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Mental health in times of multiple crises

Focus: Staying sane in a terrifying world **Opinion:** In view of massive cuts, development cooperation must not be overburdened, but rather focused **Around the world:** Insights from inside the protests in Kenya **Around the world:** A participatory approach helps strengthen communities in India and the Caucasus through cooperative competition

Photo: dpa / Xinhua News Agency / Martin Mbangweta

The health sector is hardest hit by global budget cuts.

Opinion — 5

"Rarely before has global development cooperation faced such pressure from so many sides."

Heiner Janus and Tim Röthel, p. 5

Around the world — 8

"Presidents are more likely to remain in office for the normal term if there are strong parties with a vision for the future."

Christopher A. Martínez, p. 12

26 Focus — Mental health in times of multiple crises

Cover: "Healing & Restorative Justice" by Zimbabwean artist Kuda (see p. 4).

The multiple global crises and the loss of traditional forms of community are taking a heavy toll on many people's mental health. At the same time, there is a lack of professional help – especially in low-income countries, where mental health issues often remain a taboo subject. The good news is that certain circumstances that promote resilience can be found all over the world. These include social cohesion, whereas loneliness increases the risk of mental illness.

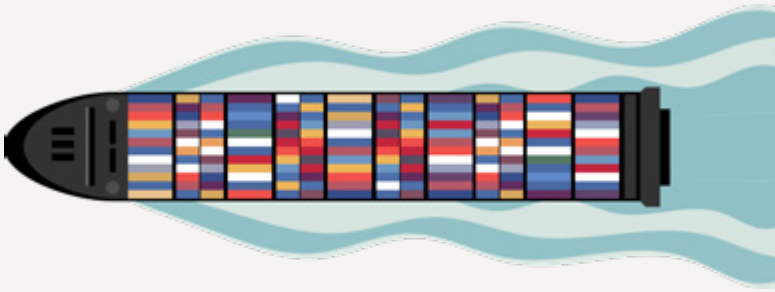
Kudakwashe Kagudu,

alias Kuda, is a visual artist from Harare, Zimbabwe. The cover image of this issue and the image at the beginning of the focus section are his works. His paintings are strongly inspired by the life cycle of African communities and are characterised by figurative surrealism. Among other things, he deals with themes such as personal healing, cultural pride and postcolonial identity. Flowers often appear in his works, growing out of people's heads to symbolise their state of mind and visually express certain emotional or cultural situations. Kuda wants to inspire growth, be a source of hope and creative positivity and raise awareness within the society around him. *Instagram: kuda.artist*

The good news

In order to achieve the goal of net-zero greenhouse-gas emissions by 2050, the *International Maritime Organization (IMO)* has agreed to introduce a global carbon-pricing mechanism for shipping emissions. Expected from 2027 onwards, ships with emissions above set fuel intensity thresholds will be required to buy surplus units from more efficient ships or remedial units sold by the IMO Net-Zero Fund. Revenues from the fund will be used to reward zero-emission ships, finance research on alternative fuels and technologies and mitigate the impact of rising shipping costs on vulnerable economies.

The agreement is a success not only for climate action but also for global governance. Even though 16 member states opposed the decision, with the US at the forefront, the 63 votes in favour were enough for the agreement to come into force – and it will be legally binding still.



$ 4.2 billion

That is how much Africa could lose annually due to biased and stereotypical media coverage. This figure was cited at the DW Global Media Forum in Bonn in July by Africa No Filter, an organisation working to change stereotypical narratives about Africa. The figure is part of a report on the link between media, investment and economic development published last year by Africa No Filter in collaboration with Africa Practice. The full report can be found here: *africanofilter.org/research-reports/the-cost-of-media-stereotypes-to-africa-full-report*

DEVELOPMENT POLICY

Don't overpromise and underdeliver

The global crisis in development cooperation will not be resolved by making exaggerated promises about what it is capable of achieving. Instead, the focus should be on improving people's living conditions tangibly. Adding all kinds of secondary objectives often means that none of the goals can realistically be reached. Tightening resources are forcing projects to focus on more specific and narrow objectives.

BY HEINER JANUS AND TIM RÖTHEL

Photo: dpa / Xinhua News Agency / Martin Mbangweta

Medical care for children in Lusaka, Zambia. The healthcare sector is hardest hit by the cuts in global funding.

The year 2025 has seen an existential crisis emerge in global development cooperation. The US, the world's biggest donor of official development assistance (ODA), has abolished its USAID development agency and looks set to slash its ODA by at least half.

> "Research indicates that development cooperation focused on the interests of the donor is less effective at improving the living conditions of local populations."

Other major donors such as the UK, France, the Netherlands and Germany have also announced substantial cuts. Meanwhile, public support for development spending in these countries has been declining steadily over the past two years. Rarely before has global development cooperation faced such pressure from so many sides.

This existential threat is forcing politicians in donor countries to increasingly defend development cooperation – often by making excessive promises about its transformative potential.

A popular strategy at the moment is to portray cooperation with other countries as an interest-driven, proactive policy. Politicians claim that development funding helps to assert economic and political interests abroad, while simultaneously winning the geopolitical race against China and Russia. This narrative creates a spiral of promises that can never be kept, putting additional pressure on individual development projects to succeed. Furthermore, research indicates that development cooperation focused on the interests of the donor is less effective at improving the living conditions of local populations.

The sweeping cuts to the US development budget are already having a negative impact on the lives of several million people, especially in the area of healthcare. A scientific study published in "The Lancet" estimates that the planned cuts could lead to around 14 million additional deaths – including of about 4.5 million children aged under five – by 2030. This highlights the fact that the US was by far the biggest bilateral donor in around 50 countries over the past nearly 20 years. Our graph (see next page) shows the second-largest donors in these countries.

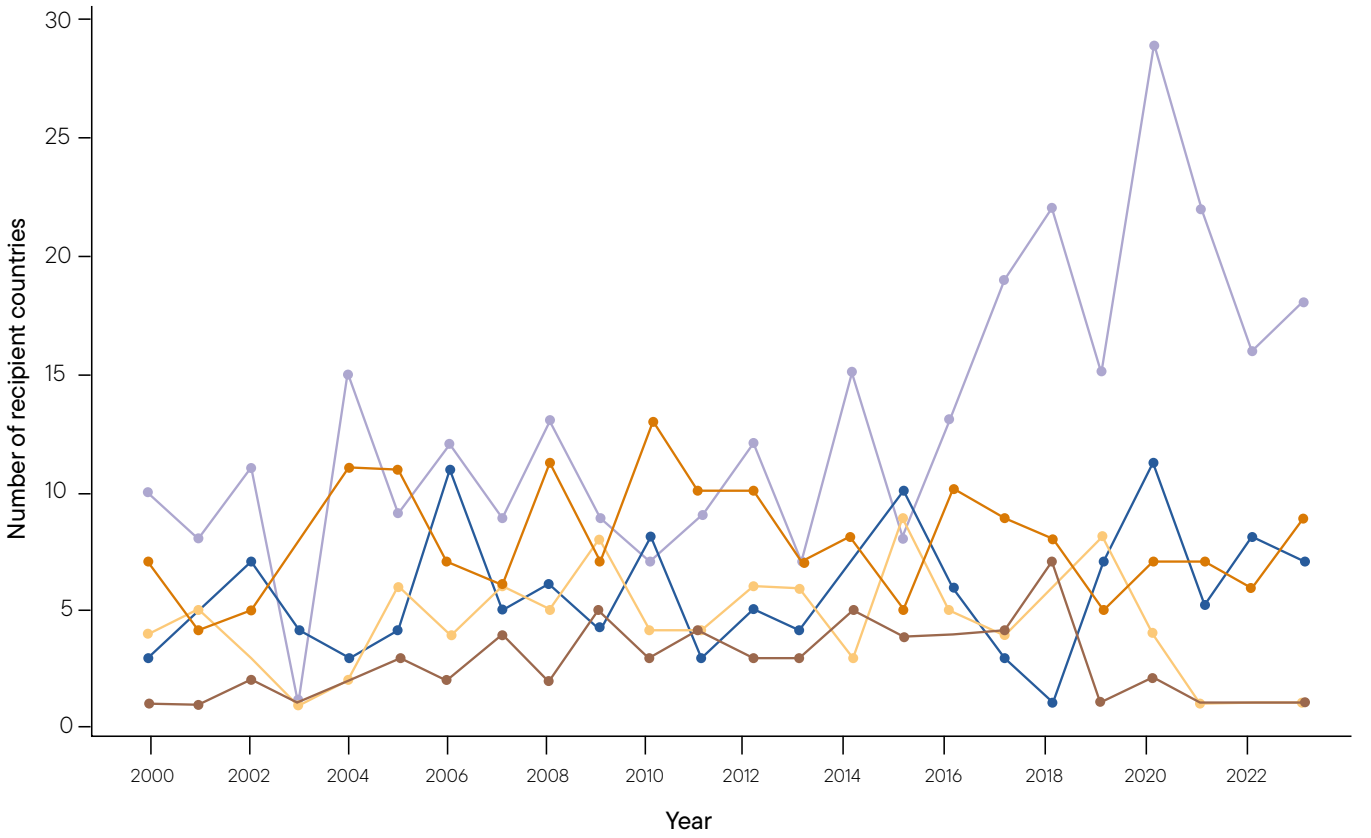
EUROPE'S RESPONSIBILITY

This makes it clear that China will not fill the gap left by the US withdrawal. We have found no evidence to support the widespread "vacuum theory" which claims that China would be willing to step in and take advantage of the resulting gaps in many of the US's recipient countries. Instead, Europe is increasingly finding itself to be responsible. Germany for example has long been the second-largest donor after the US in nearly 20 of these countries. This position inevitably entails a responsibility for filling the gap created by the withdrawal of the US.

Besides playing this acute "gap-filler role", European donors have an opportunity to realign their strategies in two ways. First, they should declare that their primary objective is to improve the living conditions of the population in the recipient countries. As donor countries increasingly focus on their own interests, individual development projects become overly complicated by a multitude of secondary goals. Even small-scale development projects are often expected to promote the donor country's own economic interests, exert geopolitical influence, address migration and tackle climate change. Consequently, it is often difficult to determine whether this form of funding allocation actually has any concrete impact.

Instruments such as diplomacy and security or trade policy are better suited to representing national interests at the global level. According to the "Tinbergen rule" (named after economist and Nobel Laureate Jan Tinbergen), focused policy leads to an efficient allocation of resources. The rule states that political goals are best achieved when the number of goals pursued does not exceed the number of instruments available. When applied to development cooperation, this means that improving living conditions should remain the primary objective. Other secondary goals, such as boosting one's own economy, are better pursued

> "Donor countries should focus on specific areas of development cooperation."



The graph shows how the number of recipient countries in which a selected donor country was the second largest ODA donor after the United States has developed over time. Example: In 2014, Germany was the second largest donor after the United States in 15 recipient countries.

Source: Own work compiled on the basis of Bomprezzi et al. (2025) and the OECD (2025).

through measures such as promoting investment, ensuring exports and fostering trade agreements, rather than by using development cooperation to serve trade interests.

We propose that the second step in realigning the strategy should involve a clearer thematic focus within the project portfolios of bilateral donors. While donors can continue to pursue a variety of objectives via multilateral organisations, their bilateral cooperation should be limited to three to five goals. This will help to pool scarce resources and demonstrably improve the lives of the people in specific areas. It also allows for better coordination with local partners and other donors. Donor organisations can develop specialist expertise and select projects based on evidence. They will thus strengthen their expert profile in the public eye, thereby reducing politicisation and softening public criticism.

We argue that development cooperation based on exaggerated promises made for the sake of interest-driven economic and geopolitical policy is unlikely to be successful. Instead, donor countries should focus on specific areas of development cooperation to deliver concrete benefits to local communities.

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PROTESTS IN KENYA

“I am plagued by doubts about how we as a country can survive”

It has been a year since Kenya’s young “Generation Z” took to the streets in large numbers for weeks to protest tax increases and the 2024 Finance Bill. The movement attracted considerable international attention, but a year later little has changed in Kenya. On the contrary, the state is cracking down hard on any form of protest. Shakira Wafula, one of the most prominent faces of the movement, writes here about her thoughts on the situation in her country.

Shakira Wafula has become an icon of the protest movement after her courageous stand-off with police last year.

Photo: Shakira Wafula

BY SHAKIRA WAFULA

I went to the demonstration on 25 June with a certain sense of hope. That day marked the first anniversary of the storming of the Kenyan parliament, the climax of the youth-led protests against the government in 2024. I hoped that at least the families of those who had died in the previous year's protests would be one step closer to justice and coming to terms with the loss of their loved ones.

We wanted to march through Nairobi, lay flowers at various places where protesters had been killed to commemorate them, and then go to the final stop in front of the parliament building, where we wanted to hand over a petition to the speaker of parliament to push for a faster trial so that those responsible would be prosecuted and the families would receive some kind of compensation from the state for their loss. We wanted to submit the same petition to the president's office.

The police had made things very difficult for the families and their planned demonstration before finally announcing that a peaceful march could take place. Many people came to the city that day – mothers and fathers, relatives of the victims and numerous Kenyans who had come out of solidarity, despite the roadblocks on the main streets and the barbed wire surrounding the parliament and government buildings.

> "I am concerned about my personal safety and that of my family."

I personally started the day alongside Mama Rex, Mama Kennedy – two women who lost their sons in last year's protests – and former Chief Justice David Maraga, keeping my fingers crossed that the state would, for once, allow us to commemorate our heroes. But we had barely walked what felt like 100 meters when tear gas canisters were thrown at us, followed by rubber bullets. Water cannons were also used, and live ammunition was fired. And so, the chaos began. I spent the rest of the day among protesters in various parts of the city, trying to get to the parliament and helping injured people, until I gave up in the evening and found my way home. As darkness fell, gangs of thugs looted and destroyed shops and attacked women who had joined the protests. When I got home, I was physically exhausted – but above all mentally and emotionally drained.

At least 19 people were killed that day. I spent the following days helping victims, offering my condolences to the families affected – and, as always, demanding justice.

SABA SABA

Almost immediately, discussions about Saba Saba began. The original Saba Saba protests on 7 July 1990 were a key moment that helped bring about multiparty democracy in Kenya. To this day, Kenyans take to the streets on 7 July ("Saba" means seven in Kiswahili) to demonstrate for their rights. This year, tensions in the lead-up to the anniversary were running higher than ever.

I made a deliberate decision to stay away. We needed to organise ourselves better. I felt that the loss of life, the injuries and the damage were becoming too great, and that the state had repeatedly shown that it was prepared to treat its citizens with unlimited brutality. On the evening of 3 July, I entered my house and did not leave until the morning of 9 July.

I passively watched online as people made plans for Saba Saba, while I prayed at home for my sanity and the salvation of my country. I tried to take time off, rest, and not be particularly productive. 7 July arrived, and the state panicked. It had literally sealed off the city. It was almost comical as a reaction to a group of unarmed youths. No one is going to die today, I thought – until we saw posts online showing the police spreading terror in smaller towns and residential areas all over the country.

I have a relative who runs a small private clinic in Ngong town. On that day, 12 victims with gunshot wounds were brought in, and even the paramedics were traumatised by the events of the day. By nightfall, the death toll had risen to 30, and reached at least 42 by mid-July as more victims have succumbed to their injuries.

AUTOPILOT MODE

Since then, I have been almost in autopilot mode. I am concerned about my personal safety and that of my family. I feel that I am not there for my son as much as I would like to be. I am tired and sometimes I want to give up. I am not sure

what we as citizens can do to bring about the urgently needed changes more quickly and with less damage. Not long ago, I officially joined the political committee of former Chief Justice Maraga's presidential campaign. As I settle into my new role, I am plagued by doubts about how we as a country can survive until 2027, when the next presidential election is scheduled to take place.

Much has changed since last year. It now seems clearer than ever that the government has decided to declare war on its predominantly young population. The death toll from state-sanctioned brutality continues to rise. People are disappearing without a trace. Since last year, bodies with undisclosed causes of death have been found in garbage dumps, rivers and other locations throughout the country.

At least 20 people have died in police custody in recent months, according to the Independent Policing Oversight Authority, including teacher and blogger Albert Ojwang, who was abducted from his home and taken to the central police station in Nairobi for criticising a police boss online.

In mid-July, Kenya's most prominent activist, Boniface Mwangi, was arrested on fabricated charges. Boniface's prominence is drawing a lot of attention to the case, but many more young people – some of them minors – have been held in Kenyan prisons for weeks. Many are charged with terrorism, and their bail is set so high that their families cannot possibly pay it. I am currently helping to coordinate a national fundraising campaign to find lawyers who will work pro bono and to pay the bails.

SHOOT TO KILL

Boniface Kariuki was shot at gunpoint while selling masks during a protest. It feels like everyone has the video of his execution on the phone. It is not even necessary to demonstrate to fall victim to violence: Bridgit Njoki, a 12-year-old girl, was hit by a stray bullet during the Saba Saba protests while watching television in at home. Many more young people, including children, have been injured in the violence surrounding the protests. This was to be expected: In June, Interior Minister Kipchumba Murkomen ordered the police to shoot to kill. In July, President William Ruto replaced Murkomen's orders with a public announcement that the police should aim for legs. In addition, it seems that gangs of thugs were hired to infiltrate the protests and harass and attack citizens.

The government also appears to be paying media outlets and bloggers to spread propaganda and narratives that seek to confuse the people. On 25 June, the Communications Authority of Kenya issued an order banning live coverage of the ongoing protests on national television. Four Kenyan filmmakers were temporarily detained in May for allegedly being involved in the production of "Blood Parliament," a BBC documentary about state violence in connection with the 2024 protests. Rose Njeri was arrested for creating a website that facilitated public participation against the gov-

Photo: picture alliance/Anadolu/Gerald Anderson

One of many seriously injured during the Saba Saba protests.

ernment's finance bill. People like me, who are at the forefront of the fight against the government, have to take special precautions to ensure our personal safety. Personally, I no longer feel safe when I am out at night.

MORE DESPERATE THAN LAST YEAR

Kenya is on a dark path. What frustrates me in particular is that Member of Parliament Kimani Ichung'wah who belongs to the ruling United Democratic Alliance (UDA) openly admitted that many of the financial bill proposals we protested against last year were passed quietly. Opposition leader Raila Odinga has once again cooperated with the government in a major plan. This leaves us with no official opposition. What we do have is a vice president who was technically appointed illegally, as he took office in the absence of an Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) board.

There have been several attempts to pass outrageous laws, such as one to extend the president's term of office from five to seven years and others aimed at restricting social media or the right to demonstrate. The government has been reshuffled several times, and the president has appointed several more advisers.

As a movement, we feel like we are constantly putting out fires while this regime bombards us with one problem after another and simultaneously plans how to stay in power and amass more wealth. Many Kenyans are angrier or more desperate about the state of their country than they were a year ago.

By the way, I also don't understand why international institutions and governments continue to interact with our government representatives and shake their hands. I personally attended a meeting with the Dutch royal family, which took place despite a petition with over 22,000 signatures from Kenyans urging the royal family to cancel their trip considering human-rights violations in the country. The Dutch royals then agreed to meet with us as a movement. The whole thing was a PR stunt and quite a disappointment. Following this meeting, no tangible efforts were forthcoming. Such behaviour is not limited to Kenya: the world seems to be standing by and watching as Palestine, the DRC, Sudan, Haiti and many other countries suffer without anyone actively working for justice. We accept that no one will come to save us, but we at least hope that the world will not hinder us by supporting a repressive regime.

REMAINING STRONG

So, things look pretty bleak at the moment, with little hope in sight. However, I find strength in how Kenyans continue to stand up for one another – from hospital bills and blood donations to requiem masses and funerals. Despite all the threats to our lives, we still take to the streets. Moreover, a growing number of Kenyans seem to realise that it is up to us to save ourselves. We all have a role to play if the people who are supposed to protect us are so clearly against us. The government continues to try to portray us as anarchists and enemies of progress, while hypocritically courting Western favour. But we continue to receive expressions of solidarity, especially from other African countries such as Togo, Burkina Faso and Zambia.

"We accept that no one will come to save us, but we at least hope that the world will not hinder us by supporting a repressive regime."

The best way forward currently seems to be through elections. We are organising to bring about a change in leadership and take political power. From social-media posts to political education to rallies, we are committed to changing the way Kenyans participate in politics. We cannot keep electing the same old, tried and failed politicians and expect different results.

We also cannot afford to be indifferent and fail to engage in governance as we have done in the past. In the last election cycle, nearly half of eligible voters did not participate in the elections. This must change. We are traveling across the country encouraging citizens to arm themselves with their ID cards and voter registration cards and, when the time comes, to choose their leaders based on their merits and past achievements. Most importantly, the vigilance toward what is happening in government that was awakened last June must remain strong – no matter how hard the government responds.

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Photo: dpa/Xinhua News Agency/Nicaragua Government

Dictatorial dynasty: Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega with his wife and Vice President Rosario Murillo.

GOVERNANCE

Coups in slow motion

Democracy is under threat in large parts of Latin America. In his book "Why Presidents Fail", Chilean political scientist Christopher A. Martínez warns of a new generation of authoritarian leaders who have links to organised crime and aspire to eternal power – such as the current presidents of Nicaragua and El Salvador, Daniel Ortega and Nayib Bukele.

CHRISTOPHER A. MARTÍNEZ IN AN INTERVIEW WITH JAVIER A. CISTERNA FIGUEROA

Your book is about the failure of Latin American presidents. What do you mean when you talk of their failure?
I am referring to presidents who do not manage to complete their term in office – though not for health reasons. I also attempt in my book to shed light on political parties and the important role they play. I show that presidents are more likely to remain in office for the normal term if there are strong parties with a vision for the future. If parties take active part in a country's political life, they will think twice before ousting a president. On the other hand, if they serve people merely as a vehicle by which to get into parliament, this points to a short-term view that can lead to failure.

Is it not the case that weak parties can also enable presidents to rule unchallenged?
Weak parties cannot provide any political counterbalance to the office of president because they are not sufficiently organised. There are only the parliamentarians, possibly also from the opposition, but only as individuals – yet collective action is needed to topple a president. I conducted a survey of more than 300 social scientists in 12 Latin American countries for my book. In Guatemala for example, where to all intents and purposes no political parties exist, they didn't mention Congress when asked what served as a counterbalance to the presidential office – they mentioned the country's largest group of companies instead. They put social movements in second place, followed by the military and the US embassy. Congress was mentioned only in fifth place. This makes it clear that it will be up to other actors to curb the president's influence if political parties are weak.

Can you give examples for Latin America of strong parties and healthy democracies on the one hand and of weak parties and democracies in crisis on the other?
Uruguay is an obvious example of robust parties and a robust democracy. Parties there succeed in noting the interests of the people and addressing them within the political system. In this context I would also cite Chile and Costa Rica, in that order. Mexico is another country with relatively strong political parties, but it doesn't have a healthy democracy. Without a doubt, Guatemala and Peru are prime examples of countries with weak parties and democracies in crisis. Parties are just vehicles for election participation there – empty shells containing people who simply want to get into parliament but have neither ideas nor any political identity.

Where is authoritarianism particularly pronounced in Latin America just now?
The most critical cases, if we leave Cuba out of the picture, are definitely Nicaragua, where President Daniel Ortega and his wife and Vice President Rosario Murillo essentially comprise a dictatorial dynasty, and of course Nicolás Maduro's Venezuela. The most recent addition to the authoritarian scene is Nayib Bukele in El Salvador, who unlike the others I've just mentioned is extremely popular.

So, it's not just that presidents fail if they are deposed, but that presidencies – and the system – also fail if they become authoritarian regimes?
There is a crucial difference between the 20th century and the current one. In the 20th century, the military would stand behind these authoritarian governments and carry out coups. What we are seeing this century are coups taking place in slow motion: they begin with presidents who are voted into office in free elections. Once in power, however, they weaken the democratic institutions and systems that provide counterbalance, such as the free press. The favourite tricks of such presidents include abolishing the constitutional limit set on their term of office. This is something we have witnessed in Nicaragua and El Salvador.

> "Various political studies have concluded that content citizens are not all that good for democracy because they become uncritical."

What role does the economy play in all this? During Latin America's commodity boom there was little talk of any democratic or institutional collapse in countries such as Ecuador, Bolivia or Venezuela.
Various political studies have concluded that content citizens are not all that good for democracy because they become uncritical. In the case of the commodity boom, people profited from the revenues being reaped and took a fairly uncritical view of the state of democracy in their respective countries – even though what was happening in countries such as Ecuador, Bolivia and Venezuela was clearly nothing short of a concentration of power. Democracy was weakened but many people were prepared to turn a blind eye, above all thanks to the good economic conditions that prevailed in the region.

What poses the biggest threat to democracy in Latin America at the moment?
Organised crime, without any doubt. It has shown just how capable it is of exploiting the historic weakness of Latin America and its institutions for its own ends. At the same time, we are seeing the demise of traditional political actors such as parties and trade unions, and we are moving towards a highly fragmented world in which our views of the world are rooted in social media, not in community projects. What we experienced in the 20th century will definitely not happen again.

BOOK

Martínez, C. A., 2024: Why presidents fail.
Stanford University Press.

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COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

Strengthening communities through cooperative competition

The Financial Participatory Approach encourages local people to come up with their own solutions to pressing problems. It rewards good ideas and provides funding to implement them. The approach has fostered creativity, innovation and self-confidence in communities from the South Caucasus to India.

BY NAND KISHOR AGRAWAL AND STEFFEN SCHUELEIN

Photo: Chonbenthung Kikon

A woman who has pitched her idea via an FPA process receives an award in Songlhuh village, Nagaland, India.

For four decades, Imnasenla has lived in Nukshiyim village in Mokokchung, one of the most remote districts in the Indian state of Nagaland. As part of a Financial Participatory Approach (FPA) contest, she decided to present her idea, which involved extracting banana fibre and using it to craft ecofriendly products, to the village community. Receiving an award of Rs. 5000 (about $ 58) for her idea was both unexpected and encouraging for the villager. Following the award ceremony, Imnasenla and her women self-help group as the first prize winners then obtained Rs. 400,000 (about $ 4670) to implement her winning idea – for the benefit of the village – in collaboration with the village council. The money comes from a joint biodiversity project of the governments of India and Germany, supported by Gopa Worldwide Consultants.

The FPA is a method of fostering community-driven development. It revolves around the idea that local people can generate solutions to the most pressing problems their community faces. They are encouraged to come up with ideas that foster economic and social development and to pitch them to a local jury. The best proposals receive financial awards and funding for implementation. The FPA originated in Latin America in the 1980s and draws inspiration from classic participatory approaches and entrepreneurial models.

The FPA includes handing over the power and responsibility of decision-making and budget management to local actors, allowing them to implement solutions that address their specific needs. Receiving a financial award further boosts the presenter's self-confidence and motivates locals to take action, especially in remote and poor communities, where awards, certificates and cash prizes are rare. Quick project implementation with tangible benefits and improved trust between the project and communities are among the positive results of the FPA.

The FPA process differs from conventional funding in the sense that applicants "compete to win" and have a large degree of freedom in designing their solutions. The FPA framework builds on eight core principles:

1. All initiatives come from the people.

2. The role of project staff in the FPA is limited to facilitation.

3. Cooperative competition generates the best ideas and practices.

4. Direct financing supports successful generation and implementation of ideas.

5. Mobilisation of learning, knowledge and experience.

6. The FPA makes constructive use of tensions.

7. Media exposure reinforces the impact of the FPA.

8. The FPA progresses through cumulative cycles.

There is no inherent priority among the principles, as their application may differ depending on the reality and practical needs on the ground. They can be adapted to align with the unique social, economic and environmental context of each community.

IMPLEMENTATION OF FPA PROJECTS IN NAGALAND

In Nagaland, 64 villages have implemented FPA projects aimed at enhancing biodiversity conservation and improving the livelihoods of the local communities. The first contest focused for example on storytelling by adults and drawing by school children. Participants reflected upon their relationship with nature and traditional conservation practices and shared their ideas through presentations and artwork. This initial contest not only led to the communities connecting emotionally with the project but also laid the foundation for more complex initiatives.

Subsequent contests centred on nature-based community infrastructure and biodiversity-driven livelihoods. A total of over 900 ideas were presented across all project communities, with 120 being granted funding for implementation. The projects inspired innovation while at the same time uniting communities to tackle local challenges together.

For instance, several villages proposed ideas that covered everything from producing traditional herbal medicines to establishing water harvesting structures and constructing "marketing sheds" – small buildings to collectively sell local products. Many of these ideas were successfully realised with financial support from the project funds.

Though perhaps less obviously innovative, many villages also proposed pig breeding, a popular livelihood activity in the Naga community. The idea was based on a self-sustaining propagation model: The initial beneficiaries would donate one piglet from the first litter to the village committee, which would then distribute it to the next group of beneficiaries, creating a continuous cycle of shared growth and opportunity. The result would be a sense of ownership and belonging.

ADVANTAGES OF GENERATING IDEAS FROM LOCAL COMMUNITIES

One significant outcome of applying the FPA in Nagaland was the increased participation of women and marginalised groups. The contests provided a platform for these often-overlooked community members to voice their ideas. Members of a women's group in Nagaland said: "The awards are good for motivation, and of course we are happy when we win, but for us, the opportunity to express our ideas in front of the entire village is even more important than the money".

Right from the first contest, the presentation of ideas and announcement of winners were accompanied by a community celebration involving dance, singing and theatre performances. This event character adds an element of playfulness to the project planning process that motivates participation. Furthermore, it ensured that the entire village was informed and aware of the project. Local media cover-

age helped spread successful experiences. So far, community feedback has been unanimously positive. One of the enthusiastic participants exclaimed: "We would like to organise this type of contest every month!"

The community members not only engaged with one another during the events but also played a part in implementing the winning ideas. Notably, the communities' in-kind and cash contribution to the implemented initiatives covered almost 30 % of the costs rather than the expected 10 %. Rather than just relying on the project's budget, community members scaled the structures to meet their needs and covered the extra costs themselves. Their extraordinary commitment made sure that the project was more tailored and sustainable.

> "One significant outcome of applying the FPA in Nagaland was the increased participation of women and marginalised groups. The contests provided a platform for these often-overlooked community members to voice their ideas."

Before reaching Nagaland, the FPA had been implemented in several other countries with similarly positive outcomes and valuable lessons. Experiences range from projects for sustainable livelihood development in the Andes of South America and a business incubator to promote youth employment in an urban context in Iraq to projects for community-based nature conservation in the South Caucasus (see box).

Despite many positive results, however, the FPA cannot be considered a panacea for nature conservation and more sustainable livelihoods. Rather, it is a valuable preparatory step on the road to long-term investment agreements driven by local communities.

This article draws on the authors' first-hand experiences in the Nagaland Biodiversity Project and in various projects in the southern Caucasus, which are supported by KfW Development Bank.

LINKS

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OWNERSHIP

Implementing community ideas in the southern Caucasus

In Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, the Financial Participatory Approach (FPA, see main text) has been successfully used to improve local livelihoods. The projects show that community members often know best what solutions to their problems might look like – and that ownership is very important to bring about positive change in the long term.

BY NAND KISHOR AGRAWAL AND STEFFEN SCHUELEIN

An outstanding adaptation of the FPA was implemented by the Eco Corridors Fund Project (ECF) in the three countries of the southern Caucasus – Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia – through WWF in cooperation with Gopa Worldwide Consultants. ECF is a financial instrument aimed at preserving large, sustainably used landscapes in the southern Caucasus. Its partners are ministries of the three countries as well as local governments, and it is financially supported by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) through KfW Development Bank.

ECF used three kinds of FPA contest – storytelling, livelihoods and community infrastructure – to build a rapport with the target communities and find out which communities had sufficient motivation and capacity to implement projects. The jointly developed action plan was then supported by long-term funding (usually 10 years) for nature conservation areas managed by the communities.

CHICKEN FARMING AND SOLAR STREET LIGHTING

In Azerbaijan, a presenter won the FPA livelihood award for proposing a community chicken incubator that all villagers would be able to use, bringing their eggs for incubation and then taking the hatched chicks. A small community building was allocated to shelter the incubator, and a small fee had to be contributed to cover the cost of electricity. The entire community is benefiting from the new facility, which also enables them to experiment with different breeds to find out which produce the best meat and eggs and which are most resistant to diseases.

In one Armenian village, the idea of installing solar street lighting won an award. Going out in the dark would put villagers at risk of attacks from bears, wolves and jackals. The money from the award motivated the FPA contest participants and their village community to further cooperate with the project on wildlife conservation zones and other measures to reduce human wildlife conflicts.

A community in Georgia received an award for proposing better haymaking equipment so that their cattle would

Photo: Steffen Schuelein

This mobile hut with a solar roof is part of a campsite – a community idea from an FPA project in Armenia.

have more fodder in the winter. This allowed the project members to discuss and implement a grazing management plan that would see their summer pastures used more sustainably, and strict conservation implemented in an adjacent high mountain area.

FOSTERING OWNERSHIP

In countries as diverse as India, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, FPA projects have demonstrated that cooperative competition can encourage community members to think creatively and propose their own ideas. This increased ownership is critical for addressing complex challenges, particularly in contexts with diverse needs and limited resources. The approach thus offers valuable lessons for future development efforts.

Successfully implementing project ideas not only creates satisfaction and pride among the community members but also facilitates trust building with government agencies and donors. Successful projects make a village attractive for future investments. Authorities are often keen to introduce government programmes in villages where they see success and cooperation with motivated village communities.

This article draws on the authors' first-hand experiences in the Eco-Corridor Fund (ECF) Project and in various other projects in the southern Caucasus, which are supported by KfW Development Bank.

LINK

Eco-Corridors Fund for the Caucasus:
ecfcaucasus.org/fpa

Photo: dpa / Middle East Images / Bryan Dozier

Shifts in international development cooperation were already evident at the IMF and World Bank Spring Meeting in April 2025.

WORLD BANK

"We will always be the target of criticism"

Although one of the most influential multilateral institutions, the World Bank relies on the backing of its member countries. What is the consequence of the waning support for international cooperation? Senior Management Director Axel van Trotsenburg should know: he has been at the World Bank for 37 years and, as managing director of operations, oversaw its global activities from 2019 to 2023.

AXEL VAN TROTSENBURG IN AN INTERVIEW WITH EVA-MARIA VERFÜRTH

Axel van Trotsenburg, several donor countries are cutting their development aid budgets and questioning the value of international cooperation. US President Donald Trump ordered a review of whether World Bank membership was still in the USA's interests. How are you dealing with this situation?

It's not only in the US that we are currently seeing growing criticism of multilateralism. Nor is this anything new – it's something the World Bank has experienced ever since it was founded in 1945. In the early years, many Wall Street investors were sceptical about buying bonds from the World Bank. In the late 1990s, the International Financial Institution Advisory Commission (also known as the Meltzer Commission) in the US questioned the World Bank's role, and now, "Project 2025" published by the Heritage Foundation is doing the same. As a global organisation representing people in 189 countries, we are very much part of the public debate and will always be the target of criticism. We have to face up to this criticism and demonstrate over and over again what benefits the World Bank entails for the international community. We firmly believe that multilateral cooperation can do a great deal of good.

Which examples come to your mind from the past 80 years?

It's easy to forget how much some things have changed. It is estimated that 60% of people around the world were living in extreme poverty in the early 1960s, whereas the figure now is around eight percent. So, although extreme poverty hasn't yet been eradicated, much has happened. A number of countries in Asia that were the beneficiaries of substantial World Bank resources have shown impressive development. The World Bank's strength is that we are represented directly in our member countries. Around two thirds of our staff work in over 140 country offices.

> "We have to demonstrate over and over again what benefits the World Bank entails for the international community."

This does not appear to be particularly appreciated in global politics at present. Do you still have enough support for your work?

Yes, absolutely. The International Development Association (IDA), which belongs to the World Bank Group and is responsible for the world's poorest countries, concluded its most recent replenishment round in late 2024. Despite the difficult global political situation, it was the highest IDA replenishment in history with the largest number of donor countries contributing – 60 in all. That is overwhelmingly positive. In its current budget proposal, the US has earmarked $ 3.2 billion for IDA.

That is indeed only slightly less than the Biden administration had promised in December. However, it was long uncertain how much the US would contribute. How serious would it be for the World Bank if it lost its largest donor?

Every country has its government, and every government wants to focus on specific areas – and even the biggest donor can decide to concentrate more on domestic policy again. However, over 85% of IDA funds come not from the US, even though it is the largest single donor, but from other nations, with European countries for example contributing roughly half of the IDA21 funding.

Countries in the Global South in particular are demanding a greater say in the international financial architecture. Does the World Bank see itself as having an obligation here?

The major donors to the World Bank and IDA have already given away very large numbers of their votes. In the World Bank's early years, the US and the UK, the two largest shareholders in the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), together held more than half of the votes. Since then, they have relinquished around 60% of their voting power – I can't think of anywhere else that something similar has happened. The US now holds around 10% of the votes on the IDA board. Furthermore, every country has a voice in IDA negotiations, which is pretty democratic. Though the board does have some executive directors who represent just one country, such as the US or Germany, most act on behalf of a group of countries to ensure that all are represented.

Essentially, however, the debate is about more than this – it's about whose voice is heard. In my experience at the World Bank, people will listen to whoever has the best ideas. For example, the mid-sized European countries have raised many important issues over the years. In the 1980s they pushed for the structural adjustments to be accompanied by social measures, they brought about the debt-relief initiative and addressed matters relating to the environ-

ment, gender and the climate. The G7 countries then picked up on these issues and continued to pursue them at World Bank level. Such ideas for development are important for the World Bank, as they make the organisation stronger.

For European countries, it might be easier to make their ideas heard than for others. What about countries from the Global South?
For over 25 years we have been working on bringing about greater decentralisation. It isn't only important for us to cooperate with governments on the ground and keep an eye on how the projects are being implemented. Our colleagues at the local level are also better placed to tap into new ideas. For instance, the idea for our cash-transfer programmes originally came from Latin America. Around the turn of the millennium, the Mexican programme "Oportunidades" helped a very large number of poor people. The model was then expanded to other Latin American countries, and these days similar programmes are underway all over the world.

In 2022, the World Bank broadened its vision from a "world free of poverty" to a "world free of poverty on a liveable planet". What do you mean by this?
We want to combat poverty on a planet where it is in fact possible to lastingly eradicate poverty. This relates not only to the climate and the environment, but also for example to conflicts that cause regions to become unliveable.

A year later the World Bank undertook to make nearly half of its annual funding available to climate-related projects by 2025. A large-scale energy project in Africa is planned, for example. Can you tell us more?
Energy supply is a key issue, especially for the poorest countries that we support via IDA. 600 million people in Africa have no access to electricity. Our goal with the project "Mission 300" is to hook 300 million of them up to the power supply. To this end we are working with African governments, the private sector and bilateral donors. We are also fostering cooperation between African countries to ensure that power grids are expanded. Though this is ambitious, we believe it is important to face up to such challenges if quicker progress is what is wanted.

"Mission 300" is criticised by NGOs for not excluding fossil energy sources, especially gas. And in June news emerged that World Bank President Ajay Banga no longer rules out the idea of funding nuclear power – a decision in line with the demands of the US. What is your view of this criticism, and why the change in policy on nuclear energy?
Many experts around the world, including in the EU, regard gas as an important transitional fuel. That's exactly how we see it, too: gas can be part of the energy mix, but only as an interim solution. We assume that we will also provide funding for hydrogen and thermal energy. A number of executive directors have raised the issue of nuclear power at the World Bank because this is something that is being discussed in many countries – not only in some OECD member states, but also in developing nations. It is important to note however that the World Bank has never financed the construction of nuclear power plants themselves – with the exception of one project funded for Italy in 1959. We will now work together with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and initially advise countries on their options in this area.

> "First and foremost, we want to increase public funding and determine how best to deploy it."

The IDA replenishment was a positive signal, yet ODA spendings are being cut and we have an annual global funding gap of trillions of dollars when it comes to achieving the SDGs. At the Hamburg Sustainability Conference in June, you've therefore called for greater involvement of the private sector. What do you hope this can achieve?
First and foremost, we want to increase public funding and determine how best to deploy it. The leverage the World Bank achieves on the capital market can play an important role here: for every dollar that is paid into the IBRD, we can make financial pledges of up to ten dollars in ten years' time. Even IDA has a leverage ratio of one to four. This means we get more out of taxpayers' money – and should take advantage of this, especially when public budgets are cut. Of course, there is also the question of how private funding can be increased.

The impact of international private investment has so far fallen short of expectations, with only little capital flowing to sub-Saharan Africa. Is it realistic to pin one's hopes on foreign private capital if it's the poorest countries one is trying to help?
The international private sector does actually invest a great deal of money, though it chiefly gets channelled to countries that are good at attracting it, such as in East Asia. We want to create similar prerequisites in other countries too, especially in the poorest nations, by putting in place risk

mitigation measures or providing guarantees. IDA's "Private Sector Window" programme uses a risk mitigation facility to encourage private investment in the poorest and most fragile countries, which I personally believe to be very important. We should further develop such derisking instruments, not only in the World Bank Group but also in multilateral and bilateral development banks. Otherwise, the private sector will refrain from getting involved. However, we are also convinced that much needs to be done on the domestic level, by improving taxation systems for instance. Many of the success stories in Asia are rooted in the successful mobilisation of local resources. Neither ODA funding nor foreign private sector investment on their own will ever be enough – countries also have to maximise their own revenues.

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AGRICULTURE

How Malawi embraces AI to support smallholder farmers

The new AI-powered app "Ulangizi" helps Malawian smallholder farmers to get real-time advice in their local language, improving yields and resilience.

BY BENSON KUNCHEZERA

When a farmer in rural Malawi notices unusual spots on their maize or soybeans, expert advice is often out of reach. But now, help might be just one click away: to support the many smallholder farmers, the mobile application "Ulangizi" powered by Artificial Intelligence (AI) was developed to deliver real-time agricultural advice, helping them to improve yields, manage livestock and recover from climate-related disasters. The app is available in Chichewa, Malawi's most widely spoken language.

Smallholder farmers account for over 80% of Malawi's agricultural labour force and are central to both national food production and rural livelihoods. Yet many of them face

persistent challenges including unreliable weather, pest outbreaks and limited access to professional consultation services. According to the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), only around 13 % of Malawian farmers regularly receive advice from trained extension officers, mostly due to staffing shortages and limited resources.

A DIGITAL BRIDGE TO EXPERT KNOWLEDGE

The Ulangizi app – its name means "advice" in Chichewa – operates through WhatsApp, allowing users to interact via text, voice and photos. It draws on AI technology like ChatGPT and Malawi's official agricultural extension manual to provide locally relevant recommendations on pest management, planting methods, fertilisation, soil care and animal husbandry. "Farmers can type a question, send a voice message or upload a photo of a sick plant or animal. The app analyses the problem and offers a solution," says Richard Chongo, Country Director at the nonprofit organisation Opportunity International Malawi.

The tool was developed by Opportunity International to improve rural livelihoods with inclusive digital technologies. While the Ministry of Agriculture continues to provide consulting services, the app acts as a complementary tool, especially in remote areas. "Government extension workers can't be everywhere," Chongo says. "This app helps reach more farmers with practical advice based on Malawi's own farming guidelines."

SUPPORTING RECOVERY AND RESILIENCE

The need for such tools became particularly evident after Cyclone Freddy hit the country in early 2023, displacing over 500,000 people and destroying thousands of hectares of farmland. Many families lost not just their crops but also their primary source of income. "So, this app is not just about farming tips – it's a resilience tool that can help people bounce back and prepare for future shocks," says Chongo.

Looking ahead, Opportunity International Malawi wants to keep improving the app by including support for more crops, additional languages and offline features for areas with poor internet access. "This is just the beginning," Chongo says. "We're working towards a future where every smallholder farmer in Malawi can access the knowledge they need."

"While the Ministry of Agriculture continues to provide consulting services, the app acts as a complementary tool, especially in remote areas."

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RESILIENCE

Mental health in times of multiple crises

„Gathering of Life“ by Zimbabwean artist Kuda. For more information about the artist, see p. 4.

OUR VIEW

Out of the taboo zone

In our crisis-ridden world, people's mental health is suffering greatly. Low-income countries in particular lack professional staff, and mental health issues are often taboo. This urgently needs to change.

BY MAREN VAN TREEL

Mental health is just as important as physical health for individual and social development. This makes the WHO's estimate all the more alarming: one in eight people worldwide lives with a mental disorder. Anxiety and depressive disorders are the most common. A recent international study found that one in two people will probably develop at least one mental disorder in their lifetime.

Risk factors include poverty, violence and displacement, as well as global disasters such as the Covid-19 pandemic and climate change. People can develop post-traumatic stress disorder after experiencing an extreme weather event, for example, or they may become anxious or depressed when harvests become increasingly unpredictable. Secure living conditions are therefore essential for improving mental health worldwide.

Those who are already suffering must receive support. Mental health professionals are urgently needed worldwide, yet their availability varies greatly. According to the latest WHO Mental Health Atlas from 2020, Africa has 1.6 mental health professionals per 100,000 inhabitants, whereas Europe has 44.8. The difference between low-income countries (1.4) and high-income countries (62.2) is extreme. Even where provision is relatively good, questions remain: Who can afford mental healthcare? Are such services covered by health insurance? Who has health insurance in the first place?

SEEKING PROFESSIONAL HELP

Social acceptance also matters a great deal. In many societies, mental health issues remain a taboo subject. This stigma must be broken: the less those affected judge themselves, the more likely they are to seek professional help. In view of the figures mentioned above, it may also be helpful to remember that it is highly probable that others in your own environment are also suffering from mental illness – even if you cannot necessarily see it.

It is therefore crucial not to equate mental illness with weakness. Rather, it is part of being human – and those affected should be given the help they need.

FACTORS FOR RESILIENCE

The good news is that certain circumstances and characteristics that promote resilience can be found all over the world. Clinical psychologist Gladys K. Mwiti analysed for D+C how young people in Africa manage to overcome the many adversities in their lives. She cites the sense of community and mutual support traditionally found in many African societies, the entrepreneurial spirit that boosts self-efficacy and motivation and the strength and purpose provided by spirituality and religion.

Her findings can be instructive for modern societies around the world that are characterised by isolation. Loneliness is a risk factor for mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety disorders. It seems that we need to relearn what our ancestors knew: we humans are only healthy when we are in good company.

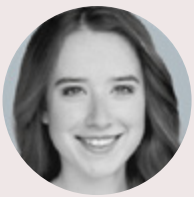

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Photo: dpa/ASSOCIATED PRESS/Tsvangirayi Mukwazhi

Talk therapy in Harare: Much of the mental health work in Zimbabwe is community-based.

HEALTH FUNDING

Placing greater value on mental health

The chronic underfunding of Zimbabwe's healthcare sector is contributing to a rise in mental illness. The lack of investment will have long-term consequences not only for the wellbeing of the population, but also for the country's economy.

BY DERICK MATSENGARWODZI

Mental health issues such as depression and anxiety tend to be underestimated in Zimbabwe. However, these conditions come at a high financial and human cost. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health is crucial to overall health and wellbeing, yet it is often neglected and underfunded, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. Poverty, political instability and poor access to healthcare exacerbate preventable mental illnesses.

In 2021, mental health issues cost the Zimbabwean economy an estimated $ 163.6 million – nearly 0.6 % of the country's GDP. Less than five percent of this sum was actually spent on mental healthcare. The remaining costs were due

> "Investments in mental health could prevent over 11,000 deaths and add more than 500,000 healthy life years over the next 20 years."

to lost productivity caused by premature death, disability and absenteeism. It is estimated that investments in mental health could prevent over 11,000 deaths, add more than 500,000 healthy life years over the next 20 years and save Zimbabwe around $ 689 million.

"You cannot understand people's needs without research on poor mental health, including its risk and protective factors," says Tanatswa Chikaura, founder and director of Ndinewe Foundation, a youth-led mental health organisation. "Grassroots organisations are playing a growing role because they work with high-risk groups and vulnerable communities."

Jesca Tapfumaneyi, community engagement coordinator at Friendship Bench, a community-based mental health initiative, underscores the importance of adequate resources. "Without prevention, early intervention and treatment, people face prolonged distress, impairing their capacity to function in daily life, their relationships and their ability to contribute to their families and communities," she says. "This leads to discrimination, stigma and a diminished quality of life."

ANYONE CAN BE AFFECTED

Tapfumaneyi notes that high poverty rates, unemployment, economic instability and food insecurity cause significant stress and uncertainty for many Zimbabweans, often leading to mental illness such as drug addiction (see box). Weakened social safety nets and limited access to healthcare further exacerbate the problem. Cultural norms can also prevent people from seeking professional help.

Chikaura emphasises that mental health issues can affect anyone, contrary to certain widespread cultural beliefs about who suffers from them and how. "Mental illness doesn't discriminate, and we all need to educate ourselves and seek help regardless of gender, age, skin colour or other factors," she says. "And just like physical health, mental health requires different types of support. It encompasses our emotional, psychological and social wellbeing. Don't compromise when it comes to mental health."

Lacking the necessary knowledge and resources, however, many people turn to religious practitioners who have little experience. "Do you require psychological help? Make an appointment with a psychologist and find out what you need," advises Chikaura. "Mental health is an important aspect of our lives that can affect every area of our day-to-day existence."

Investments in mental health, just like in all other areas of health, must be taken seriously and distributed fairly by policymakers. Chikaura adds that such investments also help communities develop better support mechanisms.

Ultimately, mental health policy needs to be integrated into broader health and development strategies. "Addressing mental health requires a multifaceted approach that goes beyond simply treating illness," Tapfumaneyi stresses. "It's about promoting an environment that supports mental wellbeing – through social connections, healthy lifestyles and life skills training."

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Photo: dpa/NurPhoto/Matt Hunt

Crystal meth addiction is a major problem in Zimbabwe.

DRUG ABUSE

Addiction's toll on households

Families also suffer when their loved ones become addicted. In Zimbabwe, where healthcare systems are already overwhelmed and the effects of mental illness still tend to be underestimated, no one gets the help they need.

BY DERICK MATSENGARWODZI

In Zimbabwe, approximately 60% of patients admitted to psychiatric facilities suffer from conditions related to drug and substance abuse. The spread of illegal drugs, particularly methamphetamine (commonly known as crystal meth), has far-reaching psychological and social consequences – not only for users, but also for their families. Affected households report a progressive decline in their physical and mental wellbeing as they live with the consequences of a loved one's addiction.

There are no official drug statistics, but experts agree that the crisis is worsening. Despite this fact, little research has been done to examine the impact on mental health in depth. As a result, many families suffer in silence. Some seek spiritual help, while others resort to desperate measures, including violence, to cope with the problem.

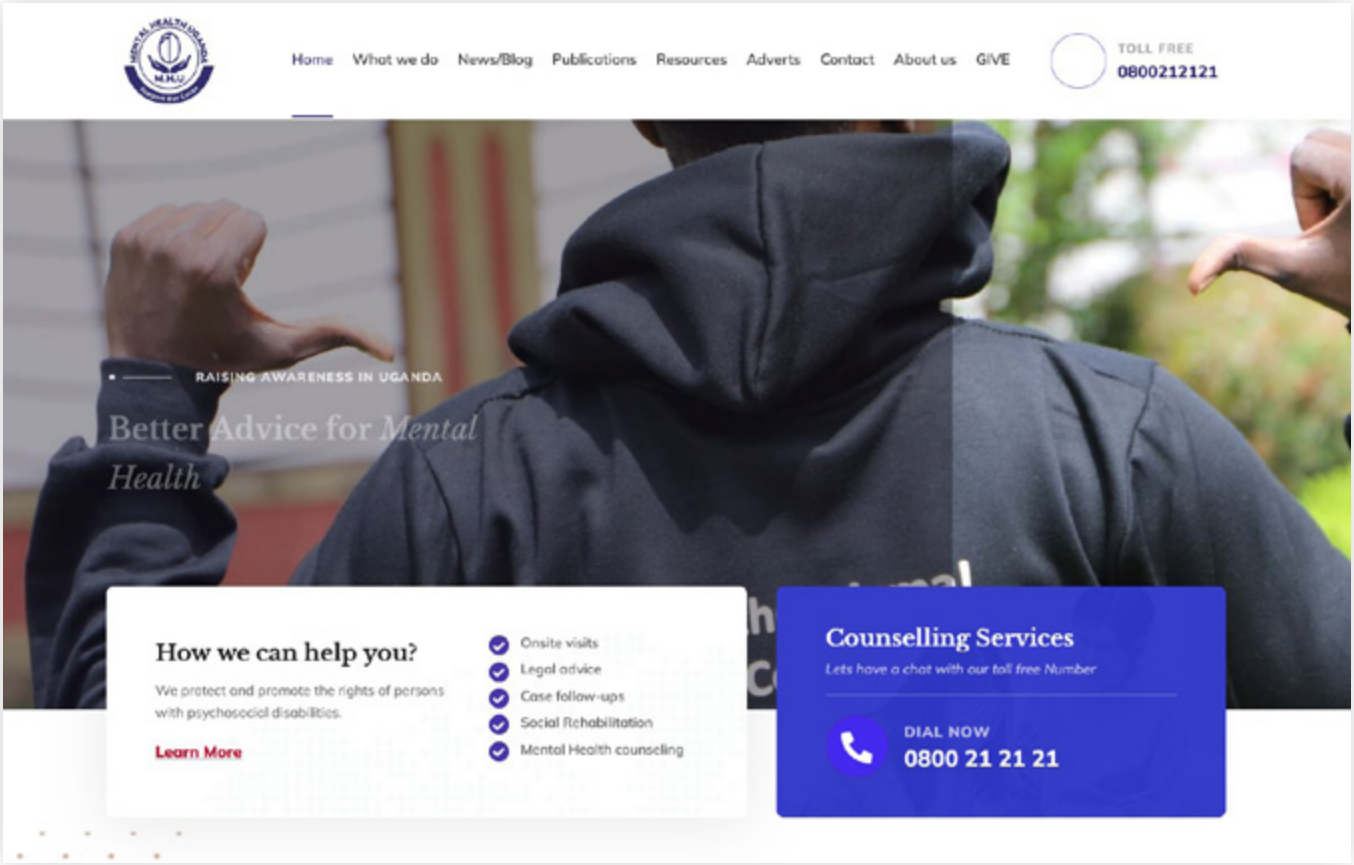
COMMUNITY STIGMA

One such case is Bernard (not his real name), a 36-year-old who began using meth about a year ago. Since then, his relationships have deteriorated. He has become violent and manipulative. Each time he was caught stealing, his mother paid to protect him, clinging to the hope that he would eventually stop.

"When he started using drugs, he began stealing small items from the house and from neighbours to finance his addiction," says Sekai (name changed), Bernard's mother. "When we tried to keep him out of the house, he became violent and threatened to destroy property and hurt us."

As a widow with no access to adequate support services, Sekai eventually sought a court order to evict her son. Many other parents have taken similar steps, turning to the courts in desperation. But instead of receiving support for her difficult decision, Sekai became a target of community stigma. Neighbours accused her of causing her son's addiction, of abusing him – and even of using witchcraft for personal gain. "But I had no choice. He had become a threat to everyone. I feared he might even assault someone. No parent wants that, but I needed peace and safety," she explains.

Sekai's story reflects the problems faced by many families in Zimbabwe who are struggling with the widespread availability and abuse of methamphetamine, a drug considered a serious public health threat worldwide. In a country where the healthcare system is already critically overburdened and mental illnesses such as addiction receive little attention (see main text), these families are forced to watch helplessly as the condition of their loved ones continues to deteriorate. They too become victims.



Screenshot: mhu.ug

MHU's mental-health hotline is focusing on Uganda's youth.

UGANDA

A hotline to support young people's mental health

Uganda's youth is struggling with significant mental-health issues for a variety of reasons, yet professional help is scarce. One of the few services available is a free hotline, which has been well received.

BY RONALD SSEGUJJA SSEKANDI

In Uganda, one of the world's youngest nations, about half of the youth are not in employment, education or training. The country's economy is struggling, and the consequences of the pandemic are still affecting daily life. For many young people, the weight of expectations at school, at home or from society in general has become unbearable. A 2023 study conducted in schools in the districts of Wakiso and Gulu found that one in five students had considered suicide. The reasons include bullying, social-media abuse, academic pressure and the breakdown of families.

Cultural stigma remains one of the biggest obstacles to mental wellbeing in Uganda. In many families, addressing mental-health issues is seen as a weakness, especially in boys, who are told from a young age to "be a man" or "never cry". Such phrases, often repeated with good intentions, build emotional walls that many boys carry into adolescence and adulthood. By the time they reach crisis point, they often have no vocabulary for their pain, no practice asking for help and no support system to catch them.

In this situation, young people need public support services – but mental-health facilities in Uganda are few and far between. The national mental-health hospital at Butabika and a few private clinics in urban centres notwithstanding, there is nowhere for most Ugandans to turn. Existing facilities are often reserved for very severe cases, such as individuals with visible breakdowns. Virtually no options exist for teenagers who are silently struggling with anxiety or depression.

While digital solutions are emerging, including private online-therapy platforms such as Serene Mind, these services are still limited in scale and reach. Nevertheless, they reflect a growing openness among young people to seeking help outside traditional systems.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT BY PHONE

One of the most popular services is a toll-free helpline run by the civil-society organisation Mental Health Uganda (MHU). In mid-2024, amid growing concerns about youth suicide, MHU expanded its helpline service in partnership with Mental Helse Ungdom of Norway. It is now available Monday to Friday around the clock on 0800 212121.

Even though the helpline is open to people of all ages and backgrounds, it focuses particularly on callers aged 15-35. It offers an automated interactive voice-response system in multiple Ugandan languages. Trained counsellors, including staff from Butabika National Referral Hospital, provide confidential psychological first aid and referrals.

Immediately after the helpline opened in 2021, the popular interest was overwhelming, according to Mental Helse Ungdom. Since then, the service has provided mental-health and psychosocial support to over 8000 clients, as reported by MHU. A review of the project conducted in 2022 revealed that 82 % of the callers reported being satisfied with the service. Indeed, in a country where over three quarters of the population live in rural areas, a simple phone call can mean the difference between despair and hope.

> "In many families, addressing mental-health issues is seen as a weakness, especially in boys, who are told from a young age to 'be a man' or 'never cry'."

FEELING HEARD, NOT JUDGED

The young people calling the MHU helpline are not just seeking therapy – they want to be heard. Timothy Malindi, an 18-year-old student at Makerere University and one-time user of the hotline, described the relief of finally finding someone who would listen without judging: "Talking helped. I felt heard, not judged."

That small act of listening may not solve every problem, but it can initiate a healing process and avert crises. It reminds Uganda's youth that their pain is valid, and that they are not alone.

Still, the helpline is facing challenges. Calls made after hours often go to voicemail, with follow-up delayed until the next working day. For a young person in crisis, those hours can feel endless. Stakeholders are therefore pushing for weekend services and integration with broader community support systems, including primary health centres and schools.

EXPANDING MENTAL-HEALTH EFFORTS

MHU is partnering with Uganda's Ministry of Health and has contributed to informing the country's mental-health strategy. In line with a global-guidance document released by WHO and UNICEF in 2024, the country is now considering

> “Mental health is not a luxury – it is essential. The earlier we take action, the more lives we can save.”

more integrated and globally recommended practices for dealing with mental health. This includes strengthening the formal health system as well as working with families and schools to build a supportive environment for young people.

Parents have a special responsibility here. They must listen to their children and take their concerns seriously. Since young people face complex pressures – from cyberbullying and unrealistic expectations shared on social media to stress at school, university and work – they need a safe space at home to express themselves without fear of ridicule or rejection.

Schools must evolve, too. While Uganda’s education system continues to focus on academic achievement, it must also prioritise student wellbeing. Teachers should be trained to recognise early warning signs of mental distress and offer support. School counsellors need to be empowered, and curricula should teach emotional literacy, helping students articulate their feelings and navigate life’s ups and downs.

The expansion of the MHU hotline sends a clear message to Uganda’s institutions, families and schools: mental health is not a luxury – it is essential. The earlier we take action, the more lives we can save.

LINKS

Mental Health Uganda:
mhu.ug

WHO, UNICEF, 2024: Mental health of children and young people. Service guidance.
who.int/publications/i/item/9789240100374

If you are thinking about taking your own life, please talk to friends and family about it. International suicide hotlines offer professional help:
blog.opencounseling.com/suicide-hotlines

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Photo: dpa/Design Pics/Joel Sartore Photography

Playing with others is one of the most important coping strategies for adolescents in Madagascar to mitigate the effects of climate change on their mental health.

CLIMATE CRISIS

How climate change is impacting adolescent mental health in Madagascar

The global health community increasingly recognises that climate change is threatening the wellbeing of both children and adolescents. However, a critical gap remains when it comes to understanding the specific impacts on mental health, particularly in the most vulnerable low- and middle-income countries. A study reveals alarming rates of anxiety and depression among young people.

BY ROLI MAHAJAN

The authors found that climate change is having a profound impact on mental health among adolescents in southern Madagascar, one of the most severely climate change-affected regions in the world. People there have suffered from cyclones, extreme heat and prolonged periods of drought. This is turning fertile land into desert and depleting water sources, leading to food and water insecurity. Since most people in this region are subsistence farmers or pastoralists, they are significantly affected by changes in weather and climate.

In order to investigate the impacts of climate change on adolescent mental health, the researchers conducted surveys and initiated group discussions. They talked to 83 adolescents aged 10 to 24 in six rural villages outside the city of Ambovombe in the Androy region. All of the participants were experiencing multidimensional poverty. Less than 14 % had electricity at home, and none of them lived in a household that owned a motorbike, car, truck or computer.

The results indicate that mental health problems are widespread among young people. A staggering 82 % of the adolescents showed probable depression. Between 76 % and 87 % exhibited probable generalised anxiety disorder. The adolescents also had high levels of climate change concern.

At the heart of this mental health crisis lies severe food insecurity. Within the previous 12 months, 90 % of the adolescents had experienced their household running out of food. 95 % reported having been hungry but not eating, and 69 % had endured an entire day without food.

HOW CLIMATE CHANGE LEADS TO PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS

The focus group discussions with 48 adolescents revealed three main ways in which climate change translates into psychological distress for them. First, the loss of household resources leads to fear and despair. Increased heat, relentless droughts, intensified winds and suffocating sandstorms have decimated food and water supplies. The adolescents frequently used the Malagasy word "kere", which means famine or starving to death. They reported that they had witnessed people starving. Families were forced to sell their meagre possessions to buy food and water, trapping them in a cycle of impoverishment and distress.

Second, the adolescents feel very uncertain about their future because of climate change. The fact that weather, farming and food availability have become less predictable has had a devastating impact on their psychological wellbeing. They expressed an overwhelming sense of powerlessness and helplessness. "There's nothing that we can predict," one adolescent lamented.

> "The adolescents frequently used the Malagasy word "kere", which means starving to death."

Third, the study reveals a widespread disruption of fundamental sources of resilience, such as close friends, family, religious faith, community support, school and simple opportunities for fun. Adolescents use these coping mechanisms to mitigate the effects of climate change on their lives. However, some of these sources of resilience were themselves undermined by climate change. Extreme weather prevents children from going to school, for example, while climate-induced poverty makes it impossible for adolescents to afford school fees, forcing them out of education. This economic hardship has also stripped them of possible sources of joy: Though listening to the radio or dancing to music could help them cope with their situation, the majority of adolescents do not have a radio in their household, for example. "We don't have a radio, but we play with other kids … we play, or we think about starvation," one girl said.

URGENT CALL TO ACTION

The findings from southern Madagascar underscore a crucial distinction: unlike in many high-income countries where climate change impacts might feel more abstract, the effects on mental health are inextricably linked to the immediate reality of food and water insecurity.

In order to preserve the mental health of children and adolescents, the authors suggest several potential pathways:

- Improve food and water security, as this fundamental need underpins all aspects of wellbeing.
- Empower adolescents with the knowledge and skills necessary to adapt agricultural methods to a changing climate, thereby reducing their sense of powerlessness and uncertainty.
- Ensure continuous, safe access to education.
- Reintroduce opportunities for activities that foster psychological wellbeing, such as music, dancing and art.

The study is relatively small, and its significance is limited. However, it highlights the extent to which children and young people are already suffering from the climate crisis. Further studies are needed to better help them and others. Consistent climate protection and effective climate adaptation are particularly important. We must slow down global warming – otherwise more and more young people will be confronted with situations like those experienced by the adolescents in Madagascar.

LINK

Hadfield, K,. et al., 2025: "There is no hope; only strong wind": How climate change impacts adolescent mental health in southern Madagascar. The Journal of Climate Change and Health, Volume 23.
sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2667278225000215

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RESILIENCE

What's behind the legendary resilience of young Africans?

When people return from a visit to Africa, you often hear them comment that young people, in particular, seem remarkably happy despite the hardships and poverty they face. Is this really the case? In her article, Kenyan clinical psychologist Gladys K. Mwiti examines the factors that contribute to the resilience of African youth, including African cultural values, entrepreneurial spirit, spiritual beliefs and community ties – not least those brought about by social media.

BY GLADYS K. MWITI

Photo: picture alliance/robertharding/Frank Fell

Is there any truth to the claim that young people in Africa always have a smile on their faces? Mural near Aswan, Egypt.

Jude is the second of four siblings in his family. He lost both his parents when he was eight years old. In his village, the house they had lived in collapsed after heavy rainfall, forcing them to move into the unfinished house their parents had started building.

Responsibility for Jude and his siblings fell to their 78-year-old grandmother. As a devout Christian, she ensured the children attended church and participated in youth activities. The entire family worked hard. Since they could not afford help, the children learned to manage their small farm whenever they were not in school. They grew food, fetched water from the river at the bottom of the valley, gathered firewood and did all the housework. Jude went one step further and took on odd jobs in the village. Later, he enrolled in a day school, which meant walking nearly 10 kilometers each way every day. His grandmother supported him with what little she had, and occasionally a benefactor sent help. Jude studied diligently, and when he completed his education, the school began hiring him for jobs such as organising tools in the science lab.

> "While the mental health of young Africans is certainly complex and multifaceted, it is fair to say that many of them are remarkably mindful and resilient."

With his meagre earnings, he managed to enrol in a teacher training course as part of a vacation programme and qualified a few years ago. Jude has finished his parents' house project and is currently building his own house on the property. Young people from the church occasionally visit to assist him with his projects. Sadly, his grandmother died last year at the age of 100. He plans to get married soon.

RESILIENCE FACTORS

What factors contributed to Jude's resilience? First and foremost, the young man received emotional support from his grandmother. He and his siblings worked closely together, supporting each other. He was never alone. The elderly woman provided him a safe environment in which he could discuss his problems. His friends and extended family formed a strong network that embodies the old African saying that it takes a village to raise a child.

Furthermore, it is traditional in many African cultures for people to strive to preserve their family line; as the only male child, Jude is central to his family's legacy. He accepted the responsibility of carrying on the family name, giving him a purpose he couldn't abandon. Then there's the aspect of religion: Jude is a Christian and believes that his faith in God is his source of strength.

Resilience refers to a person's ability to successfully adapt to stress factors and thus maintain their psychological well-being despite adverse circumstances. It is the ability to recover from difficult life experiences.

Like Jude, many young people in Africa face numerous daunting challenges, including loss and grief, poverty, unemployment, political instability and lack of access to quality education and healthcare. Others are impacted by climate change, conflict and discrimination. But while the mental health of young Africans is certainly complex and multifaceted, it is fair to say that many are remarkably mindful and resilient.

SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXT: UBUNTU

The sociocultural context has a significant impact on the mental health and resilience of African youth. Many African societies place great value on community spirit and mutual support, creating a safety net for young people. Older generations do not abandon young people. It is rare for adolescents to be sent out into the world at the age of 18 to fend for themselves.

Family celebrations such as weddings, funerals and rites of passage make young people aware that they are continuing the legacy of their parents, whether living or deceased, and their families. These community events strengthen family structures and enhance social networks, fostering a sense of belonging and support that can help alleviate feelings of isolation and anxiety. According to cultural scientists, community activities and traditional ceremonies and rituals serve not only as experiences that boost social cohesion, but also as opportunities to express emotions, thereby empowering those who are struggling.

This emphasises cultural values such as strength, perseverance and adaptability, which foster a resilient mindset among young people. Africanists highlight the idea of "Umuntu" or "Ubuntu," which stresses compassion and interconnectedness rather than individualism and is reinforced through shared experiences. Individuals are encouraged to seek community and support each other, not just during difficult times, thereby enhancing collective resilience.

ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT

However, not everyone in Africa can rely on typical community support networks. Moses is an Uber driver and the eldest child in his family. At the age of 16, he lost both his parents to Covid-19. He has two younger brothers. Moses did not have a traditional extended family to support him, as his parents moved to the city when they were young and lived in a slum, far from the social structures of village life.

Faced with the responsibility of caring for his siblings, he left school and took a job as a labourer, lugging stones and mixing concrete on a construction site. The contractor, who also owned a hardware store, noticed his hard work and dedication and eventually hired him as the store manager. With his earnings, Moses financed his siblings' education. He also took driving lessons, passed his driving test and managed to save enough money for a down payment on his first car. Today, he is a successful Uber driver, has paid off one car and has a second one on credit. He plans to expand his fleet. As for his brothers, the second-born has graduated from college and is working, while the youngest is still studying. Moses, a devout Christian, is married and has one child.

He is an example of how many young people in Africa, despite the significant economic challenges the continent faces, engage in entrepreneurial activities that sharpen their mental focus and increase their resilience. In Kenya, for example, working hard despite adversity has become a way of life known as "hustling". In this sense, the informal economy and entrepreneurship enable young people to take control of their economic future, enhancing their self-efficacy and motivation. It also gives them a sense of pride. Studies indicate that entrepreneurial involvement can positively affect mental health by providing a sense of purpose and achievement.

SPIRITUALITY

Spirituality is deeply embedded across all generations in Africa. For example, many young Africans turn to spiritual practices such as prayer, which can provide comfort and a sense of control over their circumstances. Numerous studies have linked spirituality and religion to resilience, as they can offer hope, meaning and a framework for coping with life's challenges.

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The rise of technology and social media has significantly influenced the mental health of African youth. While it is right to be concerned about negative aspects such as cyberbullying, social media nonetheless provides another platform in the African context for networking, information sharing and strengthening mental health. Social media facilitates networking and the creation of support systems, thereby augmenting the Ubuntu way of life and extending it into the online world.

Online communities such as WhatsApp groups can support individuals by providing a space where they can share their experiences and coping strategies and maintain a sense of community even across long distances. A significant number of young Africans tend to use social media differently than some of their Western peers: not as a medium for comparison or for spreading hatred and malice but focusing rather on its "social" aspect. This was evident not least in the support systems during the recent Kenyan youth-led protests, which relied on such social-media platforms.

Recognising and supporting all these factors is crucial to improving the mental wellbeing of young people across the continent and will ultimately pave the way for a better future for individuals and communities.

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Photo: dpa/Middle East Images/Konstantin Novakovickovic

Divorce is a recurring theme at the Aurat Marches (Women's Marches) on International Women's Day.

WOMEN'S MENTAL HEALTH

The stigma of divorce

Divorce is still a taboo in Pakistan. Divorced women are ostracised – whether they were the ones who filed for divorce or not. Social pressure drives women into depression, loneliness and even suicide. More psychological support services and destigmatisation are needed.

BY MAHWISH QAYYUM

Mental health is one of the most neglected areas of public health. According to statistics from the World Health Organization (WHO), around one billion people worldwide live with a mental disorder – but adequate treatment options are lacking in many places.

Pakistan has one of the highest rates of mental illness in the world. According to WHO estimates, 24 million people in Pakistan need mental health care – a tenth of the total population. An analysis of psychological data from 2023 shows that depression and anxiety are the two most common illnesses, and mental disorders are more common with women.

One of the causes of mental health problems among women is divorce – but mostly not the end of the relationship itself, but the stigma associated with it. Divorce is a social

taboo in Pakistan. High rates of suicides and attempted suicides make it clear that this also has an impact on physical health.

Fareeha, 28, is one of the women who attempted suicide. "When my husband divorced me after only 13 months of marriage, I was happy to get rid of the abusive relationship, but with time I realised that the end of marriage did not mean the end of suffering in my life," she says. Her family, especially her brothers and sisters-in-law, blamed her for the divorce. Constant criticism, derision and social scorn led to her developing depression and trichotillomania, an impulse control disorder that causes people to pull their hair out. "The divorce triggered feelings of guilt, anxiety, loneliness, shame, sadness and a sense of worthlessness in me," she says. In the end, she tried to kill herself by ingesting an insecticide, but family members took her to hospital, and she survived.

Aneela's husband divorced her in 2019. The 39-year-old fell into depression too. Chronic anxiety caused panic attacks. Similar to Fareeha, her ordeal began during marriage because her husband abused her. But divorce was unthinkable for her. "Women who want a divorce are killed by their husbands and in-laws because they bring shame on the family. So, I put up with my husband's domestic violence," she says.

A NEW CHAPTER

Qazi Shahbaz Mohyuddin, a psychiatrist working in the city of Peshawar, says: "When women want to talk about their divorce, they are discouraged. In our society, it is considered a sin to even talk about it." Patients who have gone through a divorce experience feelings of shame, embarrassment, low self-esteem and self-blame and develop confidence issues. These feelings then lead to all sorts of health problems ranging from anxiety, depression, migraines, stress, insomnia, high blood pressure, gastrointestinal and nerve problems to impulse control disorders, suicidal thoughts, panic attacks and substance abuse. The psychiatrist adds that divorce also has a negative impact on women's social lives and drives them into loneliness. In his therapy, he tries to work with women to "see divorce not as the end of life, but as a new chapter in it".

Mohyuddin is one of very few psychiatrists in the country. According to the WHO, there is only one psychiatrist per 526,000 inhabitants in Pakistan, one of the lowest rates in the world.

There are also not many initiatives that fill this gap. Taskeen Health Initiative is one of them. Sarah Hatim is clinical coordinator at the Pakistani non-profit organisation that promotes mental health and offers free mental health support. She says that divorce marginalises women and isolates them. The initiative offers free telephone counselling to people from all walks of life and age groups. Through their Stories of Hope programme, in which affected women and other people with mental health disorders tell their stories, they aim to raise community awareness and offer discreet self-help options.

"When women want to talk about their divorce, they are discouraged. In our society, it is considered a sin to even talk about it."

Pakistan needs more professional psychiatric care and initiatives that work to break down stigma and taboos and offer disadvantaged women the chance to get help to really turn over a new page in their lives.

If you are thinking about taking your own life, please talk to friends and family about it. International suicide hotlines offer professional help: blog.opencounseling.com/suicide-hotlines

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EMPOWERMENT

Supporting traumatised women and girls in Iraq

Many people in the conflict-ridden Kurdish region of Iraq are suffering from trauma. The civil-society organisation medica mondiale works with women and girls affected by sexualised violence.

BY HANEEN MASOUD

Photo: dpa/Middle East Images/Younes Mohammad

Women fighting against the terror militia ISIS in Iraq in 2014. The conflict has left both physical and emotional scars.

Violent conflicts not only destroy infrastructure, they also leave behind broken hearts and bodies marked by visible and invisible scars. Trauma comes with painful emotions such as shame, guilt, self-blame, helplessness and powerlessness. It also negatively affects the way people think, feel and interact with others.

The Kurdish region in north-eastern Iraq has experienced numerous conflicts, from the genocidal policies pursued by Saddam Hussein's regime in the late 1980s to the invasion by the terrorist militia ISIS in 2014. Each of these events has caused deep trauma among the population.

At women's rights organisation medica mondiale, we know that survivors can recover from trauma if they receive the help they need in an environment that is empathetic, supportive and non-judgmental. We have been working in the Kurdish region of Iraq since 2015, supporting women and girls who have suffered terribly, for example through sexualised violence. We collaborate with partner organisations to provide spaces in which these women and girls can rediscover their strengths and empower others.

> "Violent conflicts not only destroy infrastructure, they also leave behind broken hearts and bodies marked by visible and invisible scars."

STRESS- AND TRAUMA-SENSITIVE APPROACH

Our work is based on our "Stress- and Trauma-sensitive Approach" (STA). This low-threshold approach offers women and girls affected by sexualised violence access to support through individual and group counselling. The approach helps to establish a stress- and trauma-sensitive perspective at various levels of support, e.g. in healthcare and social work. It is designed to work even within low-resource environments and was developed in cooperation with medica mondiale's partner organisations in Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Afghanistan and Liberia. The approach is taught to others in training courses and continuously adapted and refined to meet professional and regional needs.

The STA raises awareness among staff and other supporters, enabling them to respond appropriately to traumatised women. This stress- and trauma-sensitive perspective fosters empathy and understanding. We recognise the profound impact that trauma has and the feelings of insecurity, disconnection and disempowerment it provokes. Prioritising safety, trust, connection and solidarity, we empower women and girls to stand up for their rights.

SUPPORTING THE SUPPORTERS

The STA also ensures that those who support traumatised individuals remain stable themselves. This is crucial, as staff and psychologists often witness atrocities while helping survivors process their experiences. In the Kurdish region of Iraq, many supporters are themselves survivors of trauma. Working with others who are traumatised can trigger their own past experiences, leading to emotional strain in the form of compassion fatigue, burnout and secondary trauma. Secondary trauma refers to the emotional distress experienced by those supporting others, and its physical and psychological symptoms are similar to those observed in primary trauma survivors.

It is vital to support staff – not only for their own wellbeing, but also to enable them to continue helping others while being connected with themselves, their limitations and needs. For this reason, medica mondiale's work in the region focuses on promoting self-care and staff care. As the saying goes, you can't pour from an empty cup, which reminds us that caring for others starts with caring for ourselves.

However, the STA extends beyond individual support. One of medica mondiale's core commitments is to address the root causes of sexualised violence. We address how patriarchal structures shape societies, how inequality becomes normalised, how survivors are silenced and how violence persists. We focus on raising awareness, breaking the silence and challenging the systems that enable violence. Recognising that violence devastates families, communities and entire societies is key to building environments that support healing and prevent further harm – in Iraq and around the world.

LINK

medica mondiale, Stress- and Trauma-sensitive Approach: *medicamondiale.org/en/violence-against-women/overcoming-trauma/trauma-work-the-stress-and-trauma-sensitive-approach*

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FAITH AND MENTAL HEALTH

How faith-based organisations are supporting mental health

In the global development context, churches and other faith-based organisations are caring for people with mental illness and conducting preventive work, often in places where state and private services are lacking. However, their therapeutic and psychosocial efforts are coming under increased pressure.

BY SABINE SCHWIRNER

Photo: dpa/Anadolu/Gerald Anderson

Community, counselling, purpose: churches and faith-based organisations have an influence on people's mental health.

Religiousness and faith can affect mental health and psychosocial wellbeing both positively and negatively. International humanitarian aid and development cooperation programmes have only started taking this potential into greater account in the past ten years or so, however. It's surprising that it took so long – after all, over 80 % of the global population belongs to a religion.

"Religious communities and faith-based organisations are uniquely positioned to provide spiritual assistance to people affected by conflict and disaster," reads the Charter for Faith-Based Humanitarian Action. It was endorsed in 2016 at the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul and represents a paradigm shift in the development cooperation of the Global North. Up into the 2000s, the dominant ap-

> “The fact that many people place high value on spirituality and faith in their personal lives is just one dimension among many that has to be taken into account in a development context.”

proach was secular: religion was considered a private affair, and development policy work should be neutral, rational and research based. There was a concern that faith-based actors would bring missionary or confessional interests into their collaborations.

Germany’s Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) also acknowledged in a 2016 paper that religion is an important source of values and provides orientation with regard to ethical and legal norms. According to the BMZ, it can increase the resiliency of individuals and whole societies because it offers explanations and rituals that help people deal with loss, sorrow, failure and catastrophes. Local religious actors have since started playing larger roles in programmes run by international aid organisations. Their local capacities and perspectives are being incorporated into programme planning.

The fact that many people place high value on spirituality and faith in their personal lives is just one dimension among many that has to be taken into account in a development context. Another important dimension is the relevance of local religious communities and the role of religious leaders. Moreover, the institutional level also cannot be ignored, since churches and faith-based organisations can differ from secular organisations in ways that might influence the design of international development programmes.

Faith-based organisations are a diverse group of widely varying organisation types and religious affiliations. Christian organisations can range from internationally active church associations to civil-society organisations that are connected to a church through personnel or ideology to small, local church congregations in rural areas. They all present a variety of opportunities for international development cooperation, as the following examples will show.

THE ROLE OF CHURCHES IN REGIONS WITH WEAK INFRASTRUCTURE

Some African countries have nowhere near enough state or private providers of mental health services. Religious institutions are often the first port of call for people seeking counselling, and they enjoy a great deal of trust. One example is the Nkhoma Mission Hospital near Lilongwe, the capital of Malawi. In a multi-year pilot project, the hospital is working with local churches to talk to the public about mental illness and the socially sensitive issue of suicide. The participants refer to religious spirituality and traditional values to destigmatise suicide and help people to stop seeing it as a spiritual deficiency.

Together with its long-term partner, the German Institute for Medical Mission (Difäm), the hospital is training pastors to pass along knowledge about mental illness and suicide to their congregations. The long-term goal is a fundamental change of perspective: in future, psychotherapy should be seen as a strength and those in need should be empowered to seek help.

DISAPPEARING CIVIC SPACES

Numerous states are increasingly restricting civil-society work in order to silence critical voices. These vanishing spaces often remain open longer to churches and faith-based organisations than to many secular organisations. Examples of this phenomenon can be found in Europe, too, whether under the dictatorial regime in Belarus or in work with refugees in Greece, Hungary or Poland. Church groups are often initially exempt from legislation that raises taxes on organisations or requires costly registrations. If state funds run dry, churches and faith-based organisations can turn to church funds like collections in order to be able to work and express independent, critical views.

One example is criticism of Europe’s increasingly restrictive asylum policy. Churches and their organisations, like the Naomi Workshop for Refugees in Greece, the AIDRom umbrella association of churches in Romania or the Polish Ecumenical Council, have managed time and again to make themselves heard as progressive voices. Drawing on theology, they credibly call for countries to “welcome the stranger”. In doing so, they have repeatedly called attention to refugees’ poor mental health and the particular stress

they are put under because of increasingly dangerous escape routes and their reception in destination countries.

STABILISING COMMUNITY LIFE

Churches' psychosocial work is not limited to the therapeutic care of a person by a mental health professional. Community and a structured, stable everyday life are also important. Affected people therefore receive help finding a place to live, a functioning environment, neighbourly relationships or an economic livelihood.

There is a very great need for these kinds of supports in the context of the conflict in the Middle East, with its heavy losses, refugee movements and discrimination. The Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) in East Jerusalem aids disabled Palestinian youths with physical limitations by offering them a combination of therapeutic consultations and professional training. The YMCA's services therefore combine hope for a better life with a sense of security.

> "Religious institutions are often the first port of call for people seeking counselling, and they enjoy a great deal of trust."

INCREASING PRESSURE DUE TO STANDARDISATION AND EFFICIENCY REQUIREMENTS

In the global development context, churches and faith-based organisations have a great deal of potential from a spiritual and institutional perspective: they fill gaps when state or private service providers are lacking; they are very active on a variety of levels, in the treatment and prevention of psychological stress and mental illness; and they often have an important political voice. But their therapeutic and psychosocial work, like that of secular organisations, is coming under increased pressure. Standardised approaches and efficiency-oriented thinking do not work equally well everywhere. While the spiritual approach of these organisations can provide certain alternatives and freedoms, the funding requirements of international donors, performance indicators and the logic of effectiveness place technical limits on these freedoms.

We at Brot für die Welt, the Protestant development agency, offer guidance to project managers in our Berlin office to help them better understand project support in various regions: a 2024 handout should help them better recognise the psychosocial aspects of their work and thus deal with them more appropriately. The goal is to look at projects through the lens of trauma awareness: are people receiving help to optimally heal and overcome their trauma? Are we helping them feel safe and in control? Are we promoting empowerment and self-care? How can we take psychosocial dimensions into account in the project cycle, from the application to budget planning to project visits and evaluation? And how can the projects address potential power imbalances between those that provide help and those that receive it?

Answering these questions helps us support people with mental health concerns even better and promote mental health as an integral part of international programmes.

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