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Living with disabilities


People with disabilities continue to experience disadvantage and discrimination worldwide. Access to health services and education tends to be difficult for them. Hence, they also find it difficult to enter the labor market. However, they have a right to participation, guaranteed by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It is high time that societies around the world made a stronger commitment to inclusion and provide disability-friendly infrastructure.

Title: Disabled member of a women's microfinance cooperative showing her savings book in northern Togo.

Photo: picture-alliance/Photononstop/GoDong





 Our focus section on living with disabilities starts on page 19. It pertains to the UN's 3rd Sustainable Development Goal (SDG): "good health and well-being". The topic also has a bearing on other SDGs (see editorial).

Things are particularly tough in developing countries. That is where about 80% of the world's 1.2 billion people with disabilities live according to a GIZ report. Tax revenues tend to be low, and government spending tends to be quite meagre as well. International donor agencies must rise to the challenge. Every project and programme should take account of the needs of disabled persons explicitly and right from the start. Bilateral institutions such as GIZ and non-governmental organisations such as CBM aspire to do so.

Inclusion, moreover, is needed for gender justice. Around the world, women do most of the care work. When mothers, sisters and daughters have to take care of family members with special needs, they have fewer opportunities to earn money, get an education and become active in public affairs. They thus suffer exclusion themselves.

The SDG targets make sense. State agencies, civil society and the private sector must rise to the challenges. It is essential not to leave anyone behind. The inclusion of persons with disabilities concerns society as a whole – and the entire international community.

Do not abandon people with disabilities

The motto of the UN's 2030 Agenda is to leave no one behind. The implication is that the poorest and most disadvantaged people deserve particular attention when it comes to achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). People with disabilities are a relevant target group. Indeed, about 80% of them live in poverty.

Several SDGs explicitly refer to persons with disabilities. For example, SDG4 (quality education), SDG8 (decent work and economic growth), SDG10 (reduced inequalities) and SDG11 (sustainable cities and communities) have specific targets – and for good reason. Research shows that persons with disabilities are typically marginalised in several ways. They tend to be excluded from social life and are neglected by both schools and health-care institutions. Even access to sanitation or public buildings cannot be taken for granted.

Those who have a handicap need particularly good infrastructure. All too often, it proves insufficient. Shortcomings are systemic even in a high-income country like Germany. Many schools and public buildings neither have appropriate toilets, nor

markers for visually impaired persons, nor ramps for those who require wheelchairs. The lack of adequately trained professional staff is similarly embarrassing.

Where infrastructure is inadequate in daily life, disaster looms in the case of emergencies. Extreme weather events, for example, are especially dangerous for persons with disabilities. Neither warning nor rescue systems are designed in ways that would suit their needs.

Things should not be this way. After all, Germany and about 180 other nations have ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Its big promise is to bring about the inclusion of the people concerned as well as ensuring they enjoy equal opportunities.

The CRPD results from respect for basic human dignity. At the same time, there are tangible economic reasons why persons with disabilities must not be left behind. Where they are not enabled to live productive lives, they become a burden on society, with governments generating less tax money, but having to spend more on social benefits.



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Psychologist Vilma Duque specialises in working with people traumatised by war. She works in Guatemala and other countries in Latin America. In our interview starting on page 26, she talks about the extent to which experiences with violence can influence individuals and also entire societies. In the interview, she emphasises that coming to



terms with conflicts appropriately is essential for paving the way for change. "Fear spreads, paralyses and engenders more fear," she says.

► We post all items of our focus section and other stories online on www.dandc.eu.

DISASTER RELIEF AND RECONSTRUCTION

Too much has not been “built back better”

Natural disasters often deepen pre-existing social divides. The earthquake that hit Nepal seven years ago was a striking example. It showed how important it is to make poor and marginalised communities in risk-prone areas more resilient – and that delayed reconstruction makes it hard to build back better.

By Rukamane Maharjan

On 25 April 2015, a 7.6-magnitude earthquake hit Nepal severely. The epicentre was Barpak in the historic district of Gorkha, about 76 kilometres northwest of Kathmandu. The disaster affected 37 out of 77 districts. Fourteen severely damaged districts were declared to be “crisis-hit”, which meant they were prioritised in regard to relief and rescue activities.

The Post Disaster Needs Assessment Report of 2015 showed that the earthquake affected approximately one-third of the country’s people. The majority of them were unaware the aftershocks could continue for months, so they were hit unprepared. Indeed, hundreds of aftershocks followed, including a major one.

About 9,000 people were killed and tens of thousands injured. Houses, heritage sites and schools were destroyed, and so were health centres, trekking routes as well as water supply systems and hydropower plants. Hospitals were filled with the dead and injured. Nepal’s emergency response was overwhelmed. This is a poor post-conflict country, and the impacts of decades of civil war still matter. Public capacities generally tend to be rather weak.

Accordingly, masses of survivors were left to themselves for far too long in the disasters areas in 2015. They desperately searched for loved ones who were trapped under the rubble. Those who have not experienced such a scenario cannot imagine the pain it causes. Indeed, the fear and trauma of many survivors remain unaddressed.

People in Nepali villages – and even in the cities – hardly have access to psychological support. The mental health of countless people has thus suffered long term.



Survivor in devastated Barpak in 2015.

And still, Nepal was lucky in a certain sense. The earthquake occurred on a Saturday. Had it happened during the week, the casualty numbers would certainly have been much higher. The official data shows that more than 7,000 schools were severely damaged. On a weekday, the buildings would have been full of students.

Moreover, the calamity struck in daytime. It destroyed over 800,000 houses, but many people were outside. At night, masses would have been in bed at home – and thus even more at risk. The full truth, however, is that not every structure that collapsed did so immediately. A lot of harm was done after the main event.

One lesson is that buildings in Nepal must be constructed in ways that make

them withstand disasters. Indeed, legislation regarding earthquake resilience has been passed accordingly. The new regulations make sense, but – as is typical of least-developed countries – cannot be stringently enforced and are bypassed, especially by informal economic activities.

THE AFTERMATH

After the earthquake, over 100,000 people were forced to live in temporary shelters. News reports suggested that women and children were at high risk of trafficking and abuse. Reckless criminals were exploiting the vulnerability of families in desperate need. Human trafficking is a long-standing problem. Because families lost their livelihoods, moreover, child marriages and child labour increased. Many peoples’ welfare was thus affected irreparably in the long run, with women and girls experiencing particular distress.

In the early days, the government did not play an effective role in coordinating various humanitarian agencies from Nepal and abroad. On top of private and public outfits from Nepal, UN organisations and international non-governmental organisations were involved. Nonetheless, many communities had to wait long before support arrived. Some injured people thus did not get the care they needed and died or remained more severely disabled than would otherwise have been the case.

Things were particularly bad where the earthquake had destroyed access roads. To reach indigenous mountain communities, humanitarian helpers needed helicopters, which were in short supply. This was particularly the case in Nepal’s remote mountainous north.

As days progressed, stories of discrimination spread. In a rapid assessment, the Dalit Civil Society Massive Earthquake Victim Support and Coordination Committee spoke of “willful negligence” and “cast prejudice”. Deep divisions mark society, so some communities were prioritised over others.

It mattered that many people lacked the documents they needed to get assistance. In many cases, government agencies asked for citizenship cards or other legal documents, such as land-ownership certificates for example. Some people had lost those papers due to the earthquake, more disadvantaged people had never had them

in the first place. Requests of this kind led to the further exclusion of people from poor and marginalised communities. The natural disaster thus deepened pre-existing social divides. The implication is that more equal societies perform better in regard to relief and reconstruction, so reducing inequalities should always be on the agenda.

On 25 December 2015, the government established the National Reconstruction Authority. Its mission was recovery and reconstruction. Nonetheless, reconstruction efforts remained slow for the next two years, as the Asia Foundation stated in a monitoring report it published in 2019. Masses of people had to stay in temporary shelters or damaged houses. There was no clarity concerning government assistance and financial aid.

To families whose homes were destroyed, the government provided reconstruction grants of 300,000 Nepali rupees (the equivalent of about \$3000) in three instalments. This policy was quite helpful. However, government plans to offer low-interest loans through the banking system largely failed. The reasons included that:

- the banks had requirements of their own that did not match the governments' scheme and
- many affected people did not have access to the financial industry at all.

Many families, however, could not wait for government money to flow. They started rebuilding houses informally, without complying with earthquake-resilient building codes. While government action did help, more would have been achieved if it had not set in so late.

LATE, BUT SIGNIFICANT PROGRESS

However, there was significant progress on reconstruction by the end of 2019, according to the Asia Foundation, with the majority of people moving back to rebuilt or repaired houses. In December 2020, the National Reconstruction Authority released a progress report. It claimed considerable progress in the reconstruction of private houses. Some 90% of private houses were said to have been restored, but that figure is less convincing than it looks because it does not include a long list of heritages sites. While media reports show that there still are gaps, however, there certainly are examples of projects that worked out well. Integrated

settlements with housing and infrastructure were completed and handed over to the earthquake-affected families.

In December 2021, the World Bank published an assessment of Nepal's reconstruction efforts. It appreciated five approaches as good lessons:

- using technology to understand reconstruction needs fast,
- taking an owner-driven approach to building back,
- providing targeted socio-technical assistance to the vulnerable,
- investing in structural integrity assessments for school buildings and
- sharing knowledge at both local and global levels.

Seven years later, people hardly speak about the disaster anymore. Their priorities have shifted, not least, because the coronavirus pandemic hit Nepal hard. The trauma lingers on nonetheless, and stark inequality persists.

The initial Post Disaster Recovery Framework after the earthquake spelled out a vision of building back better, not least by ensuring resilience, reducing landlessness and recognising women's land rights. For many marginalised people, that has not come true. Had action started faster, more could have been achieved.

Due to its geography, Nepal will always be an earthquake-prone country. The

first recorded earthquake was in 1255. Reports suggest it killed about one-third of the population of Kathmandu Valley. In the past 100 years, the country suffered major earthquakes in 1934, 1980, 1988 and 2011. Weather-related disasters are common too. Floods and landslides affect the country every year in the monsoon season, because of heavy rainfalls. Nepal therefore must certainly improve disaster preparedness, especially by boosting poor communities' resilience.

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There are examples of newly built integrated settlements.



Small-scale farmer in Zimbabwe.

FOOD SECURITY

“Smallholder farms must benefit from innovations”

The Global Forum on Agricultural Research and Innovation (GFAR) coordinates hundreds of agencies and organisations internationally. Hildegard Lingnau, its executive secretary, told D+C/E+Z why researchers should focus more on family farms in the global south and why real innovation is about more than merely technological advancement.

Hildegard Lingnau interviewed by Hans Dembowski and Jörg Döbereiner

The UN's second Sustainable Development Goal (SDG2) is to end hunger and malnutrition by 2030. Some 10% of humanity are currently suffering hunger. While there is enough food in principle, it is not distributed equitably. Is SDG2 achievable at all?

Unfortunately, it will probably not be achieved, as the UN secretary-general's recent report on SDG progress has noted. Indeed, the situation is set getting worse. In 2020, 161 million more people were affected by hunger than in 2019. Some 2.4 bil-

lion lacked food security. The conclusion of the UN document is that a global food crisis is likely. We'll have to do much more than in the past to achieve SDG2 or at least make some progress towards doing so by 2030.

What needs to happen?

There are no simple solutions, but it is obvious that we must focus more on smallholders and family farms. They account for about 84% of agricultural businesses and produce about 35% of all food around the world. On the other hand, diets must change. Meat consumption, for example, must be reduced.

The mission of GFAR is to increase global food supply. What do you focus on for that purpose?

GFAR is a network of networks. We cooperate with hundreds of agencies and organisations interested in the transformation

of the agri-food system, including farmers associations, research centres, civil-society organisations and the private sector. We help them to network, get heard and become more involved in global agricultural research. GFAR depends on members' initiatives and supports their priorities. On that basis, we organise joint projects, which we call "collective actions".

Please give examples.

One collective action of ours focuses on forgotten foods – traditional crops in which there is no investment. Thousands of these plants have been cultivated in history, and they have considerable advantages, such as high nutrient content and excellent adaptation to local eco-systems. Our members have adopted a global manifesto, demanding more investment in further cultivation of these landraces on smallholder farms. That is not what big agro corporations want. They focus on only a few plants such as maize, wheat and rice. Another important issue is digitalisation. Its potential with regard to payment systems, marketing or weather reports is huge. However, a survey we did showed that industrial-scale farms benefit most. To change matters, we have launched another collective action. It is designed to provide smallholders with better access to regional markets and supply chains. If we manage to improve their business prospects, that will hopefully help to reduce climate-harming emissions as well. At this point, agriculture contributes at least 31% to global greenhouse-gas emissions, and the share is growing.

Unhealthy and environment-unfriendly diets, especially in high income countries, are among the drivers. They include too much meat, sugar and heavily processed goods. Is this pattern spreading?

Habits may slowly be changing in the global north, where this kind of diet is currently not becoming more prevalent. However, things are different in large emerging economies like China or India with a huge share of the world population. The meat sector is forecast to increase there in coming years. One implication is that the demand for animal feed will increase too. Accordingly, experts expect the agriculture's share in global climate emissions to increase by six percent in the next 10 years. Once more, we see things deteriorating instead of improving.

What must we do to change course?

It would make sense to eat less meat. Indeed, it would be possible to cut carbon emissions by 29% internationally by 2050 with every person on earth getting a healthy diet including large portions of fruits and vegetables.

Doesn't it seem cynical to people in developing countries and emerging markets when they get such advice from high-income countries?

The global north is not in a position to tell the rest of the world what to consume. But it should try to be part of the solution, not part of the problem. The point, moreover, is not to forbid something, but to focus on health. The good news is that the more sustainable solutions are not only healthier, but also contribute to reducing poverty and hunger. These are the solutions we need to promote and invest in. In particular, it is essential to enable smallholders to produce highly nutrient food at regional levels. For that to happen, they must benefit from innovations.

Research is a driver of innovation. Do research institutes in the global south get the attention they deserve?

Our members say that they do not. There is a big global consortium, the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR). It is a network of 15 multi-lateral institutions which are doing excellent work. In our experience, however, they tend to bypass partners in the global south and do not necessarily serve their interests. We want to see more involvement of our members and want partnership principles to become the global norm. One implication would be that there would be no more research about small scale producers from the global south without small scale producers from the global south.

How would that be feasible?

Smallholders always participate in our collective actions. I just mentioned the one regarding forgotten foods. In this context, we created a global manifesto for better utilisation of neglected crops. Now, we will implement it at regional levels, for example in cooperation with the Asian Farmers Association (AFA). Smallholder farmers are assuming roles of leadership, and we insist that other partners, such as academic re-

searchers, corporations and civil-society organisations accept their leadership. We would like to see big business and multi-lateral agricultural research do so too. It is indispensable – the only approach that'll allow us to really see and take into account the needs and ideas of smallholders. Solutions typically result from different parties interacting.

And you can help to spread good ideas?

If we see that something would make sense in other countries or contexts, we contribute to scaling that up in collective actions. What really matters, in our eyes, is not simply that something is new, but that it helps our members achieve the SDGs. In this sense, a technology invented somewhere in a lab is not necessarily an innovation, because innovation requires social concepts and processes. According to Harald Welzer, a German sociologist, essential progress in the course of civilisation was always brought about via improved interactions and institutions, and technology was only useful when people knew how best to exploit it. At GFAR, we agree. We are not interested in innovation for its own sake, but as an engine of progress. To emphasise that innovation must be related to values and fair, we plan to add an "I" to our name and become GFAIR.

What vision guides your work?

The SDGs, and – apart from SDG2, which we just discussed – in particular SDG17, international partnerships and cooperation for achieving all SDGs. The need for cooperation cannot be over-estimated, and we are currently seeing just how destructive narrow-minded nationalism and, even worse, warfare are on the northern shore of the Black Sea. Anyone who is interested in cooperating with partners in the global south is welcome to get in touch with us. An email will do, we are an open forum.



HILDEGARD LINGNAU

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hosted by the Rome-based FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN) and funded by the EU.

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Cleaning up Mexico's water bodies

The Gulf of Mexico off the Atlantic Ocean and other water ecosystems play a vital role in the livelihood of many Mexicans. However, these marine ecosystems are now in trouble due to increased human activity that is accelerating climate change.

In a country of over 128 million people, the pressure on the environment is immense. There is increasing discharge of plastics into water bodies, sewerage runoff, as well as mega infrastructure projects coming up near protected areas and reserves. Climate change is already impacting food security and endangering aquatic life.

Civil society and environmental activists are rallying communities and other actors in Mexico to do something about the increasing pollution. "MY World Mexico" is a hybrid initiative that combines social mobilisation and advocacy. It has launched a campaign called "Revitalise Oceans".

The campaign kicked off on World Oceans Day 2022 and involves conducting clean-up of plastic waste and other pollutants from coastal areas, riversides and other water bodies across the country. "Beach clean-ups are a useful tool to raise awareness and achieve a reduction in the consumption of single-use plastics, but that is only the tip of the iceberg,"

says Melania Lopez, a marine biologist and environmental activist. In her eyes, a change is really needed from those who generate these products to those who oversee waste management.

Erika Montes de Oca, an environmental consultant from Mexico City, who organised a clean-up in a natural reserve in northern Mexico, says: "The sites of final disposal of solid urban waste do not comply with the environmental standards of the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources to be considered as sanitary landfills. How can we ask the citizens and companies to carry out an adequate disposal of their waste?"

The clean-up in San José del Cabo had 105 volunteers, among them were labour union members, municipality departments, local civil-society organisations, hotels and a public high school. Montes de Oca argues that more initiatives and actions at all levels remain urgent to address the problem.

Gema Yuridia, a geologist and engineer from the south-central region of Mexico, is leading a clean-up of the Moctezuma River, an important hydrological system that flows through four states and into the Gulf of Mexico. The river is polluted by sewage discharged from Mexico City, State of Mexico and Hidalgo. Moreover, the disruption to the river flow has resulted in flooding especially during periods of excessive rainfall. Residents around it face a potential risk to their health and being cut off from access to basic services.

Since March, MY World Mexico has mobilised volunteers across 10 different states. They have conducted two workshops in which the volunteers are taught about pollution and how they can help counter it. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has joined MY World Mexico to conduct this sensitisation. The organisation hopes that the clean-ups will boost further action and funding for environmental programmes.



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DEVELOPMENT AND
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D+C



Second-hand bookstore in Hanoi, Vietnam.

Culture Special

As every summer, the D+C/E+Z editorial team presents books and films that we appreciate and would like to recommend to you, dear readers. The oeuvres are tackling issues of developmental relevance, and we would be pleased if our recommendations inspired you to read or watch them. This year we are presenting our Culture Special in two Digital Monthlies – in August and September.

POST GROWTH

“A good life doesn’t have to cost the Earth”

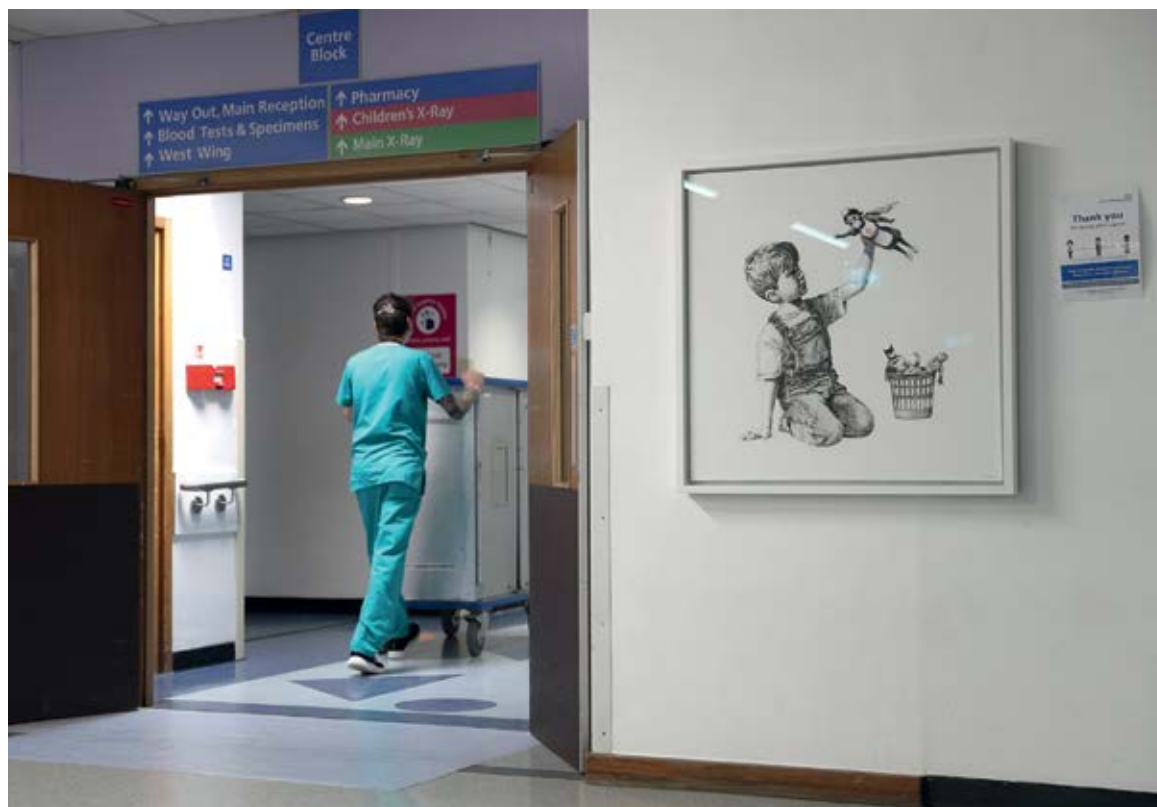
“How do we want to live?” is the question that concerns Tim Jackson, a British economist and professor for sustainable development at the University of Surrey. In his book “Post growth: Life after capitalism”, Jackson asks us to reflect on a world that is obsessed with constant growth, in which the climate catastrophe has long since become a reality, and other Earth systems are reaching a tipping point.

By Dagmar Wolf

Jackson does not fundamentally reject growth. In those places where there are shortages, growth is entirely sensible and necessary, he writes. But he believes the situation is different in so-called affluent societies, which are characterised by excess. In places where there is enough, Jackson claims, “artificial shortages” must be con-

stantly created in order to keep the motor of consumer society running. Doing so feeds a permanent sense of dissatisfaction; the old must always be replaced by the new, at the expense of resource and energy consumption. Jackson believes that the obsessive fixation on high growth rates and our consumer behaviour is leading to massive environmental destruction, the climate crisis and loss of biodiversity, with unforeseeable consequences.

Jackson is interested in the question of what prosperity is. Since the 1950s, the gross domestic product (GDP) has been used to measure the size of a country’s economy and has been considered equivalent to social progress. But he doubts whether the GDP measures the right things and points to a quote from American politician Robert F. Kennedy, brother of US President John F. Kennedy, who



“The game changer” is an artwork created by street artist Banksy to thank hospital workers during lockdown: here at Southampton General Hospital.

said in a campaign speech as early as 1968 that the GDP counts too many things that detract from our quality of life and excludes too many things that people truly value.

According to Kennedy, the GDP “counts the destruction of the redwood and the loss of our natural wonder,” but not “the health of our children, the quality of their education or the joy of their play”. Nor does it include the work of those who care for children or others at home. Kennedy concludes that the GDP “measures everything in short, except that which makes life worthwhile”. The message is that simply measuring economic activity and calling it progress is no way to achieve lasting prosperity.

The global coronavirus pandemic revealed the shortcomings of a capitalist economic system that is constantly striving for growth, writes Jackson. According to him, the system promotes short-term profit for few instead of the long-term well-being of a society. The pandemic clearly demonstrated, however, the importance of care work and the value of health care. Occupations such as nursing in hospitals or retirement homes in particular had been systematically devalued. As a result, underpaid people who were most exposed to the virus carried out

their essential services on the brink of exhaustion, and others lost their jobs entirely, while a few rich and privileged people continued to earn a profit.

During the global lockdown, the fixation on growth was paused in order to protect people’s lives. Countries that prioritised the health of their people over productivity were able to minimise suffering, Jackson writes. Consumer habits took a backseat and we were reminded of what is most important in life.

Jackson believes that especially the insights gleaned from the coronavirus and climate crises, as well as from social tensions and rising inequality, should change our way of thinking. The goal should be to develop sustainable principles for a good life and thereby usher in a socio-ecological transformation.

Conversely, Jackson is sceptical of green deals and the corresponding green growth. According to him, it is difficult to imagine infinite growth in a finite world. It is not only essential that we stop using fossil fuels, he writes, but also that we acknowledge the finite capacity of all ecosystems. Jackson calls on readers to fundamentally rethink how we deal with nature.

The end of growth does not mean the end of social progress, according to the book. Its main message is that “a good life doesn’t have to cost the Earth”. Jackson counters the myth of growth with his vision of a society that makes us richer instead of poorer without growth, where balance is valued more than growth, and prosperity means more than material excess. “Post growth” is a continuation of his previous book, “Prosperity without growth”. It is a manifesto for a different economic system. The book does not offer any ready-made solutions. Instead, it relies on scientific, political, historical and philosophical insights and anecdotes to invite readers to reflect on what makes life worth living.

BOOK

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IDENTITY POLITICS

South Asian dystopia

The new novel by Rahman Abbas, who writes in Urdu, is set at the end of this century. It was inspired by the Indian author's worries about recent trends in his home country, where aggressive identity politics have been – and still are – gaining momentum.

By Almuth Degener

Constant agitation against the Muslim minority is part of the BJP's agenda. The BJP is the Hindu-supremacist party of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. There is recurring violence, which government agencies often tolerate or even endorse. What increasingly

defined by Hinduism. The BJP and its allies promote that kind of attitude. According to Abbas, a disaster like the Nazis' Holocaust is looming. International experts such as Gregory Stanton of Genocide Watch, the international civil-society organisation, share that concern.

The title of the new novel is "Zindeeq", which means "heretic". The main protagonist is from an educated and liberal Muslim family. After succeeding in school, he rises fast in the ranks of the military. From that point on, the plot turns to other issues. The young man's life is marked by unrest in Kashmir, growing nationalist and racist

extermination camps and information centres dedicated to the Nazi genocide. He also talked with people who witnessed the Holocaust as well as descendants. Parts of the novel relate directly to Abbas' experience in Germany.

Did the trip mitigate Abbas' dreadful fears? Well, his novel is dystopian, and its ending is foretold at the very beginning: "The sky over the garrison, where he had last been stationed, was dark. Looking around, one saw, to one side, the sad sea, which sounded as though it were crying and thus reinforced the depressing mood. Some 600 kilometres away to the other side, the metropolis was now mostly in ruins. To the north and south, several cities were reduced to rubble. To the west – along the coast and in the dense forests – a few villages had been spared, but people there were suffering poverty, desperation and insecurity."

Zindeeq's plot is gripping. The novel spells out a dire warning not to allow narrow-minded identity politics to suffocate a liberal and pluralistic social order. Nonetheless, the book tackles many things that are not of immediately political relevance, though they do have socio-political implications, such as sex, philosophy, drugs, a dose of Sufism and, not least, poetry. That will not surprise anyone who knows Abbas' award-winning novel Rohzin.

Zindeeq was released in Urdu in 2021. By June 2022, the third edition was printed. Urdu is closely related to Hindi, but is written in the Urdu alphabet which is based on the Arabic one. Urdu is used as an official language in Pakistan and parts of India.

NOVELS BY RAHMAN ABBAS

Zindeeq, Urdu

- Delhi, Arshia, 2021 and
- Lahore, Aks Publications, 2022

Rohzin, English

- Delhi, Vintage Books, 2022

Rohzin, German

- Heidelberg, Draupadi, 2018 (The German title is: „Die Stadt, das Meer, die Liebe“)



Hindu supremacists marching in Assam in early 2022.

resembles pogroms, is then played down as "communal violence". Abbas feels reminded of German Nazis' brutal racism in the 1930s and 1940s.

In India, the tendency to marginalise not only Muslims, but other minorities too, has been gaining momentum in recent years. Aggressive agitation claims that minorities want to harm the nation, which, in the view of right-wing populists, must be

sentiments and increasing tensions with Pakistan. In both countries, minorities are hounded with diminishing restraint and escalating brutality. The protagonist, however, is appalled by Islamist extremism as well as Hindu supremacism.

In 2019, a grant from Robert Bosch Foundation and Literary Colloquium Berlin (LCB) enabled Rahman Abbas to come to Germany for a month. He visited former



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Demonstration against racism in Düsseldorf.

PERSONALITY

A journey of self-discovery

In her debut novel “Adas Raum” (“Ada’s Realm”), British-German writer Sharon Dodua Otoo tells the story of Ada, a protagonist reborn in different bodies at different times. Ada’s four lives are not told separately and chronologically; they are interwoven reflections of the fates of women through history.

By Maren van Treel

The story of Ada’s journey through the centuries begins in 1459 in Totope, a village on the west coast of Africa in what is today Ghana. Ada loses a baby for the second time. Over the centuries, she will experience many more traumatic events but she will also be loved and supported and – perhaps most importantly – she will find herself. On that voyage of self-discovery, her fate will be

defined repeatedly by historical and social circumstances.

ROCKY ROAD

In 1848 Ada is a computer pioneer in Stratford-le-Bow (England), in 1945 a prostitute in a concentration camp in Nazi Germany. Finally, in 2019, we meet her as a young mother-to-be looking for an apartment in Berlin, where she plans to study computer science. On her journey through the centuries, Ada is accompanied by people she meets, loses and meets again: a friend or (half-)sister at her side and a man who plays a part in each of her lives. She encounters him as the Portuguese merchant Guilherme Fernandes Zarco, as her husband Lord William King, as senior SS officer Helmut Wilhelm and finally as Mr Wilhelm. A pearl

bracelet plays an important role between the two.

The threads of the plot all come together in 2019. While conducting a viewing of an apartment, landlord Mr Wilhelm catches a glimpse of the bracelet in an exhibition catalogue that Ada is carrying. In a flashback, memories come flooding in. He confesses to Ada what he did in the past and what he did to her. He tries to justify his actions. Does she recognise him? Will she forgive him? After all the centuries, is he finally renouncing his avarice, his colonial mindset, his racism?

In 2019, Ada offers effective resistance for the first time, both to him and to others. Although she did what she could in previous lives, her hands were often tied. In modern-day Berlin, the world is naturally different from the one Ada experienced, for example, in mid-19th century England; social circumstances have changed for the better in many respects. But Ada’s behaviour is not shaped only by circumstances. It is defined by the fact that she now knows who she is, knows her limits and sets them. She has developed a consolidated identity.

In “Adas Raum” everything seems to be interconnected – something that is also reflected at a linguistic level and in the complex structure of the novel. At times, this can be confusing for the reader. Two chapters of the story are told from Ada’s first-person perspective. Elsewhere, we are led by a narrator, a supernatural being who plays a role in Ada’s life, assumes different guises and communicates with God.

Despite Ada’s arduous journey through life, some comfort and an unexpected lightness is found in the original narrative perspective and generally in the tone that Otoo gives to the story – notably through the narrator’s views on the world and the living and the dialogues held with God.

CRITICAL EYE

The author addresses colonialism and National Socialism in this socially critical novel but also casts a critical eye over present-day Germany. The pearl bracelet turns up

in 2019 in a museum; Ada discovers it in an exhibition catalogue – a reference to looted art that is still on show in the museums of former colonial powers and has not been returned to its original owners. Ada also encounters racism, from people who would probably never see themselves as racist in either thought or deed.

The novel is also about being a woman in different centuries and circumstances. Being a mother, wanting to become, being expected to become, not wanting to become a mother; being a possession; being modest; being a victim; being an object; being brave – these are just some of the facets.

Women are not placed on a saintly pedestal but a spotlight is shone on where they have been shackled by social circumstances. The male characters are given much less nuance and depth, less space. Which is hardly surprising, because this is Ada’s realm.

Sharon Dodua Otoo has written a complex, powerful story with many layers of meaning and perspectives. “Adas Raum”

will certainly yield more insights on a second and third reading. Like any good story, it conveys a message primarily through plot and characters; one or two interpretive passages would not have been necessary. Many of the ideas, sentences and characters will definitely not be forgotten.

Sharon Dodua Otoo (*1972) was born and grew up in London. Her parents come from Ghana. Otoo has lived in Berlin since 2006. In 2016, she won the prestigious Ingeborg Bachmann Prize for her short story “Herr Gröttrup setzt sich hin” (“Herr Gröttrup Sits Down”).

BOOK

Otoo, S. D., 2021: Adas Raum (“Ada’s Realm”). Frankfurt, S. Fischer Verlag.



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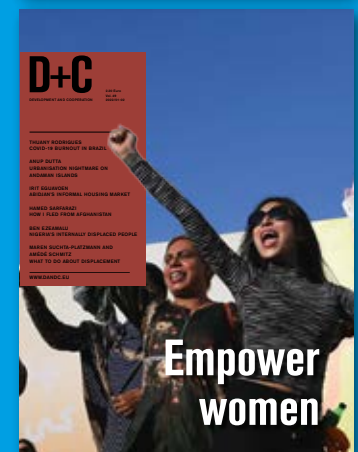
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LIFE STORY

A man flees

The animated documentary film “Flee” is devoted to the life of a man who has fled from Afghanistan. It is based on a true story and centres around the question: when does flight end?

By Jane Escher

Flight does not end with arriving in another country. “Flee” presents this conclusion already in its title. After all, the verb is in the present tense, not the past tense. Amin Nawabi (a pseudonym) had to flee as a child, which still weighs on him as an adult. The largely animated film is framed by conversations between Amin and the director, Jonas Poher Rasmussen. Piece by piece, the now 36-year-old interviewee tells his story.



“Flee” is an animated documentary film.

It begins with his childhood in Afghanistan. An estimated 35 million people live in the country. On 15 August 2021, the Taliban came back to power and are once again carrying out the reign of terror that began in the 1990s. The country is isolated. The humanitarian situation is disastrous.

Amin had already fled Afghanistan with his mother and siblings in the 1980s. At that time, violent clashes between the communist government, its Soviet supporters and US-backed mujahedeen groups rocked the country. Amin’s father had already been arrested and was presumed dead. The family’s goal was Sweden, where Amin’s eldest brother had been living for some time. They could only get as far as Moscow, however.

The family did not have enough money to travel on to Sweden and had to hold out. It was a bleak waiting period. The living conditions were hard, and attempts to flee failed. Ultimately, the family had to separate. Traffickers brought them out of Moscow at different times and on different routes.

Amin ended up alone in Denmark at the age of 16. In order to be allowed to stay, he claimed his family was dead. No one learned the truth for decades, including the friend whom he met on his first day of school in Denmark. That friend was Jonas Poher Rasmussen.

The personal relationship between the documentary filmmaker and the protagonist does not compromise the film. It actually strengthens its message. Only after many decades of friend-

ship was Amin able to open up. He tells the friend – not the filmmaker – about the flight, the fear, the isolation and the psychological strain. They also talk about his time in Denmark: how Amin grew up as a refugee in a foreign country, how he took the long-desired trip to see his family in Sweden and how he pursued his career as a researcher.

The film also focuses in particular on Amin’s relationship with his partner. His homosexuality is thematised, but not dramatised. Viewers primarily see how Amin’s attitude towards his own homosexuality changes. Much more important to him – and therefore to the film – are the challenges that his past creates for his relationships. During their conversation, the friends discover together what those challenges are. Clearly the flight and the lie continue to preoccupy the now 36-year-old protagonist.

The film is not a political statement about the war in Afghanistan. It does not take into account current events. Criticism only happens at the margins. The message of “Flee” is different. Jonas Poher Rasmussen has created a space for his friend to work through his past, and maybe even come to terms with his flight. The result is a work that depicts a normal person in the shadow of war and his years-long flight from his own past.

The animation allows the entire story to be visualised. It reveals what otherwise would have remained hidden. Occasionally, the animation is interrupted by footage taken at the narrated time. It clearly communicates that in spite of the aestheticised images, the story is real.

Of course, due to the conversation between Amin and Jonas, the audience knows from the beginning that Amin will be all right. He is living in safety in Denmark. It is rather his emotional development that lends the film its dramatic arc. Does Amin’s flight from his own past end with the film? The answer to this question can be sought in “Flee”.

FILM

Rasmussen, J. P., 2020: *Flee*. Denmark/France.



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GRAIN AND OIL PRICES

What Ukraine war has meant for Libya so far

Libya is one of the countries that are feeling the impact of Russia's attack on Ukraine. The bread price has gone up, whereas the oil-producing, but strife-torn economy did not benefit from higher energy prices. Leaders of armed groups decided to blockade oil fields and terminals, quite likely in the interest of their foreign backers, including Russian ones.

By Moutaz Ali

Ukraine was one of Libya's major grain suppliers in the past and perhaps even the most important one. Michel Cousins, the British editor of the Libya Herald, an online newspaper, has said that the disruption of those imports hurt the country. However, he insists that it does have the funds to cope with higher commodity prices, in contrast to other countries in North Africa that do not benefit from the same kind of resource revenues.

Jamal Alzaidy, the editor-in-chief of the state-run newspaper Al-Sabah, agrees. In his eyes, it helps that Libya's population of 7 million is comparatively small. Neighbouring Egypt has more than 100 million, and Tunisia 12 million. Both must do without revenues from oil exports. That makes their foreign-exchange situation more difficult, so they are less able to adjust to higher costs of importing vitally needed grain. Nonetheless, Libyans were angry about higher bread prices.

In late July, however, grain was internationally trading at about the same price level as it did when the war began. Prices had initially risen fast, and then slowly dropped again from June on. Reasons included that harvest forecasts in several world regions have improved, that Russia started selling stolen Ukrainian grain and that, in late July, a deal was struck that was expected to facilitate grain shipments on the Black Sea once more. At the beginning of August, the situation did not look tense from the Libyan

perspective. The scenario may, however, change fast again.

Oil prices increased too, when the war began. The bad news for Libya is that it did not benefit, because the leaders of various armed groups have been blocking oil fields, so production stalled. The national Oil Corporation had to suspend shipments for reasons it could not control and thus referred to "force majeure" clauses. According to Cousins, "Libyan production plummeted, losing Libya billions in exports, just when that money was most needed". The implication was that other oil-exporting countries, including Russia and Arab Gulf states, of course, wreaked in higher profits than they would have had Libya kept selling.

Various militias control different parts of the country. Peace is fragile, and the country only has an interim government. The armed groups, moreover, generally depend on support from abroad. There are reasons to suspect that the sabotage of

oil production was indeed meant to do more than only strengthen the hand of the commanders concerned.

To some extent, it may have served the interests of those who back those commanders. Quite obviously, the persons in charge do not say so in public. The armed groups do not appreciate transparency and, beyond propaganda, do not give account to Libya's people.

Russia, Turkey and Arab Gulf States are known to have a bearing on militias concerned. Arms have been shipped in from these countries. Moreover, the Wagner Group, a prominent Russian military service provider with a long track record of interventions in civil wars, is present in Libya. According to reports, some of its mercenaries were transferred to Ukraine when Russia launched the invasion.

According to Cousins, however, several hundred Wagner fighters are still in Libya, controlling places like Jufra airbase in the Sahara desert. Alzaidy, his fellow journalist, adds that the limited presence serves Russia's strategic interests. After all, Libya is often called the "flaccid flank of Europe" in geo-political jargon.



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Various armed groups in Libya have foreign backing.



Iraqi soldiers surrendering in Kuwait in 1991.

WARFARE

False equivalence

Russia's attack on Ukraine has a massive impact on global affairs. It is driving inflation for example. Nonetheless, many Africans and Asians shy away from taking sides against Russia, arguing that western powers are guilty of "military mischief" too. There is no equivalence, however.

By Hans Dembowski

Yes, several western-led interventions (Afghanistan, Libya and Mali) failed dramatically, and one was wrong from the start (Iraq). However, Russia's current war is entirely different. Unlike this so-called "special military operation", none of the western-led campaigns denied a sovereign state its right to exist. Apart from one, all had Security-Council backing. Civilian suffering was indeed unacceptably downplayed as "collateral damage", but there was no strategy of attacking homes, schools and hospitals. No western government restricted civil rights at home to wage the war, and the civil-rights situation typically improved in areas their troops occupied.

The Afghanistan war started in 2001 after Islamist terrorists had attacked New York City and Washington. Afghanistan,

then run by the fundamentalist Taliban, had served as a safe haven for terrorists. US President George Bush junior launched an invasion and US troops soon took Kabul. The UN Security Council adopted a mandate retroactively – but fast. No UN member seriously objected to the US strategy.

Attempts followed to build an Afghan democracy with the support of an international security force. They were led by the USA and supported by NATO – and failed due to many mistakes. It is striking, however, that the withdrawal of international troops in 2021 attracted more criticism around the world than the invasion did in 2001.

In 2003, Bush junior started the Iraq war. Once more, he lacked a UN mandate, and it was never given. However, he led a coalition of the willing. "Misled" is an appropriate term too, given that the weapons of mass destruction, which Bush claimed Saddam Hussein, Iraq's dictator, was hoarding, were never found.

The Iraq war was fundamentally wrong, but the guiding idea was not to deny Iraqis' their historical identity. Bush argued that a newly established Arab democracy would serve as an example in its region. That

did not work out. The war was an unmitigated disaster. The occupying forces were unable to deal with deep divides within Iraqi society and ultimately withdrew from a still rather fragile state. NATO as an organisation was not involved. Germany and France opposed the war from the start.

In early 2011, Libya's dictator Muammar al-Gaddafi announced he would crush the Arab spring uprising in his country without mercy. Britain and France obtained a mandate from the Security Council to stop him. Several countries (though not Germany) took part in the mission, which, however, did not fulfil its "responsibility to protect" promise. The allies limited themselves to airstrikes, helping rebels depose the dictator. Afterwards, Libya spiralled into civil war. The impacts on several West African countries were frightful too, with France later getting involved in Malian strife in yet another failed military mission. Both Libya and Mali are now probably in a worse state than Iraq.

All of the military interventions briefly assessed here deserve criticism. Nonetheless, they were substantially different from Russia's imperialist approach to Ukraine. One scenario in 1990/1991, however, did resemble the current one.

In 1990, Saddam Hussein declared that Kuwait was only a province of Iraq. His troops occupied the country. In response, US President George Bush senior forged a multilateral alliance and drove Iraqi troops from Kuwait in early 1991. It had a mandate from the Security Council.

Echoing Saddam Hussein back then, Russian dictator Vladimir Putin now denies that Ukraine is a legitimate nation. Once again, a strong military power has defied the multilateral order by invading a smaller neighbour.

As Retno Marsudi, Indonesia's foreign minister, recently stated, unilateralism means that the strong take what they want. Multilateralism is meant to prevent that. While disappointment in western governments is justified for various reasons, it certainly does not excuse Russia's attempt to restore the tsarist empire in the 21st century.



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DEMOCRACY

Another election, another dispute

Kenya's 2022 presidential elections were more transparent than ever before. However, after William Ruto had been declared the winner, his opponent Raila Odinga challenged the close outcome. Now the Kenyan Supreme Court is once again being asked to fix politics.

By Alphonse Shiundu

The election saw two frontrunners: feisty deputy president William Ruto of the United Democratic Alliance party and long-time opposition leader and former prime minister Raila Odinga, who ran for a coalition of several parties. It was 77-year-old Odinga's fifth attempt to become president.

The current president, Uhuru Kenyatta, had served two five-year terms and was not eligible for a third term. Kenyatta had chosen Odinga as his successor, claiming that Ruto was unfit for office and even calling him "a thief". Also on the ballot were two other candidates: the lawyer George Wajackoyah, who advocated for marijuana legalisation, and the lawyer and Christian preacher David Mwaure Waihiga.

In his election campaign, Ruto focused on the country's struggling economy. He promised better lives for millions of poor Kenyans, who are battling unemployment as well as high food and fuel prices. At the same time, he suggested Odinga would continue implementing president Kenyatta's policies that had ruined the economy.

Moreover, Ruto's campaign labelled Odinga and Kenyatta as descendants of "dynasties", keen on staying in power to continue fleecing the public coffers for private profit. They are the sons of Kenya's first president Jomo Kenyatta and first vice president Jaramogi Oginga Odinga.

Despite being sitting deputy president, Ruto cleverly positioned himself as an outsider, who is alienated from power – a victim of the dynasties, the establishment and the conspiratorial political elite. He claimed most of the achievements of the administration, but weaved a narrative that absolved him of the failures.

The Odinga campaign, on the other hand, emphasised a pro-reform history of Odinga and his running mate Martha Karua. It counted on the support of president Kenyatta and the establishment.

When Kenyans went to the polls on 9 August, only just over 14 million of the country's 22.1 million registered voters showed up to vote. After the count, the electoral commission declared Ruto the winner with a razor-thin margin of 50.5% versus Odinga's 48.8%.

It appears the majority of voters wanted to escape the suffering which the Kenyatta maladministration had caused. They voted for Ruto, who met the 50%-plus-one-vote threshold required to be declared president-elect.

Throughout the process, the chairman of the electoral commission had made public the results from all polling stations across the country. Anyone with an internet connection could download and tally the results. It was an unprecedented mark of transparency. However, four members of the electoral commission refused to back the results, claiming the tallying process had been "opaque". The electoral commis-

sion consists of six commissioners and the chairman.

Odinga rejected the results as well, calling them "a travesty". He lauded the four commissioners for speaking out and accused the commission chairman of messing up the poll. The chairman in turn accused the four commissioners of pushing to fiddle with the numbers.

Odinga's team vowed to present evidence of electoral fraud before the Supreme Court, where he is challenging the results. It is the third time that Odinga has appealed to the Supreme Court after losing presidential elections. He lost his case in 2013, but won in 2017 when the court nullified the election.

The three past presidential elections in Kenya have all resulted in prolonged disputes, challenging the stability of the political system. In 2007, at least 1,100 people died when violence erupted after the elections. This time, supporters of both Ruto and Odinga took to the streets – Ruto's supporters celebrated the win, while Odinga's supporters protested against the results. However, the protests remained largely peaceful. Many Kenyans hope the situation will remain calm once the Supreme Court has pronounced its judgement.



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Protesting supporters of Raila Odinga in Nairobi after the presidential elections in August 2022.



FOCUS

Living with disabilities

“Many children with disabilities do not even attend school.”
SAMIR ABI, P. 20

“In fact, to be visually impaired in Benin is to be nearly helpless.”
KARIM OKANLA, P. 21

“There are many good reasons to enhance inclusion.”
RAINER BROCKHAUS, P. 24

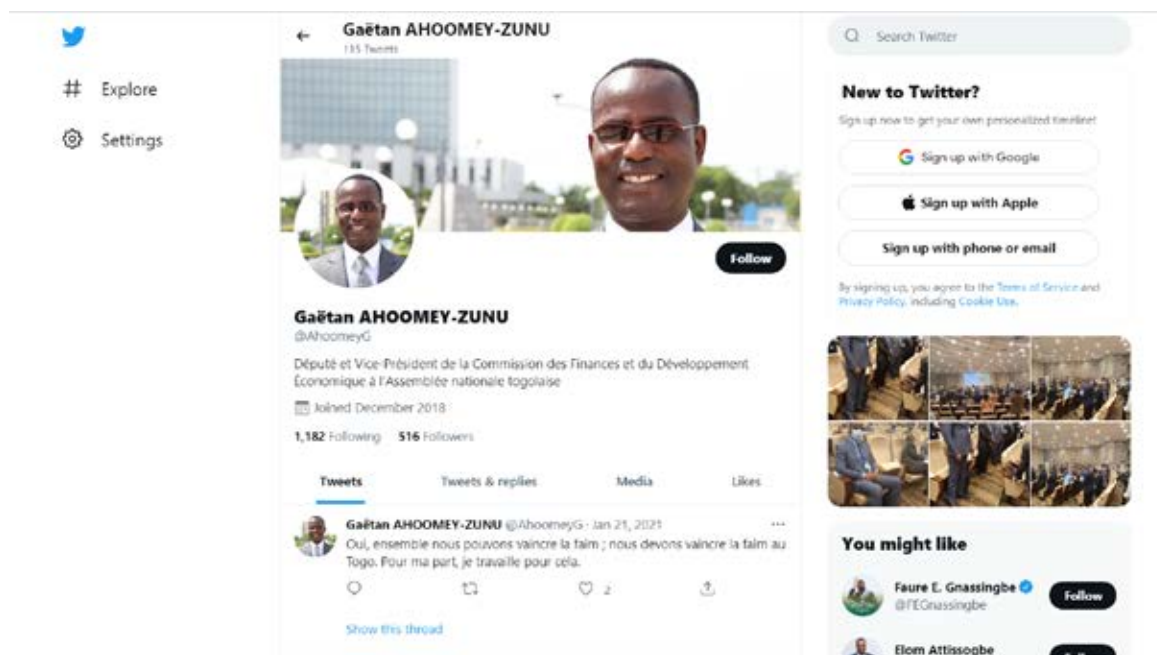
“Traumatisation creates a breeding ground for the social reproduction of violence.”
VILMA DUQUE, P. 26

“Disabled people are disadvantaged in regard to digital technology.”
IKA NINGTYAS, P. 29

“The lack of reliable data and comprehensive statistics matters too.”
SHARLIN AKTHER, P. 30

“Many sports can be played jointly by people with and without disabilities.”
FRIEDHELM JULIUS BEUCHER, P. 31

People with disabilities take part in a rally in Jakarta, Indonesia, in 2019, appealing to the government to protect their rights and end public discriminations against them.



Gaëtan Ahoomey-Zunu is the first parliament member in Togo with a disability.

TOGO

Putting a stop to discrimination

Disabled people in Togo have a hard time getting admitted to schools and finding jobs. Many end up begging on the streets. Civil-society organisations have been fighting for disabled persons' rights for years. Their activism is now bearing fruit. Change is on the horizon.

By Samir Abi

It took two attempts, and one failed. However, a man with a disability was indeed elected to Togo's parliament in late 2018. Gaëtan Ahoomey-Zunu succeeded in convincing voters in the northern districts of Lomé, and now represents them in the National Assembly.

The fact that someone with such a handicap was elected to the National Assembly is noteworthy. Jérémie Vidja, another visually impaired politician, ran in 2013, but did not win a seat. How people perceive persons with disabilities has changed.

That is not true everywhere yet. As is true of many African regions, parents typically blame a child's disability on a curse. They believe that is the reason why someone is born

with a handicap or becomes physically or mentally impaired in the course of their life, even if the obvious cause is an accident or illness.

Children with disabilities are an enormous financial burden on a family. Governmental social-protection is inadequate in Togo, so parents get no material or financial support. Very few have the courage to stand up to the discrimination their children face daily. Many struggle to give disabled children self-confidence. Parents thus often fail to ensure their kids enjoy social and professional inclusion.

Many children with disabilities do not even attend school, in spite of clear evidence of school benefiting both the children and their families. Attending classes boosts disabled children's development, so they become less likely to end up as beggars on the streets of large cities.

The first schools for children with visual and hearing impairments were established in Togo in the 1970s. German non-governmental organisations played a foundational role, helping to bring about an intellectual elite that today includes people with disabilities.

The outstanding academic achievements of the pioneers and their hard-won professional careers opened people's eyes to the considerable potential of people with disabilities. In the past ten years, the government has begun to prioritise inclusive education as well as access to the labour market. That is part of the effort to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030.

In 2021, some 20 teachers with a command of sign language and Braille were assisting 7139 children with disabilities in school. Equipped with motorcycles, these teachers each visit four to five villages a day. They support disabled children in class for a few hours. If those kids are at risk of dropping out, the teachers reach out to the parents.

Unfortunately, dropping out is common. Relevant causes include long and difficult journeys to school as well as inadequate access to learning materials.

NOT EVERYONE BENEFITS

So far, the number of mobile teachers is too small to support every child with a disability. Government statistics show that 13,282 children with disabilities were identified as being at risk of dropping out because their low-income parents cannot afford the high costs associated with sending a disabled kid to school.

Nonetheless, Togo's government deserves appreciation for focusing on inclusion in education. It is a major progress that the budget now includes funding for school needs of children with disabilities. Parents – and, of course, graduates with disabilities – will have to keep campaigning to protect that budget item and, if possible, increase it.

It would make sense to introduce a quota system for employees with disabilities in the public sector as well as large private-sector companies. Legislation will be necessary. In December 2020, a law took force that forbids employment discrimination against college graduates with disabilities. However, nothing guarantees employers' compliance. The situation is difficult, given that the unemployment rate is generally high. According to data from the National Institute of Statistics, 35% of the entire working-age population was unemployed in 2018.

The Covid-19 crisis and subsequent inflation have made matters worse. Many struggling companies have failed. Employers now do not prioritise hiring persons with disabilities. They prefer people who are not

disabled, believing they will be more productive.

The public sector is currently hardly hiring either. In view of excessive sovereign debt, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) is insisting on austerity.

College graduates with disabilities feel excluded from the labour market and there is no specific financing system to support their entrepreneurship. Accordingly, some are joining in protests against the government.

SOCIAL PROTEST MOVEMENTS

Fovi Katakou, a young man with multiple disabilities, has become famous in West Africa for his opposition to Togo's government. His ten-day imprisonment at the end of 2021 attracted attention. His offence was that he had dared to criticise the government on social media.

The son of a math teacher and a businesswoman, Katakou received support from his parents. Despite his handicaps, he managed to complete school and graduate from university. He has a degree in sociology. For

ten years or so, he has been posting items on social media discussing poverty and political repression in Togo. He has become a media personality because many journalists have interviewed him.

As a high-profile activist, Fovi Katakou is exposed to repression. Togolese authorities do not shy away from imprisoning the wheelchair user for his statements or his participation in rallies. On the other hand, his bravery in confrontation with the state has indisputably made him popular in Togo.

He represents a new generation of people with disabilities. They no longer want to limit themselves to begging in the street or receiving aid from charities. In spite of their physical limitations, they want to use their intellectual capabilities. They want to build a free and just country in which no one is excluded because of poverty or disability.



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BLIND IN BENIN

Struggling to fend for themselves

In Benin, losing eyesight means living on the margins of society. Blind people are ignored and shunned, sometimes by their own families. Some sighted people see congenital blindness as a divine curse. It is high time to remove the stigma and ensure that visually impaired people get early and effective help.

By Karim Okanla

To understand the plight of blind people in Benin, one must only walk along the main street of the overcrowded Zongo neighbourhood in Cotonou around midday on Fridays, when Muslims stream to the mosque for weekly prayers. Large numbers of blind people follow in their wake, begging for alms. Some of the blind are so desperate that

they swarm around the few individuals who seem inclined to help.

In fact, to be visually impaired in Benin is to be nearly helpless. In the absence of systematic support from government, affected individuals depend on others for nearly everything: food, shelter, medicine and help with daily tasks such as eating, dressing, showering and getting to a restroom.

The neglect and prejudice start early in life. "Many parents believe that a handicapped child is a burden," says Alexis Boton, director of the centre for social promotion of blind people in Parakou, about 400 kilometres north of Cotonou. "Often, they are not keen on helping their own offspring."

Much of the misery could be prevented through early detection and treatment

of incipient blindness. According to a 2018 study co-authored by Salimatou Monteiro of the Benin-based University of Parakou, over 40% of visually impaired patients surveyed had become blind due to preventable or avoidable causes.

"The prevalence of avoidable causes of blindness is high," the scholars state. "Efforts still need to be made to improve the prevention and diagnosis of avoidable ophthalmic disorders that may lead to blindness, through better access to and high quality of eye care." Their study was published in the Journal of Clinical Research and Ophthalmology.

The main causes of visual impairment in Benin are age-related cataracts and glaucoma. Other causes include refractive errors and disorders of the macula, an important area in the centre of the retina.

The severity of the handicap varies by age, income and geography. Some people living in remote villages near rivers fall victim to river blindness. This tropical disease is transmitted by biting blackflies that breed in fast-flowing water. If this infection is detect-

ed early enough, the victims can recover after treatment. Unfortunately, many seek help only after it is too late to prevent blindness.

Other contributors to blindness in Benin are related to income. They include a poor diet, deficient hygiene, untreated high blood pressure and untreated diabetes. Many people lack access to medical care. Such factors accelerate the spread of “diseases of the poor” – illnesses and conditions that affect patients who do not get proper medicine and need better living conditions. This situation is hardly confined to Benin, but basically the same in many African countries.

Despite limited budgets, though, government agencies can and should do more to support Benin’s visually impaired people, says Father André Kpadonou. He is a blind catholic priest based in Zagnanado, 165 kilometres from Cotonou. He lost his eyesight after becoming a priest, but never abandoned his mission to support vulnerable people. According to him, non-state actors should get involved too.

Father Kpadonou regularly publishes articles and books, trying to sensitise government, NGOs and society at large to the plight of blind people. He learned to use Braille and digital tools and misses no opportunity to communicate. “I may be blind,” he says, “but my mouth and my ears work perfectly.”

He challenges the government to provide specific helpful measures, even though budgets are limited. For example, he wants the government to provide decent housing for blind people, so they must not live on sidewalks.

He also insists that white walking sticks should be issued to blind people, to help them to get around and to be recognised by others as visually impaired. Moreover, he calls for holding reckless car and moped drivers to account if they injure blind pedestrians. In the absence of designated street crossings, many visually impaired people get knocked over by vehicles while trying to cross a street.

Father Kpadonou wants NGOs and faith-based charities to do their part by providing skills training and helping blind people find jobs. Two faith-based organisations stand out as examples of the right way to proceed, he says: the Siloé Center in the village of Djanglanmè and the Father Paul Rival Center in Adjohoun in southern Benin.

They provide food, hygiene measures and skills training free of charge.

That kind of work shows tangible results. A religious order saved one young girl who was born blind and cast out of her family. It gave her shelter, food and an education. She grew up to become a nun in the “Soeurs Servantes de la Lumière du Christ” (Sisters Servants of the Light of Christ).

Ultimately, though, faith-based charities can help only the lucky few. To improve the lives of the large numbers of blind and visually impaired people in Benin, formal help is needed from government and many more NGOs. With systematic medical screening and proper health care, as well as

job training and support for daily needs, the country’s visually impaired people could live far better lives than they do today.

LINK

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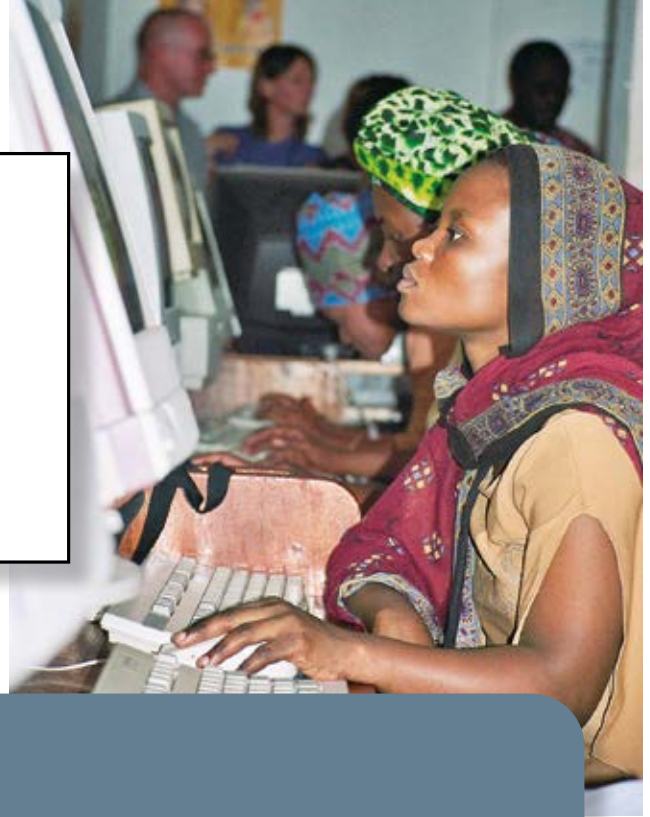
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Across Africa, river blindness makes affected persons dependent on other people’s support: visually impaired man in Côte d’Ivoire.

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People with disabilities at a shelter in Haiti in 2021.

DISCRIMINATION

Twin-track approach to inclusion

People with disabilities experience discrimination in many fields of life, and this is true of development cooperation and humanitarian aid too. Inclusion is a challenge for policy-makers and civil society.

By Rainer Brockhaus

Over 1 billion people worldwide have a disability. According to the UN, about 80% of them live in low-income countries. For a long time, sociologists have been discussing a vicious cycle of poverty and disability. The poor tend to have inadequate access to health care, so they are more likely to suffer from health problems and permanent impairments. Indeed, poverty often causes disability. At the same time, people with disabilities are at greater risk of poverty because they have fewer opportunities to earn money.

People with disabilities are disadvantaged in social terms. This was confirmed in a study done by the Christian Blind Mission (CBM), an organisation based in Bensheim, Germany, promoting inclusive develop-

ment. Our programmatic approach is called community-based inclusive development (CBID). Last year, the CBM's CBID Baseline Study showed that only around 20% of the 471 surveyed persons could fully participate in their communities' activities. The CBM collected the data in Ethiopia, Honduras, India, Cameroon, Pakistan, Rwanda, Zimbabwe and Togo in 2020 and 2021. Some of the reasons the respondents suffered exclusion were stigmatisation, poverty, physical barriers and lacking information.

The key challenge is the dearth of job opportunities. Since it is very hard for people with disabilities to earn money, they are more likely to be poor and marginalised. Around the world, employment rates are lower among people with disabilities than those without (Stoevska 2020). There are several reasons. For one, many employers do not want to recruit persons with disabilities because they think they are unable to participate fully in working life. There are physical obstacles too: public transport and workplaces, for example, are often inaccessible.

In many cases, moreover, people with disabilities lack basic education and skills, as discrimination prevented them from going to school. In 2018, according to UNESCO, 263 million children and young adults around the world did not attend school at all, and children with disabilities in developing countries were particularly affected. Schools typically have steps and staircases, but lack books in Braille and suitably trained teachers.

DISADVANTAGED IN CRISIS SITUATIONS

People with disabilities also experience discrimination in development projects and humanitarian aid. All too often, projects – mostly unaware of the issues – do not take into account their particular needs. When natural disasters occur or conflicts erupt, people with disabilities sometimes do not get any help at all. In other cases, they find themselves last in line. A deaf woman has virtually no chance to flee from an impending tsunami if only sirens signal danger. A blind man will not be able to find his emergency shelter if only visual signposts lead the way there. Development agencies must ask themselves whether they are doing enough for disabled people – and how they could do more.

There are many good reasons to enhance inclusion. For one thing, inclusion is enshrined in international law (see box). Furthermore, excluding people with disabilities has a negative impact on the entire economy, as a study conducted by Robert L. Metts on behalf of the World Bank revealed as early as 2000. When the potential of so many people remains untapped, they are not contributing to GDP, and governments are deprived of tax revenues.

Another negative feedback loop is that children with disabilities who do not attend school do not participate in school-related health and food programmes. Accordingly, they are more prone to disease, adding to health-care burdens. At the same time, their future ability to earn money is compromised. A 2016 CMB publication highlights further examples of the damage exclusion causes (Banks and Keogh).

INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

It is absolutely obvious: we cannot afford exclusion. Nonetheless, only a fraction of Ger-

many's government-funded international development projects are inclusive. So how can inclusion be achieved in crisis regions worldwide?

A motto of the disability-rights movement is, "nothing about us without us". The implication is that people with disabilities must be involved right from the moment a relevant idea is conceived. If that happens, new schools, health-care services, or cultural programmes can generally be made inclusive without costs rising significantly or even at all.

We need a paradigm shift in development affairs. To reach as many people as possible with limited resources, people with disabilities must be considered explicitly. Support must be tailored to the needs of all disadvantaged groups. Otherwise, they will fall even further behind.

A twin-track approach is necessary. All development programmes must pay attention to disabled people, and special steps must be taken to ensure this target group enjoys equal opportunities.

Inclusion is a cross-cutting issue which does not only concern government agencies. Civil-society organisations must play their role too. Once every development agency takes account of inclusion in all efforts, we will achieve a lot for the world's 1 billion people who are living with disabilities.

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The right to inclusion

Human rights apply irrespective of nationality, religious affiliation or skin colour – and obviously irrespective of any disability a person might have as well. However, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the UN in 1948 is not a binding treaty under international law. For a long time, upholding the human rights of disabled people was thus merely a moral obligation.

That has changed. In the 21st century, legally binding frameworks have entered into force. The question is thus no longer what governments and civil society can do, but what they must do to safeguard the rights of people with disabilities.

One milestone was the UN's adoption of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2006. The goal was to promote, protect and ensure human rights and basic freedoms for all disabled people. In Germany,

the CRPD was adopted in national law in 2009.

The CRPD is an overarching framework for non-discrimination and equal opportunities that encompasses civic, political, economic, social and cultural rights. Among other things, it guarantees access to the legal system, education, health

care and jobs. Furthermore, it makes explicit reference to international development cooperation and humanitarian aid. Signatory states are obliged to involve disabled people in all international programmes, including those rolled out in response to natural disasters and violent conflict.

Equally important is the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which was adopted in 2015. It is designed

to improve living conditions worldwide in a lasting way and protect our planet at the same time. At its heart are the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that are to be achieved by the year 2030. They serve as a roadmap, spelling out clear targets for governments and civil society.

All UN members have committed to achieving the goals at national and international levels – particularly in regard to the poorest and most vulnerable people. Some SDGs list persons with disabilities as a specific target group. For good reason, that is the case for the SDGs regarding education, employment and public infrastructure. In these areas, exclusion is indeed a huge problem.

Two central principles of the SDG agenda are the promises to "leave no one behind" and to "reach the furthest behind first". Everyone should stick to them. That would be a big first step towards ensuring that all people fully enjoy human rights – including those with disabilities.



Protesters in Kashmir demand better living conditions for people with disabilities, 2020.



In 2019, protestors wanted the UN Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) to keep working.

MENTAL HEALTH

Processing and overcoming traumas

Long violent conflicts and wars can cause traumas not only in individuals but also in societies. In people, it often gives rise to chronic conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In societies, it creates a breeding ground for further division and violence. Psychologist Vilma Duque has supported traumatised people in Guatemala and other Latin American countries for many years. She shared insights in an interview with D+C/E+Z.

Vilma Duque interviewed by Sabine Balk

In Guatemala, a peace agreement in 1996 ended a long and bloody civil war that had deeply traumatised the people. In the early 1980s, the military had systematically destroyed villages and massacred communi-

ties, especially in the north of the country. Hundreds of thousands of people were murdered, displaced or disappeared. Indigenous communities were targeted in particular, so the atrocities were classified as acts of genocide. How has this history been dealt with so far?

There were two truth commissions, which were very important in documenting atrocities and analysing the causes of the war. However, very little was done to actually heal wounds. Many of the perpetrators are still in office unchallenged. The state was supposed to implement a process for coming to terms with the past, but it has failed to fulfil that responsibility. Peace has done little to change the structural violence in the country. The causes of the war remain unresolved. Apart from the extreme inequal-

ity of income, land ownership and access to education and health, they also include despotism and corruption. The country's small elite is primarily interested in retaining its privileges. It has no desire to rake through the past and upset the status quo. At present, the country is actually moving backwards.

What are the consequences of not coming to terms with past events and traumas?

First of all, let me point out that what has been done in this regard in Guatemala was mainly done by civil-society organisations and people who were directly affected. The non-governmental organisation ECAP, for example, was established in 1996 to help implement a process for coming to terms with the past, dealing with collective as well as personal traumas and tackling the consequences of violence. I worked with that NGO for years. ECAP and other NGOs are highlighting a continuity of violence that is evident in new forms all the time. Wars do not occur in a vacuum, as we know from many other countries. Traumatization creates a breeding ground for the social reproduction of violence. Fear spreads, paralyses and engenders more fear. The impacts include

distrust, disorders in regard to forming personal relationships and apathy. Where social and political life is shaped that way, change is almost impossible.

How does that manifest itself in Guatemala?

Violence and abuse are common. There is drug trafficking, human trafficking, gang crime, femicide and racketeering, especially in urban areas. People generally live in poverty, and a high percentage of children is malnourished. The state is becoming increasingly absent from daily life. Indigenous rural communities are most affected by economic and social marginalisation. A lot would have to happen for the situation to improve. First of all, the state lacks funding, but only a minority pays direct taxes. Public agencies are underfunded and often fall prey to corruption. People feel abused and abandoned. To escape the violence, poverty and hopelessness, hundreds of thousands have left the country for the USA.

From your perspective, what needs to be done?

Action needs to be taken at many levels, and foundations for such action need to be laid. A process for dealing with the past must start, with the goal of providing reparations to victims. It is absolutely vital to investigate the atrocities and create a historical record of the upheavals that society was – and still is – experiencing. Latin America has many truth commissions. In Guatemala, we even had two, and one was headed by Christian Tomuschat, a German law professor. But these commissions obviously did nothing to improve the economic situation, and there was no political change either. That is why there is a so much frustration and hopelessness.

What form should the process of coming to terms with the past take in tangible terms?

The past cannot be separated from the present. In my view, any fundamental attempt to deal with the past naturally starts with education. Remembrance work in schools is fundamental, as we know from Germany and the way it dealt with the Nazi past and World War II. Remembrance is essential because the past keeps catching up with us. I think Germany tackled this issue better than many other countries because it managed to keep the topic alive in society as a warning for what might happen in the

future. It is also important to highlight connections between remembrance and daily life, to show people how much their lives are affected by the past.

You have described what collective trauma does to a society. How does trauma affect individuals?

Unresolved trauma can have all sorts of impacts. It often causes a state of permanent stress, which means that the body is kept on constant alert. Sufferers are no longer able to function normally and may develop a whole range of symptoms, including

ed spaces. In very many cases, they will then manage to rebuild relationships, create social networks, live less stressfully with less fear and restart pursuing goals in life. In the course of this, they become aware of the resources that are at their disposal for processing their traumatic experiences. Otherwise, new traumatic experiences in the divided society around them will cause retraumatisation. We often work in groups. It is important to show them that there are others they can trust. It is also very important to talk about what goes on within a group, including conflicts and minor upsets. We call



Indigenous people in Guatemala are disadvantaged: Maya woman with baby.

anxiety, insomnia or nightmares. The same phenomena have been observed in victims of political persecution. I work with such people and many of them have developed chronic complaints such as stomach problems, chronic tension, rhythmic disorders, neuropathic pain and even diabetes. In children, unresolved trauma can lead to learning difficulties, problems of staying focused and hyperactivity. And, as we know today, there is a risk of permanent organ and even brain damage.

Is there a cure for these ailments?

Well, it involves a long and complex process that goes beyond psychosocial support. A cure can take several years. It is evident, however, that people become calmer and more reflective if they feel heard in protect-

this approach psychosocial supervision. In Guatemala, it is revolutionary.

In what sense?

People normally do not talk about conflicts in a country like Guatemala. Doing so is considered to be problematic or dangerous. But when conflicts are not talked about, they remain unresolved and spawn new forms of violence. Shying away from the issues has an incredibly detrimental effect, and so does inability to handle emotions. Relevant skills need to be learned. In group discussions, we therefore tackle matters such as recognising, expressing and dealing with feelings such as anger, hatred or the craving for revenge. Let us not forget that coming to terms with conflicts appropriately is essential for paving the way for change.

How do you reach those affected?

ECAP works with representatives of civil-society organisations in Guatemala. We support activists, human-rights defenders, judges and prosecutors – many of them women – as well as people who were involved with CICIG, the UN Commission against Impunity in Guatemala. Its mission was to investigate major contemporary cases of corruption perpetrated by state officials and institutions. This is basically state-aided organised crime, and its structures can be traced back to the war. The CICIG was very successful. When it targeted not only the military, however, but also considered the systematic tax evasion of the economic elites, 13 years of successful work came to an end. In 2019, the government expelled the CICIG from the country in an affront to various donor governments and the UN itself. Numerous lawyers and even public prosecutors were openly threatened. Many have gone into exile in the two years since the termination of the commission, because they were politically persecuted. We are taking care of persons concerned. Moreover, we support journalists in the country and help them stay able to work in the present conditions.

Finally, on a very different topic, but sadly a current one: How can the people be helped in Ukraine?

First of all, it is important to start psychological support now, in the turmoil of war. Aid services must be organised. They can often prevent initial traumatic experiences from becoming long-term traumas. People must get the opportunity to talk about what they have experienced, so they can find ways to come to terms with it. This needs to happen in Ukraine – but also in Germany, where large numbers of Ukrainians have sought refuge with their children. We know today how important it is to talk about what we have experienced in order to lay foundations for mental health. An important prerequisite is to provide safe spaces, as I said earlier.

Can war also have psychological implications for us “bystanders”?

For those who support traumatised people without receiving support themselves, victims’ accounts of their experiences can cause what we call “secondary traumatisa-tion”. But things are complicated. People who are confronted with the atrocities of

war on a daily basis, but fail to maintain personal distance, may also be affected. We know that images can be quite powerful. We live in times of vulnerability. We just experienced the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic and related restrictions. Consider the unprecedented social isolation, for example. It is at the root of additional traumas. Images of war will do more damage if someone has no social ties, no social environment to compensate.



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dealing with the past in post-war societies. Her work in Guatemala and Mexico was financed by the German NGO Bread for the World for many years. She is co-editor of the book “Supervision in Mesoamerika” or “Cómo montar un caballo muerto – Retos de la Supervisión Psicosocial en Mesoamérica (available in German: Psychosozial-Verlag, 2020 and Spanish, 2018).
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DISABILITIES

Indonesia's information gap

In the Covid-19 pandemic, disabled Indonesians had an extra hurdle to overcome when seeking information on health. The country's information channels rarely took their special needs into account.

By Ika Ningtyas

Some 22.5 million Indonesians, representing five percent of the population, were classified as disabled in 2020, according to Indonesia's Central Bureau of Statistics. In theory these individuals – with impaired vision, hearing or mobility, for example – have full rights to health information. Under a 2016 law, the government must ensure that all of them can access such information.

In practice, however, the government falls short. Across the country, official information on health – and in particular on preventing and treating Covid-19 – has been less accessible to disabled people than to the general population.

This is only one example of the disadvantages faced by disabled Indonesians. They deal with physical barriers and stigmatisation. In many ways, they thus suffer the fate of other disadvantaged minorities.

According to recent research from the University of Brawijaya in East Java, a wide information gap separates the disabled from the able-bodied in Indonesia. The study assessed the disability access offered by six government websites, three social-media accounts and five digital publications, all of which deal with the pandemic. It considered whether these channels offer features such as screen-readers and text-to-speech software to enable disabled people to access information.

The survey results were sobering, says researcher Lutfi Amiruddin. Most channels did not have features for the disabled. As a result, of 259 disabled people who used them, 78% did not become aware of basic information such as the existence of government-sponsored Covid-19 hotlines. Amiruddin insists that people should know about them since they serve as entry points to the health system for infected people.

LIMITED ACCESS

Part of the problem is that disabled people are disadvantaged in regard to digital technology. Only about 35% of them have mobile phones or laptops, compared to 82% of all Indonesians, according to the 2018 National Socio-Economic Survey. Similarly, only nine percent of the disabled have internet access, compared to 46% of the general population.



Student participating in a Braille lesson during the pandemic.

The information gap can have serious consequences. For example, disabled people were less likely than others to know where to get Covid-19 vaccines in 2021. A survey by the Inclusive Covid Response Network, an advocacy organisation, showed that 54% of disabled people lacked this basic information. Of disabled people who used digital media, about 43% lacked this information.

Instead of accessing official information, many disabled people had to rely on advice from family and friends, who may not have been well informed, says Ajiwan Arief Hendradi, a spokesman for the Insti-

tute for Inclusion and Advocacy of Persons with Disabilities in Yogyakarta, a city on the island of Java. In particular, disabled people “often received wrong information about the Covid-19 vaccine,” he says.

Beginning in 2021, the Institute started producing information materials for the disabled. These included audio recordings, videos with presenters using sign language and texts produced in braille. The institute distributed 3000 Braille calendars with information on the Covid-19 vaccine. It also reached out to other disabled groups with vaccine information.

The institute's efforts to close the gap can be seen as part of a more general effort to disseminate clear and accurate information in Indonesia. Indonesia's Covid-19

Handling and National Economic Recovery Committee, a government agency, has taken note of the information gap. It has started to upgrade its website, www.covid19.go.id, with an eye to supporting disabled people. Progress will be made, but it may happen slowly. Bureaucracies typically operate slowly, not only in developing countries and emerging markets.



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Attending a World Disability Day rally in Dhaka on 3 December 2021.

SOCIAL INCLUSION

Overcoming prejudice

Having a disability is just another aspect of human diversity, yet in Bangladesh persons with disabilities live a very challenging life. They tend to be excluded from mainstream society.

By Sharlin Akther

Persons with disabilities (PWDs) often face discrimination from birth in Bangladesh. Even those who belong to prosperous families and thus enjoy considerable support, often struggle to access education, health care and employment. The belief that disability is a curse or a punishment for sinful behaviour is prevalent in society.

According to UNICEF, many children with disabilities are not registered at birth in the country. In the absence of official recognition, they are cut off from social services and legal protections. They are indeed the

least likely to attend school and often do not receive health care either.

The children concerned are among the most vulnerable to violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect. That is especially true if they live in hiding or put in institutions. Girls with disabilities tend to suffer in particular. Many are not even fed properly. It is a global phenomenon, of course, that gender discrimination compounds other kinds of stigmatisation.

Educational institutions in general do not have the resources to teach children, young adults or adults with special needs. Many deserving students have thus been denied entry to universities. Reasons include the biased attitude of the authorities as well as the lack of indispensable infrastructure.

It also matters that, as the International Labour Organization (ILO) has pointed out, PWDs often lack the self-confidence to

pursue ambitions. Even their families do not tend to encourage them to do skills training, for example. Experience shows that, in a more inclusive social environment, young PWDs can develop their potential and grow up to be productive members of society. All too often, both educational institutions and their local families fail them.

The employment scenario is worse still. Around the world, PWDs have lower employment rates than the general population. Bangladesh is no exception.

In this country, a person's "disability" is often seen as their "inability". Due to preconceived notions, a PWD is generally considered to be a burden. The consequences include discrimination, harassment and isolation.

Disability-friendly infrastructure would help. However, public buildings or buses are typically not accessible for someone in a wheelchair, for example. If there are streetlights on crossings at all, they do not have audio signals for the blind. Even in Dhaka, the capital city, only few buildings are disability-friendly.

The official regulation states that nine seats on each bus have to be reserved for

women, children and PWDs, but there are no explicit guidelines for which seats are supposed to be reserved for the latter group. When buses are full, which is often the case, the people concerned typically do not get to the seats that are supposedly reserved. For most people with disabilities, using private transportation for daily commute is the only option. As it is very expensive, many PWDs are confined to their homes.

However, the Government is making efforts to improve the situation. At the policy level, Bangladesh was among the first countries to ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2007. The Convention compels countries to promote and protect the human rights of persons with disabilities. In 2013, Bangladesh passed the Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act.

The Act lays forth an ambitious vision. It made provisions for better counting of people with disabilities, ensuring that their ID-cards would list them as “golden citizens”. The ID-cards help them to claim

disability allowances and increased social benefits from the government.

Implementation is a huge challenge, however. Most PWDs cannot visit local administration offices in order to claim the golden citizen status. Reasons include that the buildings are inaccessible or too far away from where the PWDs live. Poverty matters too, of course. A.H.M. Noman Khan of the Centre for Disability in Development (CDD) considers it a core reason of exclusion.

The lack of reliable data and comprehensive statistics matters too. It makes it very difficult to reach out to all PWDs systematically. The plain truth is different sources show very different pictures.

According to the government’s 7th Five Year Plan (2016–2020), approximately nine percent of the population were disabled, and nearly half a million people were estimated to have multiple disabilities. On the other hand, the Department of Social Services (DSS) is conducting an annual disability detection survey. In 2021, it merely identified around 1.2% of the population as

living with a disability. Experts say that this figure is far too low and cannot reflect the reality.

Some civil-society organisations are involved in supporting PWDs and campaigning for change. They are trying to step in with an eye to filling the gaps and want to empower more PWDs. For example, the Bangladesh Business & Disability Network (BBDN) has been working to eradicate negative perceptions and raising awareness for the productive potential of persons concerned. It is also making efforts to create job opportunities for PWDs. The goal is to prove that PWDs are not simply charity cases or, even worse, liabilities. Of course, much more needs to happen for all Bangladeshis with disabilities to live lives of dignity.



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SPORTS

“Disabled sports are indispensable”

Many people with disabilities are active in sports. Friedhelm Julius Beucher, president of the German Disabled Sports Association, spoke with D+C/E+Z about why that is important for society as a whole and how his association cooperates with other countries.

Friedhelm Julius Beucher interviewed by Jörg Döbereiner

All over the world, sports bring people together and keep them fit. What importance do they have for people with disabilities?

Disabled sports are indispensable. They help maintain individual health even more than sports for people without disabilities.

People with disabilities who do sports not only feel better and are more mobile, they also stay fit longer. According to a report by the German federal government, however, 55% of people with disabilities in Germany do not play sports. That is an alarming figure and a major challenge for society as a whole – including for health insurance providers. We must therefore improve the offerings. The problem is that over 90% of sports fields and gymnasiums in Germany are not barrier-free. For example, stairs often prevent wheelchair users from entering. If they do get into the gym, they frequently can’t use the bathrooms. People who are blind or visually impaired often

have no possibility at all of finding their way around.

How can that be improved?

Construction measures should not only be announced, but they actually have to be carried out. The good news is that newly constructed buildings are accessible. Nevertheless, most gyms are owned by municipalities, which lack money. While there is awareness of the needs of people with disabilities, improvements are implemented too slowly in Germany. We are talking, after all, about human rights: people with disabilities have a right to participate.

How are disabled sports organised in Germany?

There are over 6400 disabled sports clubs, and also thousands of clubs that, in addition to sports for people without disabilities, also offer disabled sports. However, there are still too few of them. Many sports can be played jointly by people with and without disabilities, like wheelchair basketball. We are striving to found fewer disabled sports



Closing ceremony of the 2022 Paralympic Winter Games in Beijing.

clubs and instead facilitate participation in sports clubs for people without disabilities. In Germany, there are 17 state associations for disabled sports clubs and two professional associations for wheelchair athletes and deaf athletes. As the German Disabled Sports Association (DBS), we are the national umbrella organisation and are responsible in particular for elite sports.

Your association has a good 500,000 members. Why are you so popular?

When I took over the presidency in 2009, we had about 240,000 members. Since then we have improved our visibility and our offerings. That is the result of the hard work of many people and the successful efforts of thousands of local clubs. We used to have even more members, but over 100,000 people have left the clubs since the Covid-19 pandemic, because during these times almost no sporting activities took place. Many athletes with disabilities are also especially cautious during the pandemic, because they belong to high-risk groups, for instance because of breathing difficulties.

How are disabled sports financed in Germany?

Amateur sports live off club membership dues, corporate sponsorships and donations. Financial support also comes from the federal states, which are responsible for amateur sports. Professional sports, in other words the German Paralympic team, are marketed by an agency that obtains a considerable amount of sponsorship money. But for the most part, competitive sports are financed by federal tax revenue.

Which sports are the most popular?

Para track and field and wheelchair basketball are favourites in both amateur and competitive sports. Para cycling is also becoming more and more popular. There are a lot of variations. Sometimes the bicycle is operated with a hand crank while lying down.

To what extent does Germany support disabled sports abroad?

Germany's Federal Foreign Office has conducted international sports promotion for over 50 years. The programme encompasses a variety of projects to create and expand amateur sport infrastructure in many countries. It is an important part of Germany's foreign cultural and education policy.

Do you have any specific examples?

In preparation for the 2016 Paralympic Summer Games in Rio de Janeiro, we had a close exchange with Brazil. For example, our national team in goalball, a game for people with visual impairments, visited day-care centres in the favelas, Rio's poor districts, as part of an education project. We have also invited people with disabilities from North Korea, Argentina and Chile to Germany so that they could experience disabled sports in the snow in the Black Forest. German coaches are also sent to Africa and Asia to provide further education.

How does such cooperation come about?

We keep in regular contact with the Foreign Office and with the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ). Moreover, we are receiving requests from clubs in other countries. They often ask for financial support, which we can't actually provide because doing so would violate our statutes. Sometimes they also ask for resources, like sports wheelchairs or prostheses. We forward those requests to other institutions and aid organisations. In addition, some requests come from the International Paralympic Committee (IPC), the umbrella or-

organisation of the national committees. The IPC is headquartered in Bonn. We are close partners, for instance in the WeThe15 campaign.

Can you please explain that?

WeThe15 refers to the fact that 15% of the world's population is living with a disability. It is a global movement with the goal of making people with disabilities more visible, ending discrimination and championing inclusion and accessibility. In support of this goal, on 19 August 2021, over 100 landmarks in multiple countries and time zones were lit up in purple, the international colour for people with disabilities. We arranged for the Olympia Stadium in Berlin to be lit up. This movement is being carried out worldwide and is also contributing to cooperation between various countries.

The international highlight of disabled sports are the Paralympic Games, which are always held following the Olympic Games at the same location.

They are the absolute highlight, yes. The decision that the Olympic Games would only be allowed to take place with Paralympic Games was a quantum leap for disabled sports. The relevant agreement will be valid

until 2032. But I assume that it will be renewed.

Early this year, the Paralympic Winter Games took place in Beijing. You were there with the German team. What was your experience of the Games?

In the words of one of our athletes: it was like two and a half weeks of prison with day release. Because of the Covid-19 pandemic and the associated restrictions, we were not allowed to have contact with the Chinese people. I can understand that, but our freedom of movement was nevertheless excessively restricted. Our hotel complex was locked down. The point of the Olympic and Paralympic Games is actually to get to know people from other countries, to gain insights into other cultures and experience the way sports can bring people together. This concept was put on the back burner. Prior to the Games, the Chinese government also threatened to set its legal system in motion if we made any negative statements about the country. I was already of the opinion that no athletic competitions should be awarded to countries that violate human rights – whether it's the Olympics and Paralympics in China or the World Cup in Qatar. This experience reinforced my position.

The next major event will be the 2024 Paralympic Summer Games in Paris. Are you looking forward to them?

Of course, they will hopefully be a big party and an enormous opportunity to draw attention to disabled sports! I assume that, by then, the pandemic will be more under control so that a better exchange can take place.

If you could make one wish regarding the future of disabled sports, what would it be?

I hope that we can push the equality and non-discrimination of people with disabilities that are enshrined in the constitution, and not at a snail's pace, but rather in huge steps forward. We really should be able to live out the claim to participation that is formulated in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities – everyday, everywhere.



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Wheelchair basketball is one of the most popular disabled sports in Germany.

Smallholder farms should benefit more from agricultural research and innovations.

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