river". The water temperature of the Nairobi River, which still flows through the city, will be difficult to measure in some places because of all the rubbish. It's not only in the water that the city's waste problem is glaringly obvious – rubbish is everywhere, with refuse only collected regularly in wealthier neighbourhoods. Waste is often just burnt in the street or taken to dumpsites where waste pickers scavenge it for anything of value. Nairobi has some of Africa's biggest landfill sites, though numerous projects are using new apps, education campaigns and clean-up days to tackle the problem.

There's always something happening in a city like Nairobi. However, many areas are drastically neglected. Two years ago, the Nairobi and other rivers burst their banks following heavy rainfall, causing many people to lose their homes – especially in informal settlements. As Sam Olando and Eva Dick argue in their article on our focus topic, the scale of the damage could have been avoided if urban planners more systematically consulted slum residents and involved them in decision making.

Almost half of the world's population lives in cities. Particularly in view of the advancing climate crisis, life in metropolises such as Nairobi must improve for everyone – not just for those who can afford a comfortable urban lifestyle.

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INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS

How marginalised urban communities in Africa are driving innovation

Africa's cities are growing fast, and so is the need for inclusive, community-driven innovation. Residents of informal settlements are already developing practical solutions to the challenges they face, from the provision of basic services to climate resilience. When governments, researchers and communities collaborate, the potential for meaningful urban change is enormous.

BY TEURAI ANNA NYAMANGARA

People living in the informal settlements of Zimbabwe's capital Harare don't really think of themselves as innovators. For them, innovation is something that happens in universities or large companies: it's a new mobile phone or digital payment system.

Yet the very same people are quietly innovating each and every day – adapting, learning and improving things to make a living and support their families. Some of this is quite visible, like recycling metal and wood to create new products, a process critical to the circular economy.

Other innovations aren't as easy to see, but their potential to change societies is huge. I regularly encounter them in the community networks, initiatives and campaigns that develop in the most marginalised areas of the city. Initially these may be established through mutual self-help group savings schemes. With the right support and opportunities, these groups grow into platforms that can fully engage with the state to demand improvements and help create solutions to complex urban problems.

There's a popular refrain heard in many settlements across the continent: "We are not the problem. We are the solution." Ignoring the knowledge, skills and energy emerging from low-income communities means missing out on a crucial source of inclusive and innovative urban reform. This grassroots potential is especially important in African cities, where the realities and priorities of many residents are often overlooked.

UNPRECEDENTED URBANISATION

In part, this is simply a question of numbers. Africa is the most rapidly urbanising region on earth. 700 million people already live in urban areas, and the number is set to double to 1.4 billion by 2050. Currently, around half of all urban dwellers across the continent live in informal settlements – these people therefore represent an enormous "human resource."

In most urban centres, people are young – a trend that is accelerating. By 2050, half of Africa's population will be under the age of 25. Young people are increasingly well educated, yet formal employment remains scarce. Underemployment and unemployment are widespread. Most earn a living through informal means, often under precarious conditions. Basic services are lacking, and insecure land tenure puts residents at constant risk of eviction. In such an environment, innovation is not a choice, but a necessity.

Climate change is compounding these challenges. More frequent extreme weather events demand local solutions.

Heavy rains can cause severe damage, for example when flash floods hit informal settlements that lack drains or paved roads. High temperatures can make life unbearable in small shacks with little ventilation.

RESIDENTS ARE TAKING ACTION

In such situations, communities often realise that government support is unlikely to arrive soon. In settlements like Tafara in Harare, residents have taken matters into their own hands. They are building drainage channels to divert floodwaters and planting resilient local grasses to stabilise the soil and prevent erosion. In Dzivaresekwa Extension, an informal settlement in Harare, community members are mapping out where drains are most urgently needed to manage floods more effectively.

Some of the most innovative communities I have encountered did not start out that way. Innovation takes time, trust and a lot of organising. I work for Dialogue on Shelter for the Homeless in Zimbabwe, which is affiliated with Slum Dwellers International (SDI), a global alliance of local organisations driving collective, bottom-up change for inclusive and resilient cities. Community organising is at its core.

In South Africa, for example, SDI has helped establish community-based recycling teams that engage in solid waste recovery and management. In Uganda, SDI brought together government officials and residents of informal settlements to co-develop solutions for settlement upgrading. In Zimbabwe, significant innovation supported

Photo: Teurai Anna Nyamangara

In the Tafara settlement in Zimbabwe's capital Harare, residents are working to improve their living conditions.

ZIMBABWE

HARARE
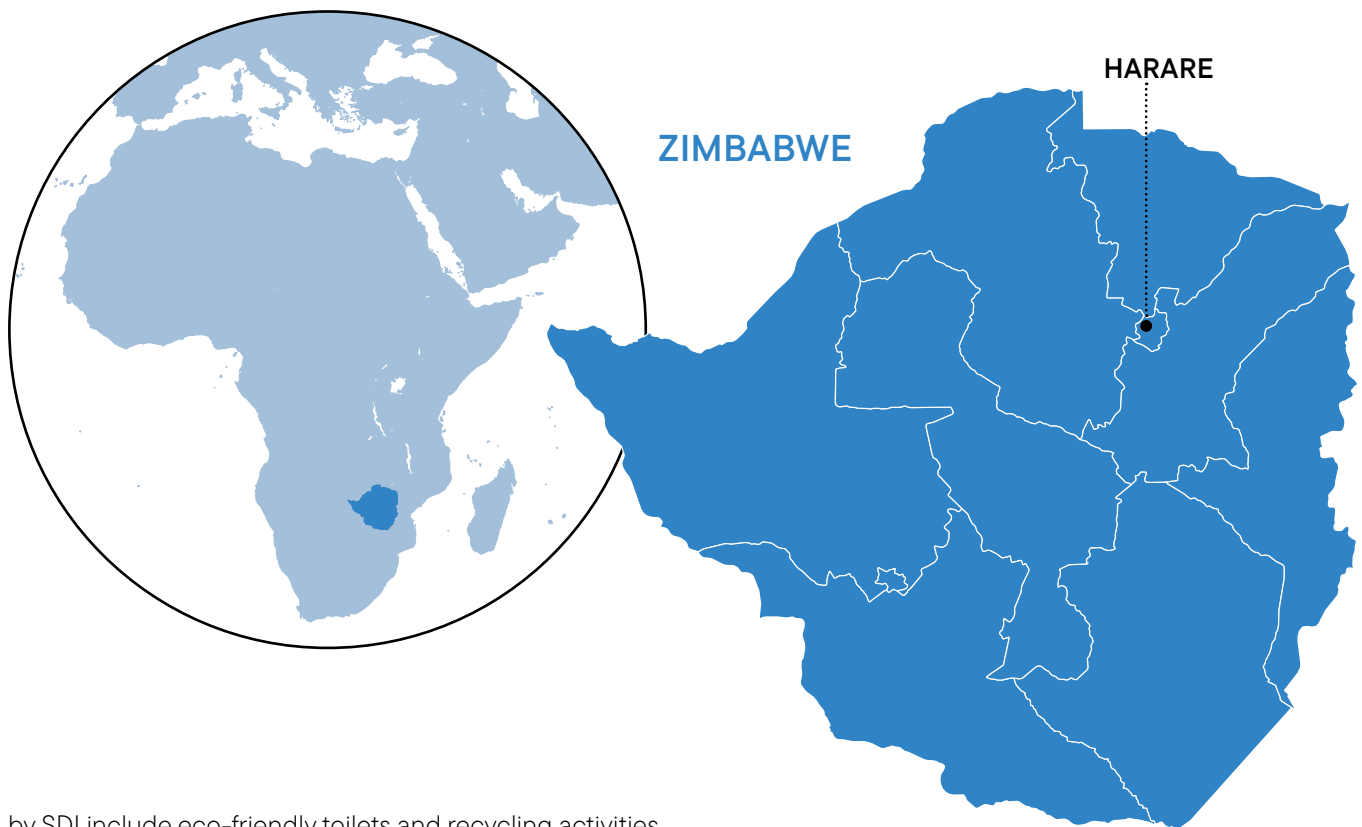
by SDI include eco-friendly toilets and recycling activities in informal settlements to manage waste and turn it into a source of income. Other SDI-backed projects focus on urban agriculture, climate adaptation and securing land tenure.

IT STARTS WITH SAVINGS GROUPS

In many informal settlements, the process of community organising begins with small-scale savings groups. These groups bring people together who might otherwise remain isolated and unheard. Building such groups can be a slow and iterative process, and not all of them endure. But when they do take root, the impact can be transformative, both for individuals and the wider community.

As their savings grow, group members naturally begin to reflect on the broader issues affecting their settlement – from securing land tenure to managing floods to improving access to water and sanitation. In Hopley, another neighbourhood in Harare, residents are saving to drill boreholes, since the state has no plans to extend piped water to the area. Savings not only strengthen a group's sense of agency but also give it the financial capacity to initiate change or be taken more seriously by local authorities.

Peer-to-peer learning can accelerate community-driven change. Exchanges between residents of neighbouring settlements, cities or even countries offer people an opportunity to share experiences and practical knowledge. Innovations that have proven effective in one context can then be applied and adapted to another. A willingness to reflect, learn and draw inspiration from others amplifies

"In many informal settlements, the process of community organising begins with small-scale savings groups."

the potential for change. Recent exchanges between settlements in Harare have enabled communities to share ideas on eco-friendly building materials, toilet construction and waste-recycling cooperatives.

MOTIVATING LOCAL AUTHORITIES TO ACT

"Information is power" is a guiding principle for all SDI groups. Local authorities often have very little information about life within informal settlements – including how many people live in particular areas, where they earn a living in the city, or how they engage with informal service providers. SDI groups address this gap by systematically mapping, profiling and enumerating their communities. The detailed data they generate and analyse can be decisive in getting the attention of government officials and strengthening the case for in-situ upgrading – without displacing residents.

> "Communities often realise that government support is unlikely to arrive soon. In settlements like Tafara in Harare, residents have taken matters into their own hands."

Such engagement benefits not only communities, who gain access to services and improve their living conditions, but also government institutions. When reliable data reveals how many people live in an area and how much communities are already investing, local officials often begin to see where they can take action too. This can pave the way for the upgrading and regularisation of informal settlements.

LEGITIMISING COMMUNITIES' IDEAS

Dialogue on Shelter for the Homeless in Zimbabwe is currently working with the African Cities Research Consortium, which brings together community organisations, researchers and government actors to identify and tackle complex urban challenges. Platforms like this can be extremely useful in amplifying the voices, knowledge and solutions of communities. When communities co-create evidence and pilot projects with researchers, their knowledge is often taken more seriously by government agencies. Such collaborations allow researchers to play an important role in helping to legitimise the insights and ideas that are already present within communities.

In Harare, the Urban Informality Forum, a network hosted by the University of Zimbabwe's Planning School, has created a space for dialogue between community organisations, local officials and researchers. It provides a platform to highlight pressing issues and establish a path forward. The forum has helped shift how the city sees informal settlements: its tendency to demolish them is now being replaced with a growing openness to upgrading and improvement.

This progress cannot be taken for granted. Much deeper change is needed in Zimbabwe and across the African continent to unlock the full potential of urban residents' ideas, ingenuity and innovation. But when communities receive support to organise, set their own priorities, learn from one another and experiment with new ways of working with authorities, the possibilities for meaningful and inclusive urban transformation are immense.

Innovation comes from people. In African cities, that means working hand in hand with the vast majority who are living at the sharp edge of rapid urban expansion.

LINKS

African Cities Research Consortium: *african-cities.org*
Slum Dwellers International: *sdinet.org*
Dialogue on Shelter for the Homeless Trust: *dialogueshelter.org*

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URBAN TRAFFIC

How citizens take action for a cleaner and healthier Lagos

The residents of Nigeria's largest city suffer from severe air pollution, traffic congestion and car-centric urban planning. Local initiatives are proposing solutions to redesign public spaces and transport — from citizen science to car-free days. However, real transformation depends on authorities, researchers and residents working together to shape the future of the city.

BY OLAMIDE UDOMA-EJORH AND WAZIRI MAINASARA

Photo: picture alliance/NurPhoto/Adekunle Ajayi

Bicycle riders gather during the Lagos State Government 2022 World Car Free Day.

Lagos is notorious for its chronic traffic congestion, commonly referred to by locals as "go-slow". The city's high traffic volume, combined with an ageing vehicle fleet, outdated emissions controls and high-sulphur fuels, means that road transport accounts for a significant portion of the city's PM2.5 air pollution. These emissions contribute to cardiovascular disease, lung cancer and respiratory illness, leading to increased absenteeism and premature deaths. According to the Clean Air Fund, around 24,000 premature deaths were attributable to air pollution in Lagos in 2019. The philanthropic organisation states that the economic cost of air pollution in Lagos – under a business-as-usual scenario – will rise from $ 1.4 billion in 2023 to $ 9.9 billion by 2040.

Around the world, green public transport is becoming increasingly important as a means of reducing emissions and improving urban life. Global electric car sales are breaking records, with China being the largest market. Electric buses have been introduced in cities such as Santiago de Chile, where 40 % of the entire bus fleet is now electric. On the African continent, Ethiopia has attracted attention by expanding its charging infrastructure and deploying locally manufactured electric buses.

Lagos's ambitions align with these global shifts. The Nigerian state of the same name, in which the metropolis is located, has published an ambitious long-term transport policy. It aims to reduce journeys by car, as a proportion of total trips, from 11 % in 2015 to two percent by 2050 and run 52 % of BRT (bus rapid transit) vehicles on clean energy by 2050.

Progress has already begun. In 2023, the Lagos Metropolitan Area Transport Authority (LAMATA) introduced electric buses on key BRT routes, delivering a reported 13 % reduction in carbon dioxide emissions on some of these routes and improving the commuter experience. In 2025, LAMATA announced that it planned to deploy 10,000 electric buses by 2030, and the Lagos state commissioner for transportation, Oluwaseun Osiyemi, outlined plans to introduce 2000 compressed natural gas (CNG) buses. Alongside investments in electric rail – currently powered largely by electricity generated using diesel and gas – and water transport, these initiatives aim to create a more integrated, multimodal transport system.

Yet electrification alone risks obscuring deeper structural challenges. While cleaner buses reduce emissions, they do little to address congestion, unequal access to mobility or car-centric street design. In Lagos, over 40 % of all trips are already made without motorised vehicles, mostly on foot. Nevertheless, road space is dominated by informal transport and private cars. BRT serves only about three percent of total daily road users in the state. With inadequate pavements, unsafe crossings and limited cycling infrastructure, Lagos continues to prioritise vehicles over people.

Addressing these gaps requires a more holistic approach to urban innovation – one that links mobility, health and public space. Initiatives such as UrbanBetter and the Lagos Urban Development Initiative (LUDI) show how citizen-led data and participatory interventions can complement technological change.

> "With inadequate pavements, unsafe crossings and limited cycling infrastructure, Lagos continues to prioritise vehicles over people."

CITIZEN-LED URBAN INNOVATION

In a city as vast and fast-changing as Lagos, official air-quality data remains inadequate and unevenly distributed, leaving large areas effectively invisible in government records. UrbanBetter's Cityzens initiative, which is operating in cities such as Accra, Nairobi and Bogotá, helps fill this gap by training residents and equipping them with wearable air-quality monitors. Youth and community groups act as citizen scientists, using low-cost sensors to measure PM2.5 levels while mapping local conditions. The data is uploaded, analysed collaboratively and shared through accessible visualisations with authorities, communities and the public to stimulate dialogue and action.

This approach challenges conventional models of urban governance. Rather than relying solely on distant experts, it empowers citizens, particularly young people, to become producers of knowledge, thereby enhancing transparency and accountability. Publicly shared data broadens the evidence base and urges decision-makers to respond to lived realities, fostering more inclusive debates on transport, health and urban planning.

In early 2025, for example, Cityzens collected air pollution data along the Lagos City Marathon route before and dur-

LAGOS

NIGERIA

"Urban transformation in Lagos depends on linking community-generated insights to the city's broader goals for climate, mobility, health and resilience."

ing the event. The findings showed that pollution levels dropped by 60 % during the marathon, largely due to partial road closures, demonstrating how reduced traffic can significantly improve air quality. The initiative presented the data to authorities and used it to advocate for cleaner and healthier urban traffic in Lagos.

UrbanBetter has also advanced the concept of clean air zones, spaces where shaded walkways, cycling lanes and urban greening are tested for their ability to reduce exposure to pollution and heat and promote healthier lifestyles. In April 2025, the Lagos Cityzens Hub convened a workshop to co-design a pilot Clean Air Training Zone, linking air-quality monitoring data with tangible interventions in the urban environment.

IGNITING URBAN CHANGE

However, translating evidence into lived experience requires experimentation in public spaces. The Lagos Urban Development Initiative (LUDI) plays a key role at the intersection between data, participation and physical transformation. Over the past five years, LUDI has tested participatory urban interventions throughout Lagos. These range from allotment gardens and parklets to waste-sorting projects and car-free days. By bringing together community members, practitioners and government officials, LUDI aims to challenge car-dominated norms and demonstrate how locally driven projects can catalyse broader urban change. The initiative particularly seeks to amplify the voices of groups often excluded from urban planning processes.

Car-free days have become central to this approach. In Lagos, they encourage communities and policymakers to reconsider how streets are used. These events serve as advocacy tools for pedestrian-priority spaces. They also involve actors typically absent from such debates, including women's groups and local associations.

While car-free days have a long global history, having emerged in the 1950s and gained momentum after the 1973 oil crisis, LUDI has adapted the concept to Lagos' context. Since 2022, it has worked with cycling groups, NGOs and government agencies, including LAMATA and the La-

gos State Ministry of Transportation, to scale these interventions. In recent years, car-free days have been consolidated into the Sustainable Transport Festival (STF).

In 2025, STF temporarily transformed streets in five Lagos communities into spaces for learning, play and dialogue around clean mobility, engaging more than 1000 residents. The festival concluded with a policy-focused conference, linking community experience with data and decision-making. Together, these initiatives demonstrate how co-produced, street-level experimentation can make non-motorised transport visible, strengthen civic participation and reimagine how Lagos' public spaces function.

CONNECTING RESIDENTS AND POLICYMAKERS

Urban transformation in Lagos depends on linking community-generated insights to the city's broader goals for climate, mobility, health and resilience. A recent white paper by UrbanBetter highlights how innovations such as citizen science directly support state-level priorities, from the Lagos Climate Action Plan to the Non-Motorised Transport (NMT) Policy and commitments in the Lagos Resilience Strategy. By filling data gaps with hyper-local evidence, citizen scientists help ensure that these frameworks reflect residents' lived realities, moving beyond abstract goals to more grounded, inclusive policymaking.

Effective transformation also requires governance structures that incorporate citizen input into formal planning. UrbanBetter's Cityzens work, LUDI's community walkability assessments and lessons learnt from car-free days are increasingly feeding into Lagos policy forums where decisions are shaped, such as the Lagos State Environmental Protection Agency's air quality conversations and LAMATA's mobility and walkability dialogues. Cleaner air or climate-resilient streets won't come from technology alone; they require governance cultures that value transparency, shared evidence and co-creation.

For Lagos to set a precedent, its future must be collaboratively shaped by its people, alongside policy and technology. The path forward is unambiguous: Lagos must invest in a city where residents can move safely, breathe freely and actively participate in shaping the urban future. This commitment is the authentic measure of progress, and it is entirely within Lagos' grasp.

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The Metrocable in Medellín's Comuna 13 neighbourhood.

URBAN INNOVATION

The miracle of Medellín

Cable cars reaching the city's margins, green corridors designed to cool the streets: Medellín is full of ideas for improving urban life. But how transformative have the much-praised projects actually been, and will the "miracle of Medellín" be able to withstand the social and environmental pressures it faces?

BY CAMILO ANDRÉS CARVAJAL GUERRA

Medellín's Comuna 13 was once considered one of the world's most dangerous neighbourhoods. The informal settlement, perched on the steep hillsides on the outskirts of the city, was under the control of drug cartels, guerrilla groups and paramilitaries for years. A massive military "recapture" operation in 2002 initially made matters worse. Comuna 13 remained a classic no-go area: no one ventured there unless they lived there.

Today, the picture has changed significantly. Not only has Comuna 13 become safer, it is even attracting tourists who want to explore its vibrant graffiti and cultural scene. This transformation is the result of a series of urban investments: the city expanded social infrastructure such as schools and hospitals as well as physical infrastructure by building, for example, outdoor escalators. Since 2011, they have bridged a height difference equivalent to around 28 storeys, reconnecting the neighbourhood with the city centre. The world's longest outdoor escalator takes six minutes to ride – and has made a tangible difference to the daily lives of Comuna 13's roughly 12,000 residents.

Medellín, Colombia's second-largest metropolitan area with several million inhabitants, has established itself as a laboratory for urban innovation over the past two decades. The acclaimed "most innovative city" is widely regarded as a model for sustainable urban development in Latin America. Projects such as the metro system with its cable-car extensions, green corridors and urban nature reserves on the hillsides are designed to make Medellín more socially inclusive and environmentally friendly. Yet despite the success of these projects, a key question remains: have these transformations truly been sustainable and do they address the city's historical inequalities?

> "The metro has strengthened a sense of community across the city. There is even talk of a distinct 'metro culture'."

MOBILITY: THE RISE OF A METRO CULTURE

The escalators of Comuna 13 are just one example of how infrastructure projects in Medellín have contributed to greater territorial equity. Since its inauguration in 1995, the metro system has significantly improved mobility for people living in the city's peripheral neighbourhoods. Due to the

city's location in the Aburrá Valley in the Andes, the network was expanded to include the Metrocable, a system of urban cable cars linking settlements on the surrounding hillsides with the city centre. Travel times have been sharply reduced, improving the quality of life for thousands of residents. The system has also had environmental benefits, partly replacing diesel-powered bus services.

> "Medellín is widely regarded as a model for sustainable urban development in Latin America."

At the same time, the metro has strengthened a sense of community across the city. There is even talk of a distinct "metro culture". Yet it remains unclear how sustainable these changes are. The system is financed largely through ticket revenues rather than public subsidies. It is uncertain whether this model will remain viable once the trains require extensive modernisation and the network is expanded further.

Moreover, areas around metro stations have experienced gentrification. Rising property prices in connected neighbourhoods risk displacing the very residents that the system was originally intended to serve. For example, several families were forcibly resettled for the construction of the Metrocable Picacho line. Whether such social costs are justified requires careful consideration.

ENVIRONMENT: COOLING THE CITY THROUGH GREEN CORRIDORS

Medellín has also made notable progress on environmental issues, particularly through renaturation projects. A total of 18 roads and 12 waterways have been transformed into Corredores Verdes, or green corridors. Along major traffic arteries such as Avenida Oriental, they have reduced ambient temperatures by up to two degrees Celsius, countering the urban heat island effect. The city has also planted over 8800 trees and 90,000 other plants to boost biodiversity, earning international recognition in the process.

Even so, the city's ecological resilience remains fragile. Air pollution, in particular, continues to pose a serious challenge. While the green corridors improve the microclimate, they are insufficient to offset the poor air quality caused by heavy traffic and the city's location in the enclosed Aburrá Valley.

Metro train and pedestrian zones with green spaces at Plaza Botero in Medellín.

Pressure is also mounting on the Cerros Tutelares – the seven hills surrounding the city that function as its green lungs. Progress has been made here, too: thanks to broad public participation in conservation efforts, forest fires were reduced by 75 % between 2021 and 2022. Nevertheless, the hills remain under threat from land occupation. There is a risk that informal settlements will once again spread across the slopes – endangering not only ecosystems and biodiversity but also human lives, as these areas are prone to landslides. This highlights a key point: ecological sustainability and social security are inextricably linked.

TASKS FOR A MODEL CITY

Medellín has shown an exceptional ability to use urban planning as a means of driving social and environmental innovation. The metro system and green corridors have improved quality of life and climate resilience. Yet the image of a "successful model city" that Medellín is keen to project must not obscure the city's ongoing challenges, such as social inequality, insufficient funding for public transport and growing pressure on vital ecosystems.

The real task is not building more infrastructure. It is ensuring that urban transformation brings more social equity, environmental protection and resilience in the long term. After all, sustainability means more than international acclaim – it must be felt in everyday life. Only then can the so-called "miracle of Medellín" truly become a reality.

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Photo: picture alliance/Markus Mainka

GENDER EQUALITY

A city where women need panic buttons is not a safe city

From crowd-mapping data to AI surveillance, technology-based security tools are on the rise in Indian cities with the increasing presence of women. But real change depends on redesigning public spaces for women and challenging gender norms.

BY ROLI MAHAJAN

Torchlight procession in Kolkata in August 2025, on the anniversary of the brutal rape of a female doctor in the city.

When I recently opened the door to receive my groceries from one of India's mobile delivery services, I was pleasantly surprised to see a woman at my doorstep. Her name was Nirmala. She told me that more women are now being hired for such jobs, but the work is demanding – not only because of the long hours, but also because of safety concerns. This reflects a broader reality in urban India: while women are increasingly visible in public spaces, city infrastructure has not kept pace to ensure their safety.

India continues to struggle with significant gender inequality. According to the World Economic Forum's 2025 Global Gender Gap Report, the country ranks 131st out of 148 nations in terms of gender parity. The ranking is based on four key dimensions: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. Indian women's labour force participation – at just 32.8 % – is also among the lowest globally. Deep-rooted social norms further limit women's mobility and access to public life.

According to Rahul Goel, an Assistant Professor of Transportation Research at the Indian Institute of Technology in Delhi, and data from India's first "Time Use Survey", some women are not only absent from the workforce, but many do not leave their homes at all. This highlights how deeply ingrained the belief remains that women belong in the private sphere – within the home.

Despite these restrictions, more and more women are leaving their houses, both in rural and urban areas. Some out of necessity, others by choice. An increasing number of young women from smaller towns are moving to larger cities to pursue education. This development makes the issue of safety in public spaces even more pressing. The urban environment – including transportation systems, roads, and workplaces – reflects the extent to which women's mobility is truly valued.

The reality becomes clear when the safety of women in different Indian cities is systematically assessed. Recent findings from the National Annual Report & Index on Women's Safety (NARI) 2025 survey provide a snapshot of where women feel protected – and where fear continues to shape daily life. According to the survey, Mumbai, Bhubaneswar and Kohima rank among the safest cities for women, while Delhi, Kolkata and Jaipur are among the least safe.

Around 40 % of women in Indian cities reported feeling unsafe – and this perception becomes even more acute after dark, especially on public transport, the streets of their neighbourhoods and in recreational areas. This is not just a subjective feeling: According to the National Crime Records Bureau's annual report published at the end of 2025, a total of 448,211 crimes against women were reported in 2023 – an increase over the previous year. Young women aged 18 to 24 proved to be the most vulnerable group. At the same time, the NARI shows that many crimes are not reported and that people have no confidence in the institutional systems.

> "Around 40 % of women in Indian cities reported feeling unsafe – and this perception becomes even more acute after dark."

The divide between "safer" and "unsafe" cities reflects more than just differences in crime rates – it points to disparities in infrastructure, transport design and institutional trust. These findings raise a fundamental question: If fear is so widespread, how can Indian city authorities shift from reactive policing towards prevention and the creation of trust?

WOMEN'S LIVED EXPERIENCES

Following the notorious rape case in Delhi in 2012, several innovative initiatives were launched to make public spaces safer for women. One of these initiatives is the Red Dot Foundation's "Safe City" project. The project collects and documents real-life experiences of women in public spaces and uses these findings to advocate for urban planning and policy changes that improve safety and accessibility.

Unlike surveillance-heavy approaches that often prioritise control, Safe City starts with women's lived experiences. It frames fear and harassment not as individual risks, but as failures in urban design. ElsaMarie D'Silva, the project's founder, explained: "Safe City adds value because we are making what is currently invisible visible through these stories – but with actionable data points."

At the heart of the project is an anonymous reporting platform that enables survivors to share their experiences without fear of exposure. What sets it apart is its use of crowd-mapping data to highlight everyday sexual harassment and gender-based violence – much of which would otherwise go entirely unreported. The model has since expanded beyond India.

The platform, which now logs more than 100,000 reported incidents worldwide, does not collect names, email addresses, or IP information. Each report is reviewed by a (human) moderator to remove any identifying details before it is published. Depending on the type of incident reported, survivors automatically receive information about relevant Indian criminal laws, hotlines and hospitals in their area.

The project now also trains young people to become "safety champions", teaching them skills to intervene as bystanders, knowledge of laws on gender-based violence, and the ability to interpret data dashboards to develop local solutions. In some neighbourhoods, this has led to community art projects that display legal information at known hotspots for harassment; in others, it has meant engaging religious and community leaders to create safer environments.

> "In Delhi, the Himmat Plus app enables users to send SOS alerts directly to the police."

THE GOVERNMENT IS TAKING ACTION TOO

In the state of Haryana, Safe City partnered with the police to train constables in using data to identify high-risk areas and adjust patrols accordingly. Similar collaborations have influenced public transport planning in the city of Chennai and helped improve street lighting and police schedules in other cities around the world.

According to the initiative, such measures have led to a significant increase in trust in police work and to an increase in reports of crime. As a result, women can stay out longer, move around more freely and participate to a greater extent in urban life.

Under the Ministry of Home Affairs' Safe City Project, several major cities – including Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and Bengaluru – have implemented a mix of surveillance systems and emergency response tools. These efforts focus on policing measures intended to deter violence and improve response times.

Central to these efforts is the expansion of CCTV networks equipped with video analytics and artificial intelligence, making it easier to identify hotspots around transport hubs and commercial areas. These systems are connected to India's Integrated Command and Control Centres, allowing police to monitor public spaces in real time and dispatch personnel when incidents are flagged. In addition, cities have installed emergency panic buttons and "safety islands" in well-lit areas, enabling women to alert authorities instantly through sirens or two-way communication systems.

Alongside surveillance, mobile-based safety tools have gained prominence. In Delhi, the Himmat Plus app enables users to send SOS alerts directly to the police. Meanwhile, platforms like Safetipin rely on crowd-sourced data to map poorly lit streets and unsafe public spaces, providing evidence to inform urban design interventions.

While these tools can help improve response times, experts warn that technology alone cannot compensate for poorly designed public spaces or entrenched gender norms. As feminist scholar Shilpa Phadke argues in "Why Loiter?" – a seminal text on feminist urbanism – Indian cities continue to treat the presence of women in public spaces as conditionally permissible. Women are expected to be outdoors only for a clear purpose, while men are allowed to move freely without question. As long as women cannot move around cities without justification, no amount of surveillance will make urban spaces truly safe. For women like Nirmala, safety is not about cameras or apps – it's about the fact that simply leaving the house should not always have to be a struggle.

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Photo: picture alliance/ASSOCIATED PRESS/Brian Inganga

People walk on the street of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

URBAN MOBILITY

Africa's undervalued path to sustainable mobility

Walking and cycling are the most affordable, climate friendly and inclusive ways to move through cities. Together, they account for more than a third of all trips worldwide, yet they remain undervalued in policy and investment decisions. As motorisation rates rise sharply across the globe, the need to protect and expand active mobility has never been greater.

BY STEFANIE HOLZWARTH

Climate change is forcing cities to rethink how people get from A to B. The decisions made today will determine whether urban life becomes healthier and more resilient – or more congested, polluted and dangerous.

Global motorisation is accelerating, especially in Asia and Africa. Without strong policies, the number of vehicles on the road will continue to rise well into the middle of the century. In many cities, this surge is already stretching infrastructure to its limits and making it harder to meet climate goals and improve road safety. Public transport access remains uneven, with only about 60 % of the world's urban population enjoying a convenient service. The consequences are serious: pedestrians are the most vulnerable road users and face disproportionate risks. They account for 21 % of road traffic deaths worldwide, rising to 33 % in the African region.

Although two thirds of countries have adopted walking and cycling policies, most commitments remain modest. This is a missed opportunity. Walking and cycling produce no emissions and support climate goals, especially when combined with public transport and land-use planning. They are also highly efficient, moving six to eight times more people per hour in the same road space as cars. Studies show they could replace over 40 % of short car trips. Creating safer conditions for people on foot and on bikes would also help reduce the toll of road accidents, which still claim around 1.2 million lives each year.

The benefits of walking and cycling – often referred to as "active mobility" or "non-motorised transport" – are increasingly recognised in global frameworks. They advance the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by improving health, promoting gender equality, reducing emissions and making cities more sustainable. They are also highlighted in Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) under the Paris Agreement as fast, affordable, zero-emission solutions. UN-Habitat, in its work, emphasises that well-designed streets for pedestrians and cyclists, paired with strong public transport and integrated housing, reduce car dependency, expand access to jobs and services and foster climate-smart cities.

WHY WALKING AND CYCLING MATTER FOR AFRICA

Africa's urban population will double from 700 million to 1.4 billion by 2050 – an increase of 700 million new urban residents. This growth offers great potential, yet for many people the opportunities of city life remain out of reach. Poor access to jobs, education, healthcare and social services keeps millions trapped in poverty. Transport is a big part of the problem. Today, only 34 % of urban residents in sub-Saharan Africa have convenient access to public transport – the lowest rate anywhere. Where services do exist, they are often unreliable.

Informal minibuses and paratransit services account for up to 70 % to 90 % of public transport, according to the Africa Transport Policy Program (SSATP), a forum on transport policy which comprises 43 African member countries. Though essential for daily mobility, they remain largely uncoordinated and profit oriented, covering only profitable routes with often unsafe conditions. Although new metro lines and bus rapid transit (BRT) systems are emerging, they often fail to reach low-income neighbourhoods. Affordability remains an issue too.

"Today, only 34 % of urban residents in sub-Saharan Africa have convenient access to public transport – the lowest rate anywhere."

In the absence of reliable public transport and safe walking and cycling infrastructure, many people are turning to private cars and motorcycles. As populations grow and incomes rise, the number of vehicles in Africa could rise up to four times by 2050. Unless cities shift towards more sustainable forms of mobility, they face worsening congestion, air pollution and traffic hazards.

Walking and cycling offer immediate and affordable solutions. They are the most accessible forms of transport, especially for young people, women and vulnerable groups. Across Africa, they already form the backbone of daily mobility. Up to 78 % of people walk every day to reach schools, clinics, shops, workplaces or public transport – often because they have no other choice. That adds up to nearly a billion people walking or cycling for about an hour each day.

Despite their importance, walking and cycling are still overlooked in transport planning and investment. Consequently, pedestrians and cyclists often navigate streets without pavements, face dangerous crossings and contend with heavy traffic. They are exposed to air pollution and speeding vehicles. In many African cities, walking and cycling are not just uncomfortable, but deadly. Every day,

an estimated 261 pedestrians and 18 cyclists lose their lives on African roads.

THE FUTURE OF MOBILITY

Africa's mobility future must be planned, built and maintained with people at its heart. By putting walking and cycling first, cities can make streets safer, air cleaner and urban growth more inclusive. The benefits are well documented – what is missing is prioritisation. Countries need to shift away from large expressways and urban highways and instead invest in integrated, accessible public mobility systems. With inclusive policymaking, more equitable investments and better design frameworks, walking and cycling can shift from being options of last resort to becoming the pillars of sustainable urban development.

> "By putting walking and cycling first, cities can make streets safer, air cleaner and urban growth more inclusive."

Momentum is building. The Pan African Action Plan for Active Mobility, coordinated by UNEP, UN Habitat and WHO with support from the African Union and UNECA (UN Economic Commission for Africa), is set for ministerial endorsement in 2026. The plan, which is already being rolled out in five countries, aims to accelerate efforts across the continent and give walking and cycling the recognition they deserve in planning, policy and investment. Cities such as Ethiopia's capital Addis Ababa have shown how the urban environment can change for the better when walking and cycling are taken seriously and investments are made to build proper infrastructure (see box on next page).

Across African cities, taking action must begin by supporting people who already get from A to B on foot, by bike or by public transport – and making those options safer, easier and more comfortable. This is as much about dignity as it is about sustainability. When cities create streets where children can walk to school safely, where women and older people can move freely, where cycling becomes a practical choice and public transport is truly affordable, Africa can shape a greener, more liveable urban future – while avoiding the downsides of rapid motorisation.

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URBAN MOBILITY

Ethiopia's promising future on foot and by bike

Addis Ababa is a prime example of how a city can change when walking and cycling are taken seriously. Over the past few years, the capital of Ethiopia has invested heavily in non-motorised transport as part of its wider urban transformation.

ETHIOPIA

········ ADDIS ABABA

BY **STEFANIE HOLZWARTH**

Between 2022 and 2024, dozens of kilometres of new walkways and cycle tracks were built in the city, providing residents with safer and more convenient options for everyday travel. These efforts are part of the City Corridor Development Project launched in late 2022.

The initiatives, which build on the Addis Ababa Non-Motorised Transport Strategy (2019–2028), the Addis Ababa Cycle Network Plan (2023–2032) and the Ethiopia Non-Motorised Transport Strategy (2020–2029), outline a phased progression towards a safer, more connected cycling network. The goal is to make walking and cycling realistic alternatives to car travel, especially for children, older people and persons with disabilities.

Addis Ababa has recently developed its third Non-Motorised Transport Implementation Plan (2025–2028), marking another step in the city's long-term commitment to walking and cycling. At the national level, Ethiopia supports these efforts through a dedicated national non-motorised transport policy and an urban street design manual that offers guidance to cities across the country.

COMBINING VARIOUS MEASURES

What makes Ethiopia's approach stand out is the way different elements have been brought together. Strong local and national frameworks are backed by consistent political support. These are not just policy statements, but concrete implementation plans and technical tools – such as the street design manual – to ensure that high-quality designs are delivered on the ground. The initiative has been strengthened by advocacy, including regular car-free days, and by effective coordination among partners and donors.

Together, these measures have built real momentum for safer, more inclusive and more sustainable mobility. Addis Ababa and Ethiopia illustrate how a city and a country can work hand in hand to make walking and cycling central to urban life. At the same time, experiences from many cities around the world show that changes to street space can be disruptive if communities are not meaningfully involved. Early engagement, clear communication and sensitivity to local needs are essential for building public support and ensuring that such transformations benefit everyone.

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Tuk-tuk delivery fleet of a South African grocery store.

MOBILITY

How delivery services are reshaping cities

On-demand delivery services, which mostly use motorcycles, have grown rapidly worldwide. In countries such as South Africa, where unemployment is high, this sector has created thousands of jobs. Working conditions are often precarious, but the industry remains an important source of income for many. Given the continued growth of this sector, it is crucial to assess its impact on urban environments. Cape Town serves as a useful case study.

BY MARCELA GUERRERO CASAS AND DUSTIN KRAMER

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, the number of deliveries using so-called micro-mobility services has increased significantly in Cape Town, particularly in the retail and food sectors. A popular delivery service called Checkers Sixty60, operated by a major supermarket chain, was launched shortly before the pandemic, just as demand for home deliveries skyrocketed due to lockdown restrictions. Previously, the market had been mainly focused on restaurant deliveries. In just a few years, all the major retailers followed suit in micro-delivery. What was once a fringe phenomenon is now central to the functioning of the city.

Cape Town's city centre offers a clear view of how these dynamics have evolved. Delivery riders gather in various locations to rest or wait for orders, all while striving to meet customer expectations for speed and efficiency.

In early 2025, we began mapping rider clusters to better understand their locations and movement patterns. Not surprisingly, proximity to delivery origin points plays a key role. Riders tend to group according to the company they work for. Their specific locations are also influenced by practical needs such as shelter, seating, Wi-Fi access, electricity and sanitation facilities.

Informal clusters of delivery riders can be found throughout Cape Town's city centre. These range from small groups to larger gatherings, often dominated by riders working for a single retailer. They are typically located on sidewalks or other pedestrianised areas just off the main roads.

MICRO-DELIVERIES AND PUBLIC SPACE

The growth of on-demand delivery services has changed how public space is used. Delivery vehicles – mainly motorcycles but also bicycles and e-bikes – now occupy areas because their riders rest, wait or collect orders. This can restrict pedestrian movement, contribute to congestion and create tensions with nearby businesses and residents.

This is what happens when a sector grows faster than public infrastructure can accommodate. As demand rises, so does pressure on shared spaces: pavements become waiting zones, kerbsides serve as loading areas, and pedestrians are forced to navigate increasingly crowded walkways. Beyond the visible impacts, there are less obvious but equally significant effects – such as exhaust fumes from idling engines, noise pollution and the build-up of litter. Yet with limited dedicated infrastructure, delivery riders have few, if any, alternatives.

Because the sector is still relatively new, responsibility for managing its impacts does not fall clearly within any existing public or private mandate. Retailers, platforms, riders, residents, City Improvement Districts (designated urban areas where property owners pay extra fees to fund supplementary services and which operate as public-private partnerships) and the municipal government all have different interests and face distinct pressures. No single actor can resolve the challenges alone.

> "As in many cities around the world, a large share of delivery riders in Cape Town are immigrants."

OVER 100 DELIVERIES PER WEEK PER DRIVER

As a research topic, micro-deliveries are still relatively new. The Centre for Transport Studies at the University of Cape Town (UCT) has only recently begun to explore this area, and there is not yet much research available to draw upon. From understanding the composition of the workforce to ownership models to behavioural changes, this is a new sector that has yet to be discovered.

Preliminary research by students at the Centre for Transport Studies is beginning to shed light on rider profiles and demographic trends. This research within three Cape Town neighbourhoods – Observatory, Rondebosch and Woodstock – reveals several common patterns. Most riders are young, with an average age of around 29, and have been working in the sector for approximately two years. They typically work more than six days a week, complete over 100 deliveries weekly and earn around $ 890 per month. The vast majority use petrol-powered motorcycles.

Safety is becoming an increasing concern. Delivery riders are more frequently involved in road crashes. This not only poses risks to all road users, but it also highlights the vulnerability of riders themselves – both in traffic and in public spaces, where tensions with pedestrians, businesses and law enforcement are likely to intensify.

Those early research findings confirm what is already visible on the ground: micro-mobility delivery is a fast-evolving ecosystem with spatial and social impacts that are deeply embedded in the way Cape Town operates.

EFFORTS UNDERWAY

Despite the challenges, various stakeholders are starting to explore ways to address the issue. Some retailers have introduced small shaded waiting areas at select locations.

Others are reconsidering the delivery model itself, exploring more centralised systems to ease pressure on individual storefronts.

The City of Cape Town, in collaboration with non-profit organisations, is also testing small-scale interventions. These include painting demarcated bays, installing bollards and engaging with local businesses to identify context-specific solutions.

> "Cape Town now has a chance to reimagine the intersection of logistics, public space and social equity."

Private actors are also stepping in, designing new types of rest stops and micro-hubs – from simple shelters to more advanced modular units. These could form the foundation of a future network of infrastructure that better supports delivery riders across the city.

SOCIAL QUESTIONS

Addressing the challenges posed by micro-mobility deliveries requires more than just physical infrastructure or updated regulations; it also demands inclusive dialogue and collaboration across sectors. As in many cities around the world, a large share of delivery riders in Cape Town are immigrants – adding another layer of social complexity to an already challenging system. Building trust among all stakeholders is therefore essential.

The way we interact with each other in public spaces says a lot about our cities, and xenophobia remains a real source of tension in Cape Town. The approach taken by law enforcement and the general fear associated with migration and the labour market shape this environment. This dynamic has implications for driver safety, but it also represents a missed opportunity: without a foundation of trust, it becomes more difficult to train, communicate with or support drivers in ways that improve both their working conditions and the overall use of public space. Part of the work therefore involves raising awareness among all users of public space – residents, businesses, city officials and the drivers themselves – and recognising that micro-deliveries are a shared urban challenge that requires shared responsibility.

The challenge lies in designing spaces and systems that acknowledge competing needs without sidelining any group – and that is precisely where the opportunity emerges. Cape Town now has a chance to reimagine the intersection of logistics, public space and social equity.

In 2026, our initiative Local South will launch a micro-mobility hub pilot in partnership with the UCT and with support from the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO). The pilot will test a small-scale model in collaboration with small businesses, local government and resident associations. The idea is to explore certain assumptions, challenge perceptions by collecting data and contribute to the growing body of publications and practices that can help shape the industry not only in Cape Town but also in other cities in the Global South.

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CLIMATE RISKS

Nairobi's floods showed why urban plans need to be made with the poor

Climate disasters affect the most vulnerable in urban settings. Experiences from Nairobi and other African cities prove that community-led planning can strengthen resilience and support more just and sustainable urban development.

BY SAM OLANDO AND EVA DICK

Photo: Nora Yunes Elaffi

The informal settlement of Mathare was among the areas hardest hit by the floods.

In April 2024, heavy rainfall triggered severe flooding in Kenya. According to the UN, an estimated 267 people lost their lives and around 380,000 were affected. The capital Nairobi and its metropolitan area were among the hardest hit. Rivers such as the Nairobi and Athi overflowed, causing extensive damage to residential areas and urban infrastructure. Those living in informal settlements – on low-lying riverbanks, wetlands or steep slopes – were hit hardest. Thousands were displaced, with women and children disproportionately affected.

At the height of the flooding, Nairobi's city government announced that residents of informal settlements along riverbanks would be relocated due to safety concerns, environmental risks and existing regulations prohibiting construction within a 60-metre-wide riparian buffer zone. The authorities promised alternative housing and support for those affected. In practice, however, many of these relocations resembled evictions. Police forces were involved, compensation was not provided, and numerous people were left homeless and without a source of income.

The events in Nairobi in 2024 are not an isolated case. Worldwide, and as a consequence of climate change, both sudden and slow-onset extreme weather events are occurring more frequently and with greater intensity. Urban residents living in precarious conditions – particularly those in informal settlements – are among the most exposed to climate risks.

Due to insecure land tenure, they are also disproportionately affected by forced evictions, sometimes under the pretext of climate risk reduction, even when alternative solutions exist in the affected areas. Evictions not only deepen communities' existing vulnerabilities and undermine their capacity to mitigate or adapt to climate change. They also perpetuate the root causes of vulnerability, including historical social inequalities and politically institutionalised exclusion, as highlighted in a recent study by the German NGO Misereor.

THE URBAN DIMENSION OF THE CLIMATE CRISIS

The United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), the UN's agency for sustainable housing and urban development, has recently released its new strategic plan for the period 2026–2029. The plan acknowledges the increasingly urban dimension of the climate crisis and calls for improved risk assessment and foresight to mitigate its impact on cities and settlements – especially for the urban poor. According to the strategy, secure access to adequate housing and land is essential to protect urban populations from the effects of climate change. It also emphasises the importance of settlement- and community-based approaches to enable context-specific preparedness and response, while safeguarding housing, land and property rights.

In Kenya and beyond, there is emerging evidence of the value of such approaches. The non-profit organisation Pamoja Trust is considered a pioneer in community-led

> "The tools applied include participatory mapping to identify hazard hotspots, critical infrastructure and areas of cultural or environmental importance."

planning. In the past years, it has supported informal settlement communities through area-based enumerations and risk assessments – enabling residents to use this information to influence government improvement plans and emergency responses.

The tools applied include community climate-awareness trainings, focus group discussions on local experiences with climate change and participatory mapping to identify hazard hotspots, critical infrastructure and areas of cultural or environmental importance within each settlement.

In the western Kenyan city of Kisumu, Pamoja Trust has applied such a participatory toolkit to support two informal settlement communities in documenting economic and non-economic losses and damages caused by climate-related hazards. This approach has enabled residents to record not only the loss of household and business assets, but also non-material impacts such as anxiety and trauma resulting from repeated flooding and displacement.

Accordingly, the spatial analysis that Pamoja Trust had conducted over several years in some of Nairobi's affected informal settlements was crucial in providing insight into the exact number of people living in the flooded areas who were potentially affected by the floods and in need of post-disaster recovery measures.

KENYA

NAIROBI

Athi River
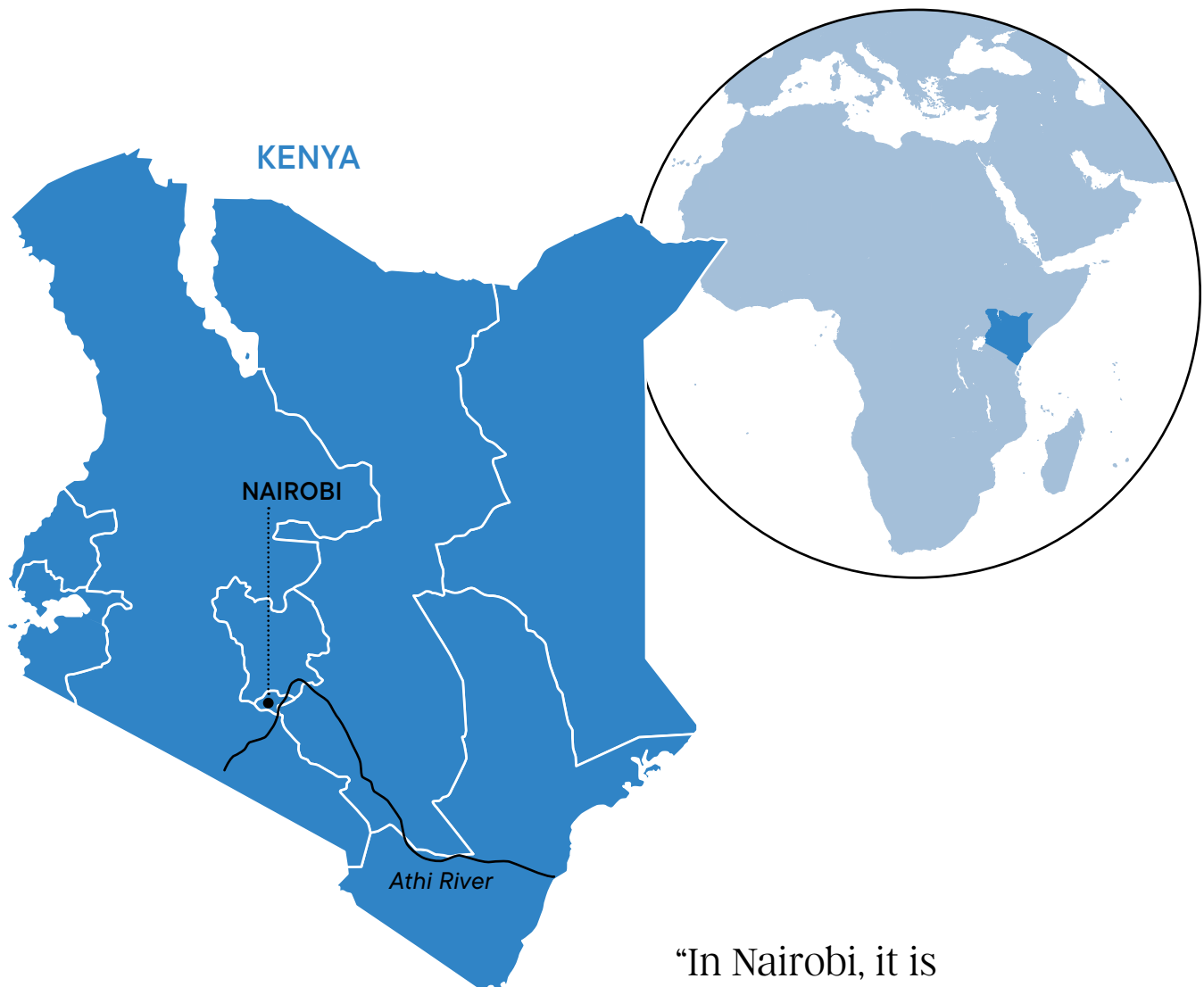
As many of these communities are not recognised by the government and many residents do not have formal property rights, this information was likely underestimated in official estimates. For example, in the informal settlements of Chieko, Budalangi and Gituamba in the Kasarani district of Nairobi, the community assessment identified approximately 700 residential buildings and an estimated 1417 people living within the 60-metre-wide riparian zone. In terms of critical infrastructure, the assessment identified four schools and nine religious institutions in this area. In contrast, the official satellite-based assessment after the flood identified only about 118 affected buildings for the entire Kasarani area, a mismatch Pamoja Trust was able to point out in an Advisory Opinion to the Nairobi River Commission, the responsible state agency for riverbank redevelopment.

USE DATA FROM THE GROUND

As regeneration planning for Nairobi's riverbank areas gains momentum, Pamoja Trust and its community part-

> "In Nairobi, it is important to harmonise existing laws on riparian zones and ensure accountability in the enforcement of clearance orders."

ners are working to ensure that data from community-led assessments is incorporated into official plans. They are also calling on the government to ensure that flood-affected communities benefit from existing programmes for low-income households, such as the Kenya Slum Upgrading Project (KENSUP) – especially since some of these communities were already identified as KENSUP beneficiaries before the floods.

„Community-lead approaches show that solutions do exist – and that they have significant potential to strengthen the adaptive capacity of the urban poor."

Experiences from other African cities underline the value of participatory and risk-informed upgrading initiatives. In Freetown, Sierra Leone, for example, improvements in drainage systems, youth-led waste collection and environmental restoration – such as mangrove planting – have enhanced the quality of life in three flood-prone areas.

In Nairobi, it is furthermore important to harmonise existing laws on riparian zones and ensure accountability in the enforcement of clearance orders, including by clarifying (hitherto fragmented) institutional mandates and responsibilities. All this must be done with clear consideration of the fact that there are tensions between environmental remediation and social protection.

UN-Habitat in its new strategic plan posits that "[strengthening] resilience to climate-related hazards through risk-sensitive urban and land-use planning (...) – especially for those in vulnerable situations (...) must be at the core of efforts to adapt to global climate change". This remains yet to be translated into practice, especially in informal settlement areas. Community-lead approaches show that solutions do exist – and that they have significant potential to strengthen the adaptive capacity of the urban poor.

LINKS

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