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Coping far from home

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Photo: picture alliance /SZ Photo/Leonhard Simon

"A society cannot function without half of its members."

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Photo: picture alliance/Matrix Images/Rupak De Chowdhu

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„Syrian Migration #15“ by Helen Zughaib (see p. 4).

When migrants find work, pay taxes and participate in the social life of a host society, everyone benefits. But integration is also everyone's responsibility: both migrants and host societies must do their part. Instead of allowing the migration debate to shift towards fear and exclusion, we should talk more about how integration can succeed.

383

killed aid workers

in 2024 were reported by the Aid Worker Security Database (AWSD) in their latest report. With 181 aid workers almost half of them were killed in Gaza alone, followed by 60 deaths in Sudan. Conflicts in South Sudan, Nigeria, Lebanon, Ukraine, Ethiopia, Somalia, Syria and the DRC were also deadly places for aid workers last year.

The good news

This month, we have some good news from **Ghana.** Far-reaching **reforms to mining legislation** are set to make the sector there fairer and more transparent. Among other things, companies will no longer be granted automatic licence renewals if they fail to meet their **environmental and social obligations.** They will also be required to allocate a portion of their gross mineral sales revenues directly to community development.

ARTIST

Helen Zughaib

Photo: Basil Kiwan

Helen Zughaib was born in Beirut, Lebanon and forced to flee her country due to the ongoing war at the age of 16. This early experience has shaped much of her work over the years.

As an Arab American, her work reflects her desire to encourage dialogue and understanding between East and West. Working primarily in gouache on board and canvas, she recently has used cloth, shoes, wood and glass in mixed media installations.

Her work is about creating empathy, she says. “I am asking the viewer to see through someone else’s eyes, to walk in someone else’s shoes, to reject divisiveness, violence and subjugation of anyone anywhere, giving a voice to the voiceless, to heal and to reflect our shared humanity.”

Helen Zughaib’s works “Syrian Migration #15” and “Syrian Migration #48” are featured on our cover page and at the beginning of the focus section, respectively.

AFGHANISTAN

When women are absent

Four years after the Taliban returned to power, the human-rights situation in Afghanistan is abysmal. The country is on the brink of economic and humanitarian collapse – not least because women and girls have been systematically ousted from education, the labour market and public spaces in recent years.

BY HILA LIMAR

Afghanistan is the only country in the world today where girls are not permitted to attend secondary school. The consequences are dire – for the girls themselves, for their families, for society as a whole and, ultimately, for the international community.

Excluding girls from school means much more than just the loss of professional opportunities. For many children – especially girls – education provides space for curiosity, personal growth and self-efficacy. Denying them access to education deprives them not only of future prospects but also of joy, motivation and some semblance of normality in their everyday lives.

LOSS OF INDIVIDUAL SELF-DETERMINATION AND HEALTH

The consequences are directly reflected in their mental health: since 2021, more and more girls and young women have talked about feeling depressed, anxious and a growing sense of hopelessness. In a study conducted by Bishnaw, a platform for women in Afghanistan, 68 % of those surveyed in March 2023 said that they knew at least one woman who had been suffering in this way since 2021; seven percent were aware of instances of self-harm in their social circle.

At the same time, other health risks are worsening. Access to medical care is increasingly limited, and since December 2024 women have no longer been allowed to begin training as nurses or midwives. This is happening in a country that already has one of the world's highest rates of maternal mortality. The combination of inadequate healthcare, early marriage out of economic necessity and a high birth rate leaves many girls and women with no alternative prospects.

The consequences go far beyond the immediate present. The children of educated women have a significantly higher chance of survival after birth, are better fed and more

likely to attend school themselves (UNESCO). The fact that girls and women are currently banned from education and employment thus poses a direct threat to the future of coming generations.

FAMILIES SUFFER FROM POVERTY AND HUNGER

When women are denied an education, they also have no way of accessing the formal labour market. In addition, their mobility is restricted: women are only permitted to go out in public if escorted by a male family member, a mahram. One of the consequences for women of this requirement is that previous activities and earning opportunities have been lost, stripping numerous families of essential income. Current figures from the World Food Programme suggest that two thirds of female-headed households in Afghanistan cannot afford basic nutrition.

What is more, the large numbers of refugees and displaced persons are having a seriously detrimental effect on the Afghan population, as are the climate crisis and the lack of international funding. This year in particular, hundreds of thousands of refugees are again being deported back to Afghanistan – especially from neighbouring Iran and Pakistan – even though some of them haven't lived there for decades. Moreover, the east of the country was hit by severe earthquakes between 31 August and 5 September. The numbers of fatalities are dramatic, and entire villages have been destroyed. Around 40,000 people in the region are affected.

All of this is exacerbating an already dramatic humanitarian crisis: the European Commission says that more than 23.7 million people – over half the population – are reliant on humanitarian aid. According to UNICEF, nearly 900,000 children under the age of five are suffering from severe malnutrition. Families are being forced to sell the last of their belongings, send their children out to work or marry off their daughters.

ECONOMIC COLLAPSE AND BREAKDOWN OF ESSENTIAL SERVICES

Excluding women from education and the labour market isn't just a catastrophe on an individual level, but it also has devastating economic effects. Outlawing the education of

Photo: picture alliance / ASSOCIATED PRESS / Ebrahim Noroozi

Instead of going to school, young women are forced by the Taliban to stay at home.

> “A society cannot function without half of its members.”

girls costs Afghanistan 2.5% of its gross domestic product each year, says UNICEF. Though women account for half of the population, they are only permitted to work in a handful of sectors. According to UN Women, their labour-market participation has already plunged to 24 %, while the equivalent figure for men is 89 %.

The losses in the healthcare sector are particularly dramatic: if no new female doctors, nurses or midwives are trained in future, the provision of medical care for women risks collapsing because treatment by men is often considered socially unacceptable.

If women do not receive education, there will also be a lack of local teachers, social workers and female entrepreneurs – precisely the people who play a key role in stabilising societies and driving innovation. Afghanistan ranks close to bottom in the Women’s Empowerment Index and in UN Women’s Gender Parity Index. On average, women achieve just 17% of their potential – an alarming shortfall that is worsening all the time.

All of this serves not least to further increase Afghanistan’s dependence on international support. However, this support has repeatedly been used as leverage by donor countries in response to the restrictions on women’s rights in Afghanistan. Yet such withholding of funding does not affect the de-facto authorities that enforce the restrictions of women’s rights, but rather the ordinary population – thereby doubling its suffering.

Furthermore, the exclusion of women isn’t merely a national catastrophe, it’s a global problem. If the international community continues to stand by and watch as the plight of Afghan women deteriorates, fundamental human rights will be abandoned. This also has repercussions for international security: a country that systematically marginalises half of its population can be neither stable nor peaceful.

TAKING ADVANTAGE OF THE AVAILABLE OPTIONS

Despite the dire situation, there are options for further supporting women and girls in Afghanistan. Local organisations demonstrate what is possible even under adverse conditions if the goal remains clear: a future in which Afghans are free to fulfil their potential.

Primary-school education is still allowed and provides a foundation that shouldn’t be underestimated. Improving the infrastructure, properly equipping classrooms and implementing healthcare programmes can have a lasting impact. Community centres and those vocational training courses that are still available in some places provide girls with safe spaces in which to engage in exchange, receive psychosocial support and improve their future prospects. Online classes can also facilitate access to secondary education – provided that the safety of the female participants is guaranteed.

A lot can be achieved with flexible funding structures, political support and reliable financing. Germany and the international community must take their responsibility towards Afghanistan seriously rather than continuing to withdraw.

Afghanistan may be an extreme case, but it is also a reminder that a society cannot function without half of its members. As yet, options are still available. These must be politically defended and financially supported. Education for girls is not a symbolic project but an investment in the stability and future of an entire country.

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Photo: Carolin Windel for Visions for Children

Photo: picture alliance / Xinhua News Agency / Wang Guansen

Lesotho declared an unprecedented two-year "state of national disaster" in order to reorganise its economy.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Africa does not flinch before Trump

When the disruptive tariffs imposed by the US came into effect worldwide in August 2025, many African countries did not buckle to President Trump, but instead promptly recalibrated their trade relations and sought alternative partners to ensure that their economies remained afloat. Others tried to take advantage of the deal mentality of the current US administration and negotiated for state recognition, peace or the guarantee of continued visas.

BY ALPHONCE SHIUNDU

South Africa, Africa's largest economy, has been hit with a 30 % tariff on its exports to the US – its third-largest trading partner after China and the EU – and is restructuring its economy to combat the impact of those tariffs. The African economic giant is trying to negotiate a better deal with reduced tariffs, but it has also intensified its search for alternative markets in Japan, Vietnam, India, Thailand, the rest of Asia and the Middle East. "This is not a plan B; it is a plan A for long-term resilience and competitiveness," a government statement issued on 12 August 2025 noted. "(...) We are pursuing these markets because we see growing demand, existing negotiations and a positive reception to South African products."

The tariff negotiations were preceded by months of diplomatic rows. One of the most explosive issues was a US programme aimed at granting asylum to white South Africans, citing concerns about a new land reform law in South Africa. Trump's directive presented the law as a human rights issue for Afrikaners, while the programme has been regarded as a racially motivated external interference in South Africa. Momentous in this context was the meeting between South African President Cyril Ramaphosa and Trump at the White House in May, where Trump confronted Ramaphosa with unfounded accusations of genocide against white South Africans. Some of the images Trump shoved under Ramaphosa's nose actually showed funerals in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

"STATE OF NATIONAL DISASTER"

Lesotho, one of the countries for which the highest tariff rate for African countries of 50 % was announced in April before it was reduced to 15 % on 31 July, had to declare an unprecedented two-year "state of national disaster" in order to reorganise its economy. Its textile industry, which employs nearly 90 % of people in industrial jobs, was disrupted as most US orders were frozen due to the expected high prices.

Trade Minister Mokhethi Shelile said that 12,000 jobs were at stake. An estimated 33,000 people are employed in the textile sector, with some data putting the figure at 40,000. Regardless of which figure is accurate, the loss of 30 to 36 % of workers in the largest employment sector is catastrophic for such a poor country, where half of the approximately 2.3 million inhabitants live below the poverty line and nearly 30 % of people are already unemployed.

But instead of playing the pity card, the government has used the declared state of emergency to implement measures to stabilise the economy and curb job losses, possibly even creating new jobs in construction and agriculture. Lesotho is also keen to use the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) to increase exports to other countries in Africa, but also to Asia and Europe, according to Shelile.

> "Jumoke Oduwole, Minister of Industry, Trade and Investment, explained that Nigeria is diversifying its export market to Brazil, Japan, China and the United Arab Emirates."

"THE WORLD IS A BIG PLACE"

Nigeria, Africa's second-largest economy in terms of purchasing power parity, which mainly sells oil, fertiliser and cocoa to the US, has not yet reacted. The country is subject to a 15 % tariff and is closely watching the US's moves regarding the upcoming but unlikely extension of the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), the tariff exemption programme that has kept trade between the US and Africa going for the past 25 years. The AGOA expires on 30 September 2025 unless it is extended by the Congress before then.

Jumoke Oduwole, Minister of Industry, Trade and Investment, explained that Nigeria is diversifying its export market to Brazil, Japan, China and the United Arab Emirates, all of which already have trade partnerships with the West African country. "The world is a big place," she told CNN in early August when the tariffs came into effect, promoting more intra-African trade through the AfCFTA, which aims to turn the continent into a single market of more than 1.4 billion people across 54 countries.

There has been no continent-wide response so far, but Wamkele Mene, Secretary General of the AfCFTA, stated on business news channel CNBC that African leaders should use the combined market size to negotiate better terms with the US. However, other experts told the Institute of Security Studies in South Africa that attempting to reach a joint agreement with 54 countries, each with its own interests and local political realities, was "idealistic" and that the development of the AfCFTA was more productive.

“It is unlikely that countries accepting deportees from the US, for example to ensure the continuation of US visas, would participate in continent-wide resistance to the tariffs.”

MINERALS FOR PEACE

They have a point. For example, the DRC, Africa’s second-largest country, which was handed a 15% tariff, did not publicly oppose the tariffs. However, it did publicly ask for US intervention to end the decades-long conflict in the country, offering lucrative mineral deals in return. For the DRC, which has already received billions in investment from China, the US-backed peace process and the associated support for President Félix Tshisekedi’s regime, as well as further billions in investment in mining, are more urgent than rebelling against US tariffs.

Somaliland, the semi-autonomous region in Somalia, operates in a similar deal-based manner. Somaliland has offered the US trade, military and diplomatic cooperation in return for official recognition as a state. Somalia is angered by these flirtations, but ultimately has more pressing problems to deal with – such as the lack of security, economic stability and development.

Rwanda appears to have accepted the basic tariff rate of 10% and has not publicly opposed it. Instead, like Eswatini, South Sudan and Uganda, it has offered to help resettle people who have been deported from the US. The BBC reported that these deportees arriving in Rwanda will come with unspecified financial grants, but the details are unclear. It is unlikely that countries accepting deportees from the US, for example to ensure the continuation of US visas, would participate in continent-wide resistance to the tariffs.

But ultimately, that doesn’t really matter, because Africa has enormous potential to diversify its export markets, secure better terms and focus on expanding intra-African trade through the AfCFTA in order to drive development, create jobs and boost its economies. Now could be the best time to kick-start things.

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Photo: picture alliance/SZ Photo/Leonhard Simon

Further investment in education and health is needed to fully realise the potential of young people in Africa.

GROWTH

How sub-Saharan Africa can grow in an inclusive way

Though Africa's economies are growing, people remain poor. There are ways to change this – by leveraging human capital, agriculture and taxation, for example. But governments need to step up their game.

BY AIMÉ MULIGO SINDAYIGAYA

In 1990, half of the people in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, East Asia and the Pacific region were living in extreme poverty. Three decades later, an estimated 35% of the population of sub-Saharan Africa lived in extreme poverty, compared to nine percent in South Asia and one percent in East Asia and the Pacific. How is this possible given that almost half of the world's 25 fastest-growing countries were in sub-Saharan Africa between 2000 and 2014?

The truth is that growth in sub-Saharan Africa has not been sufficient, nor efficient or inclusive enough to dramatically reduce poverty. Economic growth has not kept pace with

the rapid growth of the population. Though the extreme poverty rate fell by around 20% between 2000 and 2014, a surging population meant that the number of poor people in sub-Saharan Africa dropped by only 10 million.

> "Property taxes in Africa are still at around 10 to 20% of their potential, and most countries have not yet introduced net wealth and inheritance taxes."

Furthermore, the extent to which growth leads to poverty reduction in sub-Saharan Africa appears to be relatively low. A one percent increase in per capita GDP is associated with only a one percent reduction in poverty in sub-Saharan Africa, compared with a 2.5 percent reduction globally. This is linked to the quality of growth in sub-Saharan Africa, which is characterised by low human capital development and economic diversification, as well as insufficient structural transformation.

Moreover, sub-Saharan Africa is the region with the second-highest level of inequality in the world after Latin America. Among other things, this means that poverty reduction in sub-Saharan Africa is driven to a much greater degree by income growth (84%) than by the more equitable distribution of income (16%).

More than half of the inequality in sub-Saharan Africa is attributable to unequal opportunities due to factors such as place of birth, ethnicity, gender and family background, as well as market and institutional inefficiencies. As a result, unequal and limited access to employment and public services means that growth in sub-Saharan Africa is not inclusive – and this hinders poverty reduction.

Conflicts arising from economic and political exclusion are another inhibiting factor. According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, African countries affected by widespread violence experienced a 20% decline in annual economic growth and a 2.5% deterioration of human development index scores between 1996 and 2022. Currently, 42% of those living in extreme poverty worldwide are to be found in sub-Saharan African countries affected by conflict.

GOVERNMENTS MUST TAKE RESPONSIBILITY

Against this backdrop, governments in sub-Saharan Africa must take action to ensure that the region does not lose the fight against poverty. Inefficiencies in public spending must be addressed, for example. Between 1980 and 2013, such inefficiencies resulted in losses of about 11.3 % of GDP. Addressing this challenge would free up resources that could be invested in sectors that make growth more inclusive and the economy more resilient to climate change and other external shocks that are also drivers of poverty.

Human capital must therefore be prioritised. Children born in sub-Saharan Africa today are expected to reach 40% of their productivity potential by the age of 18. This figure is one of the lowest in the world. With further investment in education and health, the region's demographic dividend could contribute 11 to 15% to GDP by 2030 and reduce the number of people living in poverty by 40 to 60 million.

Agriculture is another priority area. Only three countries in the region – Burundi, Ethiopia and Mauritania – dedicated 10% of their total public expenditure to agriculture during the period 2015 to 2023, as agreed by African governments in 2003 under the Comprehensive African Agricultural Development Programme. One of the aims of this agenda is to reduce poverty on the continent.

Spending on agricultural development makes sense because growth in this sector reduces poverty two to three times more effectively than growth in other sectors does. It also has the potential to improve self-sufficiency and lower the region's spending on food imports, which amounted to $ 43.6 billion between 2018 and 2020.

TRADE, TAXES AND REMITTANCES

It is equally important to remove the bottlenecks delaying the full implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). This initiative aims to boost intra-African trade and was adopted by African heads of state and government in 2012. It has the potential to increase income on the continent by seven percent by 2035 and lift 40 million people out of extreme poverty.

Official international remittances, defined as money transfers by migrants to their country of origin, must also be promoted. A 10% increase in official international remittances relative to GDP can reduce the proportion of people living in poverty by 2.9%.

Finally, countries in the region must focus their fiscal policies more on the poor in order to reduce inequality. According to the World Bank, taxes paid by poorer households in sub-Saharan Africa are high relative to their

income. To redistribute income, the Bank therefore proposes abolishing value added tax exemptions, which mainly benefit wealthy individuals, while the poor buy most of their goods on informal markets. In addition, tax incentives for companies must be reduced and taxation of the wealthy increased. Notably, property-taxes collection in Africa remains at 10 to 20 % of potential in most African cities. Moreover, most countries have not yet introduced net wealth and inheritance taxes.

Without good governance, poverty reduction in sub-Saharan Africa will clearly be impossible. In 2013, African Union heads of state and government launched the Silencing the Guns in Africa initiative and committed to ending all wars in Africa by 2020. They hoped to achieve this by addressing the root causes of conflict, including economic and social inequalities, and by ending impunity and ensuring accountability. To this day, however, various African regions are still plagued by conflicts that prevent the continent from realising its full development potential. Good governance is undoubtedly the most important factor for truly inclusive growth in sub-Saharan Africa.

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EDUCATION

Overcrowded classrooms, outdoor lessons or no school at all

After more than 10 years of war, Yemen's education system is on the brink of collapse. Two out of five children no longer attend school. Thousands of schools have been destroyed, damaged or repurposed. The country is facing the loss of an entire generation's future.

BY ABDULRAHMAN AL-HUMAIDI

Photo: picture alliance/Xinhua News Agency/Mohammed Mohammed

Students being taught inside a half-collapsed building at Shuhada-Alwahdah School in Ibb province, Yemen.

Every morning, Amin leaves his home in the village of al-Nakhla and walks for over an hour through rugged mountain terrain. The destination of the 12-year-old from the Jabal Habashi district in Yemen's Taizz governorate is his classroom, which his teacher has set up under an old sacred fig tree outside their school near the local cemetery. About 20 students share the shade of the tree.

The sacred fig tree serves as a makeshift classroom at Omar bin al-Khattab School, where overcrowding in the 10 classrooms has forced the school administration to move some students outside.

According to Khaled Saeed, the school's headmaster, more than 600 students are crammed into 10 small classrooms in the school building, some of which lack desks and

chairs. Meanwhile, 55 students study under the tree or along one of the school's walls.

A DECADE OF WAR

In 2014, the ongoing multilateral civil war began in Yemen. A decade of war has severely disrupted the education sector in the country, as many schools have been destroyed and those that remain are overcrowded.

"The war has affected every aspect of Yemenis' lives, but the education sector has been hit hardest. About 4.5 million students have dropped out of school. Children who should have been in classrooms have had their futures thwarted by war," says Mahmoud Tarmoom, headmaster of the al-Andalus School in the city of Marib.

The country has witnessed huge waves of displacement during the war. This has had difficult consequences, as many families fled with their children from areas controlled by the Houthi rebels to government-held regions without taking their children's educational documents with them. Though the Ministry of Education has tried to resolve this issue, it remains a major problem for parents, Tarmoom explains.

"In areas with large numbers of displaced people, like Marib, the challenges are immense. There is overcrowding in schools, a shortage of teachers and not enough textbooks. We also don't have enough school buildings," he adds.

According to the UN-Habitat profile of the city of Marib, the total number of schools has increased from 18 in 2014 to 60 in 2020. The enormous growth is due to the increase in population, particularly from internally displaced persons. According to UN-Habitat, Marib had just under 17,000 inhabitants in 2014, but by 2019 it already had around 630,000.

TEACHER SHORTAGE

According to Abdulaziz Sultan, an advisor to Yemen's Minister of Education and head of the teachers' union in Taizz, over 84,000 students in the Taizz governorate are squeezed into severely overcrowded classrooms. A lack of proper seating means that many study outdoors, sometimes in unsafe locations or half-collapsed buildings.

He also reports that nine schools in Taizz have been shut down because they are within range of Houthi weapons, making it impossible for them to operate.

Though there are more than 45,000 teachers in Taizz, this is not enough, according to Sultan. Some teachers work voluntarily to fill the gaps. Many retired teachers also continue to teach because their pensions have not been paid, further financially straining an already overburdened education system. "Teachers' salaries are incredibly low and fail to cover even their basic needs", Sultan adds. The average salary for teachers in Yemen is $ 60. In Houthi-controlled areas, a bag of flour goes for around $ 150.

UNICEF warns that if the educational situation in Yemen continues to deteriorate, the next generation could face widespread illiteracy and a lack of basic mathematical skills in five to ten years' time, leaving them insufficiently equipped to earn a decent living.

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DECARBONISATION

The fossil fuel reality behind the rhetoric of energy transition

The shift away from carbon-intensive energy sources is crucial to mitigate the climate crisis. Nevertheless, fossil fuels continue to play an essential role in many countries. The role of many Global South countries in the world market remains largely unchanged, despite the rhetoric of transition: they primarily export raw materials and energy resources while importing technology. This highlights the urgent need to revisit industrial policy.

BY PEDRO ALARCÓN

Photo: picture alliance / Matrix Images / Rupak De Chowdhu

Coal mine in the Indian state of Jharkhand.

In late April 2025, Spain and Portugal experienced a massive power outage that lasted nearly an entire day. Western media outlets reported widely on the disruption to daily life. In other parts of the world, however, such events are not big news. South Africa has been dealing with recurring power cuts, locally known as "load shedding", since 2007. In Ecuador, major cities faced daily 14-hour blackouts throughout the second half of 2024. The causes vary, ranging from poor state planning and corruption to climate change-induced droughts that dry up hydroelectric reservoirs. Today, about 17 million people in Latin America and about 600 million in Africa live without access to electricity.

Nevertheless, "energy transition" has become a global buzzword. A key element of this transition, as envisioned in the Global North, is the electrification of essential services using renewable energy. Wind and solar power are expected to replace coal, providing electricity for everyday uses such as cooking and transportation.

Access to technology goes hand in hand with this vision, which presents a major challenge for the Global South. The big producers of wind turbines, solar panels, electric cars and batteries are located in the Global North and China. To afford these expensive "green" technologies, many countries in the Global South depend on revenue from the export of climate-damaging raw materials like coal, oil and natural gas.

THE CRUCIAL ROLE OF CRITICAL MINERALS

So-called critical minerals are at the heart of green technologies, and the global demand for them from clean energy technologies is projected to quadruple by 2040. Electric cars, for instance, require six times the mineral inputs of conventional vehicles, and onshore wind turbines need nine times more minerals than gas-based power plants, according to the International Energy Agency (IEA). These minerals are not scarce, but they are often concentrated in regions characterised by conflict, cultural sensitivities or rich biodiversity. Cobalt is mined in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, graphite in Mozambique and nickel in Indonesia and the Philippines, among other places. Lithium is extracted in Chile and Argentina, for example, while copper has long been mined in Peru and Chile.

These raw materials are typically exported to the Global North for processing and high-tech manufacturing. Global powers are racing to amass mineral resources outside their borders, refine critical minerals and develop green technologies. China is in the lead.

In the Global South, economies have historically depended on exporting raw materials. This reliance creates vulnerabilities, as commodity prices fluctuate on global markets. Governments often distribute resource revenues through clientelistic networks to secure political loyalty and re-election, which fosters authoritarianism. Social conflicts like disputes over land and livelihoods can arise where contested renewable energy projects are implemented and the extraction of fossil fuels and raw material is intensified for "green technologies". Instead of transforming this dynamic, the energy transition is reinforcing it.

> "Fossil fuels still play a central role in meeting energy needs and ensuring energy security in many countries."

FOSSIL FUELS REMAIN IMPORTANT

Current debates on the energy transition tend to downplay these and other structural conditions. Fossil fuels still play a central role in meeting energy needs and ensuring energy security in many countries. India and South Africa, for instance, rely heavily on domestic coal. In the Andean countries of Peru, Ecuador and Colombia, most households use liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) for cooking. Governments in Ecuador, India and Indonesia keep cooking gas affordable through subsidies. In oil-rich countries, subsidies on oil products for citizens' daily transportation are common. Fuel prices for consumers in Angola, Nigeria, Colombia and Venezuela remain among the lowest in the world.

These subsidies are not just economic tools – they are embedded in the social contract of these countries. Many citizens view cheap fuel as their rightful share of the national wealth, especially in resource-rich nations. Efforts to remove such subsidies often provoke widespread unrest, as was recently the case in Angola.

For the Global South, fossil fuels thus remain vital for development. Investors with transnational capital, in alliance with national gatekeepers, are driving the exploitation of raw materials in order to meet the growing demand for critical minerals and fossil fuels. In contrast, in the Global North, the energy transition is framed more as a business opportunity to redirect capital investments to green technologies and create green jobs.

The current narrative around the energy transition resembles the development paradigm promoted after World War II. Back then, technology transfer, capital investment and international cooperation were expected to bring progress to the "Third World". Yet decades later, many countries in the Global South continue to export raw materials and import technology.

Today's energy transition risks entrenching this pattern. As global energy consumption grows, governments may increasingly trade the natural heritage of their countries for short-term revenue and popular support. In regions with widespread informal employment, extractive industries create limited job opportunities, however.

Without fundamentally rethinking industrial policy, however, the energy transition will only translate into the Global South's next reintegration into the world economy as a supplier of natural resources.

"As global energy consumption grows, governments may increasingly trade the natural heritage of their countries for short-term revenue and popular support."

BREAKING THE PATTERN

Two key lessons emerge. First, an enterprise of the magnitude of the energy transition requires a global perspective. Against the backdrop of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), it is particularly important to take into account the role of Global South countries. The Global North should financially support transition initiatives in the South. Second, like development, the energy transition is not just a technical or economic challenge. Addressing it requires a re-evaluation of the global trade regime – and, crucially, a renewed focus on industrial policy in the Global South.

Global trade has changed significantly since the mid-20th century. In many Global South countries, the height of free trade in the 1990s increased their reliance on exports of raw materials. Since then, the technological gap between the Global North and South has widened. The energy transition could offer new opportunities, however. Natural resource-rich countries might use the growing demand for minerals to negotiate better terms in the world market. Some countries, such as Indonesia and Zimbabwe, are already attempting to retain more value by imposing bans on exports of unprocessed minerals and promoting local refining.

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CONTRIBUTION-CLAIM APPROACH

How companies can contribute to climate justice voluntarily

Few companies can operate in a completely climate neutral way, which is why many European firms make compensation payments to offset their emissions. The carbon reduction occurs in the Global South, but it is credited to the Global North. Is this an example of greenwashing, which some companies have been criticised for? However, there are other ways to contribute to climate protection.

BY LUKAS KÜSTERS AND KIRSTEN GADE

Photo: RDIS

Distribution of improved cooking devices in Rwanda: funds are allocated to projects such as this one under the contribution-claim model.

Responsibility for climate change is unequally distributed around the world. Whereas the Global North has produced most climate-relevant emissions, the Global South suffers more consequences. The North's climate debt goes hand in hand with an unequal accumulation of capital: industrial expansion has concentrated wealth in the North, while many countries in the South remain economically dependent.

Achieving climate justice therefore means not only acknowledging historical responsibility but also dismantling colonial continuities and unequal distribution of wealth. Although this goal still seems out of reach, especially to many representatives of the Global South, most countries have nevertheless pledged to continually increase their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) as part of the Paris Agreement of 2015.

Measures taken by non-state actors are also included in these calculations. In addition to trading-emission certificates, which the EU requires, for example, for large, energy-intensive industrial facilities, many companies also reduce their emissions voluntarily. Particularly in situations where this is especially difficult, they also resort to compensation payments, for instance to finance climate-friendly projects in the Global South. However, emission reductions that are financed this way are often included in the balance sheet of the respective companies, meaning that they remain in the Global North. If companies offset emissions through payments instead of directly reducing them, even though doing so would be entirely possible, they are furthermore sometimes accused of greenwashing.

PROMOTING CLIMATE PROTECTION OUTSIDE OF THE VALUE CHAIN

An alternative to carbon offsetting is the contribution claim approach, which allows companies from the Global North to promote global climate protection outside their own value chains in addition to their own carbon reduction activities. Here, too, they take financial responsibility for their own remaining emissions. The key difference is that companies set their own price for the emissions they still produce, report them transparently and do not count the carbon reductions they are financing towards their own carbon footprint. As a result, the reductions can be credited to the countries in which the emission-saving projects take place. Thus, countries in the Global South benefit.

The following three approaches are among the financing options for companies aiming to implement the contribution-claim model (Kreibich et al. 2024):

1) Companies can purchase "Verified Emission Reductions" of climate protection projects in the voluntary carbon market. In doing so, they help ensure the implementation of these projects.

2) They can contribute to a fund that supports climate-protection measures but does not pay out any financial returns to the contributors.

3) They can finance their own climate-protection measures and projects directly. These projects should undergo internal review and, where appropriate, external verification.

Companies can choose to use any of the three financing options on their own or combine them as needed.

> "Since the contribution-claim approach separates companies' support from their own carbon footprint, it prevents double-counting and greenwashing strategies."

ADVANTAGES OF THE CONTRIBUTION-CLAIM MODEL

Since the contribution-claim approach separates companies' support from their own carbon footprint, it prevents double-counting and greenwashing strategies. This provides companies with legal certainty and also strengthens customer confidence in emission reductions. The latter is especially true when funds go to high quality, scientifically sound emission reduction projects, and when companies transparently communicate and justify the price they have set themselves.

Companies that pursue a contribution claim approach admittedly do not offset their own carbon footprint. But they can claim to be contributing to global climate neutrality by helping to reduce emissions in the Global South and allowing these reductions to benefit the emission inventories of those countries. They are therefore making a contribution to global climate justice – a meaningful effort that can have a positive impact on employee commitment and corporate reputation.

The non-profit Klima-Kollekte and civil-society organisations like Brot für die Welt are already applying the contribution-claim approach. Through them, companies can finance climate-protection projects that have been independently verified to reduce emissions while also promoting social and economic development. These projects significantly improve local living conditions with relatively modest resources, as demonstrated by an example from southern Rwanda. There, rural communities are equipped with energy-efficient cookstoves, which reduce both CO_2 emissions and health risks caused by harmful gases and smoke. The project also helps to prevent deforestation, generates employment opportunities and frees up time that local residents would otherwise need to spend collecting firewood.

LINK

Kreibich, N. et al., 2024: A guide to implementing the contribution claim model. Wuppertal Institut, Foundation Development and Climate Alliance. *allianz-entwicklung-klima.de/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/2409_Guide_Contribution-Claim-Model.pdf*

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ELECTIONS

Food, fuel and job struggles

This article paints a picture of the mood in Malawi surrounding the presidential and parliamentary elections that took place on 16 September. At the time of writing, the winner had not yet been determined. It is now clear that former incumbent Peter Mutharika has prevailed in the race against the incumbent president, Lazarus Chakwera.

BY LAMECK MASINA

It is nine o'clock in the morning, and 34-year-old vendor Bertha Kamanga is arranging tomatoes on a wooden stall in Ndirande market in Malawi's commercial capital, Blantyre. As she bargains with a customer, her conversation shifts to politics.

"Life is harder than before. Every politician now is promising lower prices. But look around," she says, pointing to baskets of rotting tomatoes. "Business is slow because people don't have money to buy."

Discussions about politics and how it shapes everyday life are currently dominating conversations across the country. Many regard the general election on 16 September 2025 as a test of public trust. For weeks politicians had unfolded their campaigns against a backdrop of high inflation, food insecurity and fuel shortages.

FUEL SHORTAGES AND AGRICULTURE

In rural districts, for example, farmers are concerned with the rising cost of fertilisers. "Early last year a 50-kilogramme bag cost around 90,000 Malawian kwacha (about $ 52)," says smallholder farmer Agnes Liwanda from Kasungu district. "Now it's closer to MK 150,000 ($ 86). We don't know if politicians will solve this. They say many things during campaigns, but after elections we are left alone."

Agriculture is the backbone of Malawi's economy, employing more than 80% of the population and contributing about a quarter of the country's GDP. However, rising fertiliser costs and erratic rainfall left 5.7 million people without food last year. This year, a preliminary report on crop harvest estimates suggests a 20 % decline of maize production compared to the average of the past five years. Agriculture therefore has become a key election issue.

In the cities, conversations about fuel prices and shortages dominate. Taxi driver Lackson Nkhata worries about costs. "A litre of petrol is at MK 2530 ($ 1.46). Last year it was already high, but at least we could move. Now the queues are long, and sometimes there is no fuel at all."

Since 2023, Malawi has struggled with intermittent fuel shortage because of a lack of foreign exchange. The crisis has forced drivers to spend nights in queues, disrupting businesses and commuters alike.

HIGH PRICES, HIGH YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT

At workplaces, people often complain about unfulfilled pledges of the 2020 election when the current administration of President Lazarus Chakwera came into power. "They promised to end blackouts, create jobs and reduce prices," says Clementina Mwale, who works as a secretary at a manufacturing company in Blantyre. "But we still face load shedding while food prices keep climbing."

The Reserve Bank of Malawi has revised the 2025 annual average inflation rate to 28.5%. A 50-kilogramme bag of maize, the national staple, is selling at nearly MK 85,000 ($49), about three times what it cost two years ago.

At the University of Malawi, students debate whether the vote can change their fortunes. "We graduate, but jobs are scarce. Youth unemployment is very high," says economics student Chisomo Nyondo. "Campaigns talk about entrepreneurship, but with no capital and a weak economy, it feels like empty promises."

CHANGE WILL TAKE TIME

Malawi's major political players, the ruling Malawi Congress Party of President Lazarus Chakwera, the United Transformation Movement led by former Reserve Bank governor Dalitso Kabambe, and the opposition Democratic Progressive Party of former president Peter Mutharika, have unveiled manifestos promising quick economic fixes. Economist Adam Chikapa says Malawi should not expect overnight change. "The kwacha has lost nearly half its value since 2022, making imports costlier. External debt is high, squeezing government finances. Whoever wins must make tough choices: either pursue reforms that may initially hurt or continue short-term subsidies that strain the budget."

However, in Ndirande market, vendor Maria Samu who sells second-hand clothes, sums up the mood shared by the voters. "We are tired of false promises but maybe this time, whoever wins, will make a difference."

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Coping far from home

"Syrian Migration" from the "Syrian Migration Series" by Helen Zughaib (see p. 4).

Illustration: Helen Zughaib

OUR VIEW

Integration is a shared responsibility

Both migrants and host societies have to do their part so that everyone benefits in the end. But in Germany and other countries, the migration discourse is currently shifting towards fear and exclusion. We should talk more about how integration can succeed.

BY JÖRG DÖBEREINER

International migration is the exception to the rule. That may sound surprising given the volume of the debate in many parts of the world. But according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), over 96 % of the world's population lives in their country of birth. The majority of international migration is also safe and regular. Usually, people migrate to look for work in another country.

Others have to flee – from armed conflicts as well as from natural disasters like floods or droughts, which are being exacerbated by the climate crisis. Their number has recently been growing from year to year, from just under 88 million in 2020 to about 130 million in 2024, according to UNHCR, the United Nations refugee agency. Almost half of these migrants have been internally displaced.

When migrants find work, pay taxes and participate in the social life of a host society, everyone benefits. But everyone is also responsible for integration: both migrants and host societies have to do their part. New arrivals need access to basic infrastructure like housing, healthcare and work. Often special support is needed at first, like when refugees are processing trauma. Both the state and its citizens should lend migrants a hand.

In order for integration to succeed, migrants must also of course be willing to earn their own livelihoods. Statistical surveys of refugees in Germany show that most are doing just that: eight years after their arrival, over two-thirds of refugees have found employment – even though their personal experiences of war and persecution often make them slower to integrate into the labour market compared to other migrants.

Countless examples prove how much investment in integration can pay off. One of the most prominent examples from Germany is that of Uğur Şahin and Özlem Türeci. Both migrated to Germany from Turkey as children. Their company, BioNTech, ultimately developed a vaccine against Covid-19 in record time. Without workers with immigrant backgrounds, entire industries – including nursing, construction, transportation and gastronomy – would collapse not only in Germany, but in other countries as well.

THE MIGRATION DEBATE IS TAKING A TURN

Yet conservative to right-wing extremist forces in Europe, North America and elsewhere have recently succeeded in pushing the migration debate towards rejection, exclusion and fear. This trend is not only having a negative impact on integration, but also, alarmingly, on asylum decisions. In Germany, a study showed that in regions where people are sceptical of foreign immigration, migrants had a lower chance of being granted asylum. That is unacceptable. Asylum decisions should depend on the situation in the country of origin and the credibility of the application.

If migration is primarily understood as a problem instead of an opportunity, it hurts not only migrants but also host societies. Ageing economies like Germany's are particularly dependent on immigration to secure prosperity. Therefore, we need less fear and resentment in the migration debate and instead more understanding of how integration can actually succeed.

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Photo: Htoo Myat Khin

"Support in the host country is important"

Germany urgently needs more nurses. Htoo Myat Khin from Myanmar qualified in the profession at Marburg University Hospital but says it would have been tough for her without the support she received from an integration programme. She talked to Eva-Maria Verfürth.

When and how did you come to Germany?
I came to Marburg from Myanmar in 2022. Together with 22 other colleagues, I was selected for a nurses' integration project at Marburg University Hospital. This is a pilot project run by the hospital and free of charge for us – the costs of the German classes, the training programme itself and our accommodation are all covered. Though we didn't require any prior experience of nursing, we did have to undergo several rounds of interviews in Myanmar. Meanwhile, nearly all of us have completed the training and for the most part got good grades, despite the language barrier.

I'm sure it wasn't an easy decision to leave Myanmar, so what prompted you to take this step?

I had worked as a tour guide in Myanmar and had already been to Germany several times. Some of the people on my tours had invited me to come and visit them in Berlin and Bavaria. But then the pandemic hit in 2020, followed by the military coup in 2021 – and the tourists stopped coming. I was unemployed for two years. For a while I worked for a small digital marketing company, but I earned very little there. I didn't know how long I could still keep my head above water. I then spotted a post on Facebook asking who wanted to learn German and come to work in Germany – so I seized the opportunity. In the meantime, I've successfully completed my training and since the beginning of September have been working as a nurse in the haematology, oncology and immunology department.

What's the biggest challenge for you in Germany?

Loneliness and home sickness are the biggest problems. Even though I've made friends here and all my instructors and colleagues are really nice, I'm still sad not to have my family and friends nearby. For the younger members of our group, who had never been to Germany before, the challenges were even greater at first, as they had to get used to the culture, the food and the weather too. But now they are very content here. Some have found a new partner, and they have job security. Most of them want to remain in Germany. I actually wanted to go back to Myanmar as soon as possible, but the current political situation means it's not safe enough, so I'm sure I'll be spending a few more years in Germany.

"Loneliness and home sickness are the biggest problems."

What or who helped you get settled in Germany?

Our instructors helped us a lot; they were always willing to help and said we could call them at any time. The people responsible for our practical training in the hospital were also very supportive. Without them we would never have managed to qualify and start a new life here. Now I feel that I have settled in properly. To this day, the group I came here with from Myanmar is like a second family to me. I earn enough to live on. I go to the gym, to the cinema or out with friends in the evening. It's just my family I really miss. But I try to fly home once a year.

What is needed to ensure that you get off to a good start in Germany?

The support and hospitality shown by Germans are important to make us feel at ease and build up our self-confidence. Sometimes things are difficult for us and we feel very small. In our case it was the instructors who helped us and boosted our confidence. We rarely experienced any discrimination. However, I do think that you can make life easier for yourself by trying hard and working on yourself – for example by learning the language properly.

“The opportunities I found here outweigh many of the challenges”

Boniface Mwangi is one of many people who have left their homeland because they no longer see any job prospects there. The Kenyan civil engineer arrived in Germany a few months ago and spoke with Katharina Wilhelm Otieno.

BONIFACE MWANGI

is a civil engineer from Kenya. He currently lives in Pirmasens and works at a caretaker and gardening service.

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Photo: Rawtime

Who are you, and where are you from?
My name is Boniface Mwangi. I'm from Kenya, specifically from Kiambu county. I'm a civil engineer by profession.

Why did you decide to come to Germany?
I was searching for greener pastures. In other words, I came here looking for better job opportunities. Although there are jobs for civil engineers in Kenya, they are often not well paid – sometimes not even enough to cover basic living expenses. I also often worked on projects funded by USAID, but when the US agency scaled back its operations and eventually shut down, I was affected too. And the layoffs began long before the exit was finalised.

How did the process of coming to Germany work?
It all started when a close friend of mine – my best friend from Kenya – went to Germany. He told me about his experience, and I thought I should give it a try. He connected me with someone who later became my employer. And this man, my current boss, supported me through the whole process – securing my job, arranging my visa, preparing the applications, booking the flight and even dealing with the embassy. He made everything possible.
And now I am here since July.

What are the biggest challenges for you?
The hardest part is being away from home and adjusting to an entirely new environment. I have to come to terms with what I had left behind – especially my memories of Kenya, my mother and my daughter. But the opportunities I found here outweigh many of the challenges.

Bridging the gap between the two worlds – Kenya and Germany – is also a constant struggle. Language is another barrier. I rely on people who speak English, but I live in a rural area in the southwest of Germany, where not many people do. I'm also worried about the cold winters – they scare me a bit.

German communication is very direct, much more so than in Kenya. This can feel disrespectful to someone raised in a different culture, but I've learned that it's just the way people express themselves here. You have to adapt to that.

Who or what helped you during your first weeks in Germany?
Relatives of my Kenyan friend, as well as other people connected to them, helped me a lot. The man who is now my boss also went out of his way to support me. I could ask them anything, and they were always ready to assist. Thanks to them, I already feel like I have a kind of social network here.

Do you feel like you have arrived – like you are at home now?
To some extent, yes – I do feel at home. But there are still gaps I need to close to fully feel settled. Learning the language and getting a driver's license, for example. I think having my family here would also make a big difference. Being separated from my child, with no opportunity to see her, is very hard for me.

Another source of uncertainty is how long I can remain in Germany. Of course, I want to secure a long-term stay. If I had that assurance, I would feel much more at ease. I don't plan to return to Kenya permanently, at least not anytime soon. If I go back, it will be as a visitor or tourist.

"Bridging the gap between the two worlds – Kenya and Germany – is a constant struggle."

ANTONIA KONARSKA
from Ukraine lives in Frankfurt today and conducts volunteer work, including for MädchenbüroMilena, an educational and integration facility for girls, women and their families.
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Photo: private

“Every day I had to force myself to take small steps”

It wasn’t easy for Antonia Konarska who is over 50, to start all over again. In 2022, she fled with her son to Frankfurt to escape the war in Ukraine. She conducts volunteer work in Germany – including for other refugees. She spoke with Maneesorn Koldehofe.

When and how did you come to Germany?
I’m from Kyiv, in Ukraine. I was 53 years old when my 17-year-old son and I came to Germany in 2022. We left our home town because of the war and were looking for safety and stability. Starting all over again was a big challenge for me.

> “Adjusting to a new country is never easy, especially not if you’re over 50.”

What did you find most difficult about living in Germany?
Adjusting to a new country is never easy, especially not if you’re over 50. One of the biggest hurdles was the language. Without it, communication is difficult, and you need it to deal with the bureaucracy. I was also weighed down by loneliness and the feeling of having to start over from scratch. We had to get used to new rules, systems and cultural differences. Every day I had to force myself to take small steps that would probably seem easy to other people but were a real challenge for me.

Who or what helped you?
The German classes I took were helpful. So were the friendly people I met. My son is very supportive, too. We overcome challenges together. My volunteer work is particularly important to me. I volunteer as a barista in the cafeteria of a retirement home. I also volunteer at MädchenbüroMilena, an organisation that supports women and girls in Frankfurt, and take daily German classes there. I am very grateful to the organisation’s team for that. My volunteer activities make me feel needed, boost my self-confidence and are helping me to integrate more quickly into German society.

Do you feel at home in Germany?
I’m slowly starting to feel at home in Germany, but the integration process takes time, patience and effort. I have a place to live and am learning German every day and gathering experience through my work and volunteer activities. Things aren’t easy at my age, but that’s what makes any progress so valuable. To feel completely at home, I’d like to understand the German language even better and find permanent work. I have no plans to return to Ukraine at the moment. I want to build a future here with my son. He’s 20 now and has worked as a part-time caterer for a year.

“I met Germans who didn’t see me just as a refugee”

Following the outbreak of civil war in Syria, hundreds of thousands of refugees began pouring into Europe in 2015. This was also when Mohamad Melli arrived in Germany. As a journalist, he had taken part in the 2010 protests against the Assad regime and been imprisoned several times. He now lives and works in the German city of Rüsselsheim. He has written down his story for D+C.

BY MOHAMAD MELLI

I’m from Damascus, a city whose warm stones have exuded the sweet fragrance of jasmine for centuries and whose balconies have countless stories to tell. To me, Damascus was never just a city – it was proof that people of different religious faiths and ethnicities could live in harmony. Churches and mosques stand side by side in its neighbourhoods, with Muslims, Christians, Kurds and Arabs all living under one and the same sky. I believed that life in Damascus would change but never break down. But then, in 2010, the rot set in.

The regime, which ruled us with an iron fist, sowed distrust between neighbours and sought to deepen the rifts between religions and ethnic groups in a bid to secure its hold on power. It wanted to make an evil out of diversity. But we resisted. We clung on to the idea that Syria belonged to all of its children, regardless of their origins or faith.

HOPES AND PROTESTS QUASHED BY FORCE

When the Syrian revolution began, I had the sense that history was finally opening a window, that the air was becoming purer and held the promise of freedom. I saw hope shining in people’s eyes. The demonstrations were the story of a generation that was raising its head after decades of oppression. I was one of them – my voice against injustice, my hands on the banner of change. However, the clamour of our voices soon merged with the heavy thud of gunfire. The city’s squares were transformed into fields of death, friends disappeared into prisons, entire neighbourhoods burnt down, and the sky turned grey as ash.

Because of my articles and my participation in the protests, I spent around a year in prison in all. This period wasn’t merely a physical experience; it was a wound in my soul – invisible but bleeding constantly. I realised that staying in

Syria would be tantamount to a slow death for me, so I took the hardest decision of all: to leave.

I OFTEN THOUGHT ABOUT GIVING UP

I set off from Damascus in 2015 – carrying just a small bag but weighed down by my many memories. I left behind my childhood home, the alleyways of my neighbourhood, my mother. Some of my friends were already in exile, others were dead. I travelled by boat to Greece via Turkey, it was a very difficult journey. Our boat sank but the Greek coastguard rescued us. I then proceeded on foot, crossing what was then Macedonia (now North Macedonia), Serbia, Hungary and Austria, until I finally reached Germany, still burdened by the noise of war and the silence of the graveyards, with a mixture of fear and longing in my heart.

It was tough at first. The German language felt like an insuperable obstacle, while the laws and bureaucracy were like a labyrinth from which there was no way out. The words were alien to me, the faces were alien to me, even the rhythm of the streets was alien to me. The loneliness weighed more heavily than my luggage, the sadness pursued me into my dreams. Depression tried to get its claws into me, and I often thought about giving up. I considered moving to Lebanon. But deep inside I knew I couldn't have faced saying goodbye to everyone a second time.

> "I became what people often call integrated – I spoke the language, had a job and a secure life. For me, my second homeland is now Germany."

I DISCOVERED AN ECHO OF DAMASCUS IN GERMANY

I took language classes and then started looking for work, which wasn't easy because I was unable to work as a journalist again because of the language barrier. In the end, I applied for and got a job as a primary school assistant. At the same time, I completed all the necessary training. I still work in this profession to this day.

Over time I learnt to breathe here. The language became a bridge, work gave me self-worth and German citizenship, which I finally acquired in 2024, helped me feel I really belonged to my adopted homeland. However, what saved me during my journey wasn't only the support of the German state but the humanity of the people I encountered along the way. I met Germans who didn't see me as a refugee but as a person with a story worth listening to. They gave me their time, they listened to me, and they treated me with warmth, helping me regain my belief that goodness does still exist in this world.

And I also found something here in Germany that reminded me of the old Damascus: diversity of religion and ethnicity, people living in harmony and mutual respect. I saw churches and mosques side by side, people from different cultures sharing their daily lives, without fear, without walls. I rediscovered here what I had lost in Damascus.

EVERY CIVILISED PERSON HAS TWO HOMELANDS

I became what people often call "integrated" – I spoke the language, had a job and a secure life. In connection with significant archaeological discoveries in Syria, a much-cited phrase was coined: "Every civilised person has two homelands – their own and Syria." For me, my second homeland is now Germany, while my first has never left me.

Yet for me this is not the goal, it's just one stage of the journey. I would like to build a bridge between Damascus and Germany. I would like to take Germany's experience of rebuilding itself after two world wars – in terms of architecture, culture and social cohesion – and inject it into Syria's damaged earth. One of my most important ideas is to establish a cinema and cultural café in the German consulate in Damascus. German films about culture, life and experience would be shown there alongside Syrian films for German audiences to foster cultural exchange. I'm also planning a programme that would bring Syrian schoolchildren to Germany so that they could learn the language and be introduced to German society. However, these visions

> “Freedom isn’t a privilege, it’s a right bestowed at birth. Humanity isn’t a slogan, it’s a daily obligation.”

need official support. The German embassy in Damascus needs to fully reopen so that projects for cultural and social exchange can become a reality.

As far as returning to Syria is concerned, I’m thinking more about a partial return – spending for example four months in Damascus and four months in Germany. I cannot imagine returning for good because Germany means so much to me. I have friends here and people who have become an important part of my life.

Freedom isn’t a privilege, it’s a right bestowed at birth. Humanity isn’t a slogan, it’s a daily obligation. For as long as I have breath in my body, I will work to turn pain into strength, loss into motivation and foreignness into a bridge between nations and hearts.

Photo: Mohamad Melli

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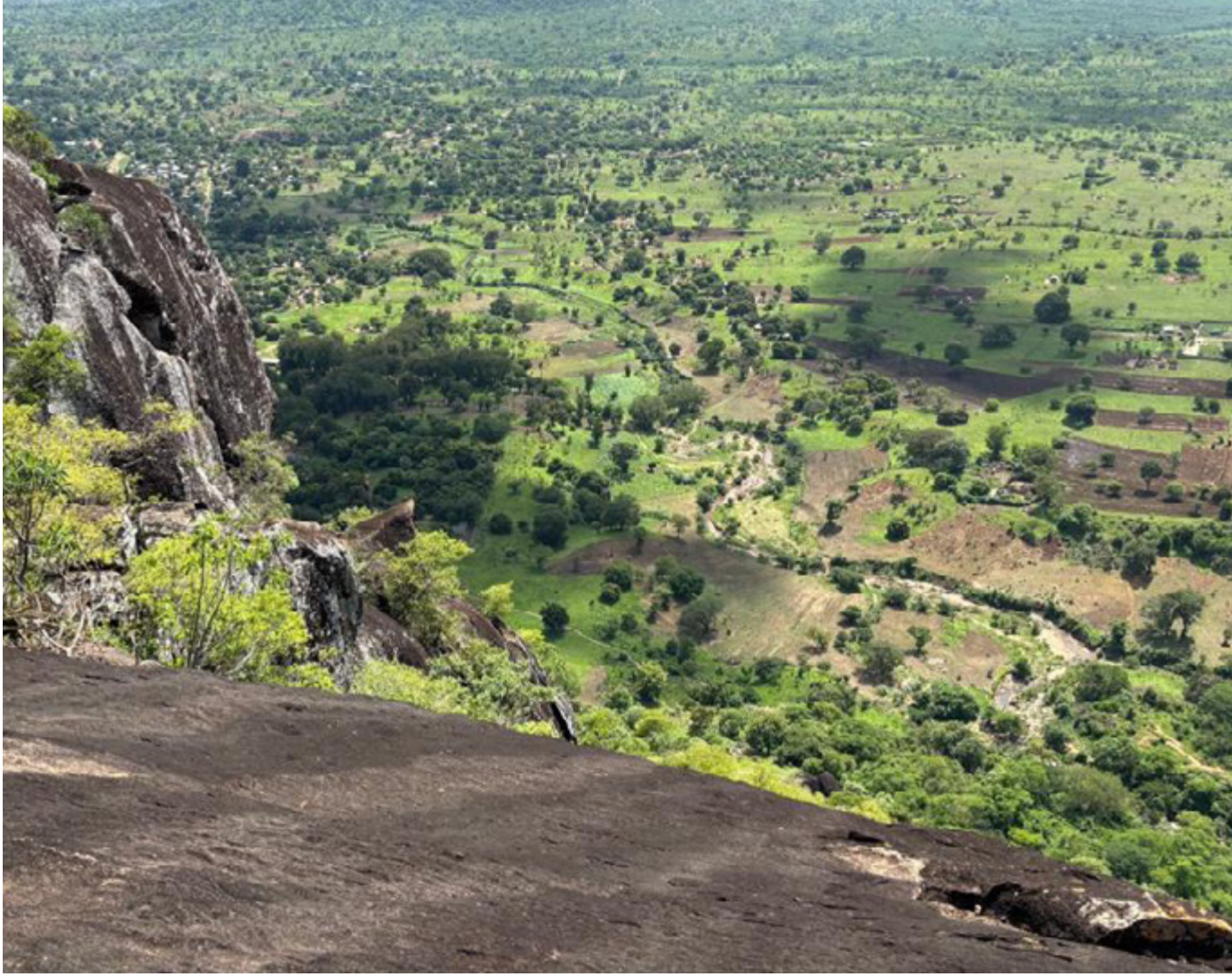
Photo: James George



A view of Chukudum, where the twins were born.

NEW BEGINNINGS

Two sisters, two paths

Born during South Sudan's struggle for independence, twin sisters Anna and Lily Nadai now live almost 12,000 kilometres apart. Their story is full of disruptions and new beginnings. It shows how lives can begin identically but unfold completely differently as a result of global upheavals – and how people come to terms with it.

BY KATHARINA WILHELM OTIENO

Anna and Lily Nadai have not seen each other for four years. Anna brought her sister to the airport in Nairobi, and then Lily's plane took off for New York. "I had very mixed feelings," Anna recalls. "I was sad, because we had never really been apart, but also happy for her and the opportunities she was going to have now."

Nowadays the sisters call each other daily to ease the pain of separation, but seeing each other again under the current American administration is almost unimaginable. Even before Donald Trump took office, all of Lily's attempts to bring Anna to the USA failed. And neither wants Lily to risk losing her visa by travelling abroad. So, she stays away from all the family celebrations that would make a reunion possible.

They likely saw each other for the first time shortly after birth: The fraternal twins were born in 1997 in the small town of Chukudum, in what is now South Sudan. Anna is two hours older than Lily. Their mother was the fourth wife of a chief of the Didinga ethnic group and a well-known independence fighter. The twins have a brother and around 30 half-siblings.

The so-called Second Sudanese Civil War had been raging since 1983 in the region that at the time still belonged politically to Sudan. The Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) was fighting against the troops of Sudan's central government. There were historical reasons for the conflict: In 1947, northern Sudan and colonial power Great Britain agreed that the former would also control the provinces of southern Sudan after independence. The southern part of the country had no part in the decision, which sparked decades of fighting for more political representation, resources and ultimately independence for the south.

A 2005 peace agreement made South Sudan an autonomous region. The independence that followed has so far failed to bring the new country true peace, however: Violent clashes between ethnic groupings or state security forces and rebel militias are still occurring.

Sudan's civil wars killed an estimated 2.5 million people and displaced about 4 million. The twins' parents did not survive the period, either. Their father became the victim of a political assassination in 1999. That same year, their mother was killed by a land mine.

FLIGHT BY NIGHT

A fight broke out over Lily and Anna between their mother and father's families. Their father had not yet fully paid off the bride price for his fourth wife, and part of their mother's family hoped to later marry the twins off to obtain compensation. Then everything changed.

Many of Anna and Lily's half-brothers had already fled on foot to Kenya. They pressed for the sisters to join them. At night, in secret, the twins were smuggled over the border to Kenya – with the help of the German nun and missionary Luise Radlmeier, who was active in the region during the war.

Anna and Lily landed in Kenya's notorious Kakuma refugee camp, located near the border. It is one of the largest in the world. Around 300,000 refugees are currently living there. Many have been there for 20 years, including some of the twins' friends and relatives.

> "The fact that more or less all the children in the orphanage had been uprooted went a long way towards promoting integration and cohesion across ethnic borders."

UNDER THE PROTECTION OF DOMINICAN NUNS

Kakuma could have been the last stop for Anna and Lily, too, but after only a month, Luise Radlmeier brought the now eight-year-olds to Juja, a city in the Nairobi metropolitan region. At the time, she was running the order's house there and continuing to advocate for war refugees from South Sudan and elsewhere. She placed the twins in an orphanage run by Dominican nuns and ensured that they could go to school.

In the beginning, it was difficult for both children to get used to living in a foreign country. They only spoke Didinga, the language of their ethnic group. In time, they learned Kiswahili and English, Kenya's official languages. The fact that more or less all the children in the orphanage had been uprooted went a long way towards promoting integration and cohesion across ethnic borders, the twins recall. Even now, the "orphanage siblings" are important people in each other's lives.

The twins report that they sometimes encountered racism or discrimination at school because of their background and very dark skin colour. But these experiences were limited. In Kenya's multiethnic society, which includes refugees or migrants from Burundi, Somalia, Eritrea, Nigeria and elsewhere, everyone feels foreign from time to time, Anna says.

STANDING ON THEIR OWN TWO FEET

When they were 20, the sisters moved out of the orphanage and into a small apartment. With support from the Dominicans, who kept finding new Western sponsors for

the children under their care, and their large family, Anna and Lily were able to attend university. Anna earned a diploma in communications, Lily in public relations. In Kenya, a diploma is a (more affordable) precursor to a bachelor's degree.

Like many graduates, they could not find work in their fields at first. Even though Kenya's social structure generally makes it easier for people from a variety of backgrounds to integrate, Kenyan nationals are usually given preference in the country's highly competitive labour market.

Anna and Lily kept their heads above water with a variety of jobs. They helped friends with a clothing store, sold second-hand clothing online themselves and worked as coaches for a youth project. Anna ran a bar for her brother in Juja for a while; Lily sometimes worked as a model.

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit Kenya's economy, the twins' odd jobs came to an end. The two moved often – always together – from one small one-bedroom apartment to another, depending on the rental market. Both wanted to earn their bachelor's degrees, but they lacked the financial resources. In moments of despair, they toyed with the idea of returning to South Sudan in the hopes that as citizens, they might find it easier to find permanent work there.

SEPARATE PATHS

Then life took a sudden turn for one of them. Lily found a partner, also from South Sudan, who lived in the USA. In 2021, she managed to get a visa, and the sisters had to separate for an extended period for the first time in their lives.

Lily is now training to become a nurse in a medium-sized city in the state of New York. She has a green card. She has not yet experienced open racism in the USA, she says. It helps that she has a cousin living in the same city, as well as a friend she met in the Kakuma refugee camp. Other members of the large Nadai family live in other US states. Getting together with them is difficult, Lily says, but she takes comfort in the fact that she could stay with them if she had to. A sponsoring family that supported Anna and Lily in the orphanage also stays in touch.

Anna still lives in Juja, but she has made progress, too. Her brothers helped her finance a bachelor's degree in communications, and she has gained more of a foothold in the media landscape – for instance as a freelance journalist and with a few of her own videos on YouTube. She has a permanent part-time position in a community-based organisation in which she coaches disadvantaged girls. Lily also supports her financially.

Anna is well integrated into the city's community, has a large circle of friends and often has her hands full with her various projects. "Juja has become my home," she says.

What unites both siblings, is the pain of separation. "The fact that we can talk every day makes it easier," Lily says. "And I also take comfort in the fact that I can help Anna by being here." She is determined to keep supporting her relatives and for that reason also make something of herself. She thinks that doing so will be easier in the USA than in Kenya. At the same time, the East African country is still more familiar to her; she says that life there is "more pleasant".

> "Above all, Anna would like Lily to come to her graduation ceremony next year in Kenya."

PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

Above all, Anna would like Lily to come to her graduation ceremony next year in Kenya. What she would like most is to move to the USA to be with her and their other relatives, but she could imagine going to Europe, too. "The main thing is that I have the opportunity to work and earn money," she says.

That's also important to her because of something the sisters call the "black tax": "My brothers and Lily have always supported me," Anna says. "I also need to be able to help other members of my huge family soon. It's a kind of family tax."

Anna only returned to South Sudan once, when their father's remains were reburied in a ceremony. That was in 2011. Lily visited relatives there again before she migrated to the US in 2021. "If the country was peaceful and stable," Anna says, "I could imagine making a new beginning there." rrLily, however, says that she no longer feels a deep connection to the region where it all began. "Right now, I can only imagine visiting," she says. "Nothing more."

Names have been changed by the editors.

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REFUGEE INTEGRATION

The challenge of starting over

The number of people forced to leave their homes has soared over the past decade. They now have to start from scratch in societies that are sometimes completely foreign to them. Whether they succeed depends not only on their own ability to adapt, but also on the host societies taking responsibility.

BY JENNY PHILLIMORE

Photo: picture alliance/dpa/Boris Roessler

Refugees arrive at a German initial reception centre. How their lives unfold from this point on is largely the responsibility of the host society.

In recent years, the number of people forced to leave their homes has more than doubled. By mid-2024, over 122 million people were displaced, up from around 43 million in 2012. These figures don't yet reflect the full impact of more recent conflicts, including those in Gaza and Sudan. Most of those displaced remain within their own countries, but many also flee across borders, often to neighbouring nations.

People are forced to migrate for many reasons: war, violence, persecution, natural disasters and the growing effects of climate change. Many LGBTQIA+ individuals are also forced to leave their homes due to discrimination and violence, especially as dozens of countries continue to criminalise homosexuality.

Contrary to stereotypes, over half of the world's displaced people are women and children. Women face particular dangers, including a greater risk of sexual and gender-based violence, while men are more likely to suffer physical harm.

Finding safety is not easy. The journey to refuge can be just as dangerous as the situation being escaped. People crossing borders may face detention, torture, and deportation. Migration routes are often deadly, with thousands of people drowning or dying along the way. Survivors arrive in refuge deeply traumatised, often having lost loved ones and endured unimaginable hardship. Many have significant physical and psychological health issues.

> "Until people feel safe and emotionally well, they cannot be expected to learn or work."

INTEGRATION IS NOT ONLY A PERSONAL JOURNEY

When they finally reach safety, forced migrants must navigate complex and often hostile immigration systems. In some countries, asylum seekers live in poverty and uncertainty for years while waiting for a decision on their status. This waiting period, combined with the fear of being returned to danger, has serious psychological effects. People are often not allowed to work or study and must endure long periods of isolation and inactivity.

At the same time, once they have refugee status, they are expected to rebuild their lives in a country that may be completely unfamiliar. They have lost homes, possessions, jobs and sometimes even their children or parents. They must now adjust to new cultures, climates, languages and ways of life. In this context, they engage in the process we call integration, or learning to live and participate in a new country.

Integration is not only a personal journey but also a political one. Successful integration helps people feel a sense of belonging and recover from trauma. It is viewed as essential by host societies, as integrated refugees are more likely to contribute socially and economically. Increasingly, public and political support for refugee resettlement depends on how well refugees are perceived to be integrating.

Integration is multi-faceted. It includes finding housing, work and healthcare, building social connections, learning the local language, gaining legal rights, and feeling emotionally connected to the new country. These areas are all linked. A person can't look for work if they're unwell or can't speak the language. They may not feel they belong if they're isolated or face discrimination.

Integration is a shared responsibility. It depends not just on refugees but also on host governments, institutions, employers, the media and local communities. Racism or anti-refugee attitudes can create huge barriers. There is clear evidence that discrimination harms mental health and makes it harder for refugees to feel they belong or to thrive.

WHAT'S BEHIND POOR INTEGRATION OUTCOMES?

Many countries have integration programmes that offer language classes, job trainings, or help developing employability. Yet refugees struggle more than other migrant groups to find employment or learn the language. It can take up to 10 years for refugee outcomes to match those of other groups, and women often remain excluded even after that time.

Negative integration outcomes can worsen trauma and increase a sense of dependency, while successful integration improves wellbeing and enables refugees to contribute. So why are outcomes often poor?

First, it's vital to understand that refugees face unique disadvantages. Unlike other migrants, they didn't choose to leave their homes or plan their journey based on job prospects. Many have experienced deep trauma and arrive with very few resources. They don't know how systems work, may lack qualifications or documents, and often don't have friends or family to support them. Some

women have no formal education or experience of working independently.

Second, many struggle with complex health problems. Even after physical injuries are treated, psychological trauma can take years to heal. Hearing news from back home or remembering past events triggers emotional distress with individuals experiencing vicariously the traumas of loved ones back home. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) can affect sleep, memory, concentration, and cause anxiety and social withdrawal, all of which make learning or working very difficult.

Despite these challenges, many refugees, especially men, are eager to work and support their families. Most come from cultures where relying on government benefits is unusual, and the idea of not working is deeply uncomfortable. Yet they face a tough job market, lack of networks, language barriers, and prejudice from employers who may be reluctant to take a chance on someone with no host country qualifications or experience.

The situation can be even harder for women. They are often more deeply affected by trauma, loss and isolation. Many lack confidence, especially if they had little education or work experience before fleeing. Some are single parents or have young children and are afraid to use childcare, especially if they have experienced family separation or loss. Many language classes don't offer childcare, further limiting their ability to learn and engage.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO IMPROVE INTEGRATION OUTCOMES?

Some countries have better systems than others. Sweden and Australia, for example, offer structured integration programmes that include language learning, childcare and support from caseworkers. These caseworkers refer refugees to services like psychological support or community groups where people can speak their own language and connect with others. This kind of support network helps refugees build confidence, learn about the new culture, and make friends.

Mentoring schemes and community sponsorship programmes are also helpful. Being paired with a local volunteer or family can make a huge difference in helping refugees navigate new environments, feel welcome, and access opportunities. These small connections can help people feel less alone and more hopeful about the future.

Even with such supports, many refugees struggle. Too many programmes are time-limited and place too much focus on getting people into work quickly, without addressing the health or emotional needs that must come first. Refugee women in particular are often left behind, especially if they don't feel ready or able to take on work or study responsibilities.

Long-term success requires a more thoughtful approach. The first step should always be to ensure safe housing and access to psychological support. Until people feel safe and emotionally well, they cannot be expected to learn or work.

> "When supported properly, refugee children often do very well at school and can be the bridge between their families and the host society."

Next, language learning must be more flexible and accessible, beginning with everyday communication and progressing to job-related or academic language. Classes should include childcare and take into account different starting points. For some, vocational training may be a goal; for others, it may be higher education. Refugees, like all people, need time, support and choice.

Entering the labour market can be supported through paid internships or training placements, ideally with employers who receive support and incentives to take part. Matching refugees with volunteer mentors or compan-ions, especially those of similar age, gender or background, can offer the kind of informal help most of us get from family or friends.

Importantly, the work of refugee parents, especially mothers, must be valued. Parenting through trauma and in a new country is hard, and many women focus their energies on helping their children adapt and thrive. This role should be recognised, not penalised. When supported properly, refugee children often do very well at school and can be the bridge between their families and the host society. Supporting refugee parents through befriending, volunteering opportunities, or involvement in schools can help them grow confidence and build a life in their new country at a pace that does not cause additional stresses.

Integration is complex, essential and inevitable. Yet many stakeholders lack a clear understanding of what it means to be a forced migrant and the profound difficulties involved in rebuilding a life in an unfamiliar country. Effective integration demands not only empathy for refugees' experiences but also the active engagement of all stakeholders. This includes the implementation of comprehensive integration strategies, with states assuming responsibility for ensuring that refugees have access to the resources necessary to rebuild their lives out of place.

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Photo: Syed Muhammad Abubakar

Parveen Bibi in Darkut Colony in front of a water tank that is filled by a solar-powered pump.

INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS

Solar-powered water supply for climate refugees in Pakistan

Functioning basic infrastructure is one of the prerequisites for the integration of refugees. In Pakistan, a WWF initiative is helping to supply internally displaced persons (IDP) with drinking water.

BY SYED MUHAMMAD ABUBAKAR

In 2010, heavy monsoon rains caused devastating floods in various regions of Pakistan, claiming 1985 lives and resulting in enormous losses of homes, livestock, crops and personal belongings. Parveen Bibi, now 30, reports that her family suffered great damage when the floods hit their home in the Darkut valley in the Ghizer District of Gilgit-Baltistan, a mountainous region in northern Pakistan. However, the government only provided a small amount of financial compensation and food rations for three months, she says. "There was nowhere to stay, we used to live in shelters and in the houses of relatives," she recalls.

In 2016, the Ismaili Council, a Muslim organisation, helped affected families purchase land and co-financed the construction of houses in a safer area. According to Parveen Bibi, more than 50 households from Darkut valley migrated to Hatoon valley that year. They named their community "Darkut Colony". It reminded them of where they came from and connected them to their ancestral homeland, Bibi says.

She recalls that when she and her neighbours arrived in Darkut Colony, there was no drinking or municipal water and no school for the children. "Life was difficult," she says. "We used to drink water from streams." The Ismaili Council had constructed a water tank to draw water from the nearby Ghizer River, but the electric motor powering the pump wasn't fully functional, and the community's water requirements weren't met. The residents had to fetch water from nearby open sources, which exposed them to various waterborne diseases.

BASIC SERVICES ARE LACKING

Khadim Hussain, Director of the Gilgit-Baltistan Environmental Protection Agency (GB-EPA), warns that families displaced by climate-induced disasters often end up in informal settlements or temporary camps that lack basic services. "Housing is inadequate and access to clean water, healthcare, education and sanitation is limited, which deepens their vulnerability," he says. Hussain adds that many lose their traditional livelihoods such as farming, herding and orchard cultivation and are forced into insecure, low-paid jobs.

He points out that migration also breaks family and community ties, and newcomers often face discrimination in host areas. Children's education suffers as new schools can be inaccessible or unwelcoming, he says.

According to Hussain, government institutions, civil-society organisations, local communities and volunteers generally provide immediate relief in the aftermath of climate-induced disasters in Pakistan. Affected communities have been resettled to safer areas, and government authorities have provided compensation for losses, rehabilitated critical infrastructure and in some cases provided permanent housing. However, Hussain stresses that support is often insufficient to ensure long-term stability and resilience.

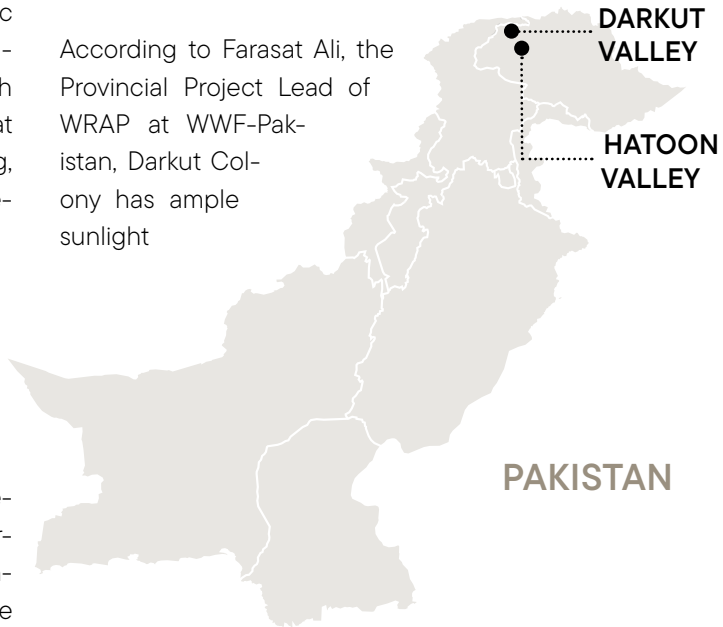
Affected communities are concerned not only about housing, water, sanitation and healthcare, but also about the risk of repeated displacement due to natural hazards, Hussain continues. Loss of ancestral land leads to financial insecurity, and resettled families often feel marginalised and excluded from decision-making. "These communities aspire to a safe and dignified resettlement with sustainable livelihood opportunities," he says.

A SOLAR-POWERED SOLUTION FOR DARKUT COLONY

In 2024, Darkut Colony's Local Support Organization (LSO) approached WWF-Pakistan, a civil-society environmental organisation, for help. Using funding from its Water Resource Accountability in Pakistan (WRAP) programme, a solar-powered water supply scheme was installed. The work began in December 2024, and by July 2025, the new system was operational. It provides safe drinking water to Darkut Colony while avoiding carbon emissions.

The community turns on the solar water pump twice a day, once in the morning and once in the afternoon. The water is pumped into a tank, which has a capacity of 28,000 litres, then distributed to households through a network of pipes. According to a WWF-Pakistan official, the project cost 7.1 million Pakistani rupees (about $25,000). It has been handed over to the community, which manages its operation and maintenance through a monthly household contribution. The system's projected operational lifespan is 25 to 30 years.

According to Farasat Ali, the Provincial Project Lead of WRAP at WWF-Pakistan, Darkut Colony has ample sunlight



> “It is vital to provide adaptation support to the mountain communities in Gilgit-Baltistan so that as many people as possible can become resilient to climate impacts and stay in their ancestral homeland.”

even in the winter season, so the water supply scheme can fully meet the needs of the entire community through solar energy. He says that the water supplied through the intervention is safe for drinking and meets WHO guidelines and Pakistan’s National Environmental Quality Standards (NEQS).

Residents say the project has brought health improvements and reduced exposure to waterborne diseases. Parveen Bibi notes that the water is “good for drinking” and that people “feel healthy”. Another resident, Shakoor Khan, who lost his farmland and job in the 2010 floods, is grateful for the water scheme but emphasises the need for a back-up electric connection during cloudy weather.

Farasat Ali stresses that the solar pump can operate with limited sunlight due to its Variable Frequency Drive (VFD) technology. Nonetheless, he acknowledged that the team planned to assess the need for an additional electric connection in winter.

DEVASTATING FLOODING IN 2025

While the IDPs of Darkut Colony are trying to build a life in their new home, some of their fellow Pakistanis in Gilgit-Baltistan have recently been affected by heavy flooding. According to Faizullah Faraq, a spokesperson for the Gilgit-Baltistan government, 45 people have lost their lives and 41 have been injured in the administrative territory between 22 June and 15 September 2025 due to extreme weather events caused by climate change-induced Glacial Lake Outburst Floods (GLOFs) and cloudbursts. Faraq reports that the government is working to rebuild the damaged infrastructure.

Khadim Hussain of GB-EPA warns that the threat of recurrent disasters is high in Gilgit-Baltistan, explaining that “without comprehensive support systems, climate-induced migration in northern Pakistan is expected to rise exponentially.”

It is vital to provide adaptation support to the mountain communities in Gilgit-Baltistan so that as many people as possible can become resilient to climate impacts and stay in their ancestral homeland. Those who have to leave – like the Darkut Colony community – need sufficient support to start a dignified life in a new home, without discrimination or marginalisation.

Meanwhile, initiatives such as the solar water pump installed by WWF-Pakistan can be replicated in other parts of northern Pakistan where communities are struggling to access safe drinking water.

LINK

WWF-Pakistan:
wwfpak.org

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Photo: picture alliance / AA / Juancho Torres

Venezuelan migrants awaiting the issuance of the Special Stay Permit by the Colombian government in Bogotá in 2023.

COLOMBIA

Legalising millions of displaced Venezuelans

When millions of Venezuelans fled across the border, neighbouring Colombia made a bold choice: instead of closing its borders, the country kept them wide open. Since 2021, displaced Venezuelans have been eligible for residence and work permits. Not everything has gone smoothly, but the example shows what's possible when the political will is there.

BY FABIO ANDRÉS DÍAZ PABÓN

Let's start with the numbers: by the end of 2024, no other country had seen more people flee than Venezuela. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), 6.5 million Venezuelans are currently living in neighbouring countries — more than the number of refugees living outside Syria or Afghanistan. Since the collapse in oil prices in 2014, Venezuela has experienced hyperinflation, shortages of food and medicine, a deterioration in healthcare and other public services and a massive rise in crime. At the same time, the increasingly authoritarian government has begun to crack down on opposition.

The situation is widely seen as one of the largest forced displacement crises in Latin America. No other country has taken in more displaced Venezuelans than Colombia. Millions of them have passed the border in search of protection. This makes Colombia the world's third-largest host country for refugees.

In Colombia, the crisis has been exacerbated further by the influx of people fleeing other Latin American countries, many of whom are en route to the United States. Since the onset of the pandemic in 2020, the country has seen a general increase in transit migration from other South American countries such as Ecuador, from the Caribbean, Asia and even Africa. Almost 3 million international refugees currently reside in Colombia, adding to the challenges the country is already facing.

A ROLE MODEL FOR NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES

Nevertheless, Colombia has been better able to respond to the refugee and migrant crisis compared to other countries in the region. This is certainly due to the country's own experience with displacement: Colombia has the third-highest number of internally displaced persons in the world. Despite the fact that the government and the FARC guerrilla group concluded a peace agreement in 2016, the decades-long armed conflict continues to this day. Clashes between armed groups lead to forced displacement, and by the end of 2024, around 7.2 million Colombians were registered as internally displaced persons.

The country's institutional and administrative capacity to respond to the humanitarian needs of migrants and refugees stems from its efforts to provide protection to millions of its own citizens in recent decades. Colombia has spent years learning to adapt and respond to this societal challenge.

To address the Venezuelan exodus, Colombia implemented an interesting initiative in 2021. The Estatuto Temporal de Protección para Migrantes Venezolanos (Temporary Protection Status for Venezuelan Migrants – EPTV) allows Venezuelan migrants to legalise their status. It permits them to stay in Colombia for up to 10 years before having to apply for residency and provides a work permit, access to education and healthcare services. All Venezuelans who were already in the country – whether legally or illegally – and those who entered legally between February 2021 and May 2023 were eligible. They could apply for the EPTV and receive the Permiso por Protección Temporal (Special Stay Permit – PPT), a document similar to a residence permit. The PPT lets Venezuelans approach local and regional governments to access various support programmes.

While imperfect, the EPTV allowed Venezuelans to try to rebuild their lives in Colombia and to integrate in the social-protection network of the country. According to estimates by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Venezuelan migrants and refugees contributed $ 529.1 million to Colombia's economy in 2022, accounting for almost two percent of the country's total tax revenue. The IOM projects that as a result of the EPTV initiative, Venezuelans will contribute even more in the coming years.

> "Being a migrant or refugee in Colombia poses many challenges, even for Venezuelans. Many are still struggling to regularise their status and access essential services."

OTHER REFUGEES ARE LESS PROTECTED

When it comes to the EPTV, Colombia is an example for the continent. However, decrees and laws always also create necessary yet arbitrary limits to plans and programmes. Anyone who does not fall into the above mentioned categories is in limbo. This includes all people from other countries than Venezuela looking for shelter in Colombia. Most of them need to be recognised as "refugees" in order to acquire legal status. But Colombia has a stringent definition of what it means to be a refugee, which makes it harder to be recognised as such within Colombian institutions. Refugees are generally less protected and have consistently had less access to healthcare, education and work.

Being a migrant or refugee in Colombia poses many challenges, even for Venezuelans. Not only are many still strug-

> “Migrants and refugees living in Colombia are being increasingly impacted by violence and displacement and are at a higher risk of being exploited by mafias and armed groups.”

gling to regularise their status and access essential services. Migrants and refugees are often being stigmatised by society. They are being erroneously blamed for a rise in crime and seen as less employable, lazy and less deserving of support. In a country with high levels of informal employment and high precariousness, they are competing with locals for state support.

What’s more, Colombia is a country that is still dealing with several ongoing armed conflicts and currently observing a worrying upswing in violence. Migrants and refugees living in Colombia are being increasingly impacted by violence and displacement and are at a higher risk of being exploited by mafias and armed groups. Reports illustrate the violence that occurs on migration routes from Latin America to the USA, which mafias essentially control. Refugees and migrants can be used by armed groups or find themselves caught in the crossfire. Colombia is no exception.

THE USA AND ITS GUNBOAT DIPLOMACY

Another reason why Colombia has responded to the refugee crisis so well is that it has the political will to do so. Historically, Colombia has been a right-leaning country, and given its leadership’s distaste for the Venezuelan regime, it has welcomed Venezuelan migrants with sympathy.

More recently, however, the government of Gustavo Petro has struck a different tone. Petro, who took office in 2022 as the first left-leaning president in Colombian history, has worked to ease tensions with Venezuela. This shift in position has led to a reduction in support for the programmes that assist migrants and refugees, which is coming on top of cuts to USAID funding for humanitarian programmes. In the end, the protection of migrants and refugees also depends on the state of international affairs.

The USA has recently deployed naval ships around Venezuela as part of its gunboat diplomacy and continues to clamp down on migrants and refugees. It remains to be seen whether these tensions will increase the outflow of Venezuelans searching for shelter. It’s possible, too, that migrants and refugees who were trying to reach the USA will now break off their journey. This will present Colombia with future challenges in fulfilling its humanitarian duties. For now, however, it can be said that despite its past and present difficulties, Colombia has chosen to defend humanity.

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Photo: Stephan Pramme

The Baghdasaryan family was forced to flee their home in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023. They now live in Yeghegnadzor, in southern Armenia.

DISPLACED BY CONFLICT

"I wanted to die in Nagorno-Karabakh"

When the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh escalated between Azerbaijan and Armenia in 2023, a large number of the region's inhabitants fled to Armenia. Despite the support they have received from civil society there, not all of them have managed to gain a foothold in society.

BY ANDRÉ UZULIS

Irina Baghdasaryan has lost everything. It's now two years since she was forced to flee from her home region of Nagorno-Karabakh. The 38-year-old Armenian remembers the day – 19 September 2023 – with horror. She lived with her family in the village of Chankatagh in the Martakert region. That Tuesday morning, she heard that Azerbaijani troops had invaded. Everything happened so quickly that she didn't even have time to take a family photo down from the wall. By the time the family fled with their four small children and 81-year-old Grandmother Raya, their village was already surrounded by the Azerbaijani military.

Somehow, they managed to find a way through and escaped into the forest. They ran all night, pursued some of

the time by soldiers. They had nothing to eat with them, nor any water, and only the clothes they were wearing. While on the run they saw an Armenian tank blown up by a grenade before their very eyes. Eventually they came across some Armenian soldiers who took them by truck to Stepanakert, the capital of Nagorno-Karabakh. There they spent four days staying with acquaintances before traversing the Lachin corridor – the only land route into Armenia from Nagorno-Karabakh, which is in Azerbaijani territory – in a bus jam-packed with refugees.

The Baghdasaryans share their fate with around a hundred thousand of their compatriots. The seizure of Nagorno-Karabakh brought thousands of years of Armenian settlement in the region to an end. Azerbaijan, a predominantly Muslim country, occupied the Christian Armenian exclave and drove out all the Armenians living there. This ended the armed conflicts that had kept flaring up between the neighbouring states for decades. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, the two former Soviet republics had repeatedly waged war against one another. Armenia was victorious initially and conquered a large chunk of territory around Nagorno-Karabakh; later, Azerbaijan recaptured the area and, by driving out the Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh, established an entirely new set of circumstances.

These days, Nagorno-Karabakh is largely deserted. Allegedly, a number of Azerbaijani soldiers have been relocated there with their families. In August 2025, the governments in Yerevan and Baku signed an agreement pledging to recognise each other's territorial integrity within their existing borders.

SUPPORT FROM CIVIL SOCIETY

The Baghdasaryan family was initially met in Armenia by the civil-society organisation Syunik-Development in Yeghegnadzor, the capital of Vayots Dzor province in the south of the country. Syunik-Development says its mission is to promote Armenia's regional populations in solving their current social, economic, environmental and educational issues.

The organisation was a 1995 initiative of the diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church in the region, specifically of Archbishop Abraham Mkrtchyan, Syunik-Development's founder and current board chairman. This was the period following the collapse of the Soviet Union when the newly independent Armenian state had yet to redefine itself and a lot was happening in the capital Yerevan but very little in rural areas.

The urban-rural divide remains one of Armenia's biggest structural problems to this day. Everything is concentrated

Photo: Stephan Pramme

Gohar Ishkhanyan and her children are standing in front of their house on the outskirts of Yeghegnadzor. Having been displaced twice, the family has now built a life for themselves in Armenia.

on Yerevan, where economic growth has become detached from that in the rest of the country and prices are on a par with those in Western European cities. Meanwhile, provincial areas are suffering from underemployment and low incomes.

FROM EMERGENCY AID TO EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMES

"One of our most important challenges in 2023 was to provide refugees with emergency aid," says Project Coordinator Hayarpi Aghakhanyan. "It was a question of meeting their basic needs for things like food, clothing and medical care. The second step is to make lasting support available in the form of housing, educational programmes, youth work and social work."

The Baghdasaryan family also benefited from this assistance. After an initial period at a refugee centre, they found a flat in Yeghegnadzor with Syunik-Development's help. The family is still eking out an impoverished existence there today. Irina Baghdasaryan, formerly a management assistant at a gold mine in Nagorno-Karabakh, has failed to fully integrate into society in Armenia's heartland – despite all the help provided following the family's flight and despite the considerable solidarity shown by her new neighbours. She is divorced and unemployed. Her ten-year-old son Artur has been traumatised ever since they fled from Nagorno-Karabakh and needs a great deal of care and attention from his mother, making it impossible for her to go out to work.

The family is reliant on the meagre pension paid to Grandmother Raya – now 83, she had worked as a cleaner in Nagorno-Karabakh. Dressed in black, the emaciated old lady hides her face in her hands, with tears coursing down her cheeks, as she talks about the family's escape. "I wanted to die in Nagorno-Karabakh and be buried there," she says. "But then we lost everything, even our own grave."

The Ishkhanyan family, who these days live in a small house on the outskirts of Yeghegnadzor, suffered a similarly harsh fate. They were even forced to flee twice: from their home town of Shushi during the war in 2020 and then again in 2023 from Stepanakert, where they had moved when the hostilities ended in 2020. Unlike the Baghdasaryans, however, they have built a life for themselves in Armenia. Armen Ishkhanyan works as a long-distance lorry driver and his wife Gohar as a designer. Although they have integrated, they will never give up hope of one day returning to Nagorno-Karabakh, says Gohar Ishkhanyan. They have chosen not to take Armenian citizenship, fearing it could pose an obstacle to their return.

A modern solar thermal system is installed on the roof of the family's house. It was funded by Syunik-Development, explains Project Coordinator Aghakhanyan. "This enables the Ishkhanyan family to save on heating costs during the winter." Armenia is dependent on Russian gas and buys it at relatively low prices. Nonetheless, rural households in Armenia have little in the way of purchasing power, so gas bills in the long, cold and snowy winters of the southern Caucasus hit them hard. The solar thermal system is thus of huge benefit to the Ishkhanyan family.

"We are funded by the Church and by donations from international partners," says Hayarpi Aghakhanyan from

Syunik-Development. She names German charity Brot für die Welt and the European Commission as examples of foreign donors. Their international partners are based in 20 different countries, for the most part in Western Europe. However, they also include Georgia and Russia – two states with which Armenia enjoys a special relationship. A not inconsiderable proportion of the organisation's funding stems from donations from Armenia's global diaspora. An estimated 8 to 10 million Armenians live abroad, whereas the population in Armenia itself numbers only around 3 million. Many Armenian expats have built successful lives for themselves in Europe, the USA or Russia. The ties between the diaspora and their compatriots at home are traditionally close.

Following the surge of refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh in the autumn of 2023 and the need to provide them with emergency aid, Syunik-Development has gone back to focusing on the region's medium- and long-term development. In Yeghegnadzor, its activities revolve around agricultural initiatives, nursery schools, educational programmes, promoting neighbourhood help schemes and around youth and social work. As the organisation's website explains, the goal is to help establish a stable and democratic society in Armenia that is better prepared to meet the social, cultural, economic and environmental challenges of the 21st century.

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Photo: Stephan Pramme

Archbishop Abraham Mkrtchyan, founder of the civil-society organisation Syunik-Development.