

Drugs, despair, dependency

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“To anyone who has experienced autocratic rule and kleptocracy, Donald Trump was always easy to understand.”

Hans Dembowski, p. 8



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More and more people around the world are taking drugs, and more and more people are dying from them. While influential countries like the USA put their heavy-handed drug policies on display, the problem cannot be solved with security measures alone. The cartels adapt, using politically unstable regions to expand their influence. Consequently, development policy approaches should receive much more attention: It is crucial, for example, to offer legal sources of income to people who earn their livelihoods cultivating plant-based drugs. Development policy measures aimed at fighting poverty or reducing youth unemployment can also serve as part of farsighted policies against drugs.



VIDEO

How human rights activists are prosecuted abroad

In this exclusive D+C video, human rights expert Selmin Çalışkan talks about how human rights activists are persecuted by authoritarian regimes even when they are abroad – and what can be done about it.

The good news

South Africa's Constitutional Court – the country's highest court and final court of appeal – revoked Shell and Impact Africa's exploration rights on the Wild Coast, thereby halting plans to search for oil and gas along the coast using seismic surveys. The intense underwater noise caused by these surveys raised concerns about potential harm to marine life and ecosystems, particularly as local communities have close cultural and economic ties to the sea.

The court found that both the consultation with local communities and the consideration of key environmental and climate concerns were inadequate. What began in 2021 with six local councils, NGOs and environmental justice organisations has developed into the first climate case to be heard before the country's Constitutional Court and is regarded as a landmark ruling on climate justice. Five key dimensions of climate justice can be derived from the court's approach, as Angela van der Berg, an expert in environmental and climate law, has outlined in "The Conversation": procedural justice, recognition justice, distributive justice and intergenerational justice, as well as an understanding of justice that encompasses not only people but also ecosystems and other species.

South Africa's top court blocked Shell's Wild Coast oil search: why it matters for climate justice



75

percent

of participants in an international survey on housing say they have cut back on at least one expense in the past year to afford housing costs. For example, a third of those surveyed have spent less on food or groceries. The data is based on a survey of more than 30,000 people conducted across 22 countries including Ethiopia, Brazil, Guatemala, Mexico, Nepal, Nigeria, Indonesia and South Africa. *The survey was commissioned by the non-profit organisation Habitat for Humanity*, which is committed to overcoming the chronic shortage of housing worldwide and ensuring that everyone has access to decent accommodation.

WORLD CLIMATE CONFERENCE

“The mood is extremely tense”

The geopolitical situation provides few reasons to hope for progress at COP31 in Antalya. The rise of authoritarian forces is making international cooperation significantly more difficult. Climate policy expert Axel Michaelowa says he does not have high expectations for the conference. But he explains where he's seeing progress nonetheless.

AXEL MICHAELOWA IN AN INTERVIEW WITH EVA-MARIA VERFÜRTH

Photo: picture alliance / ZUMAPRESS.com / Huang/Menders



At a meeting in the island nation of Tuvalu in October, decision-makers gained an insight into the impacts of climate change in the run-up to COP31.

This year, the global climate conference is jointly presided over by two countries for the first time: Turkey is holding the formal presidency, and Australia is leading the negotiations. What are your expectations?

This division is a half-hearted compromise. It gives Turkey every opportunity to push through its positions and leaves the bulk of the work to Australia. It will put a major strain on the COP. Turkey's authoritarian government has always simply put the brakes on climate policy and is now expected to play a constructive role in the leadership of a COP. That does not make sense.

Moreover, COPs typically achieve concrete results when an important issue has a clear deadline. That's not the case this year. The conference is also taking place in an extremely difficult global environment dominated by the wars in the Middle East, economic upheavals, the energy-consuming AI revolution and the strengthening of authoritarian forces that are not interested in international cooperation. I am not expecting this climate conference to arrive at a relevant result. Instead, I see it as a transition conference to the COP that will be held in Ethiopia next year. Ethiopia has always pursued climate policy consistently and played an active international role in this area.

“COPs typically achieve concrete results when an important issue has a clear deadline. That's not the case this year.”

Climate finance from public budgets is declining again worldwide. How will that impact the negotiations?

The mood is extremely tense. The UK is making massive cuts, and Switzerland and Germany are reducing spending as well. That is causing a lot of resentment among the countries of the Global South, and rightly so. At the preparatory meeting in June, the financing debate came up in almost all of the negotiation tracks. The countries of the Global South kept repeating: industrialised countries are not providing enough financing. In turn, the latter are demanding that emerging countries and wealthy oil states in particular contribute to funding climate protection too. This is the long-standing conflict that has shaped the climate regime for decades. Now it is breaking out into the open.

Where can progress still be made?

In Antalya, more steps should be taken to define the 59 adaptation indicators that were adopted in Belém last year. The Belém Adaptation Indicators are intended to make progress towards climate adaptation measurable at the country level.

Why is that important?

The consequences of climate change are rapidly becoming more severe, and adaptation is the highest priority for all poor countries. This is extremely timely given the current “Super El Niño”, which could result in a temperature increase of 1.8 °C above pre-industrial levels in 2027. But funding for adaptation is still much lower than funding for mitigation. In order to change that, financial institutions and the private sector in particular must become more involved – but they lack clear metrics. Mitigation can be measured well now, because there is broad consensus on the relevant indicators. If Antalya manages to make progress towards the operationalisation of the adaptation indicators, that would help mobilise more public financing. For example, internationally recognised indicators would help states apply for loans or grants for adaptation measures from development banks and climate funds. The ideal outcome would be to create an international institution, a global adaptation think tank, that would take over coordination and work on creating transparency without pursuing its own agenda.

At last year's COP, over 80 countries endorsed a road map to transition away from fossil fuels, but it failed because of resistance from large fossil fuel producers in particular. At a conference this spring in Santa Marta, Colombia, just under 60 countries wanted to advance the issue anyway. Is the process making headway?

The process has come to a complete standstill. There is supposed to be a follow-up conference in Tuvalu in 2027, but with the election of the right-wing hard-liner Abelerdo de la Espriella as President of Colombia – and the resulting end of the prior left-wing government – the Santa Marta initiative lost an important initiator. At the COP, the same forces that rejected the road map to transition completely away from fossil fuels last year will reject it again this year. More promising is the “35 by 35” electrification goal, which has broad support.

The goal says that by 2035, electricity should cover 35 % of global final energy consumption. Why is that so promising?

The topic is not even on the official negotiation agenda, but was introduced by the presidency. Nevertheless, it could become the milestone of this COP. Almost everyone can endorse this goal, because it does not set any fixed quotas for

energy sources – renewable or fossil. Even the nuclear and AI lobbies have an interest in more electricity production.

Things are also happening now in the area of international carbon markets. The Turkish COP31 presidency announced that it wants to mobilise an additional \$ 50 billion for greenhouse gas emission credits in the coming years. The UN-led carbon market under Article 6.4 of the Paris Agreement has made significant progress this year, for example with regard to credits for projects for clean cookstoves. Is more progress being made here than in other areas?

This area has been very resilient so far. It is amazing that it continues to be possible to advance more stringent regulations here while negotiations on most other topics are hampered by arguments over the financing question. Of course, there is lobbying pressure, which is also increasing. But the mood in this “negotiator family” is significantly better than in other negotiation tracks. A decision by the EU has also injected a lot of dynamism into the debate: as of this year, the European Climate Law stipulates that in the future, international emission credits can also contribute to the EU climate goal for 2040: reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 90 % compared to 1990. Up until 2010, the EU was a pioneer in the international carbon credit market, but then turned completely away from it.

“The most vulnerable countries in the Global South see that international cooperation is steadily declining and that the world’s powerful actually do not care about anything.”

What other relevant developments do you see?

I was very excited when it was recently informally announced that China would be prepared to organise the COP in 2028. That year will mark the end of the second Global Stocktake, and the implementation of the Paris Agreement will be evaluated – in other words, there will be

a global review of progress towards mitigation and adaptation. The expectation would be that China, as the host country, would want to achieve results that it could showcase. But in order to do that, it would have to start those developments now, which could be a real game changer: we would then have a real chance at a usable two-year work programme leading up to 2028. We will have to wait and see what happens.

It would also have a big impact if China were to publicly and seriously announce in the run-up to the 2028 conference that it supports phasing out fossil fuels – which is highly controversial in the country itself. There, we can observe both the highest number of new coal-fired power plants commissioned in a decade as well as the ongoing record-breaking development of renewable energies. I very much hope that the fight among the various interests within the Chinese government comes out in favour of renewable energies and not coal.

What is the top concern right now of the most vulnerable countries in the Global South?

The preservation of the climate regime. They see that international cooperation is steadily declining and that the world’s powerful actually do not care about anything. Small, poorer countries are particularly affected. Support for the multilateral process by important actors, including the EU, is essential for these countries to feel represented.



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Donald Trump and Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto in October 2025 at the Sharm el-Sheikh Peace Summit, where they apparently also discussed real estate projects involving one of Trump's sons.

KLEPTOCRACY

Benefiting privately from public office

Thanks to his office, Donald Trump is becoming richer. His behaviour fits a well-known pattern of corruption. The hope for the US mid-term elections in early November is that people have noticed.

BY HANS DEMBOWSKI

To anyone who has experienced autocratic rule and kleptocracy, Donald Trump was always easy to understand. Shortly after Trump's first election victory and before he even took office, Trevor Noah, the South African comedian, predicted what Trump's approach to governance would be like in 2016. He likened Trump to African despots on TV.

The *clip* was funny, but the message was serious. Noah said Trump, like typical dictators, was known to lie, rely on cronies and serve his family's private interests. In Noah's eyes, Trump's penchant for conspiracy theories, disdain for independent media and contempt for legal norms fit the picture.

Watching it today, one wonders why so many journalists are still struggling to spell out clearly that self-enrichment is the single consistent pattern of Trump's presidency. His policies, by contrast, are erratic. What he says today often contradicts what he said yesterday, and he is likely to say something completely different again tomorrow. On the other hand, his officially reported private revenues jumped from \$ 622 million in 2024, when he was not yet president, to \$2.2 billion in 2025, the year he took office for the second time.

His kleptocratic tendency affects many countries apart from the USA. The government of Vietnam broke its own planning rules to fast-track a \$ 1.5 billion real-estate project of the Trump Organization, the president's family firm. The scheme includes a golf course, shopping facilities and various buildings. Vietnam's Communist regime announced its approval shortly before its trade talks with the USA started. It obviously wanted to please Trump in the hope he would reduce tariffs on Vietnamese imports to the USA.

“Sometimes, however, attempts to win Trump's favour by offering his clan business opportunities backfire.”

The pattern is persistent. International media noted a brief informal exchange of the US president with Prabowo Subianto, his Indonesian counterpart. In late 2025, Prabowo wanted to get in touch with one of Trump's sons, and Trump replied audibly over the microphone that Eric would call him. It is known that Eric Trump is keen on reviving major

real-estate projects that have stalled for legal reasons in Indonesia. Prabowo even named Eric's Indonesian business partner.

REPUBLICAN POLICYMAKERS UNBOTHERED

In normal times, this kind of interaction would have caused outrage. This time, it did not bother Republican policymakers that their nation's top leader was pursuing private interests while handling public policy. Not long ago, Republicans were obsessed with Hunter Biden, who had joined the board of a Ukrainian company, when his father, Joe Biden, was vice president. They claimed Hunter was illegitimately profiting from his father's public office.

Hunter Biden earned approximately \$ 50,000 per month that way. That is a lot of money, but pales when compared with the sums the Trump clan is hauling in. At the end of Trump's first term, Jared Kushner, the president's son-in-law, attracted a \$ 2 billion investment from a Saudi Arabian fund which is led by Mohamed bin Salman, the country's crown prince and de facto ruler. As an official representative of the White House, Kushner had previously built personal ties with him.

The emolument clause of the US Constitution forbids the president and other public officials from getting any remuneration from foreigners. Nonetheless, there are known cases where the Trump clan has benefited privately from public office. In his first term, people who wanted to win Trump's favour could check into the Trump International Hotel in Washington. It was sold once he left office.

Today, Trump's crypto company World Liberty Financial serves a similar purpose. In January 2025, for example, shortly before his second inauguration, a company close to the government of the United Arab Emirates bought a 49% stake in this firm. A few months later, the new Trump administration permitted the sale of computer chips to the UAE in spite of security concerns.

International media reported that Trump's revenue from various crypto ventures amounted to at least \$ 1.4 billion in 2025, even though the worth of his crypto products dropped dramatically, so buyers suffered a collective loss of about \$ 3.8 billion. The issue quickly disappeared from the headlines. Newspapers and broadcasters obviously neglect many individual cases of Trump's corrupt practices. They only take an interest when there is public outrage.

CASES OF OUTRAGE: INFANTINO AND ALBANIA

Sometimes, however, attempts to win Trump's favour by offering his clan business opportunities backfire. For example, Albania's government triggered protests in early 2026

by agreeing to let Kushner build a tourist resort in a nature reserve, which is a flamingo habitat. Young Albanians who lack opportunities and feel neglected by their government took to the streets. October saw protests escalating again.

Gianni Infantino, the president of the world football association FIFA, has similarly run into trouble. He wanted to sell a stake in future World Cups to Kushner's brother Joshua and other private investors. Infantino may now lose his job, because national football federations oppose the idea. It would hurt their business models.

The definition of corruption is to generate private benefits from public office. Since the temptation to do that will always be strong, democracies must keep a check on leaders' conflicts of interest. In the past, US institutions insisted on related norms, but they have been failing in the Trump era. The worst part was probably when the Supreme Court in 2024 granted the president immunity for all official acts. A more recent step in the wrong direction was the Republican dominated Senate's confirmation of Trump's personal lawyer, Todd Blanche, as the nation's attorney general (AG). The AG is supposed to be independent of the White House and uphold the rule of law, but Blanche's priority is evidently to please the president.

The big question is whether the American public will tolerate Trump-style corruption in the longer run. Senator Jon Ossoff, who is running for re-election in Georgia this year, has made it his central topic. His lead in the polls shows his message is resonating. Other Democrats have noticed – and that may make a difference in the mid-term elections across the nation.



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Books displayed for sale at street book fairs held at different locations across Khartoum.

CONFLICT

Khartoum: a city picks up its pieces

As Sudan's capital is slowly recovering from having been a theatre of war for two years, grassroots book fairs and cycling clubs are reviving daily life in Khartoum's streets. Urban researchers warn that the state shouldn't regard this community momentum as a substitute for real reconstruction.

BY AUNNAB ALMAN

In September 2025, once the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) had regained control of the city following the withdrawal of the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in March 2025, Osama Elrayah returned to Sayyid Abdul Rahman Street in central Khartoum. The capital was nothing like the city he had left when war had broken out two years earlier. It was now shrouded in destruction and silence, its usual bustle gone.

Elrayah is the owner of the Dar Al Musawarat Library and Publishing House. He found his bookstore's doors wide open. It hadn't been looted or burned, but neglect had left its mark: dust lay thickly on books scattered across the floor, and trees had sprouted between the shelves. "I arrived as soon as the area was liberated," he says. "The first thing I did was clean the library with the help of two friends."

Reopening the library didn't immediately bring readers and customers back. Elrayah opened the library three days a week into early 2026 but had few visitors. Rather than wait, he moved books out onto the pavement, selling them at discounted prices – with the help of some young volunteers – as part of the "Mafroush" street fair events. By the end of the year, the used book fair had attracted visitors and other small bookstores.

Mawada al-Tom, 30, is a regular visitor. She says the fairs used to be part of her cultural life before the war. "The war changed my relationship with books: at first it was driven by curiosity, then books became an escape, then a breath of fresh air, then friends and a refuge," she says. "I saw the book fairs as a rose that had sprouted amid the rubble."

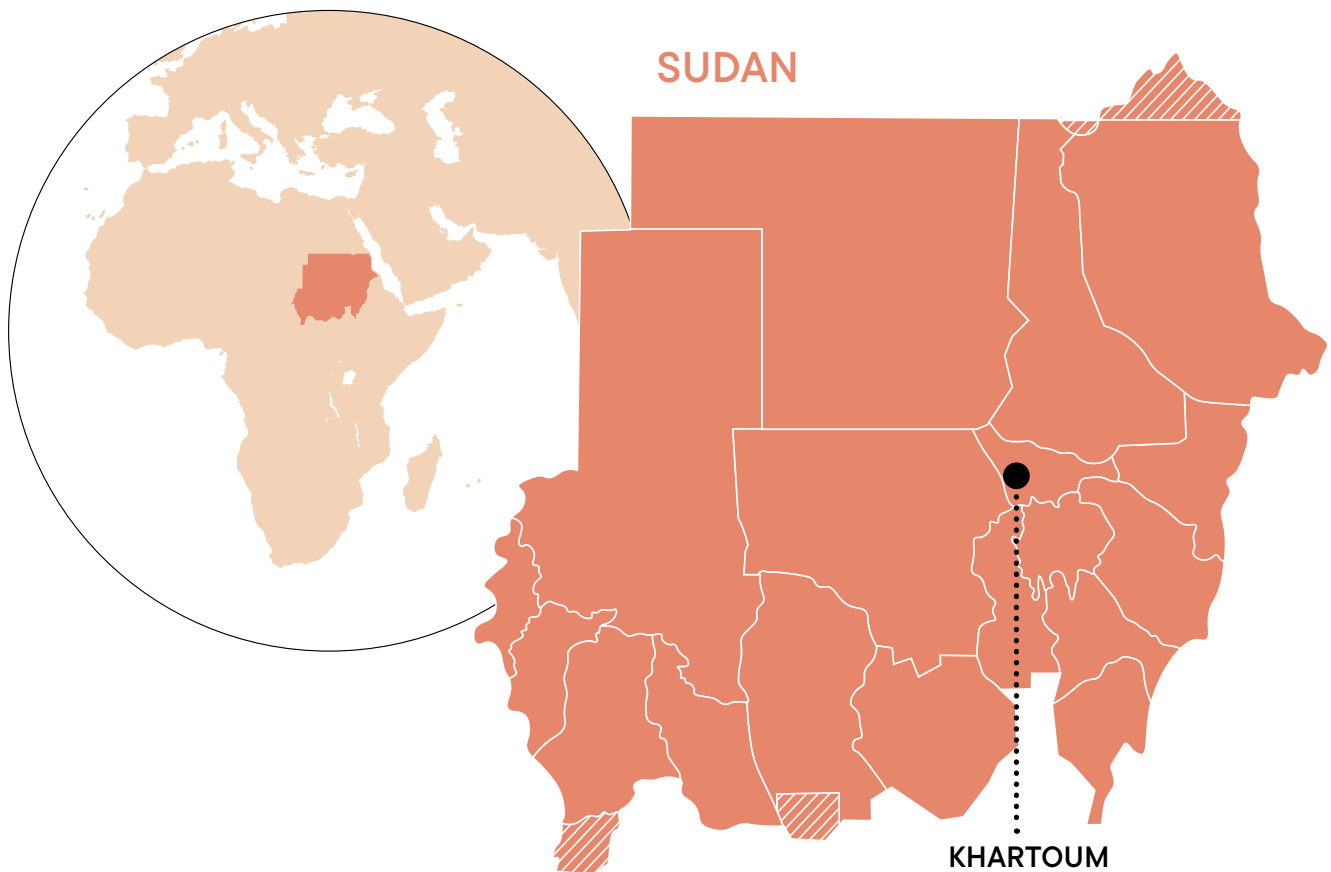
Inspired by the "Mafroush" events, 52-year-old bookseller Muhammad al-Sheikh shows up daily at Al-Kalakla Al-Lafa market in southern Khartoum to display his books on philosophy, literature and history on the ground, despite falling sales. "People ask about books, but I don't make sales every day," he says. "All the same, I come every day, even if no one buys a book from me."

"These initiatives will not in themselves enable a city the size of Khartoum to recover."

Photo: Aunnab Alman



The Dar Al Musawarat Library and Publishing House, a bookstore and cultural space in Khartoum.



By mid-2026, the Mafroush book fair initiative had expanded across all three cities of the tripartite metropolis of Khartoum – Khartoum proper, Omdurman and Khartoum North (Bahri). Working with bookstores like Nirvana and Opal, the initiative had also been extended to include other Sudanese cities such as Port Sudan, Atbara and Kosti.

RECLAIMING PUBLIC SPACES ON BIKES

Civil society groups have also been reviving the city on two wheels. Bike clubs like the Sudanese Amateur Cyclist Club existed before the war, but when the fighting broke out, its members scattered and its bikes were destroyed.

Ahmed Al-Murad, 34, returned to Khartoum as soon as the army regained control. The member of the men's national cycling team decided, along with a teammate, not to wait for institutional support. They got hold of bicycles and organised training sessions, starting with 40- to 60-kilometre routes through Khartoum, which they then extended to 80- to 120-kilometre rides coordinated with the local authorities. As rides expanded in the capital, the group also started working to reunite the city's various cycling clubs.

Islam Al-Sadiq was selected for the women's national team in national qualifiers in August. However, for the 26-year-old, returning to her sport was hard. "The roads were in a

terrible state and there was no security, not to mention the theft of professional-grade bicycles and the resulting rise in their prices", she says. She also still faces social push-back against women cycling in public. "But my perseverance and that of my teammates led to races being organised and new members recruited, which helped to slightly increase social acceptance of women doing this sport." She sees cycling as a way for women to reclaim their presence on the street.

THE CREATION OF A NEW CITY

Urban researcher Hassan Al-Nasser documents Khartoum's postwar transformation in a book and in a series of discussions on the Sudanese cultural platform "The Muse multi studios". He argues that what is happening in the city right now isn't simply a matter of Khartoum regaining its former shape. "Khartoum is witnessing the actual creation of a 'new city' that is emerging from the rubble, with different geographical and social centres of gravity than those that characterised the city before the war," he says.

He describes book fairs and cycling clubs not merely as recreational activities but as "primary networks of revitalisation" that are remapping the social boundaries of places that fell apart during the war. However, Al-Nasser warns against treating this surge in civic action as a substitute for



Cyclists take part in the Khartoum Tour, a cycling event held in June 2026.

“Civil society groups have also been reviving the city on two wheels.”

state responsibility: “There is a real danger that the authorities will take this for granted and shirk their actual responsibilities by allowing community solidarity to take the place of official planning.” Operating water and electricity networks, repairing infrastructure and planning long-term urban development, he stresses, remain tasks that no volunteer initiative can shoulder alone.

These initiatives will not in themselves enable a city the size of Khartoum to recover. What they can do is restore fragments of daily life and create local networks that formal reconstruction could build on. A library reopening its doors, a bookseller returning to the pavement each day regardless of sales, a cycling club reorganising its ranks – though not solutions in themselves, these are very important first steps.

Khartoum is embarking on reconstruction. Despite the devastating war, which has led to one of the worst displacement crises in recent history and is still raging in other parts of the country, this presents an opportunity – provided that official planning takes into account the knowledge that residents have gained about their own neighbourhoods and needs.

This story was published in collaboration with [Egab](#).



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RENEWABLE ENERGY

Indigenous protest against projects on Indonesia's "geothermal island"

On the Indonesian volcanic island of Flores, a state-owned company is pushing ahead with controversial geothermal projects in the name of climate neutrality. The Indigenous groups living there are protesting, calling for greater involvement – and the German development bank KfW has suspended its funding following criticism.

BY GARRY LOTULUNG



Photo: Garry Lotulung

The Ulumbu Geothermal Power Plant in Wewo village, East Nusa Tenggara Province, Indonesia.

Thin smoke seeps from cracks in the ground in Mataloko, a village on the Indonesian island of Flores in the province East Nusa Tenggara. The sharp, rotten-egg stench of hydrogen sulfide catches in the throat. Underneath the tree canopy and the remains of old plantations, villagers look out over land that has become increasingly unlivable.

The Indonesian government has envisioned the volcanic island of Flores as the powerhouse of its green energy future and officially dubbed it the “Geothermal Island” in 2017. But for the Indigenous communities living here – including the Mataloko, the Wae Sano and the Poco Leok – the transition to renewable energy marks the beginning of a profound loss of their way of life.

The unease surrounding geothermal power on Flores is not new. Thirty years ago, the first plant was built in Mataloko, but it failed and operated only briefly. Today, a remnant of that plant remains: an abandoned borehole surrounded by a fence and a skull-and-crossbones warning sign. Despite being sealed, toxic steam still escapes.

The local environment has irrevocably changed. The stream that once flowed here has vanished, replaced by boiling mud bubbling up from the earth. Nearby fields lie barren; nothing grows. The corrugated iron roofs of local houses, which should last two decades, rust through in mere months – a decay residents blame on the constant hydrogen sulfide emissions. Villagers also report chronic skin irritation and breathing difficulties, well-known side effects of the gas.

“The land used to be fertile, the harvest good,” says villager Augustina Kigo sitting in front of her hut. “But since the drilling started here, that’s no longer the case.”

THE GREEN TRANSITION AND THE RING OF FIRE

Geothermal energy is widely championed as a sustainable, always-on alternative to fossil fuels. Given its location on the Pacific Ring of Fire, Indonesia is uniquely suited for it, since it boasts an estimated potential of more than 23 gigawatts. As the country is committed to achieving carbon neutrality by 2060 or sooner, Flores plays a vital role. The government is heavily investing in the island. Yet experts warn that developing geothermal energy on small, highly active volcanic islands like Flores carries unique, severe risks.

Surya Darma, head of the Indonesia Center for Renewable Energy Studies (ICRES), notes that Flores’ geography already makes it highly vulnerable to seismic activity. “Geothermal utilisation should avoid areas with high disaster risk because geothermal activity increases the risk of earth-

quakes, particularly through the reinjection of fluids into the Earth’s crust,” he says, stressing the need for comprehensive geological risk assessments and safe injection technologies.

RESISTANCE IN THE VILLAGES

In the village of Lungar, in the shadow of the Poco Leok volcano, local women are spearheading resistance to energy expansion. The nearby Ulumbu Geothermal Power Plant, owned by the state-owned electricity company PLN and inaugurated in 2011, plans to increase its output from 10 to 40 megawatts, targeting 60 new drilling sites spread across 13 hamlets.

Elisabeth Lahus, a coffee and clove farmer, is one of those leading the fight. “Tana hitu ende dami,” she says in Manggarai, her traditional language – “the land is our mother”. Her community believes it is their ancestors’ inheritance.

“The damage doesn’t just happen where the drill is,” Lahus says. “It can affect places 500 metres away. There’s smoke. The sound of bubbling, boiling water fills the area. The negative impacts of geothermal energy will endanger us all.”

Residents, many of whom live in simple wooden huts and rely on subsistence farming, say the plant’s expansion is moving at breakneck speed. They report a lack of proper consultation, claiming the project violates the UN principle that requires the free, prior and informed consent of Indigenous peoples.

THE CHURCH STEPS IN

The growing unrest recently gained a powerful ally. In January 2025, Catholic Church authorities on Flores, led by Archbishop Paulus Budi Kleden, publicly rejected the geothermal projects. Flores is a predominantly Catholic region, and the Church’s stance has sparked local protests and prompted critics who had previously remained silent to speak out.

Archbishop Kleden stated that the Church’s decision came after hearing first-hand testimony from affected communities. “Geothermal energy can be a very good thing, as has been demonstrated elsewhere. But it is not an option for Flores,” he said, citing the island’s steep, disaster-prone topography and the threat to vital agricultural land and water sources. He added that the communities’ culture and identity are at risk because both are closely tied to their land and agriculture.

The civil society organisation Coalition for Human Rights in Development has criticised the role of Germany’s develop-

ment bank KfW in the matter. It claims that by signing a loan agreement to fund the expansion of the Ulumbu geothermal power plant in 2018, KfW backed a project in the course of which, for example, community members have been attacked and beaten for opposing the occupation of their land. The Coalition stated that the land acquisition process is failing to ensure the participation of local communities and to respect their collective rights.

In a statement issued in December 2025, KfW says it commissioned an independent expert review on the matter, which found that the requirements of the relevant FPIC standards (free, prior and informed consent) have not been sufficiently respected. KfW says it has recommended measures to improve the information and consent processes with the affected communities and has suspended financing for planned infrastructure measures in the Ulumbu project since the end of 2024.

Despite the suspension, the drilling rigs still loom, and the future for the Indigenous communities of Poco Leok,

Wae Sano and Mataloko remains in limbo. The promise of a clean energy transition has, for now, stalled their lives. It is a bitter irony for the villagers: they are being asked to sacrifice their land, their health and their heritage so that distant cities can keep the lights on in a “sustainable” way.



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LABOUR

India's food-delivery workers are going hungry

India's food-delivery riders spend their days moving meals from restaurant kitchens to customer doorsteps. Many of them, however, cannot afford to stop long enough to eat one themselves.

BY RISHABH JAIN



Photo: picture alliance / NurPhoto / Debajyoti Chakrabortya

On the job, come rain or shine: a Zomato delivery worker in Kolkata.

Anjani Kumar, 26, a father of two who lives in Delhi, works from around 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. and calls the shift routine. How much he eats depends on how much he earns. “Sometimes what we make in a day is so little that I can only eat once. Eating twice would mean less money saved for my family,” he says. If an order gets cancelled, he eats it himself, he says – but that rarely happens.

India’s gig and platform economy has grown at an extraordinary speed. NITI Aayog, the government’s policy think tank, estimated in a 2022 report that the gig workforce would stand at around 10 million in 2024/25 and more than double to 23.5 million by 2029/30. Food delivery, dominated by quick-commerce platforms Swiggy and Zomato, is one of the sector’s largest segments, part of an online market valued at over \$ 43 billion in 2024 and growing at more than 20 % a year.

Riders are classified as “delivery partners”, not employees, a distinction that has kept them outside Indian labour law. They receive no fixed salary, no paid leave, no medical coverage and no meal allowance. Earnings depend on the number of deliveries completed and on ratings determined by rider punctuality and customer acceptance rates. An idle half hour, whether spent eating lunch or waiting out a delay, can lower a rider’s standing on the platform’s algorithm and jeopardise future assignments.

“Pay tied to speed and volume gives riders little incentive to pause, since every unpaid minute off the road is a minute of lost income.”

A single meal ordered through a delivery app in a city like Delhi frequently costs more than a rider earns for an hour’s work. Delivery drivers who eat whilst working often resort to cheap takeaways, whilst the pressure to remain available during peak hours can disrupt their regular eating patterns. A 2025 study of 425 app-based food-delivery riders in Tamil Nadu found that 66.8 % reported skipping meals whilst on duty, whilst 63.3 % complained of dehydration. A separate qualitative study of delivery riders in Indian cities documented limited access to basic facilities such as water and toilets.

“The Code creates a Social Security Fund to pay for benefits including accident insurance, health coverage, maternity benefits and old-age protection.”

Long shifts like the ones Anjani Kumar works are typical as well. A 2025 study of 255 platform workers – whose employment is based on online apps or digital platforms – in Tamil Nadu found that more than 45 % of respondents worked over 10 hours a day, and most earned about four to ten dollars per day, before deductions for platform commissions, fuel, vehicle maintenance and other expenses. The study traces this to platform design: pay tied to speed and volume gives riders little incentive to pause, since every unpaid minute off the road is a minute of lost income.

A WORKFORCE WITHOUT A SAFETY NET – UNTIL NOW

For years, India had no legal category for gig and platform workers at all. That changed with the Code on Social Security, 2020, one of four labour codes that consolidate dozens of older laws. The Code formally defines “gig workers” and “platform workers” for the first time and creates a Social Security Fund, financed partly by contributions from companies such as Swiggy, Zomato and Uber, to pay for benefits including accident insurance, health coverage, maternity benefits and old-age protection.

The Code came into force in November 2025, after years of delay, but implementation remains patchy. By mid-2026, most Indian states had notified rules detailing how at least one of the four codes would be implemented, though a uniform national start date has still not been set. Before the Code came into force, the government was already registering gig and platform workers through its e-Shram portal to become eligible for future benefits. As of August 2025, only around 337,000 gig and platform workers nationwide had done so, a small fraction of the estimated workforce. Contribution rates for platform companies and the design of benefit schemes are still being finalised.

Some states have moved faster than the central government. Rajasthan passed the country’s first dedicated gig

workers' welfare law in 2023, Karnataka has followed with its own legislation, and Tamil Nadu has set up a Platform-Based Gig Workers' Welfare Board. None of these frameworks, state or central, addresses meal breaks or on-shift nutrition directly. Social security in its current form insures workers against accidents and sickness; it does not yet touch the daily question of whether a rider eats between 9 a.m. and closing time, nor does it tackle the algorithms and the rating systems behind the businesses that force workers to make the most of every minute.

The gap has not gone unnoticed by workers. On New Year's Eve 2025, an estimated 200,000 gig workers across India went on strike, demanding minimum earnings guarantees and a rollback of ultra-fast, 10-minute delivery targets that leave riders even less time to pause. The government subsequently asked e-commerce platforms to scale back the 10-minute model, though the practice has not been fully phased out.

“A single meal ordered through a delivery app in a city like Delhi frequently costs more than a rider earns for an hour's work.”

Dharmendra Kumar, founder-secretary of the workers' rights group Janpahal, has argued publicly that heatwaves should be officially classed as disasters and that riders have a “right to cool”: they should be given shorter login periods, guaranteed rest breaks and shaded rest areas, none of which currently exist even at platforms' small neighbourhood warehouses. Basic provisions such as drinking water, oral rehydration salts and ventilated rooms to rest, he told Indian media, would cost platforms little but improve riders' daily working conditions substantially.

Platform companies point to accident insurance and, in some cases, subsidised meal schemes as evidence of progress. Worker advocates counter that such measures remain optional and unevenly applied.

India's food-delivery boom has made restaurant meals available within minutes to tens of millions of urban households. It has done so by building a workforce whose own food security depends on how quickly they can move from

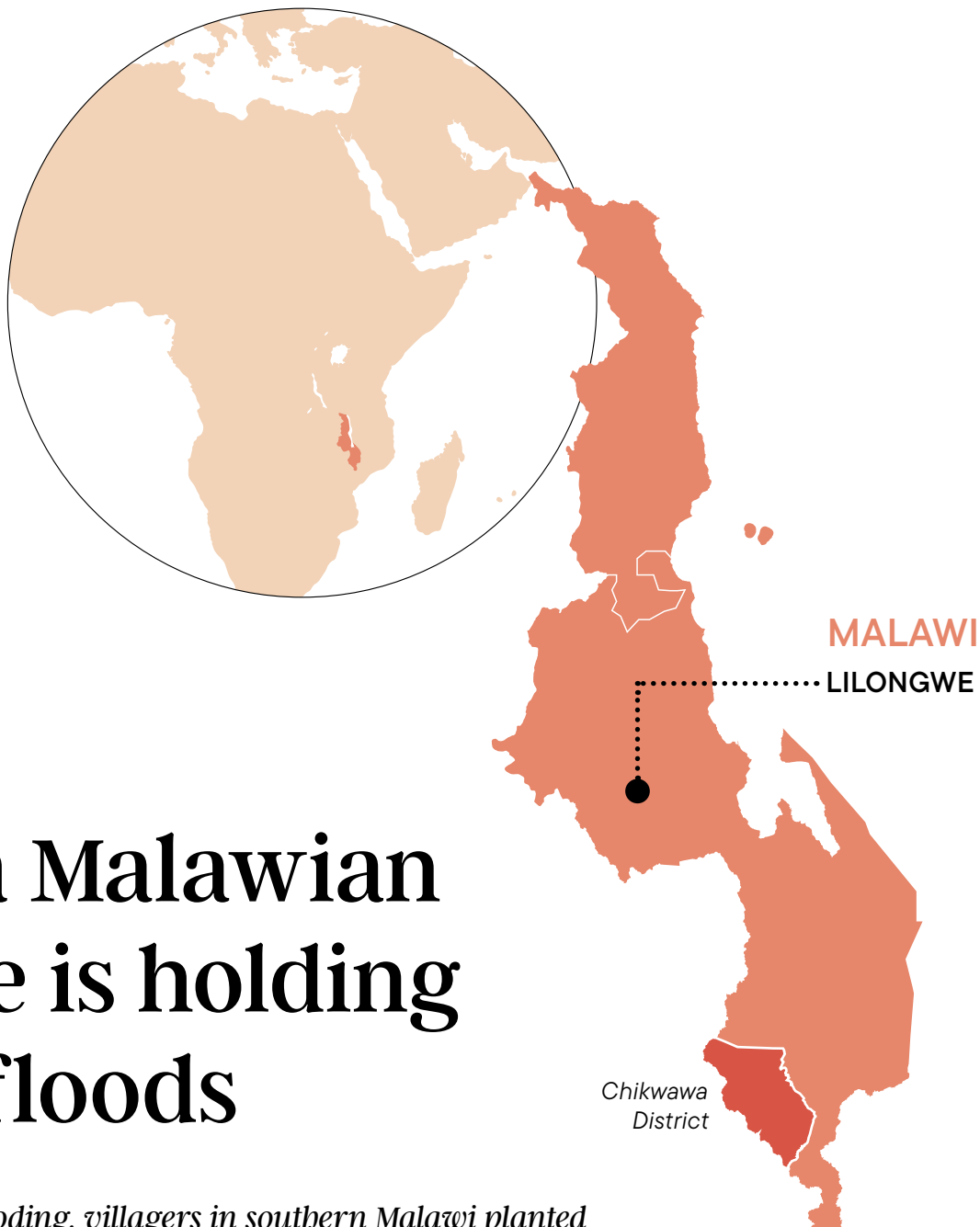
one order to the next. As the Code on Social Security is rolled out over the coming years, the test will be whether its provisions – which are still being defined – will reach far enough to include something as basic as the right to a meal break.



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CLIMATE CHANGE

How a Malawian village is holding back floods

After repeated flooding, villagers in southern Malawi planted trees and built a dyke. Their local approach is now helping to protect their homes from rising water – and it is becoming a role model for disaster preparedness throughout the country.

BY CHARLES PENSULO

Under the thick canopy of a man-made forest in Chikwawa, a district in southern Malawi, Luis Kudzala points towards the dry bed of the Mikalango River. During the rainy season, he says, that same river threatens to suddenly swell and flood nearby homes.

Kudzala lives in Nsomo, a village traversed by the Mikalango riverbank, and is no stranger to disasters. His district has repeatedly been hit by floods, while cyclones, including Idai, Ana and Freddy, have left a trail of destruction across southern Malawi. Kudzala recalls the events that followed

Cyclone Freddy's days of heavy rain in 2023: "Houses were destroyed, cattle and goats were washed away downstream, and household items ended in the Shire River." The Shire River flows around three kilometres outside the village. Some families later used support from charities to buy iron sheets and rebuild their homes.

After a series of damaging floods, the community decided it could no longer idly wait for the next disasters, which are likely to hit even harder due to climate change. "We sat down to find the root cause of the damage and what could be done to minimise it," Kudzala says. "We realised one of the reasons was the lack of trees." So in 2013, villagers began planting trees close to the riverbanks. What started as a local effort has since grown into a forest of neem, *Albizia lebbek* and other tree species.

A DYKE AGAINST FLOODWATER

But the trees were only part of the plan. Villagers also began strengthening the Mikalango riverbank with a dyke designed to stop floodwater from reaching their homes. "In 2015, a programme called Ubale started boosting our efforts by giving us maize, flour and cooking oil," Kudzala says. "By then we had planted 12,000 trees." Other organisations later joined in. The civil society organisations Eagles Malawi and Concern Worldwide supported the community's disaster preparedness work, while the nonprofit organisation GiveDirectly, which makes unconditional cash transfers, assisted families who lost possessions during Cyclone Freddy.

Earlier this year, when heavy rains returned to the region, the outcome was different, according to Kudzala. The trees and the dyke stopped floodwater from reaching nearby households. "Without it, we would have been speaking about how many houses had been destroyed," he says. "But because of the dyke, there is a bit of relief, considering we haven't covered the whole riverbank yet."

The approach has also spread beyond Nsomo. Kudzala says the village has shared seedlings with neighbouring areas, and surrounding communities have established similar forests.

Malawi's Department of Disaster Management Affairs has also encouraged communities to take a greater role in disaster preparedness. Former spokesperson Chipiliro Khamula said community-built dykes complement government efforts to reduce disaster risks. "It is high time that communities, whether vulnerable or not, take an active role in all efforts aimed at building resilience to disasters," he said.

COMMUNITIES TAKING THE LEAD

External organisations have joined the communities' flood-protection efforts. Concern Worldwide, for instance,

has provided support for disaster-preparedness work in the area, including community-led flood management and other nature-based solutions, says Ernest Kambiya, programme officer for monitoring and evaluation at the organisation. The idea, he explains, is to equip communities with the means to act proactively and autonomously. "In terms of preparedness, one area that we are focusing on is local financing, where we are trying to show that communities can take a lead on their own if they are given a platform."

Similar flood-protection projects include dykes along the Milore River in southern Malawi, as well as plans to build another dyke along the North Rukuru River in the city of Karonga. For Luis Kudzala in Nsomo village, the approach's success is already visible right by the Mikalango river: a forest planted by the community itself and a dyke that, when the rains return, will help keep the water out.



CHARLES PENSULO

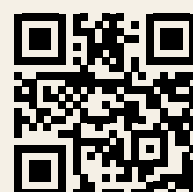
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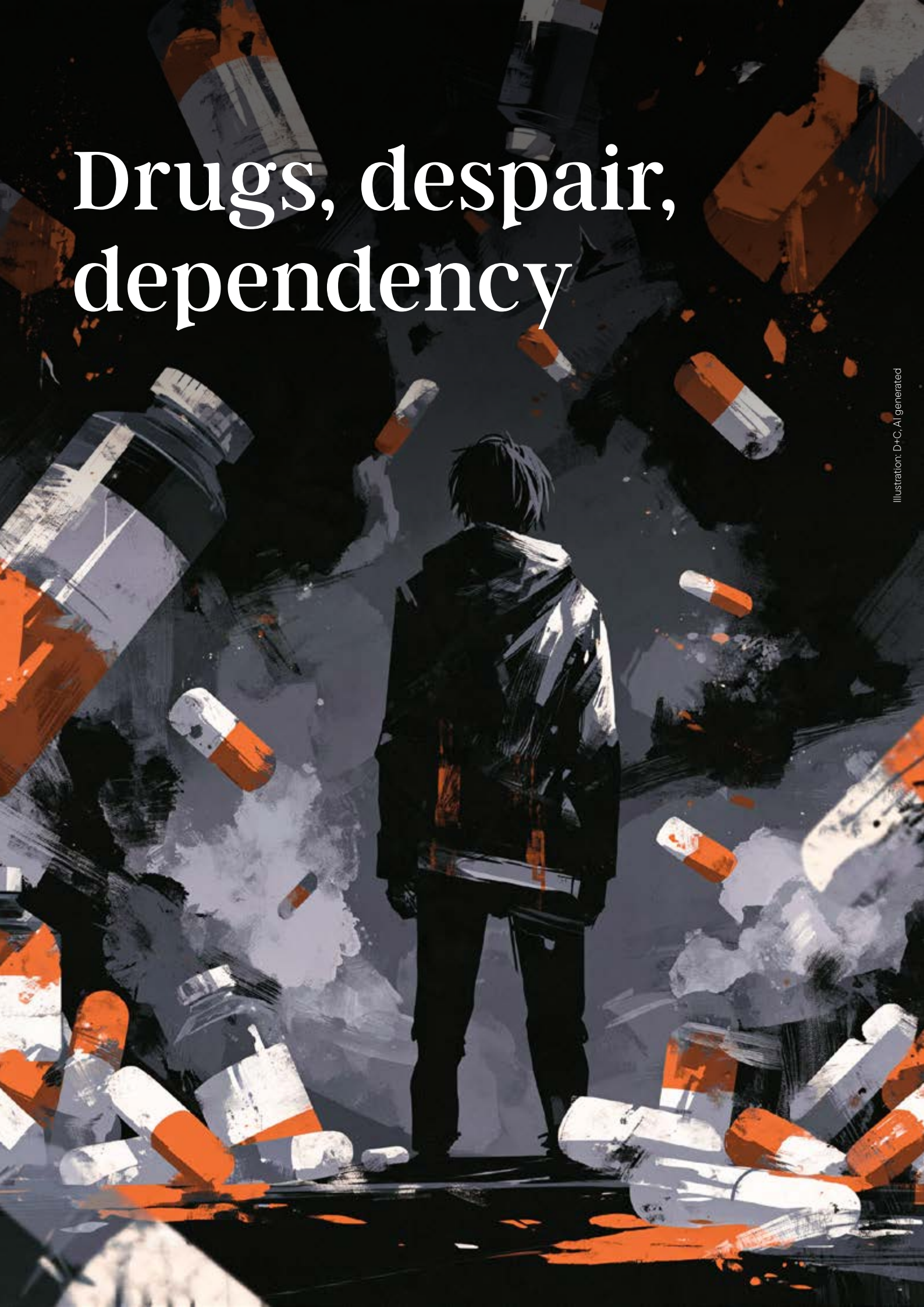


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Drugs, despair, dependency



Fighting drugs with smart development policy

More and more people around the world are taking drugs, and more and more people are dying from them. The problem cannot be solved with security measures alone.

A speedboat ploughs through the water, filmed from above in black and white. There's a sudden flash of light, then nothing but grey smoke. The video by the US military from September shows the destruction of a boat that was allegedly being used to smuggle drugs in the Caribbean. Four people were reported killed. The fact that human rights organisations condemn such campaigns as extrajudicial killings is of no interest to the Trump administration. It wants to attract media attention to show: we're doing something.

There's no question that something has to be done. The number of drug users worldwide has recently climbed dramatically: according to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, it rose by over a third to 331 million within 10 years. More and more people are dying from drug use – currently almost 500,000 a year. The lost years of health, the violence and criminality associated with drugs, the social costs – there are more than enough reasons to increase investment in the fight against drugs. One part of this task is undoubtedly consistent criminal prosecution, but it should be done with adherence to applicable laws.

Especially when influential countries like the USA put their heavy-handed drug policies on display, it's important to remember that the fight against drugs cannot be won with security measures alone. The cartels adapt, communicate using encrypted platforms and sometimes transport their goods with drones. They establish new routes and purposefully use politically unstable regions to expand their influence. For example, the internal conflict in Myanmar has benefited local drug production. Myanmar is the world's largest producer of illegal opium and the main source of methamphetamine in Asia.

At the same time, it's clear that anyone who destroys coca plantations in Colombia, Peru or Bolivia without a thought for the local population is simply kicking the problem down the road. The plantations will pop up somewhere else, while the former producers will be left struggling to figure out how they should feed their families now.

OFFERING LEGAL OPPORTUNITIES

Consequently, development policy approaches should receive more attention in the fight against drugs. It is crucial, for example, to offer legal sources of income to people who earn their livelihoods cultivating plant-based drugs, in accordance with the concept of "Alternative Development". German development cooperation has long championed this approach, and its efforts were recognised internationally in the Lima Declaration on Alternative Development as early as 2012.

A similarly holistic approach can be taken to people who consume drugs. They often do so out of despair and a lack of prospects. Development policy measures aimed at fighting poverty or reducing youth unemployment can therefore also serve as part of farsighted policies against drugs.

At the same time, people with substance use disorders should be seen first and foremost as people who deserve appropriate medical and psychological care. Many civil society actors have worked in this area for a long time; they deserve better financing. All too often, people struggling with addiction receive no care at all: even in wealthy Europe, less than a fourth of them are in treatment. In Africa, that number is well below five percent.

Cooperating internationally to fight cartels, identifying better opportunities for everyone involved in the drug business and providing appropriate help to people with substance use disorders might attract less attention in the short term than blowing up a boat. But these approaches are certainly more sustainable.



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DRUG USE WORLDWIDE IN NUMBERS

The millions of lives destroyed by drug abuse

While more than 60 million people are living with drug use disorders, only one in 12 of these people is in treatment. Facts and figures on global drug use.

BY ISAH SHAFIQ

331 million

people were estimated to have used a drug in 2024, according to the UN. This is 34 % more than a decade earlier, partly a result of population growth and greater availability of data, but it also reflects an increase in the prevalence of use. The World Drug Report lists the following numbers:

- cannabis: **256 million**
- opioids: **63 million**
- amphetamines: **32 million**
- cocaine: **25 million**
- “ecstasy”: **21 million** (1)

2.5 billion

people above 15 years of age use alcoholic beverages, according to latest estimates by the World Health Organization (WHO). (2)

1.25 billion

people in the world smoke tobacco, according to WHO estimates. (2)

14 to 32 %

of drug users are female, depending on the drug:

- 14 % opiates,
- 25 % cocaine,
- 24 % cannabis,
- 32 % “ecstasy”-type substances,
- 28 % amphetamines. (1)

63 million

people were living with drug use disorders in 2024.

Only one in 12 of these people was in treatment. (1)

112

countries explicitly refer to reducing the harm of drug use in national policy documents, according to the civil society organisation Harm Reduction International. Newly reported countries include Ghana, Fiji, Trinidad & Tobago and the Philippines. (3)

6.9 million

of the 14 million people who inject drugs are living with hepatitis C, while 1.7 million of them are living with HIV and 1.5 million are living with both HIV and hepatitis C. (1)

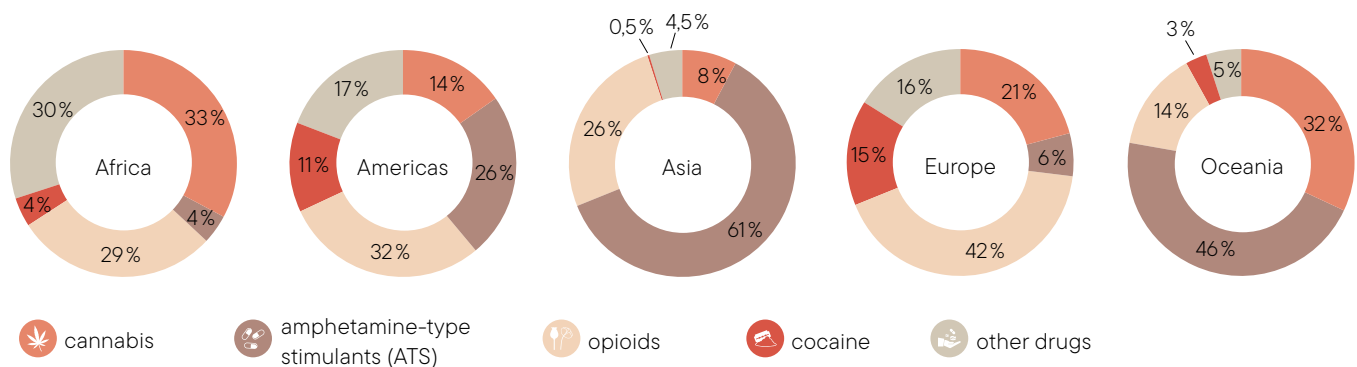
Almost 500,000

deaths were attributed to drug use in 2023 worldwide – 29 % more than a decade earlier. Cirrhosis and other liver diseases resulting from hepatitis C are the leading cause of indirect deaths attributed to drug use, while opioid use disorders account for most direct deaths. (4)

The primary drug

of people in drug treatment varies depending on the world region. In Asia and Oceania, amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS) are the main drug, while it is cannabis in Africa and opioids in the Americas and in Europe. (1)

Primary drug of people in drug treatment, 2024



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Photo: Murali Krishnadas

Charaliyil Unnikrishnan and his
passion – chess.

DRUGS AND COMMUNITIES

When an Indian village chose chess over alcohol

Once known for illicit liquor production and alcoholism, Marottichal has transformed into India's "Chess Village", writing a story of hope, change and the spirit of sport.

BY ROLI MAHAJAN

In the South Indian state of Kerala, there is a sleepy village called Marottichal where chess has saved people from excessive alcohol consumption. This is not an exaggeration. Unlike other Indian villages, in this hamlet of about 6000 residents, chess is played everywhere: at bus stops, outside local shops and under trees residents regularly gather around black-and-white boards for a game. In the early 2000s, Marottichal earned the name of the “Chess Village of India”. At least one person in each household is believed to be proficient at chess. The game is played by children and teenagers as well as by older people.

However, this was not the case a few decades ago. In the 1960s and 1970s, rampant unemployment led locals to start brewing liquor from cashew fruits. What started in three households as an activity for personal consumption had, by the 1980s, transformed Marottichal into a regional hotspot for illegal alcohol production.

Alcoholism took a heavy toll on the community. Liver cirrhosis became common, while gambling, domestic violence, street fights and debt plunged many families into poverty. Hooliganism became a familiar sight.

It was against this backdrop that former local resident Charaliyil Unnikrishnan returned to Marottichal to run a tea shop. A participant in anti-alcohol campaigns, Unnikrishnan began playing chess in public spaces. Curious villagers would stop to watch and wanted to know more. At his tea shop, he offered them more than a cup of tea: he introduced them to chess and taught the game to anyone willing to learn. Word spread quickly. Some villagers joke that the “C” in his name stands for chess.

Over the years, he taught chess to hundreds of villagers and competed against grandmasters internationally. For many in Marottichal, chess became an alternative to drinking and gambling. It brought people together in public spaces and gave children and young adults a new pursuit.

TAKING CHESS INTO THE FUTURE

The transformation is now reaching the next generation. The village is working to introduce chess into school lessons so that children can begin learning at an early age. Young players from Marottichal are already participating in competitions across India and abroad. One example of the village’s growing talent is 17-year-old Gowrishankar Jayaraj, who was awarded the title of Candidate Master by the International Chess Federation (FIDE) in 2025.

The village of Marottichal itself has also gained recognition for its love of the game. In 2016, more than 1000 people

“Marottichal’s story is a reminder that sometimes transformation begins with something as simple as one person inviting another to play a game.”

gathered to play chess simultaneously, earning the village recognition from Asia Records.

From a community struggling with alcoholism to one united by chess, Marottichal’s story is a reminder that sometimes transformation begins with something as simple as one person inviting another to play a game.



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A khat seller in Somalia, Kenya's largest export market for the plant.

DRUG TRADE

How a drug lobby almost reopened a border

Khat exports are worth around \$ 100 million a year to Kenya. Farmers and traders hope that their economic and political clout will finally reopen the long-closed border with Somalia permanently.

BY JOSEPH MAINA

For 15 years, the border between Kenya and Somalia has remained closed – a border so unstable that two previously announced attempts to reopen it had already failed before they even began. Kenya had closed it in October 2011 following a series of attacks by the terror organisation Al-Shabaab and Kenya’s military intervention in Somalia.

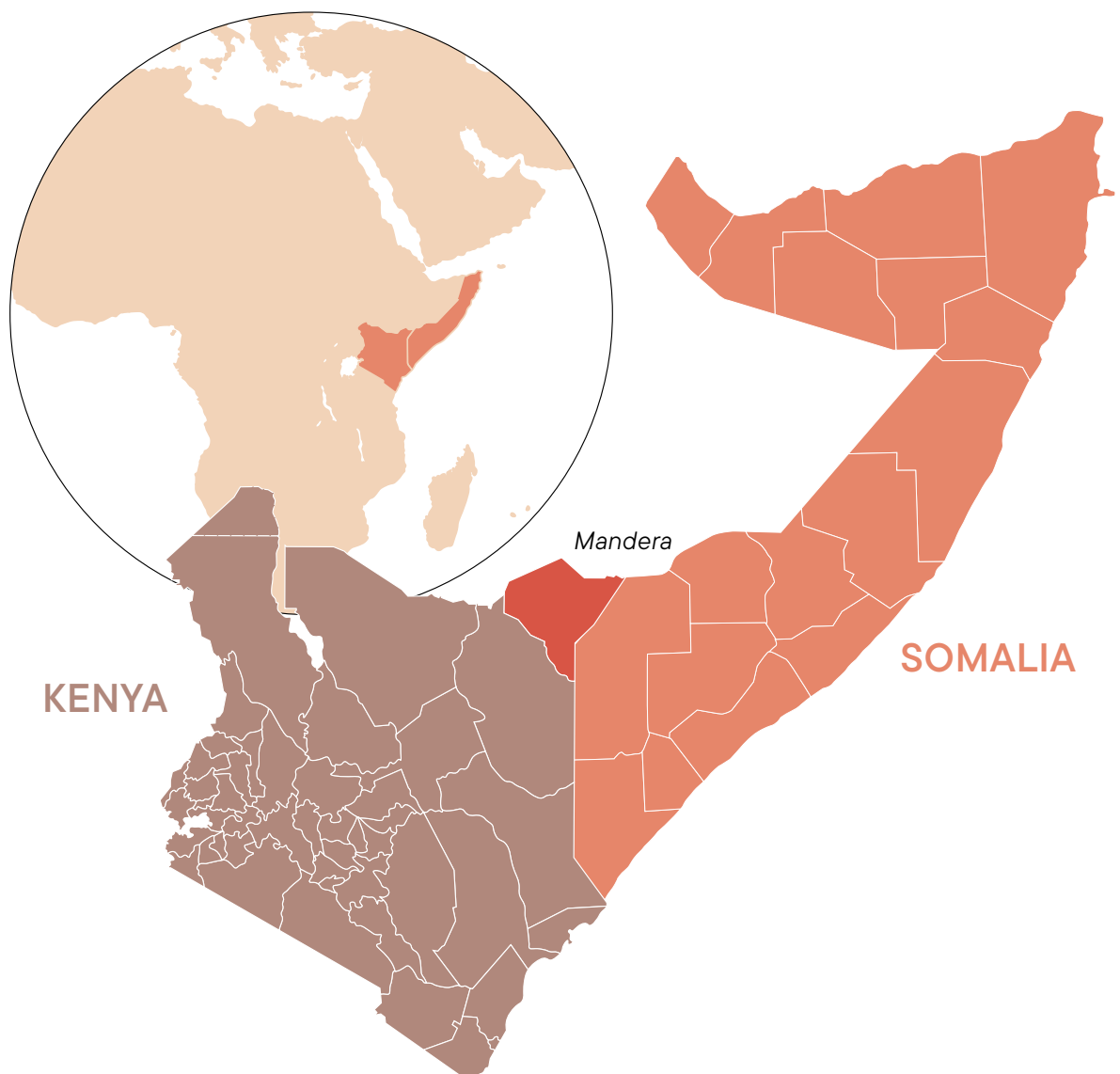
Then opening up the border almost worked – thanks to a factor that few security analyses had foreseen: a lobby that had formed around the cultivation of a drug plant and was working behind the scenes to influence policymakers and government agencies until the state relented.

Khat (*Catha edulis*) is known locally as “miraa”. It is a leafy shrub whose leaves are chewed as a stimulant. Under Kenyan law, its active ingredients, cathinone and cathine, are theoretically classified as psychotropic substances. The National Authority for the Campaign Against Alcohol and Drug Abuse (NACADA) classifies the plant as a potentially

harmful drug. However, under the 2013 Crops Act, miraa is also a legally regulated crop, which means it may be cultivated within a regulated framework.

Miraa supports a value chain comprising farmers, harvest workers, middlemen, transportation companies and exporters. The Kenyan Agriculture and Food Authority reports that miraa generates approximately \$ 100 million annually.

“Miraa supports a value chain comprising farmers, harvest workers, middlemen, transportation companies and exporters.”



Producers and their representatives point to this economic and cultural significance. In practice, this argument has largely overshadowed miraa's reputation as a narcotic.

AIRLIFTING THE KHAT

Due to the border closure, exporters have to airlift their shipments to Somalia, Kenya's largest export market for khat. This drives up prices and makes farmers dependent on cartels that demand commissions. The Nyambene Miraa Farmers and Traders Association (Nyamita) submitted a petition to the Ministry of the Interior to secure the resumption of exports by land. Chairman Kimathi Munjuri says that the campaign was waged on several fronts. "We conducted official trade negotiations between Kenya and Somalia," he explains. "We also wrote letters and demanded political commitments from our politicians, insisting that one of the conditions for our support is that they help us push for the unconditional reopening of the border."

"In Meru County, khat is the driving force behind a regional economy centred on the slopes of Mount Kenya, where thousands of smallholder farmers depend on it as their primary source of income."

On 6 February, Raymond Omollo, the state secretary at the Ministry of the Interior, informed traders that the National Security Council committee had approved the reopening of the border crossings close to the towns of Mandera, Liboi and Kiunga for the road transport of miraa. That same month, President William Ruto promised in Mandera to reopen the border crossing in April. The ministry's letter cites Nyamita's petition as the catalyst.

This illustrates the influence of the lobby. Presidential candidates travel to Meru County to campaign for support – there, khat is the driving force behind a regional economy centred on the slopes of Mount Kenya, where thousands of smallholder farmers depend on it as their primary source

of income. Some politicians chew the leaves ostentatiously during election campaigns.

However, it remains to be seen whether the lobby has enough power to actually open the border permanently – in May, President Ruto backtracked and postponed the opening due to renewed local escalations. The reopening is also the first real test of Somalia's membership in the East African Community, which the country joined in March 2024.

The border itself stretches 680 kilometres. It separates communities that are linked by cultural ties and has always been important for cattle drives and informal trade. The governor of the Mandera border region, Mohamed Khalif, has described it as "an economic lifeline for this county."



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TRADITIONAL BREWING

Drinking and brewing in one of Africa's largest refugee camps

At the Kakuma refugee camp in northern Kenya, the sale and consumption of locally brewed alcohol are part of everyday life. For some, cheap alcohol offers a way to cope with the stress of displacement and the harsh conditions of camp life. For others, brewing and selling alcohol is a source of income in an environment that offers few formal employment opportunities.

BY ALBA NAKUWA

Such makeshift distillation setups are frequently used in Kakuma to produce spirits such as chang'aa.



Chang'aa, also known locally by names such as Siko or Number 1, is a distilled alcoholic beverage typically made from corn, millet or other grains. In Kenya, it was illegal for many years until the government legalised the traditional, home-brewed beverage in 2010. Its aim was to put an end to the practices of businesses without licences that added toxic chemicals to the brew to make it stronger. Since chang'aa can be sold at a low price, it is more affordable for consumers in Kakuma with limited financial means than commercially produced spirits. Some refer to the drink as "kill me quick" due to concerns about its potency and potential effects.

Christin Nyadeng is a refugee from South Sudan and has been living in Kakuma for more than 10 years. As a mother of seven children with no formal education, she has limited opportunities to find regular employment. Illegally brewing chang'aa has become one of the few ways for her to earn money to feed her family. "I brew because it allows me to earn enough to feed myself and my children – or even contribute a little to their education," she says.

But her income is uncertain. Random raids by law enforcement officers can result in her brews being confiscated, leaving Nyadeng without the money she had hoped to earn. In addition, customers sometimes don't pay.

"Others start brewing because they see it as one of the few ways to earn money and escape these difficult circumstances, which, in turn, further fuels the drinking of their desperate neighbours."

Joseph Lopir, who has lived in Kakuma for 13 years, is well aware of the challenges faced by residents struggling to make ends meet. He works as a communications officer for the "Solidarity Initiative for Refugees" (SIR) and is also a freelance filmmaker and photographer.

According to Lopir, some residents turn to the production of chang'aa because they need alternative sources of

income. The business reportedly yields higher profits than less potent traditional local beverages such as busaa, a thick, porridge-like beer made from grains, often corn or millet. Busaa is consumed in several East African countries, including South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi and Uganda.

Lopir cites unemployment, idleness and stress as factors that can contribute to both brewing and alcohol consumption in the camp. Young people face particular challenges when they have limited access to jobs and few opportunities to build a sustainable livelihood.

INEFFECTIVE POLICE OPERATIONS

It's a vicious cycle: for some residents, alcohol consumption is linked to the stress caused by difficult living conditions. Others start brewing because they see it as one of the few ways to earn money and escape these difficult circumstances, which, in turn, further fuels the drinking of their desperate neighbours.

That does not mean that every unemployed young person in Kakuma drinks alcohol or is involved in the illegal production of alcohol. However, it is important to understand the broader economic context in which these practices take place.

Where legitimate sources of income are scarce, it is not enough to simply tell people to give up their illicit work – that does not address the reasons why they took it up in the first place. Consequently, enforcement of the regulations remains a central part of the problem. According to Lopir, some brewers continue their activities despite warnings from the authorities and occasional raids.

This creates a repeating cycle. The authorities take action against illegal brewing; products may be seized and disposed of, yet the brewers simply resume their activities afterwards. When products are destroyed, they suffer the immediate financial loss. The ongoing disputes lead to frustration on both sides.

REGULATION ALONE IS NOT ENOUGH

The ongoing tensions and problems demonstrate why measures can have only a limited impact if the underlying issues regarding livelihood security remain unaddressed.

Any proposal to regulate the production or sale of alcohol, including restricting sales to certain days, would need to be reviewed in light of applicable Kenyan law, public health concerns and the potential impact on the community. A regulation should not be considered a solution without first assessing its feasibility and expected consequences.



Lopir proposes a more comprehensive approach that takes into account regulation, job creation and vocational training. Rather than simply aiming to eradicate illegal brewing, he suggests finding ways to curb this practice while simultaneously addressing the root causes that perpetuate it.

However, especially for young refugees, vocational training alone may not be enough. Lopir points to a lack of support after training, which can result in young people acquiring new skills but having few practical opportunities to apply them.

Access to tools, mentoring, support in starting a business and connections to potential employers could help close this gap. The programmes would also need to address the needs of the local economy, rather than simply offering training without providing a clear path to income.

For households that already make a living from brewing, income support could help make the transition to other occupations more realistic. This would require programmes that address immediate financial needs while also creating longer-term economic opportunities.

Lopir also sees resettlement as a possible path to better future prospects for some refugees. However, this is not an

immediate or universally available solution. For most residents, the opportunities available within their current living circumstances remain important.



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Members of the civil society organisation "Grupo Marte" on patrol in the Mexican border town of Tijuana.

CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT

Mexico under the influence of drugs

Crystal meth, fentanyl and other drugs that are made in a laboratory are a booming business with global supply chains. Mexico plays an important role: drugs are produced and exported here, but they are also consumed to a worrying extent. Though civil society organisations are advocating for people with substance use disorders, life-saving policy changes have yet to materialise.

BY SONJA PETERANDERL

A camouflage cloth hides the lower part of Marck Rivera's face as he squints and lets his gaze glide over the parched canal of the river in the Mexican border city of Tijuana, where a dark sludge has collected. Rivera and other members of the "Grupo Marte", a volunteer initiative, patrol the canal in black clothes and heavy boots. This is one of Tijuana's drug hotspots. The volunteers enter tunnels where unhoused people live and visit a street camp. They tend to wounds and distribute medication along with clean needles to people who inject drugs. If someone is lying too quietly and not moving, they check whether the person is only sleeping. "There are people who die of an overdose on the street here," Rivera says. "They don't know what they're taking any more."

Rivera came to Tijuana years ago from Culiacán, located in the Mexican state of Sinaloa, the cradle of the well-known Sinaloa Cartel. He had hoped to cross the border into the USA to experience the American dream. Instead, he found himself in the canal – homeless and addicted to heroin and crystal meth. He wound up in prison.

Nowadays Rivera helps other people in crisis. "Drug use in Tijuana is severe. This is where all the drugs and flows of migration come together," he says. "Everyone who has been deported from the USA, is released from prison or comes from other cities or countries, washes up here." Many had taken drugs in the past, he continues, but the difficulty of everyday life in the border city speeds up their downward spiral. The people who are stranded here need support for addiction, psychological problems or life-threatening injuries, Rivera says, but instead they are often simply harassed by the police or military.

MEXICO'S CARTELS AS GLOBAL PLAYERS

Mexico's large, transnationally active criminal networks, the Jalisco Cartel and the Sinaloa Cartel, are active in over 40 countries worldwide. They control large portions of the trade in drugs like cocaine, crystal meth or fentanyl, and the border city of Tijuana is one of the most important drug corridors to the USA. According to the UNODC World Drug Report 2026, the growing volume and availability of synthetic substances could permanently change the global drug market – and bring about overdoses and violence. Experts worry that powerful synthetic drugs are flooding the global market, including fentanyl, nitazenes or orphines like buporphine or cyclophorphine.

According to the Mexican crime expert Óscar Balderas, the new "super drug" of the Mexican cartels is the synthetic opioid fentanyl. It is the "most financially lucrative drug for the cartels," he says. Fentanyl is up to 50 times stronger than heroin.

Fentanyl is highly potent even in small doses, costs relatively little to produce and can be cut with other drugs to increase their effectiveness. All of these factors make it more attractive to drug producers than the half-synthetic heroin, which is chemically extracted from the seed pod resin of poppies. In addition, the price of heroin has fallen steeply in recent years. Compared to cocaine, which is made from coca plants, fentanyl has the advantage that it does not need to be imported from cultivating countries in South America.

"The cartels are mixing together more and more potent and therefore riskier combinations, partly because consumers want a stronger high."

In recent years, Mexico has increasingly transformed from a drug corridor to a production site. Hundreds of labs producing fentanyl, as well as crystal meth, have been raided. In March 2026, security forces discovered during a raid in the western state of Colima around 270 kilos of a fentanyl-like substance in powder and pill form, enough for about 14 million doses.

SHIPMENTS FROM ASIA

Mexican cartels obtain the chemicals to manufacture synthetic drugs like fentanyl primarily from China, India or other Asian countries. The most important liaison between China's chemical factories and the Sinaloa Cartel is currently standing trial in the USA. Zhi Dong Zhang, alias "Brother Wang", allegedly trafficked chemical substances for fentanyl production by the tonne to drug labs in Mexico. The cartels press these into tablets or cut other drugs, even medications sold in pharmacies, with fentanyl. Drug cooks are always working to perfect their formulas.

Cartels also fly their drug cooks to African countries like Nigeria to establish labs there, especially to produce crystal meth. They then ship the synthetic drugs from Africa on to Europe and all the way to Australia and New Zealand.

Mexican cartel members are increasingly present in Europe too. Members of the Jalisco Cartel were recently arrested in Spain, where they had coordinated the trade in cocaine and methamphetamines. Vanda Felbab-Brown, a crime expert at the US think tank Brookings, warns that crystal meth is a potential gateway drug to fentanyl. “My biggest concern is that Mexican cartels will adopt the same tactics elsewhere as they have in the US – namely, mixing fentanyl and other synthetic opioids, such as nitazene, into meth shipments,” she says.

THE RISK OF OVERDOSE

The cartels are trying to manufacture stronger and stronger products. They are mixing together more and more potent and therefore riskier combinations, partly because consumers want a stronger high – despite the high risk of overdosing. Even a tiny amount of fentanyl can cause respiratory arrest. “I never know how much fentanyl is in there,” says Luis, who lives in a street encampment in Tijuana and injects a heroin-crystal meth blend about six times a day in order “to not feel bad”. He has already survived an overdose, he says. Now he takes drugs only when someone else is near who could help him.

In 2024, paramedics with the Red Cross tried to revive over 800 people experiencing overdoses in Tijuana. According to the Forensic Medical Service (SEMEFO) of Baja California, almost 17% of all the bodies it received in the cities of Mexicali and Tijuana had fentanyl in their systems – though it was unclear whether that was what killed them. Since there are no official, nationwide statistics, many victims remain invisible.

“You have only 10 or 15 minutes to react to an overdose, and then it’s too late,” Marck Rivera from Grupo Marte explains. Naloxone, available as a nasal spray or injection, works as an antagonist in case of an opioid overdose by reversing life-threatening respiratory paralysis. But naloxone is only available by prescription in Mexico and too expensive for people living on the street. Even organisations that support people with substance use disorders have trouble maintaining their naloxone supply.

CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT FOR PEOPLE WITH SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS

One organisation that distributes naloxone is PrevenCasa. In the NGO’s courtyard in Tijuana, graffiti exhorting visitors to “Help, not punish” is emblazoned on a wall, and colourful chairs await people needing medical exams or psychological counselling. PrevenCasa is a laboratory for an alternative, health-oriented drug policy. Helpers distribute medication, condoms or injection kits. A plastic box is available to dispose of used needles. There is even a safe space for women to consume drugs.

At PrevenCasa, people who use drugs can also test their substances for fentanyl with adulterant detection strips. Nowadays, almost all these tests come back positive. Drug quality and composition change constantly. Dramatic changes to the fentanyl content can lead to a wave of overdoses – until users adjust to the new blend.

“Mexico’s President Claudia Sheinbaum is taking military action against drug labs, but there is no comprehensive, health-focused drug policy with long-term state financing for support structures.”

A DIFFERENT DRUG POLICY

In the past, organisations from the USA delivered naloxone to Mexico to support organisations there that had limited resources. In the USA, naloxone has been available in pharmacies without a prescription since 2023, and as a result, the number of fatal overdoses has declined in the USA for the first time since 2018. “Since the start of the opioid epidemic, the US approach to drug use has undoubtedly changed dramatically,” observes Brookings expert Vanda Felbab-Brown. “In particular, during the transition from the Obama administration to the first Trump administration and finally to the Biden administration, we observed a significantly greater acceptance of certain forms of harm reduction, such as the widespread availability of naloxone and improved access to medication-assisted treatment.”

However, after some progress towards a more sustainable drug policy, the global trend now seems to be going back to heavy-handed policies. Budgets are primarily prioritising arms build-ups, surveillance and prison instead of better social and health policies, which could interrupt the cycle of poverty, hopelessness and violence.

"We believe that cross-border harm reduction work is crucial, but it is a terribly difficult time now as the Trump administration is against harm reduction strategies and gutting funding for anything other than naloxone," Gretchen Bergman says. She founded the organisation "A New Path" in San Diego, which supports people with substance use disorders and also works with Mexican organisations. She still has a steady supply of naloxone in California, but says that there have been delays recently in procuring fentanyl test strips.

In many Latin American countries, right-wing to far-right politicians have also used the "drug war" to attain the presidency, promising to take tough military action against criminal groups. The era of Latin America's turn to the left seems to have ended. Committed initiatives like Grupo Marte, Prevencasa or A New Path are trying to cushion the social impact of the billion-dollar criminal drug business, but their funds are shrinking. Mexico's President Claudia Sheinbaum is taking military action against drug labs, but there is no comprehensive, health-focused drug policy with long-term state financing for support structures.

"Here in Tijuana, it's not politics, but rather drugs and migration flows that influence what happens," Marck Rivera

believes. In order to document the operations of his army of volunteers and the crisis of people on the streets of Tijuana, he operates the TikTok channel @grupo.m.a.r.t.e. He also uses the platform to attract donations because money is always tight. He often won't know until the last minute if he's raised enough through crowdfunding to carry out an operation. It's not possible right now to deliver naloxone to drug users. The most Rivera can do is transport people to clinics and hope that he can get them there on time. But at the moment the group doesn't even have money for gas.

SOURCE

UN Office on Drugs and Crime: World Drug Report 2026.



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REHABILITATION

Inside Zimbabwe's controversial drug rehab camps

Young people struggling with addiction in Zimbabwe are caught between virtually non-existent public mental health services and unregulated private rehabilitation centres. Testimonies describe military-style drills, corruption and forced confinement in facilities that claim to offer treatment.

BY DEOGRACIOUS KALIMA



Drug abuse is particularly high in Zimbabwe's urban centres, especially in the capital, Harare.

There is a troubling economy flourishing in Zimbabwe's capital, Harare. "The drug trade is in full swing," says John Gwada, community leader and pastor of the Zimbabwe Apostolic Church. This shadow economy is built on the shattered lives of Zimbabwe's so-called "lost generation" – young adults born after the year 2000 who constitute the section of the population hardest hit by the country's devastating employment crisis.

Although there are few comprehensive national surveys, studies by the Zimbabwe Civil Liberties and Drug Network (ZCLDN) and the Zimbabwe Youth Development Initiative estimate that over 60% of young people in urban areas have already experimented with drugs, with around 35% using them regularly. "It's chaos – children are dropping out of school; some are driving their parents out of the house; others are selling off all their household belongings just to buy their next fix," says Gwada.

**"Families have to pay
between \$ 400 and \$ 800
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— or even more to secure
their release."**

But the horror does not end on the streets, where drugs and illicit alcohol are readily available; for some addicts, it only really begins behind the steel bars of so-called "rehab boot camps", which claim to rehabilitate young people suffering from addiction.

The drug rehabilitation centres in Zimbabwe, which are springing up like mushrooms, have become hotbeds of corruption and brutality, where politically connected elites have turned a public health crisis into a lucrative business. Those affected and their families report that at facilities such as the Matrix Rehabilitation Centre and the Angel of Hope Foundation in the capital, their journey to sobriety has been marred by bribery, military-style torture, forced detention and a disregard for human rights.

FEWER THAN 20 REGISTERED PSYCHIATRISTS

For a desperate mother like Chipso Ganga (not her real name), who had to watch her 19-year-old son waste away due to his

drug addiction, it was all too easy to be taken in by the stylishly designed adverts on TikTok and Facebook, which prominently promote these drug rehabilitation centres.

"In 2025, I was desperately trying to save my teenage son – the adverts for the rehabilitation centres seemed like a gift from heaven," she says. They promised "holistic therapy", "psychological assessments" and a path back to mental health, as well as a return to school or work for "rescued young people". In Zimbabwe, a country where the mental health system is virtually non-existent – with fewer than 20 registered psychiatrists and fewer than 40 clinical psychologists available for a population of 17 million – these seemingly charitable drug rehabilitation centres present themselves as the only remaining hope for parents whose children are addicted to drugs.

The Matrix Rehabilitation Centre, run by Tafadzwa Chidawa, a former police officer and social media personality, and Angel of Hope, a foundation headed by Zimbabwe's First Lady Auxillia Mnangagwa, are the best-known of these rehab centres. They claim to offer free or subsidised programmes lasting between one and three months, designed to transform young people struggling with addiction into productive members of society.

"The Matrix Rehabilitation Centre promised me that my 19-year-old son, who had dropped out of his first year of law at the University of Zimbabwe, would stop using drugs within a month – and would return to university on his 20th birthday," says Ganga. But as soon as the gates closed, her son was subjected to military-style drill, she reports. He told her that his day began at 3 am – he was doused with cold water and had to roll about in the muddy backyard, slap other young people and endure five slaps to the cheek himself every day. His only meals consisted of "breakfast" at 3 pm and a light supper at 10 pm. "He slept four hours a day and lost seven kilos in a month," she says. At the same time, the rehab programme, which had initially been presented as free of charge, turned into a financial nightmare. The operators demanded \$500; otherwise, her son would be held there for six months. "I had no choice but to sell my fridge to pay them," says Ganga.

"Patients as young as twelve who are battling addiction are stuck in these dubious rehabilitation centres, which are designed to make a profit rather than provide paediatric care," says Jigga Saro (not his real name), a former security officer who claims to have alerted the Zimbabwe Republic Police to Matrix and to have gone into hiding after the owner of Matrix was briefly arrested in 2025.

SNATCHERS AS "HEALTH WORKERS"

One of the most worrying aspects of these rehabilitation centres is the way in which they "recruit" their clients,

alongside promises made on social media. There are numerous allegations that rehab centres such as Matrix employ private bouncers as “kidnapping squads”. These squads pick up troubled young people off the streets and forcibly take them to their centres, says 22-year-old Irimayi Goto (not her real name). This is what happened to the young mother, who struggled with alcohol and ecstasy addiction for three years and spent two months in a centre before her uncles, who live abroad, paid a fee of \$900 to secure her release.

“Wealthy families allegedly pay hefty bribes to secure places for their troubled children.”

The men in these gangs stroll through the streets of Harare and lure suspected drug users into their vehicles under the pretence of taking them for a medical examination or a seminar on “empowering youth”, says Goto. As soon as they are taken behind the gates of the rehabilitation centres, brutal methods are employed. The “patients” are held against their will, she says. “This is not medical treatment – it is kidnapping.”

Goto adds that what lies behind these forced detentions is not medical concern, but the financial value of every drug addict who is sent to rehabilitation centres. Families have to pay between \$400 and \$800 a month if their children are held in these camps – or even more to secure their release.

INSIDE THE “BOOT CAMP”

Goto recounts that daily life in the rehabilitation centre was more like that of a prison inmate than that of a patient in rehab. “We were woken from our brief sleep to take part in roll call, forced singing and gruelling training,” she says. This included, for example, “air seating” – remaining in a squatting position for 30 minutes or longer – or “frog marching”. “Beatings were also a daily occurrence,” says Goto.

The exercises took their physical toll and often left her feeling dizzy and on the verge of fainting. But showing any sign of weakness would have resulted in beatings with a water pipe. There were no doctors or nurses specialising

in addiction to treat the inmates as promised on admission. “Just muscular men who mocked and beat us. We were told we were useless to our families and the country because we were drug addicts. If we complained too strongly, they threatened to send us to the war in Ukraine and Russia to die there,” she reports.

Several leaked videos from the rehabilitation camps corroborate these accounts. Some footage shows inmates, fully clothed, being doused with water and forced to stand still while fellow inmates, egged on by staff, mock them.

Another unsettling aspect of the “boot camps” was the so-called “medical procedures”, says Chipso Ganga, mother of the 19-year-old law student. She reports that her son had blood taken and strands of his hair tested for “traces of cocaine” while at the rehab centre. Video footage available on the facilities’ social media platforms also shows how inmates are subjected to compulsory “medical” tests upon admission.

Investigations have since revealed that consent had been faked, the methods were rudimentary and no experts were present. This constitutes a flagrant breach of Zimbabwe’s Public Health Act and the Medicines and Allied Substances Control Act.

“Goto recounts that daily life in the rehabilitation centre was more like that of a prison inmate than that of a patient in rehab.”

CORRUPTION AND THE FIRST LADY’S FOUNDATION

While the Matrix Centre has become notorious for its alleged brutality, the Angel of Hope Foundation represents, according to whistleblowers, another facet of the crisis: systemic corruption.

The First Lady’s rehab centre in Zimbabwe does not use snatchers to get addicts off the streets, says Ethan Soko (not his real name), 24, a former prospective patient who dropped

out of his accounting degree at the University of Zimbabwe due to his abuse of cough medicine. Angel of Hope takes a different approach – a “pay-to-play” system, he says. Wealthy families allegedly pay hefty bribes to secure places for their troubled children, thereby pushing ahead of those like him – the destitute young people from poor neighbourhoods who cannot afford private rehab clinics.

“I’d been addicted to codeine-based cough syrup for five years, and after waiting a long time, a spot opened up at the First Lady’s boot camp for three months. I was thrilled,” he says. On the day Soko enrolled, however, his place was cancelled indefinitely. No reason was given. Guards later told him that the troubled teenage son of a wealthy politician had paid \$ 1200 to snatch his place. Soko was devastated – and, as he says, now suffers from depression, drinks alcohol and continues to abuse codeine cough syrup.

“The Zimbabwe Health Professions Authority, a state regulatory body, has issued a statement warning that several rehabilitation centres, such as Matrix, are operating illegally.”

Tafadzwa Chidawa, director of the Matrix Rehabilitation Centre, dismissed claims that his centre was operating illegally and “drilling” inmates using torture methods. “That’s nonsense – we don’t hold anyone against their will. Our methods are humane – some of the videos you’ve seen of the exercises are AI-generated and fake. We operate within the law – and the families are delighted that we’ve changed their children for the better,” he says. Requests for comment from the First Lady’s Angel of Hope Foundation went unanswered.

THE POLICE ARE NOT DOING ENOUGH

The Zimbabwe Health Professions Authority, a state regulatory body, has issued a statement warning that several

rehabilitation centres, such as Matrix, are operating illegally. That said, the Zimbabwean government’s response to such warnings has so far been half-hearted.

The operator of Matrix was briefly arrested in March 2025 for allegedly running an illegal rehabilitation centre and posing as a child protection officer. He was released shortly afterwards. The Zimbabwean police ignored several requests to explain why critics accuse them of being too lenient towards influential figures who allegedly run illegal rehabilitation centres.

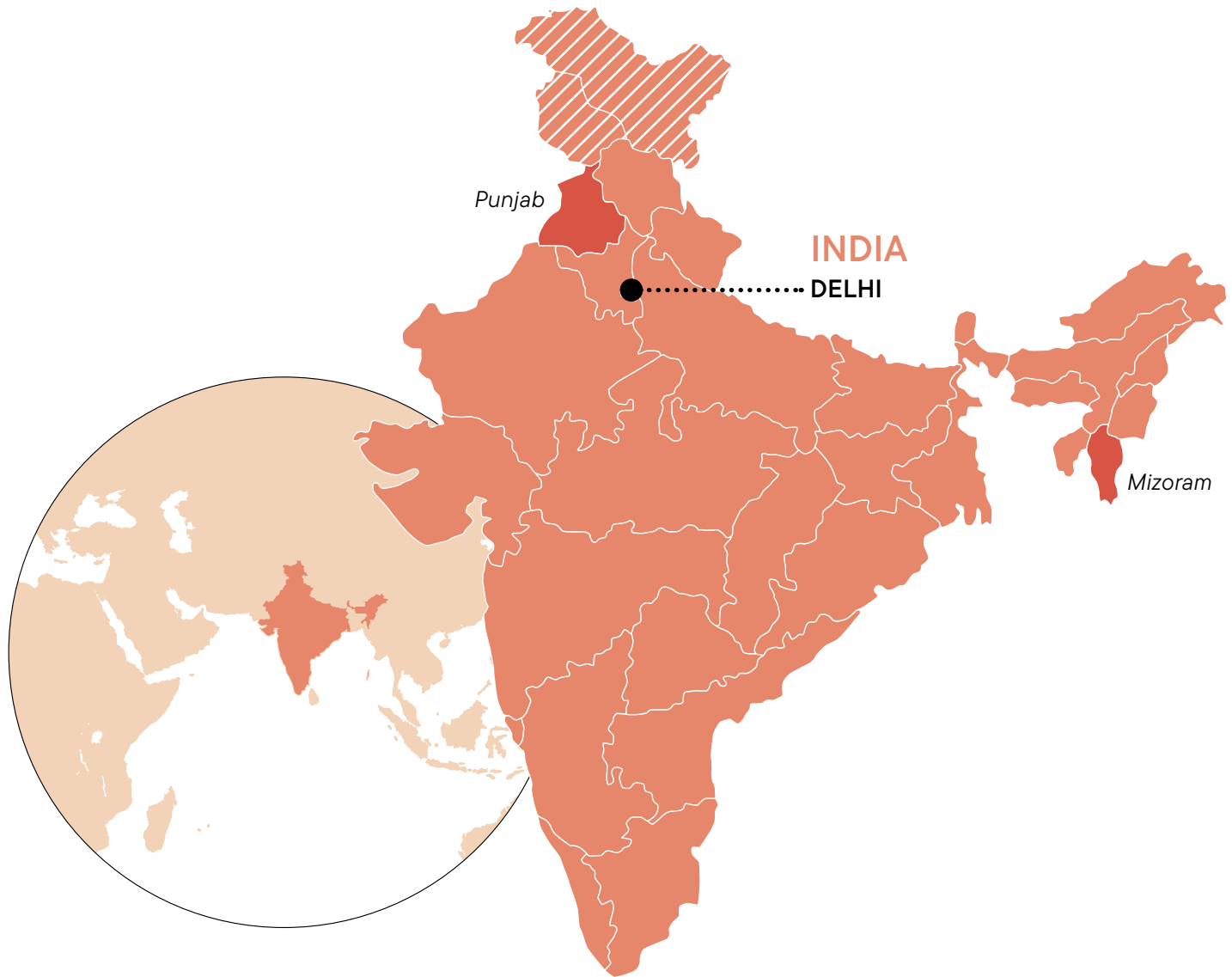
The Zimbabwean Ministry of Health has merely expressed what it calls its “concern”. Yet it seems its hands are tied when such “boot camps” are linked to influential figures in politics and government, says Soko, who lost his place at the First Lady’s rehab centre. “These are not drug rehabilitation centres; they are blackmail boot camps that use dubious methods to instil fear in young people struggling with addiction,” he says.



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FAITH-BASED ORGANISATIONS

From gurdwaras to churches: Religion tackles India's drug crisis

As government efforts seem to fail, it is religious organisations that are building the country's most effective drug rehabilitation networks in India.

BY RISHABH JAIN

India's drug crisis has reached critical dimensions. The state of Punjab records some of the country's most alarming figures: in 2024, over 230,000 people were addicted to opioids there, and the opioid use rate stood at 9.7%, compared with a national average of 2.1%. Punjab has a population of about 30 million and lies directly on the "heroin corridor" that runs from Afghanistan to India via Pakistan.

That same year, 9025 criminal cases were registered in Punjab under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act. Despite a downward trend, this is still the second-highest figure in the whole of India after the state of Kerala. The most frequently consumed drugs in Punjab were heroin, opium and abused medication.

At the same time, Punjab's public addiction treatment system is severely overburdened. The state operates 529 Opioid-Assisted Treatment (OAT) outpatient clinics, which are supplemented by around 180 private treatment centres.

Religious organisations have stepped into this gap with a degree of effectiveness that the state has so far found difficult to match. The reasons for this are not hard to understand. In communities plagued by addiction, trust in state systems is weakened. Religious organisations, on the other hand, possess moral authority, a reach that goes right down to the community level and an understanding of recovery that is as much spiritual as it is medical. They do not merely treat those affected; they reintegrate them into society.

THE GURDWARA MODEL IN PUNJAB

The concept of "Seva" – selfless service – has a long tradition within the Sikh faith. It has made gurdwaras, the Sikh places of worship and learning, ideally suited to providing social care. In Punjab, some of these have evolved from merely providing free meals to running comprehensive rehabilitation programmes. In some gurdwaras, patients receive support with detoxification, counselling, vocational training and – crucially – a community that continues to accompany and support them even once they have been discharged.

The need for continued support is underscored by research on opioid dependence in India. A study of 466 patients who underwent inpatient opioid detoxification at a treatment centre in Amritsar found that around 32% had relapsed during the year following discharge. Another Indian study of patients undergoing treatment for opioid use disorder found that one-third relapsed within a 90-day follow-up period. These findings highlight the challenges of maintaining recovery after detoxification and the potential importance of continued psychosocial and community-based support.

The gurdwara model integrates what addiction experts refer to as "social capital" directly into the therapy itself. A recovering addict is not simply discharged into anonymity – they return to a community that knows them, looks after them and offers them job placements through its own networks. The drug crisis in Punjab is, in fact, also an unemployment crisis. Studies consistently link substance abuse to unemployment in rural areas. Data from the periodic labour force survey for the period April to June 2025 showed that youth unemployment (among those aged 15–29) in Punjab stood at 20.2%, which was above the national average. The gurdwara programmes tackle both drug abuse and unemployment simultaneously.

"Against the backdrop of these institutional shortcomings, religious organisations are now not only filling a part of the gap; they are shouldering a disproportionately large share of the burden."

Meanwhile, the state-run infrastructure is facing serious credibility issues. Punjab introduced new regulations on the treatment of substance use disorders in 2025. The reform followed the emergence of a major scandal that involved private rehabilitation providers diverting millions of buprenorphine tablets – an opioid used to treat opioid use disorder and acute and chronic pain – onto the open market. A centre in Patiala is reported to have sold 2.6 million tablets in less than eight months, despite only 55 patients having been registered there. This incident starkly illustrates the risks of a commercialised rehabilitation sector operating without adequate oversight – and strengthens the case for community-based alternatives.

THE CHURCH STEPS IN ACROSS THE NORTH-EAST

Almost 3000 kilometres to the east, in the hills of north-eastern India, another religious community is making similarly extensive efforts. The region – comprising states such as Mizoram, Nagaland, Meghalaya and Manipur – is predominantly Christian. It borders Myanmar, which alongside Laos and Thailand comprises the Golden Triangle of the



Photo: picture alliance / ZUMAPRESS.com / Hafiz Ahmed

An anti-drugs awareness rally in the northern Indian state of Assam in September.

opium and heroin trade, and is one of Asia's largest narcotics-producing areas. India's 1643-kilometre-long, largely unfenced border with Myanmar runs through three of these states, allowing heroin and methamphetamine to enter the country relatively unhindered.

In Mizoram, around 87 % of the population identify as Christian. The largest denomination, the Mizoram Presbyterian Church, has recently signed an agreement with the government under which the Jordan Centre – one of the largest rehabilitation centres in Mizoram – will be handed over to the church's synod for a period of 15 years. The state will provide an annual grant of around \$52,000, and the church has allocated \$238,000 from its own budget to revitalise and expand the facility, which had become largely non-functional under state management.

The logic is the same as in Punjab, just expressed in different theological terms. "The government found it natural to reach out to them," Francis Kharshiing, head of the state-run Drug Reduction, Elimination and Action Mission (DREAM), told UCA News. He mentioned a similar collaboration between the Church and the state in Meghalaya. "By combining resources, trust and grassroots reach, we aim not just to treat addiction but to restore dignity, rebuild lives

"India's drug crisis is also a crisis of belonging."

and protect future generations," he said. In Nagaland, the Catholic Church's Shalom Rehabilitation Centre in Chumukedima has been in operation since 1993; its director was officially honoured by the state governor in October 2024 for the centre's three decades of work.

In June this year, churches of various denominations – Presbyterians, Baptists and Catholics – teamed up with civil society organisations in Mizoram to form a joint anti-drug coalition. The "Central Young Mizo Association" and the highest church body, the "Mizoram Kohhran Hruaitute Committee", had convened the meeting as a matter of urgency. "Drug abuse is one of the most serious problems facing both the churches and civil society today," Bishop Stephen Rotluanga of Aizawl told UCA News.

THE WOMEN THE STATE OVERLOOKS

India's drug crisis has another dimension that is scarcely reflected in the official data: women. The country's drug rehabilitation infrastructure has been geared almost exclusively towards male patients. In the past, addiction research, diagnosis and treatment approaches were based on models that focused primarily on men, while the specific realities of addiction among women have often been overlooked. In India, these realities are exacerbated by a stigma so pronounced that women with addiction are rarely identified at all – families hide them away, communities exclude them and state-run facilities, where they exist at all, are often inaccessible.

“State-run
infrastructure is
facing serious
credibility issues.”

Women face a wide range of overlapping barriers to addiction treatment, including stigma and shame, limited family support, caregiving responsibilities and concerns about safety and privacy. Indian studies of women seeking treatment have documented limited social support, childcare responsibilities, self-stigma and family stigma as obstacles to entering or remaining in treatment.

Faith-based organisations that operate within communities rather than from outside are sometimes better placed to reach these women. Church networks in the north-east, for example, have developed peer-counselling models and home-visit programmes, so women do not have to publicly admit to their addiction or leave their families in order to seek help. Programmes linked to gurdwaras in Punjab have also begun to develop services specifically for women, as it has been recognised that addiction in families rarely affects only the men.

Nevertheless, the gaps in the provision of treatment remain enormous for both genders. According to the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, 768 treatment and rehabilitation centres are currently funded under the National Action Plan for Drug Demand Reduction (NAPDDR) – far too few for a country where millions of people require treatment for substance dependence. Against the backdrop of these institutional shortcomings, religious organisations are now not only filling a part of the gap; they are shouldering a disproportionately large share of the burden.

India's drug crisis is also a crisis of belonging: people turn to drugs when they feel disconnected from economic life, from their families and from the future. The most effective rehabilitation work currently being carried out in India is done by institutions whose very existence revolves around helping people feel a sense of belonging – both spiritually and physically – to a community and to a higher purpose.



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Men in a bar in Kano – drinking alcohol has become a pastime in Nigeria.

ALCOHOL

Alcohol as a threat to public health in Nigeria

Reforms to the Nigerian healthcare system could be undermined by rising levels of harmful drinking. To tackle this problem, measures such as a stricter regulatory framework, better enforcement of regulations and higher taxes are needed.

BY CHINEDU MOGHALU

Alcohol consumption has become an increasingly routine part of social life in Nigerian cities, particularly among young adults. Drinks once associated with celebrations and milestones are now often consumed during the week and in everyday settings. Alcohol has shifted from a symbol of festivity to a means of coping, affecting women and men alike.

Nigeria's relationship with alcohol began in moderation. Traditional drinks such as palm wine, burukutu and pito were part of social practices and rituals. Communities shared them, and custom set boundaries for their consumption.

The colonial era, however, changed both the range of drinks available and their meaning. European traders introduced gin and rum, which became symbols of modernity and social status. In the 1980s, breweries sponsored national football and music events. By the early 2000s, alcohol had become an integral part of people's leisure time.

The 2020s have consolidated this transformation. Local and international spirits producers now market their products directly to young people via digital media and influencer campaigns. Some of these products contain added sugar, caffeine and flavourings, which can mask their alcohol content and encourage excessive consumption. Alcohol can now be easily found in car parks, on university campuses and at building sites, where vendors sell cheap spirits in small sachets alongside bread and cigarettes.

THE DEVASTATING EFFECTS OF ALCOHOL

Alcohol affects women and men in the same way, but the health risks differ. Women reach higher blood alcohol levels more quickly, as they generally have a lower body water content and are slower to break down alcohol enzymatically. This increases their risk of breast cancer, liver failure and high blood pressure. Men face an increased risk of strokes, heart disease and reduced fertility.

“Alcohol should be subject to the highest permissible excise duty rate amongst consumer goods.”

In 2024, the World Health Organization (WHO) attributed around 2.6 million deaths worldwide to alcohol consumption, accounting for 4.7% of all deaths. More than 1.6 million

of these deaths were due to non-communicable diseases, including cancer and heart failure, whilst more than 700,000 were due to injuries such as road traffic accidents. The WHO states that there is no safe upper limit for alcohol consumption with regard to cancer.

In Nigeria, the 2024 WHO report estimated annual alcohol consumption in 2019 at 4.2 litres of pure alcohol per person aged 15 and over. The same report estimated the age-standardised prevalence of episodic heavy drinking in this population group at 12.1%. In 2019, 62,236 deaths in Nigeria were attributed to alcohol.

NIGERIA'S EXISTING FRAMEWORK

The Nigeria Health Sector Renewal Investment Initiative (NHSRII) provides a coherent framework for prevention and health promotion. Its approach enables the authorities to link the fight against alcohol and drug abuse to, for example, vaccination programmes and maternal health. The rationale is simple: preventing non-communicable diseases through behavioural regulation saves lives and reduces the burden on specialist hospitals.

Furthermore, the “Nigeria Alcohol Policy and its Multisectoral Implementation Plan (2026–2030)”, launched in August 2026, now provides a national framework. It brings together public education, screening, treatment and enforcement. Moreover, the introduction of a national health promotion day created a permanent national platform. This day should now be specifically geared towards combating alcohol and drug abuse. It can bring together public education, community policing and clinical screening under a common guiding principle. Without such coordination, the rapid progress achieved under the NHSRII – improved uptake of primary healthcare, increased insurance cover and expanded screening for non-communicable diseases – could be undermined by precisely those behaviours that contribute to preventable diseases.

THE LAW AND THE ROLE OF NAFDAC

Nigeria's legal framework is adequate on paper. Under the NAFDAC Act, the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC) regulates the manufacture, import, advertising and sale of alcoholic beverages. The Alcoholic Beverages Regulation (2019) requires product registration and the correct labelling of alcohol content and prohibits misleading health claims. Advertising guidelines prohibit content aimed at minors and require references to age restrictions.

In February 2024, NAFDAC enforced a ban on alcohol in pouches and bottles with a capacity of 200 millilitres or less. This was an important step towards restricting young

“The current reality in Nigeria is that billboards advertising whisky and beer are situated directly above clinics that treat alcohol-related emergencies.”

people’s access to strong alcohol. The authorities must maintain this ban and enforce it consistently. State governments should also bring their licensing laws into line with the national legal framework and impose tougher penalties for illegal production and sale without a licence.

However, the legal definitions in Nigeria remain outdated. Alcohol is still treated as a commodity rather than a toxic substance. Scientifically speaking, alcohol is a toxic, psychoactive and addictive substance, and the International Agency for Research on Cancer classified it as a Group 1 carcinogen decades ago.

The Federal Ministry of Health and the Federal Ministry of Justice should, within the framework of NAFDAC, initiate legislative amendments to reclassify alcohol as a controlled toxic substance with regard to advertising, labelling and retail licences. Such a reform would not criminalise alcohol consumption by adults. Rather, it would enable the regulatory authorities to treat alcohol with the same level of scrutiny as medicines and pesticides.

ALCOHOL ADVERTISING IN NIGERIA

Regulation must also cover the marketing sector. The Nigerian Advertising Regulatory Council (ARCON) should strictly enforce the prior review of all alcohol advertising, including digital campaigns and influencer campaigns. Alcohol brands should not sponsor reality TV programmes, talent shows or sports content that reaches an audience under the age of 18. The sponsorship of entertainment programmes by alcohol manufacturers undermines national health messages and normalises alcohol consumption as a leisure activity.

The current reality in Nigeria is that billboards advertising whisky and beer are situated directly above clinics that

treat alcohol-related emergencies. This contradiction undermines public trust and weakens the credibility of public policy. The government cannot spend public funds on treating illnesses whilst at the same time allowing the industry to glorify its causes.

ALCOHOL AND ROAD SAFETY

The sale of alcoholic drinks at coach stations and along transport routes has become a public safety issue. Drivers of intercity coaches, commercial three-wheelers and lorries regularly consume cheap spirits before or during their journeys. Random roadside checks continue to reveal high blood alcohol levels among professional drivers.

The Federal Road Safety Corps (FRSC) should step up the enforcement of drink-driving laws through mandatory breathalyser tests, road checks and the immediate withdrawal of driving licences from offenders. It must work with NAFDAC and the state traffic authorities to disrupt the supply chain that enables unauthorised traders to operate at transport hubs. Road safety and public health are not separate issues; both concern preventable deaths.

ECONOMIC DETERRENTS

Economic deterrents remain an effective public health measure. Several studies indicate that higher alcohol prices and taxes are associated with lower consumption. Nigeria’s excise duties on beer and spirits remain below global averages.

“The progress made in terms of health access, efficiency and accountability will mean little if people who are receiving better care continue to drink themselves into ill health.”

Alcohol should be subject to the highest permissible excise duty rate amongst consumer goods. The revenue generated could be channelled towards health promotion, rehabilitation centres and the enforcement of regulations. The

authorities could channel the revenue through the NHSRII funding basket and link it to measurable outcomes, such as fewer deaths from drink-driving and wider coverage of preventive care for non-communicable diseases. As is the case under the NHSRII, the use of these funds must be transparent. Taxation should serve to curb consumption, not merely to increase government revenue.

CONCLUSION

Trends in alcohol consumption in Nigeria reflect a broader social shift: the country is ambitious and vibrant, but it lacks discipline. The progress made by the NHSRII in terms of health access, efficiency and accountability will mean little if people who are receiving better care continue to drink themselves into ill health. Alcohol is no longer merely a private vice; it poses a risk to public finances and social stability.

The government has the tools to take decisive action within the framework of the NHSRII. The task now is to ensure that its intentions are matched by action. If Nigeria is to secure its demographic advantage, it must tackle the

growing prevalence of alcohol with the same seriousness as it treats epidemics. This is not moralising but a matter of governance.

FURTHER READING

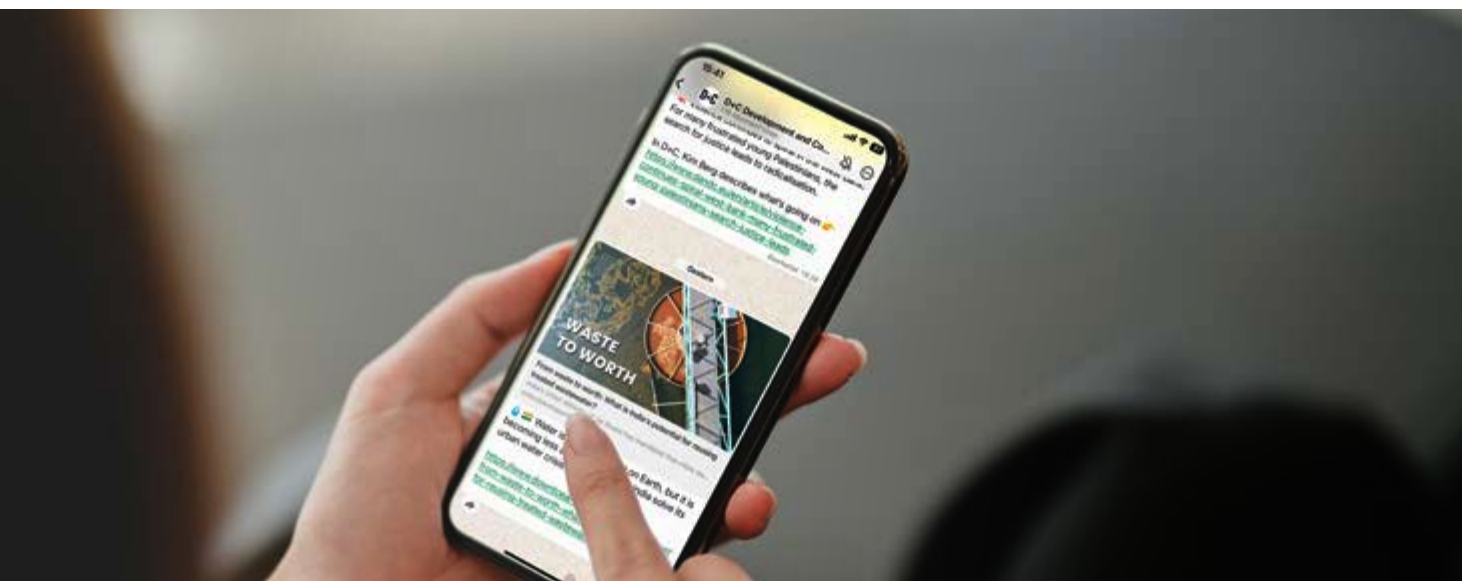
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