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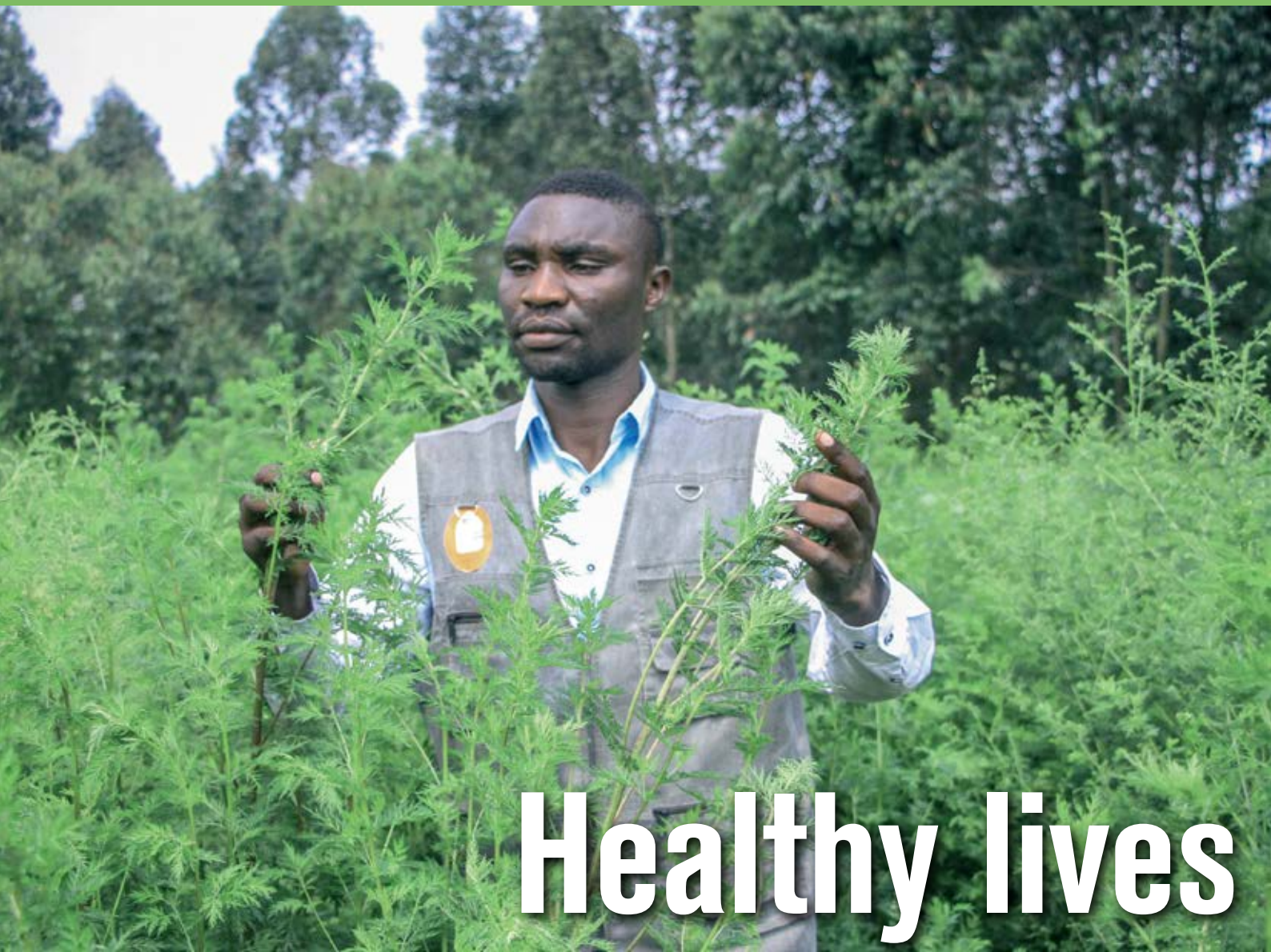
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### FOCUS

## Healthy lives

Human development cannot succeed where people are physically unfit. For this reason, basic healthcare has always been high on the international development agenda. Because of escalating environmental crises, however, health risks are increasing. Since the health of humans, animals and ecosystems is closely interrelated, the One Health approach deserves more attention. Failure to take preventive action will lead to worsening health results, further overburdening healthcare systems that even today do not grant universal access.

Title: Cultivating medicinal plants in the DRC.

Photo: picture alliance / Xinhua News Agency / Zanem





Our focus section on healthy lives starts on page 22. It pertains to the UN's 3<sup>rd</sup> Sustainable Development Goal: Good health and well-being (SDG3). It also has a bearing on all other SDGs.

## Environmental destruction exacerbates health risks

Health is a top priority for social welfare. People must be physically and mentally fit if they are to fully tap their potential and make the most of their lives. Basic health-care therefore belongs high on the developmental agenda. Health centres, hospitals and pharmaceutical supply are important, and all people who need treatment must get access. Far too many still do not.

As the saying goes, prevention is better than cure. Vaccinations serve that purpose and have helped to improve standards of life in many places. Pharmaceutical interventions, however, are only a small contribution to the prevention of illnesses and disabilities. Providing people with safe drinking water and sanitation reduces the prevalence of diseases. To a considerable extent, safety standards at work or in vehicles protect people from the impact of accidents. Air pollution is known to cause deadly illness.

“Because of global heating, the dwindling of biodiversity, pollution, land-use changes and other harmful trends, healthy ecosystems can no longer be taken for granted.”

Examples of this kind show that policy action is often of health relevance even if it does not pertain directly to healthcare. The more effective these interventions are, the less money is needed for healthcare. Where protective action is neglected, however, more patients will need more expensive therapies.

We live in an era of escalating environmental crisis. Awareness is growing for how human well-being is interrelated with the health of animals, plants and ecosystems.

Because of global heating, the dwindling of biodiversity, pollution, land-use changes and other harmful trends, healthy ecosystems can no longer be taken for granted. They used to be the norm, but they are becoming exceptional.

Depleted ecosystems are less resilient and make zoonotic diseases, which are transmitted from animals to human beings, more likely. The Covid-19 pandemic showed us how devastating the impacts can be. Most scientists think that it started when infected meat from a remote forest region was sold at a popular market in Wuhan, China, in late 2019. A global health crisis followed.

Due to the pandemic, policymakers' interest in a holistic understanding of health has grown. The technical term for this approach is One Health. Scholars had been focusing on the interrelation of human, animal and ecosystem health for quite some time. One Health deserves attention. It is of cross-cutting relevance with a bearing on a wide range of policy areas, including agriculture, forestry, urban planning, industrial development, pollution, climate and biodiversity. The list goes on.

One Health thus exemplifies the interrelatedness of the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals. SDG3 (Good Health and Well-being) depends on SDG6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), SDG11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and SDG12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), to name only three. In turn, progress towards the health goal will serve SDG10 (Reduced Inequalities). All SDGs, of course, require international partnerships (SDG17).

Current ecological trends will exacerbate health needs. Even today, however, far too many poor people do not get the treatment they need. Indeed, governments of developing countries often consider social-protection schemes to be unaffordable. Yes, budgets are tight, but even governments of some low-income countries spend heavily on military capacities. What humanity needs are global solutions for global problems. Those who start proxy wars, provoke arms races or even attack others are making those solutions unachievable.



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The Bantayog ng mga Bayani (Heroes' Monument), a monument in Quezon City honouring the victims of the dictatorship of former President Ferdinand Marcos.

#### POST-TRUTH POLITICS

## Stress and anxiety

Times have been rough on many people in the Philippines. Many of us had hoped that a long political nightmare would end with the defeat of Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr. in last year’s presidential election. He won.

By Alan Robles

Marcos Jr. is the son of a former dictator – and he proudly campaigned praising his father’s supposed achievements. In truth, thousands were murdered and tortured on Marcos Sr.’s watch, and his loot amounted to billions of dollars. The new vice president is Sara Duterte-Carpio, the daughter of Marcos Jr.’s immediate predecessor who was known for authoritarian tendencies and a phony war on drugs which claimed at least 12,000 lives. Most victims were poor urban people.

During Duterte’s regime, we were all tense – to some extent we still are – walking along narrow streets, wondering if a motorcycle would suddenly drive with the tandem rider who would shoot us in the head. One colleague from decades ago who served his newspaper as head of research, left journal-

ism and became a government consultant. A few years ago, he and his brother were ambushed and murdered when their car was stopped on a traffic light. Motorcycle gunmen shot them more than 40 times. The case, of course, is unsolved. Last year a radio journalist who criticised political corruption was similarly shot dead while he was driving home. A top government official and government soldiers have been linked to the assassination.

In 2021, after my wife Raissa, a multi-awarded book writer and investigative journalist, posted that Marcos Jr. was a convicted tax evader, a loyalist lawyer filmed himself in a short video that he then posted on social media. In it, he screamed and howled loathsome obscenities at her. For that he was first suspended and then disbarred by the Supreme Court. Nonetheless, he was recently appointed to a high-paying cabinet position by Marcos Jr.

Preening and gloating about it, he told a reporter he was not sorry for the attack, and that my wife was lucky he didn’t have her killed. One could almost imagine the im-

age of Julius Streicher, the hate-mongering Nazi publisher of Hitler Germany.

Murder is all around us, so frequent that people take it for granted. Trolls and disinformation have corrupted public discourse and undermined belief in a free press. Anger and anxiety have become our permanent companions. The blatant criminality and corruption are infuriating, the uncertainty over the future of our country and journalism is worrisome. These feelings are common among many of our colleagues and friends. Their days are marked by sleeping problems, drifting focus, low motivation and heightened anxiety – classic symptoms of depression. One friend told me she was drinking every day for weeks before she managed to control it. Others do not feel like talking much and have increasingly retreated into the privacy of their homes.

We keep finding our dismal expectations being fulfilled. What is unfolding is a replay of what we lived through decades ago. In all possible ways, Marcos, his family, cronies, appointees and flunkies are helping themselves brazenly to the public treasury. They arbitrarily use the law to hound opponents. So far, it is not brutish as the reign of Marcos Sr., but it is criminal from top to bottom.

Our country is turning into an anocracy – a democracy in name only, like a zombie or a human body possessed by some alien

parasite. The legislature and judiciary now basically serve to further enrich the elite.

It is galling that, while the original Marcos dictatorship was imposed at gunpoint under martial law, this new variant was voted into power by eager howling populists who reject facts. Similar things are happening in many countries, so I suppose we are basically experiencing the post-truth era. In the Philippines, there is no outrage, no popular resistance, no accountability. How can there be when facts are distorted constantly on conventional as well as social media. This must have been what it was like during the Third Reich, the difference being that propaganda here is now even more omnipresent and pervasive.

I read how, when Hitler seemed to be winning World War II in 1942, self-exiled novelist Stefan Zweig and his wife found the future so bleak, they took their lives. I now understand what he must have felt like, though I am not about to take my life. My wife and I have considered moving abroad, but we survived the Marcos dictatorship and

“Our country is turning into an anocracy – a democracy in name only, like a zombie or a human body possessed by some alien parasite. The legislature and judiciary now basically serve to further enrich the elite.”

think we can probably survive this. On the other hand, I sometimes think of all those Germans who, after Hitler rose to power in 1933, didn't leave while they could, saying it couldn't be that bad, and why should they worry?

My mind is historical that way. I also cannot help comparing what is happening in Ukraine to the Spanish Civil War that led up to the Second World War and let the various powers try out their weapons systems. Or seeing China as something like the Ger-

man Empire in its build-up of a navy and paranoia about being encircled. It is irritating that the US administration, which paints itself as a beacon of freedom and human rights, is wooing our authoritarian, abusive government, considering it to be an important ally in its contest with China. Tensions are rising in the South China Sea. Most people scoff at the likelihood of war, but so did most people before the great wars of the past century.

Add to all this the effects of the pandemic and global heating. We just had a record-breaking hot season with the heat index averaging 42 degrees Celsius for three months. Next, Typhoon Doksuri displaced some 300,000 people, leaving dozens dead in its wake. In fact, in more ways than one the Philippines faces stormy weather.



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## DEVELOPMENT AFFAIRS

# A long-standing pattern

**Colonial legacies still mark today's development affairs – despite decades of debate about it. True decolonisation depends on local expertise being respected. Existing local capacities must be employed.**

By Katharina Wilhelm Otieno

Typically, developmental projects result from transactional contracts with one side paying money and the other side receiving something. Such a scenario cannot appropriately be described as an equal partnership. Indeed, equality rhetoric is misleading, according to Chilande Kuloba-Warria, the founder-director of the Nairobi-based Warande Advisory Centre, a consultancy that serves civil-society organisations. Kuloba-Warria insists that there is still “us

and them” in developmental affairs. She explains that, from her point of view, „they“ mostly means people from aid-providing countries, while „us“ stands for people who receive aid.

Kuloba-Warria opposes “white washing”. That is the term she uses for attempts to camouflage unequal power relations with inclusive vocabulary. She reports that white representatives of non-governmental organisations tend to be fond of such language, though there would actually not be any international development cooperation if power relations were indeed equal. According to her, claims to be colour blind amount to a denial of reality. She appreciates that those who do so normally have good intentions. Nonetheless, they fail to see the challenges people of colour face. Ultimately,

Kuloba-Warria says, acknowledging reality is an issue of respect.

The colonial past still has impacts on development cooperation today. In an acknowledgement of an appropriate process of decolonisation not having taken place yet, VENRO, the umbrella organisation of non-governmental German development organisations, hosted an online event in late August and launched the English version of a report on the matter. The German version was published last year and is based on interviews with NGO staff. The interviews were conducted by Katja Dombrowski, a former member of D+C's editorial team. Kulo-

“Kuloba-Warria insists that unequal power relations are fundamental in any setting of donors and recipients, and that such settings are conducive to the persistence of colonial legacies on both sides.”

ba-Warria has written a related publication and shared her insights during the VENRO event.

These challenges are nothing new. More than 30 years ago, the “post-development” school emerged among scholars. At the time, the anthropologist Arturo Escobar and the sociologist Wolfgang Sachs were among those who declared that the concept of development had failed. Moreover, they read it as an extension of colonialism. Aram Ziai of Kassel University is a current author who adheres to this intellectual tradition. He shared some of his views on [www.dandc.eu](http://www.dandc.eu) in the summer of 2020. In a previous publication, however, he had acknowledged that development concepts sometimes include liberating elements that critical observers tend to neglect.

### TAPPING THE PROGRESSIVE POTENTIAL

The prefix „post“ sometimes causes confusion in this context, admits Sina Aping of a Berlin-based independent organisation (Berliner Entwicklungspolitischer Ratschlag – BER). She explains things using the word „postcolonialism“. The message is not that colonialism is entirely a thing of the past, even though the countries concerned have formally gained sovereign statehood.

Aping insists there is still a need to overcome many colonial legacies that shape people’s attitudes today. This kind of decolonisation requires people to regularly confront their personal prejudices. Training courses can help, and so can the diversification of leadership positions. Aping bemoans that decolonisation does not figure in the UN agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

In a similar vein, post-development does not mean that the era of development policies is over. The challenge is to tap the progressive potential.

Kuloba-Warria argues that local-level decolonisation is particularly important. Project plans must reflect the knowledge and desires of the people whose situation a project is supposed to improve. Local knowledge and existing capacities must not only be respected, she demands, they must be employed. One implication is that donor agencies must become more flexible in regard to rules, procedures and key indicators. In other words, Kuloba-Warria wants them to become less risk averse. The VENRO report similarly recommends the reduction of bureaucratic burdens as a step towards decolonisation.

Kuloba-Warria insists that unequal power relations are fundamental in any set-

ting of donors and recipients, and that such settings are especially conducive to the persistence of colonial legacies on both sides. Quoting an interviewee from her publication, she points out that “he who has and controls resources will always wield the power.”

### LINKS

**Dombrowski, K., 2022: Shifting Power. How development and humanitarian NGOs can address the consequences of colonialism in their work.** Berlin, VENRO (6 MB, German version available).

<https://venro.org/publikationen/detail/shifting-power-how-development-and-humanitarian-ngos-can-address-the-consequences-of-colonialism-in-their-work>

**Kuloba-Warria, C., 2023: Implications of the Istanbul principles and the DAC CSO recommendation on enabling civil society for ICSOS.**

<https://csopartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Implications-of-Istanbul-Principles-and-DAC-recommendations-on-enabling-civil-society-v1.pdf>



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**Local conventions matter: civil-society organisations in Somalia preparing the after-sunset evening meal during Ramadan in a refugee camp near Mogadishu.**



Photo: picture-alliance/ASSOCIATED PRESS/Farah Abdi Warsameh



Farmers work on their land near the Volcanoes National Park in Rwanda. Demand for agricultural land impacts Africa's biodiversity.

SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

## “Building knowledge at the local level is essential”

**Sub-Saharan Africa has numerous biodiversity hotspots, but they are increasingly at risk. In this D+C interview, Beth Kaplin, a conservation expert, discusses what threatens biodiversity. She explains why it is crucial to move beyond parachute science which is only practised by foreigners and prioritise local capacity building to sustainably protect the environment.**

**Beth Kaplin interviewed by Roli Mahajan**

**What is parachute science, and how does it harm biodiversity?**

Scientific research in Africa is still dominated by scientists from high-income countries who visit the continent for a rather limited period to do their fieldwork. For example, when new species are discovered in Africa, it is usually by foreigners. Even if a species is native to Africa, it is often a person from the global north who is considered an expert on it.

Such parachute science hinders African countries from developing the expertise to collect, organise and retain scientific information. This results in limited utilisation of valuable knowledge. For example, changes in certain species have not been tracked

over time, since there is a lack of permanent research on the ground. Today, a lot of relevant scientific knowledge is scattered, lost or non-existent.

Parachute science also extends to biodiversity conservation and climate adaptation strategies. Many strategies are designed by development partners in the global north. They possess the financial resources to collaborate with African governments to tweak strategies that may have been successful somewhere else. This can be likened to a cookie-cutter approach, whereby consultants apply the same strategy with slight modifications to different ecological regions.

### **Why do you criticise that?**

In the case of biodiversity conservation, this approach misses out on valuable local knowledge and the opportunity to build agency and stewardship. It neglects building abilities among African scientists and fails to foster forward-thinking individuals

and innovators who can develop culturally embedded solutions.

Africa's capacity must be strengthened, however. We need to start relying on people from the continent who speak the local language and know the culture well to generate holistic and local solutions. Overcoming parachute science is crucial for this purpose.

**What solutions has your team been working on?**

At the Center for Excellence in Biodiversity and Natural Resource Management at the University of Rwanda, we are training young researchers in Rwanda and the region at large. We equip them with skills to analyse biodiversity, identify species and explain why they are important. This includes studying biological indicators – species that can be used to monitor environmental changes. For example, if a certain species of pollution-sensitive frog is absent from a wetland, that is an indicator of an unhealthy wetland ecosystem. The same holds true for certain plants and dragonflies.

Enabling local experts who can identify species and understand ecosystem dynamics is crucial. This also closes the circle to agriculture. After all, quite a few newly discovered species are important for soil fertility and crop productivity, on which productive farming depends.

**What are the imminent threats to biodiversity in sub-Saharan Africa?**

Demand for agricultural land is a major threat. Poverty and rapid population growth increase the need for land for agriculture and housing. In Africa, this has led to the conversion of forests into farmland, resulting in significant impacts on biodiversity.

The main biodiversity issues in Africa stem from the conflict between biodiversity and agriculture. Farming dominates land use in most African countries, including in Rwanda. Ideally, food security and biodiversity should go hand in hand. However, forests are being cleared at an unprecedented rate for agriculture. National agriculture policies in many countries prioritise intensifying agriculture to feed the population. But we need to prioritise nature-positive food production as well. Additionally, international demand for agricultural produce from Africa leads to monocropping and a focus on commercial crops.

The massive use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides, often undocumented and unregulated, is a problem too. We do not know enough about how these chemicals are being used and where. What we do know, however, is that they pollute freshwater ecosystems and negatively affect pollinators. While African countries need higher productivity, agricultural intensification clearly has negative impacts on human health and biodiversity if not well planned.

*“In many African countries, as in many parts of the world today, people are not able to identify native trees or animals in their immediate surroundings.”*

**What other threats are there to biodiversity?**

The expansion of infrastructure like networks of roads result in loss of habitat, human-wildlife conflicts and deaths of animals. A related aspect, and also a big issue, is urbanisation. It currently has less immediate impact than agriculture, however, since most urban areas have a long history of human settlement. When urbanisation is planned properly, it allows for green growth and has positive potential for biodiversity.

Finally, illegal wildlife trade is a major problem. The huge demand for various bird, mammal and fish species, especially in wealthy world regions, is driving this trade. It is pushing species like pangolins, elephants and rhinos towards extinction.

**Is there a particular issue that concerns you the most as a biologist, scientist and teacher?**

I am alarmed by the extent to which people are moving away from nature. In many African countries, as in many parts of the world today, people are not able to identify native trees or animals in their immediate surroundings. For example, eucalyptus dominates the landscape in many countries in Africa, yet many people are unaware that it originates from Australia. Similarly, bamboo used for restoration plantings often comes from China.

Young people often don't encounter a lot of native species, except in protected areas, which are often exclusively accessi-

ble to tourists. This holds true for Rwanda, for example. In the Central African Republic, some forest cover exists, but wildlife is scarce in many of these areas. The growing disconnection between humans and nature leads to a lack of concern, resulting in a vicious circle of rapid biodiversity loss.

In fact, we do not even know what species or varieties are going extinct, since we lack a comprehensive list of African species. As interest wanes, valuable oral and indigenous knowledge disappears. US and European institutions do have valuable knowledge regarding African biodiversity, but this information is needed in Africa too. Our understanding remains insufficient, particularly at the local level. It is obvious that we cannot effectively protect what we do not know.

**What solutions do you consider feasible?**

At the policy-level, more needs to be done to explore innovative ways to enhance biodiversity. In order to reach food-security goals, we need to explore how to create a patchwork of connected landscapes that support both biodiversity and human needs.

At the individual level, people should be inspired to reconnect to the nature around them. One method of doing so – and at the same time generating scientific knowledge – is cataloguing and building a database of the amazing species that can be found in different African countries. Highlighting unique species and their significance can arouse people's interest and passion.

Research shows that effective conservation requires the support of local citizens. They need to know about biodiversity in their region, have the capability to track it and know when change is happening. Policymakers should include this information in their planning. Building knowledge and expertise at the local level is essential. We cannot solely rely on what is called parachute science or helicopter science.



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PATRIARCHAL ATTITUDES

# Blessed family planning

Since religious norms contribute to West Africa's high birth rates, faith leaders can help to slow down population growth. In some mosques and churches, that is actually happening.

By Leon Kirschgens

On behalf of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS), which is affiliated to Germany's Christian Democrats, the Berlin Institute for Population and Development has assessed what influence religious communities have on population growth in West Africa. The two institutions jointly published the study on the matter in 2022. It pays particular attention to Christianity and Islam, the religions with the largest followers in the region. The authors state that early motherhood and large numbers of children coincide with traditional religious thinking.

Change is possible, however. Indeed, African birth rates are declining, though not as fast as they did earlier in other world regions (see Mahwish Gul in D+C/E+Z Digital Monthly 2023/07). Faith leaders, according to KAS and Berlin Institute, can help to accelerate it.

According to the publication, family planning, gender equity and the formal education of girls are important tools for reducing birth rates in West Africa long-term. Women's status in society has a bearing on how many children they have – and at what age they have them. In patriarchal settings, motherhood tends to be the only role women are expected to fulfil. Many girls are only sent to primary school if they get formal education at all. That is no foundation for personal independence. Moreover, contraceptives are often rejected as a matter of principle.

Secular organisations struggle to challenge deeply entrenched faith doctrines, so traditional thinking prevails. KAS and Berlin Institute point out that believers often fear that secular initiatives want to undermine their faith.

It therefore matters very much what religious leaders preach. The authors insist that theological reasoning is essential for achieving more gender justice, better family planning and lower birth rates. Faith leaders are in a position to question long-standing attitudes. They can interpret the Bible or the Koran in terms of gender justice. They can point out that the Holy Scriptures do not forbid family planning. People listen to them when they reject conventional gender stereotypes and demand that girls be educated. Faith leaders can even talk about sex with young people and encourage them to use contraceptives.

What they say has an impact on parents as well as policymakers moreover.

According to the publication, the Sultan of Sokoto is a good example. As the leader of about 90 million Nigerian Muslims, he has spoken out in favour of girls' education. Moreover, he has told imams to do so too. He also wants them to do their best to convince sceptical parents and tradition-minded politicians. He launched the pan-African Keeping Girls in School Conference in 2019, convening Islamic and Christian leaders as well as representatives of indigenous belief systems, politics and international agencies.

KAS and Berlin Institute similarly praise the Ouagadougou Partnership. It has been promoting the use of contraceptives in cooperation with leaders of all religions since 2011. A progressive alliance of faith leaders has thus emerged in francophone West Africa.

Exchange of faith leaders across regions and countries is essential, the study states. Experience must be shared, doubting peers can be convinced and progressive leaders appreciate encouragement. For these reasons, networks like Faith to Action are said to be quite valuable. It links West African faith leaders to secular organisations and facilitates the drafting of shared strategies. All too often, faith communities and their leaders still lack the resources they would need to implement change, for example, by building schools, the authors argue.

More generally, they want governmental development programmes to involve faith leaders more actively and consistently. Doing so would not only improve people's livelihoods. It would also help to reduce West African birth rates faster.

## LINK

**Berlin Institute for Population and Development and Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2022: Faith in action. How religious organisations facilitate demographic change in West Africa.**  
<https://www.kas.de/documents/261825/16928652/Faith+in+action.pdf/6a240161-325d-22ce-734f-03e0c91ae3ba?version=1.0&t=1663164728458>



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## INTERNATIONAL LAW

# “Western governments are riddled with contradictions”

Russian President Vladimir Putin only attended the recent BRICS summit in South Africa virtually. Otherwise, he might have faced arrest. The International Criminal Court (ICC) had issued an arrest warrant for him in March. Kai Ambos, expert on international criminal law, spoke with D+C about the warrant and the global role of the ICC, which is based in The Hague.

Kai Ambos interviewed by Jörg Döbereiner

**The ICC’s arrest warrant against Putin is based on allegations of deporting Ukrainian children to Russia. Why is Putin being prosecuted for this crime, and not, for instance, for the invasion of Ukraine?**

The ICC has no jurisdiction regarding the crime of aggression. For that to be the case, both the country where the crime was committed, Ukraine, and the country which committed the crime, Russia, would have to be state parties to the ICC. The UN Security Council could also authorise prosecution, but Russia would obviously veto such a decision.

**How is the case of the abduction allegations different?**

Ukraine accepted the jurisdiction of the ICC on an ad hoc basis and this is valid for other international crimes, including this war crime. The prosecution probably chose this specific allegation because there is solid evidence. From a strictly legal standpoint, the ICC’s Office of the Prosecutor (OTP) must investigate when it has sufficient evidence that a crime within the jurisdiction of the Court has been committed, regardless of the status of the suspect or the chances of an arrest. Investigators from the OTP then carry out their own inquiries independently. The OTP does not rely on evidence collected by others because doing so would call its impartiality into question.

**What are the implications of the arrest warrant against Putin? In August, he did not at-**

**tend the BRICS summit because he feared arrest.**

Putin has to expect that he will be arrested, at least if he travels to a state party to the ICC. That includes South Africa. There is also a certain risk that other states might cooperate with the ICC on an ad hoc basis. One can only speculate what effect the warrant will have, if any, on the war in Ukraine.

**What are the chances that the ICC will be able to effectively deal with the crimes committed in the Ukraine war?**

First and foremost, investigators must have access to the areas where crimes were committed. In this regard, the situation in Ukraine is better than in some African countries. In South Sudan or the Democratic Republic of the Congo, it is much more difficult to even get into the country at all, let alone the concrete crime sites. In Ukraine, investigators have access to a significant number of crime sites and also to a lot of evidence. During an armed conflict like this, many potential crimes take place. It is crucial to select cases and prioritise carefully.

**How do the investigators work?**

They talk to witnesses and forensically secure the crime sites. For example, they can have bodies exhumed to determine whether executions took place. Digital evidence, moreover, is becoming increasingly important. It includes satellite images or evidence from social media. Compiling all relevant information is a major challenge.



ICC Prosecutor Karim Khan (right) on investigative mission in Ukraine.

**The Kremlin has announced that it will not cooperate with the ICC. What developments should we expect next?**

First of all, one must wait whether the arrest warrant against Putin will be executed. Of course, enforcement is a problem in international law generally. Meanwhile, the OTP will continue its investigation, including into other crimes. It might issue another arrest warrant soon, either against Putin or someone else.

**Could Putin be tried in absentia?**

No, there is no trial in absentia before the ICC. The defendant must be in The Hague, at least for the main proceedings. In the past, however, opportunities to make arrests certainly arose unexpectedly, for instance in the case of Slobodan Milošević and Radovan Karadžić, who were charged in connection with the war in the former Yugoslavia. So it is difficult to predict what will happen next.

**In the past, African governments have often accused the ICC of racism. They alleged that the Court primarily prosecuted African perpetrators and paid insufficient attention to potential crimes committed during the Iraq War, for example.**

Such criticism was made years ago. It can now be considered to have been put to rest. The concern had to be taken seriously, but it wasn't justified even at the time. After all, African countries themselves referred the first cases to the ICC. And with regard to its personnel, the ICC has always had strong African participation. For example, its previous head prosecutor, Fatou Bensouda, was from The Gambia, and its previous president, Chile Eboe-Osuji, was from Nigeria. Apart from that, African governments do not always speak for civil society, and civil society is an important source of support for the ICC.

That said, I currently have the impression that representatives of African states are surprised at the extent to which the West and the ICC have become active in Ukraine. Obviously, both the perpetrators and the victims are white. The new criticism is that, in contrast to Ukraine, too little is being done in response to African conflicts. In fact, there has never been so much support for a situation at the ICC as now with regard to Ukraine, and this raises criticism, not only in African countries.

However, this is not primarily an ICC issue. It marks the entire debate on the Ukraine war. African governments are pursuing their own interests, which include commodities imports and military support from Russia.

**Many influential countries have not joined the ICC, including the USA, China and India. What does that mean for the quest for a so-called rules-based world order?**

The "rules-based world order" is a western notion, and a questionable one. The key question is: What rules are we talking about? Do we mean universally applicable human rights? Or do we talk about the fair distribution of wealth and welfare, in other words about a more just world economic order? In this regard, poorer countries' interests differ from those of rich ones. Furthermore, the allegation has been made that the so-called West does not adhere to its own rules. African governments perceive western double standards and rightly so. Also, we must not forget that current international law has colonial roots and is only emerging from that legacy slowly.

If one advocates for a rules-based world order, especially in a world power like the USA which unfortunately often breaks these rules, your narrative will not necessarily be well received in countries that are victims of these rules-violations and double standards, whether in Africa, Latin America or Asia. We need rules of course, and the prohibition of the use of force – so blatantly violated by Russia – is arguably the most important one. Yet, every state, including the major powers, must adhere to these rules. Unfortunately, this is not the case as far as western countries, led by the USA, are concerned. Their policies are riddled with inconsistencies and contradictions. Of course, there are also so-called "realists", who argue that only interests matter in international relations, while we only pay lip service to values.

**What does that mean with regard to the ICC?**

On the one hand, the court is supported by western governments, including all EU members, Australia, Canada, Switzerland and others. But the leading western power, the USA, is not a state party. It also behaves inconsistently. The administrations of George W. Bush and especially Don-

ald Trump severely attacked the ICC and sanctioned some of its leading officials. The chief prosecutor at the time, Fatou Bensouda, was even barred to enter the USA to participate in UN meetings in New York once the Afghanistan investigation had started. That both Republicans and Democrats are now speaking more positively about the ICC does not necessarily mean that they appreciate the court, but rather that they are driven by anti-Russian resentment. To them, the ICC currently looks like a helpful tool to use against a geopolitical archrival.

**"A country like the USA, which sees itself as the leader of a value-based western world, should join the ICC and support it unconditionally."**

With regard to other investigations, such as those concerning possible Israeli crimes in the occupied Palestinian territories, the United States' fundamentally critical stance has not changed.

**So you demand more consistency?**

Yes, absolutely. A country like the USA, which sees itself as the leader of a value-based western world, should join the ICC and support it unconditionally. Of course, this is an idealistic demand. But the existing inconsistencies, including within NATO, are untenable: German, British or French soldiers serving in international peacekeeping missions are under the ICC's jurisdiction – but not the US troops serving alongside them.

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Flooded rural road in Sindh Province in September 2022.

## INFRASTRUCTURE

# Managing water for the future

**Pakistan is facing a looming water crisis that threatens to exacerbate food insecurity. Political instability and economic fragility are complicating the situation further. The government is taking steps to address the problems, but much more needs to be done.**

By **Abdur Rehman Cheema**

Pakistan is home to some of the world's most rugged terrain, from the Himalayan and Karakoram Mountain ranges to vast deserts and arid plains. The country is both geographically hostile and ecologically fragile, two factors that hamper efforts to feed the growing population. For example, the dry climate and unpredictable weather patterns make it hard for farmers to grow crops. The lack of proper infrastructure, moreover, means they struggle to transport produce to markets.

The 2022 Global Hunger Index ranks Pakistan a dismal 99<sup>th</sup> out of 121 countries. The looming water crisis threatens to exacerbate food insecurity. Extreme weather events are becoming more frequent and severe due to climate change. Devastating flooding ravaged the country in 2022.

Pakistan is also vulnerable to disasters such as earthquakes and droughts. In the aftermath of such events, hundreds of thousands of people are normally in need of emergency water and sanitation assistance. Climate and conflict-driven internal migration and displacement add to the difficulties. What's more, Pakistan is experiencing an economic crisis that has left the government overwhelmed. Authorities are struggling to manage food scarcity, restore livelihoods and control spiralling inflation. The World Bank's 2022 Country and Climate

Development Report paints a dire picture of Pakistan's future unless immediate action is taken to address climate change and environmental degradation. The report predicts that, if the country fails to act, it could see its annual GDP plummet by a shocking 18 to 20% per year by 2050. Water shortages in agriculture alone could make up over 4.6% of GDP losses. As of 2020, Pakistan had the lowest water productivity in southern Asia. Yet the livelihoods of the poorest critically depend on access to water services, and shortages affect them badly.

Access to safe water and sanitation is limited, with climate change and rapid urbanisation making matters worse. Even some health centres and schools lack proper water and sanitation infrastructure. That poses problems especially for girls, who need adequate facilities to manage their menstruation.

According to UNICEF, 25 million people in the country still practice open defecation, a leading cause of waterborne diseases. UNICEF estimates that 70% rely on bacterially contaminated water. As a result, around 53,000 Pakistani children under the age of

five die from diarrhoea every year. Education outcomes are affected as well: children who experience repeated bouts of diarrhoea are likely to fall behind in school or even drop out entirely. Diarrhoeal disease can also cause stunting, which currently affects almost 44% of children in Pakistan. Stunting prevents children from growing and developing as they should.

Pakistan's National Water Policy, which was approved in 2018, faces several significant implementation challenges. Relevant issues are water infrastructure, institutional capacity and political will. One of the most pressing topics is the lack of adequate water-storage capacity, which leads to a shortage of water both in times of drought and floods. The shortage is exacerbated by inefficient and outdated irrigation systems, which waste a significant amount of water.

The country's institutional capacities are too weak to implement the National Water Policy. The policy calls for the creation of a National Water Council and a National Water Regulatory Authority to oversee water management and ensure compliance with the policy's guidelines. However, the government has been slow to establish these institutions. It has also failed to properly define their future responsibilities and roles.

Political will is also a major challenge. The National Water Policy calls for significant reforms in the management of water resources, including the regulation of groundwater extraction and the promotion of water conservation measures. However, these reforms may prove unpopular, particularly among influential agricultural and industrial lobbies, and may thus face political resistance.

In light of these challenges, the Pakistani government has launched several initiatives to improve food security and address the country's water crisis. These include investments in irrigation infrastructure, support for smallholder farmers, and the construction of new dams and reservoirs. However, much more needs to be done if Pakistan is to meet the challenges of its rapidly growing population, hostile geography, and climate vulnerability.

One of the key issues in Pakistan's water governance is the lack of transparency and accountability. Corruption and favouritism in water distribution have been reported in several parts of the country, particularly in the context of large-scale irriga-



tion schemes. These practices not only undermine the efficient use of water resources, but also exacerbate social and economic disparities. Small farmers and marginalised communities are often left without adequate access to water.

Another challenge in Pakistan's water governance is the lack of effective regulation and enforcement of water laws and policies. Despite the existence of the National Water Policy and various provincial water management frameworks, implementation has been weak and inconsistent. This has resulted in a fragmented and often conflicting regulatory environment, with multiple agencies and stakeholders that lack clear roles and responsibilities.

Overall, addressing the challenges of weak water governance in Pakistan will require a concerted effort from all stakeholders, including the government, civil society organisations and the private sector. These stakeholders should focus on investing in the development of institutional capacity, promoting transparency and accountability in water management and ensuring the effective regulation and enforcement of water laws and policies.

In Pakistan, the climate crisis is primarily a water crisis. It cannot be avoided, but timely adaptation measures can help Pakistan reduce the extent of harm. The clock is ticking, and the longer we wait, the worse it will get.

## THE WAY FORWARD

Experts who participated in the Pakistan Water Week 2022 in Islamabad made five key recommendations to improve water governance in Pakistan:

1. Policymakers should focus on strengthening the institutions responsible for water governance by providing them

with the necessary resources and training to carry out their responsibilities effectively. A renewed focus on investing in water infrastructure, including sanitation, is needed as well. Public investments should complement civil society efforts.

2. Effective devolution is essential. Pakistan's province governments should take the lead in implementing initiatives to improve water storage, conservation, recycling and reuse as best suited to their needs.

3. Technology should be used to build trust and ensure transparency. Provinces should share water-flow data automatically. Data-based evidence should guide decisions regarding water allocation, use and management.

4. Journalism that addresses water and climate-related issues should be better funded. Powerful and resourceful media owners must be made aware of the severity of the water and climate crises.

5. Women and youth must be involved in debates concerning the water sector at the national and province levels. Both groups have an important role to play in shaping water use, now and in the future.

Furthermore, Pakistan needs to go beyond rhetoric and address water as national security issue in 2023, which can also be an election year. If citizens treat water security as an integral part of economic security and insist that political parties promise water sector reforms and investments in their slogans, it could create an opportunity to hold those parties accountable once they come to power. If institutions and policymakers cooperate effectively, they can reduce water-related impacts on Pakistan's people and economy.

Pakistan's contribution to global greenhouse gas emissions is less than one percent, so its vulnerability to climate impacts is disproportionately high. Access to adequate climate finance and support would help Pakistan to address these challenges effectively, enhance its resilience and contribute to global efforts to combat climate change and its adverse effects.



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Afghan women demand the right to education and work in Mazar-i-Sharif.

## AFGHANISTAN

## The Taliban's second emirate

During their second period of rule, the Taliban appear more moderate in a few selected areas. This shift is due to a variety of factors, including international expectations and a more self-confident Afghan society. However, it is not a reason for optimism.

By Felix Kugele

For two years now, the Taliban have once again controlled Afghanistan in the name of their "Islamic Emirate". The US-led attempt to pacify and develop the country failed miserably.

Perspectives on this second emirate vary, however. Many see a return of the terror of the first Taliban emirate, which controlled the country between 1996 and 2001. International media are reporting numerous extrajudicial arrests and executions. They are affecting former local staff of foreign armed forces in particular.

Serious crimes and human-rights violations also took place during the first period of Taliban rule. Women, girls and ethnic and religious minorities suffered the most. These abuses were motivated by a grotesquely reductive mix of contemporary Islamic fundamentalism and the cult of leadership. Criticism was rejected and compromise was impossible.

Nowadays, however, many Afghans are expressing hope that the current Taliban government is not the same as it was before. It is true that the period immediately after the takeover was milder compared to the 1990s. In 1996, one of the first acts of the victorious Taliban was to torture the former president Najibullah and his brother to death and put their bodies on public display. Yet in August 2021, representatives of the defeated republic and the new rulers came together for discussions. Nothing came of them, however.

There are also differences in education policy. During the first Taliban regime, education of women and girls was practically non-existent. Now, girls may attend school up to the sixth form. However, as of the end of 2022, women are no longer allowed to attend university.

At first, women could continue to work for non-governmental organisations (NGOs). At the end of 2022, this was also forbidden by Taliban leader Haibatullah Akhundzada. But the Taliban have been moved to compromise on this issue to some extent; they tolerate female employment in hospitals, for example. As of June 2023, NGOs are no longer allowed to operate schools. In July, the Taliban also closed all beauty salons, which were the last place where Afghan women were allowed to work independently.

### REPEATED DEMONSTRATIONS

What is truly new is that affected people no longer accept repression without resistance. Since the Taliban seized power, there have been repeated demonstrations by women who frequently even show their faces – which is clearly forbidden, then as now.



Hooded mannequins are a symbol of Taliban rule in Afghanistan.

The courageous women protesters are risking a great deal and their demonstrations are repeatedly broken up by force. During the first Taliban regime, however, such protests would have been completely unthinkable, since at the time, if women committed even the smallest legal violations, they risked severe penalties – including death – not only for themselves, but also their husbands.

Men have more freedom under the new rulers. They no longer completely adhere to their hairstyle and clothing regulations everywhere. At least in larger cities, there are still men who are clean-shaven or wear Western clothes. In addition, unlike in the past, the practice of team sports is largely tolerated, and prayer times are no longer rigorously enforced.

Furthermore, it has been observed that the Taliban now tolerate the representation of living beings in the media. In the past, there was a strict ban on the depiction of people, which even applied to animals to some extent. Nowadays, photographs and videos of people are ubiquitous, at least in news broadcasts and in the Taliban's own propaganda. The former fighters are even happy to be repeatedly interviewed by Afghan women YouTubers.

There have been a variety of explanations for this in some ways more moderate behaviour of the Taliban with regard to the implementation of their rules in practice.

In their current descriptions of themselves, they remain rather vague: "In terms of our ideology and beliefs, there is no difference. But when it comes to experience, maturity and vision, there's a huge difference compared to 20 years ago," Taliban spokesper-

**"In the aftermath of their defeat in 2001, the Taliban had to recognise that they had made themselves extremely unpopular. Moreover, globalisation has not stopped at Afghanistan's borders, and the Taliban must come to terms with it."**

son Zabihullah Mujahid said in his first press conference just days after the overthrow.

This transformation is plausible. In the aftermath of their defeat in 2001, the Taliban had to recognise that they had made themselves extremely unpopular. Moreover, globalisation has not stopped at Afghanistan's borders, and the Taliban must come to terms with it.

Thousands of Taliban – particularly commanders – spent several months a year in Pakistan during the twenty years between the emirates. While Pakistan is also domi-

nated by Islamic fundamentalism, girls' education, a multi-party system and a passably functional judiciary exist in almost every part of the country. According to reports, more than a few commandants secretly enrolled their daughters in school in Pakistan. These experiences have evidently also influenced those in power.

At the same time, it is likely that a more moderate approach on the part of the Taliban leadership is part of their strategy. Many observers worry that the Taliban are using it to gain acceptance and aid money from the world's rich nations, and that after this phase they could return to their old brutality. Indeed, it has been observed for instance that the Taliban are once again more strictly limiting women's freedom of movement. Demonstrations do still occasionally occur, but they are more quickly and harshly broken up.

Ultimately it could also be that Afghan society itself has modernised and is forcing the Taliban to adapt. An entire generation has grown up with a relatively high degree of political freedom. It has also received a good education and, thanks to the efforts of national and international NGOs, has taken part in the emergence of a civil society.

This thesis seems to come closest to the truth. In 2021, the Taliban encountered a more self-confident, modern population that bravely defends its interests. While some Taliban representatives certainly appear more reflective today than in the past, it is becoming increasingly clear that new freedoms are not due to the Taliban's magnanimity, but to people's willingness to fight for them again and again.

This change is not a reason for optimism. Space for civil society is being severely restricted. The Taliban remain a totalitarian movement that glorifies violence with no lasting desire for reform. They also continue to commit the most serious human rights violations.

Nevertheless, it can be said that even the Taliban are not immune to certain moderating influences. External actors should therefore be sure to do everything in their power to help Afghan society stay resilient.



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## Encouraging women to screen for cervical cancer

Whereas cervical cancer remains a major threat to women's health, in Malawi, many women face increased risk of death as several reasons stop them from seeking early detection and treatment.

Aggregated data from various sources shows that approximately 3700 Malawian women are diagnosed with cervical cancer each year, with 2300 dying because of it. Several factors account for the high mortality rates.

"Religion and culture are some of the reasons why women would not want to go to hospital and be screened for cervical cancer," says George Jobe, an executive director at Malawi health equity network (MHEN). He argues that these factors create negative attitudes amongst many women. "Most women will wait until the cancer is advanced and has weakened them before they seek medical attention," he says, adding that there is denial especially among working-class women and those that are rich "because they think cervical cancer is for the poor".

Jobe, who also doubles as chairperson of Universal Health Coverage Coalition, implores males to get knowledge about cervical cancer and its dangers so that they can encourage females to go for screening and treatment.

"Awareness should also go to local chiefs and other community leaders

so that they, too, know why cervical cancer screening is important. The chiefs play a crucial role in health issues," he informs.

Many women are also uncomfortable that male health workers will be assigned to conduct the health examinations. In this case, it would be very helpful if cancer screening centres use female health surveillance assistants (HSAs) to do the screening.

Anifa Chimaliza, a female HSA at Mitundu health centre in Lilongwe, says that most women are putting much of their faith in their religion and would not want to seek medical help. She explains that many women refuse to be vaccinated because of their religious beliefs, yet vaccination would greatly reduce the cases of cancers.

Sometimes, hearsay and rumours influence the attitudes towards attaining care. Loyce Kajawa, a 35-year-old mother of two children, says that even though she knows about the various types of cancers women suffer from, she has never been screened for any cancer: "I have never suffered from it, but I hear from other women that screening is painful. So, I am afraid to do it."

Kajawa, who lives in the outskirts of Lilongwe with her 68-year-old mother, says that she knows of women in the village who suffered from cancer and died but "some family members thought that they were bewitched".



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## MASTHEAD / IMPRINT

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Climate protest in Nairobi on the summit's first day.

#### CLIMATE DIPLOMACY

## More must happen

**The Africa Climate Summit in Nairobi in early September was an important opportunity for African countries to adopt a shared agenda. While governments managed to agree on several important issues, civil-society organisations did not get the attention they deserve.**

By Abigael Kima

The summit was the first of its kind, hosted by Kenya's government and the African Union. It contributed to shaping the African narrative ahead of the UN climate summit in Dubai in December. Kenya's President William Ruto had previously emerged as a leader on climate issues. It came as no surprise that the main theme of the Nairobi conference was green growth.

Africa is often painted as a victim in the climate crisis. The continent's contribution to greenhouse gas emissions is below four percent, but its nations are hard hit and their ability to bounce back from extreme-weather disasters is limited. The summit in Nairobi showed Africa in a different light, emphasising its potential as a hub for solu-

tions and deal maker. Government officials appreciated the opportunity.

Not everyone was equally happy. Civil-society organisations, indigenous groups and youth wanted more to happen. On the first day of the summit, they rallied in the streets of Nairobi. Participating groups feel that the governments' agenda has taken a direction that does not serve climate justice properly.

Adding to the frustration, access to the official summit was quite limited. Voices that should have been crucial in shaping the agenda were not admitted. Some people had traveled to Nairobi from far away, but did not get a chance to attend the summit and share their views. The poor communities who suffer the worst climate impacts were thus excluded once again.

Non-governmental activists expressed dissatisfaction with the fact that carbon markets took center stage in the negotiations. One problem with this approach is that it gives the biggest polluters leeway to keep polluting as long as they can pay. Another downside is that it sidelines the push for the urgently needed loss and damage

fund. Indeed, various western governments made pledges towards the Africa Carbon Markets Initiative. The idea is to unlock financial flows to the continent. Merely improving business opportunities, however, is not enough to make progress towards a better future with more sustainable lifestyles. Climate justice demands more.

Another key issue was green minerals. These natural resources are needed in environmentally sustainable technology. Examples include solar power, electric vehicles and green hydrogen. According to research done by the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, Africa holds 30% of the world's mineral reserves. To meet the expected rise in global demand, production of minerals and metals such as lithium, graphite and cobalt must increase by nearly 500% by 2050. Such growth is impossible without Africa's resources. However, history shows that resource extraction in Africa has been detrimental to communities as they are left poor, their landscapes are destroyed and some areas become war zones. Related problems were not tackled in Nairobi.

The Nairobi Declaration, which was adopted by the summit, is not useless, however. It will shape Africa's position in Dubai and highlights important issues, including reforms of the international financial architecture. It even proposes a global carbon tax. These issues are important because the current global system is indeed putting Africa at a disadvantage. Moreover, the goal to triple Africa's renewable energy capacity by the end of this decade makes sense too. It is needed to improve the lot of marginalised communities and can contribute to unlocking sustainable energy supply globally.

However, more must happen to empower poor people, as the young generation is demanding. Ahead of the official summit, we convened the Africa Youth Climate Assembly with over 600 delegates from across Africa. The subsequent Africa Climate Summit may not have met our expectations fully, but it was one step towards the Africa we want. We demand – and personally represent – the green transition to the net-zero world that humankind needs. We will keep fighting to be heard.



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FRANCOPHONE AFRICA

## Serious image problem

**The former colonial power France is facing deep resentment in many parts of Africa, not only in the Sahel region. President Emmanuel Macron's attempt to reset relations has failed.**

By Karim Okanla

On the southern fringes of the Sahara and elsewhere on the continent, people increasingly consider France to be a diminished European power that keeps meddling in their nations' affairs. Many Africans see France importing natural resources, cosying up to dubious leaders and sometimes intervening with massive military force.

Several military coups in francophone West Africa have shown that the French clout has weakened. Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger are now ruled by generals who do not want to rely on France anymore.

In September, another military coup toppled the government of Gabon in Central Africa. This country is an interesting example of how shady deals with corrupt policymakers served French interests over decades. French multinationals such as TotalEnergies have been dominating Gabon's oil sector for 50 years, while members of the Bongo family controlled the government. Omar Bongo was president for four decades, and his son Ali Bongo Ondimba was recently deposed after declaring himself the winner of a deeply flawed election.

Before his death, Bongo Sr., who had a reputation of scandal, publicly declared that he had financially supported the election campaigns of French politicians because he did not want to "take any risks" and needed "friends, not foes". He admitted to generally having given them "what they asked for". This kind of information infuriates African people. They see their nation's wealth being plundered by a coalition of their own leaders and their French "friends".

Similar patterns are evident in Sahelian countries, from where France sources precious resources, including uranium from Niger. Many people believe that French troops are only deployed to ensure this business is not interrupted. Grassroots commu-

nities are deeply frustrated, not least because French promises to protect them from civil strife and terrorism did not come true. The security situation kept deteriorating, and French soldiers were perceived to be arrogant, aggressive and violent.

France is even accused of cooperating with insurgents. Social-media posts abound, blaming the former colonial power of cooperation with Islamist terrorists. They are certainly fake, but users hardly check facts and the platforms do very little content moderation.

Years ago, President Emmanuel Macron promised to end "Françafrique" as the long-standing continued influence of Paris in former colonies south of the Mediterranean is called. His attempt to reset relations has failed, however. He is seen as a condescending and arrogant leader – which, by the way, is how many French citizens perceive him too. The brutal way French police cracked down on anti-racism protests in Paris this summer felt all too familiar to the citizens of Francophone countries. Macron's neo-colonial attitude rankles, for example, when he tells leaders from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) what to do.

Anti-French feelings were expressed loud and clear in Niger in July, when the military took over. An angry demonstrator

declared: "The British and the Portuguese left Africa many decades ago. What are the French still doing here?" Another one said: "France is no longer in a position to manipulate our corrupt leaders and keep them in power against the will of the people."

The hope that cooperation with China, Russia or the Gulf States might serve African people better is quite common. Many see Russian President Vladimir Putin as a strong man who wants to support Africa's escape from postcolonial domination. The people concerned largely ignore:

- how repressive Putin's regime is at home,
- that it is waging an imperialist war in Ukraine and
- that Russian mercenaries in Africa have a pattern of corrupt and violent resource exploitation which is probably worse than what French companies are accused of.

As a matter of fact, the security situation has not improved in Mali. That the new regime turned to support from Wagner, the Russian military service provider, instead of further relying on French troops, did not help.

So far, anti-French feelings in francophone Africa do not seem to tinge people's views of other European countries or the USA, which also has a long-standing military deployment in Niger. France, however, increasingly seems to be a liability.



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**Pro-coup demonstration in Niger's capital Niamey.**

## GOVERNANCE

# Totalitarianism strangles market dynamism

**Market forces need both the rule of law and freedom of speech. Beijing's increasingly totalitarian approach to governance is therefore bad for the investment climate. There are implications for democratic countries where authoritarian tendencies are growing.**

By Hans Dembowski

China's decades-long economic miracle seems to have ended. Youth employment is high, and deflation is a new challenge, with falling prices particularly affecting real estate. Most international observers had expected the Chinese economy to rebound fast from the coronavirus slump once sanctions were lifted. Instead, a sense of gloom now prevails.

Obvious macroeconomic reasons include the over-indebtedness of real-estate developers and local governments. Moreover, the working-age population has begun to shrink. What gets less attention, is that President Xi Jinping's increasingly totalitarian grip on power is exacerbating problems. Market dynamism may not need a democratically legitimate government, but it does require the rule of law and basic civil liberties. Without independent courts, property rights are not safe. Where investors fear they may be deprived of their gains by criminal action or arbitrary government intervention, they will do their best to shift capital abroad. Spending on productive capacities in the country concerned is less attractive.

Moreover, financiers need solid information to assess what kind of investment is likely to prove rewarding. China recently stopped publishing statistics on youth employment. The regime apparently does not want people to know how bad things actually are. A lack of data and open debate, however, make solid market research and profound economic analysis impossible. The People's Republic never had a free press, of course, but there used to be a broad diversity of websites that discussed business affairs.

This debate is dying down, giving way to more conformist posts which basically toe the Communist Party's line.

Not only the economy needs a minimum level of civil liberties, however. Freedom of speech also matters in science and technology. Innovation is stifled where researchers hesitate to express ideas. Moreover, the validity of research results can only be decided by experts who understand the underlying theories and methods. Scientifically incompetent government leaders do not do so. In a feedback loop, distorted research results further diminish the investment climate. Where neither the scope, nor the limits of new technological options can be assessed in peer debate, innovations become more difficult.

Potential investors, moreover, are aware of how Jack Ma, China's super-rich technology investor, suddenly disappeared from public life when the government no longer approved of him. Events of this kind do not motivate anyone to start a business.

The plain truth is that China's regime is no longer prioritising economic development. The country's economic boom resulted from incremental but increasing liberalisation from the 1980s on. In the first decade

of this century, western observers – myself included – expected that continued economic success would lead to further liberalisation. Unfortunately, it did not turn out that way. Some now argue that it was wrong to believe that greater prosperity would lead to a greater demand for political freedom. I disagree. People's desire for democracy was not the only reason why further liberalisation looked probable. It was – and is – equally important that economic dynamism depends on legal certainty and open exchange of opinions. Xi Jinping's authoritarianism is not making China stronger. By tightening his grip on power, he is weakening the economy.

What was not predicted around the turn of the millennium was that authoritarian tendencies would grow strong in western democracies. This trend is actually more disturbing than China's failure to liberalise as expected. The kind of political obstacles authoritarian governance now imposes on China would obviously affect the USA in a similar way should Donald Trump return to the White House. Those who support right-wing populists are obviously not interested in dynamic market competition. Their idea of "free" markets ultimately serves oligarchs who resent taxes and regulations. And their idea of "normalcy" is simply that might makes right.



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**After criticising the government, Jack Ma disappeared from public life in 2020.**



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In South Asia, bats transmit the Nipah virus.



FOCUS

## Healthy lives

### Zoonoses haunt South Indian states

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### One Health deserves full attention

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### Wastewater treatment helps control microplastic pollution

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The parents of a boy who died from a Nipah infection in Kerala in 2021 with a picture of their son.

## ZOONOSES

# Deforestation and deadly disease

**In India, different diseases show that human health is linked to the health of the natural environment. Two prominent examples are Nipah and KFD. Experience tells us that destroying forests can result in the emergence of deadly illnesses.**

**By Nayantara Narayanan**

In May 2018, two and a half years before the first signs of Covid-19 anywhere in the world, a deadly disease struck the south Indian state of Kerala. Twenty-three people were infected with viral encephalitis. Only two of the infected survived.

The first symptoms were fever, headaches, sore throats and muscle pain. Vomiting, coughing, disorientation and coma followed. The disease spread quickly from the first case — a 27-year-old man named Mohammed Sabith. On a hunch, a doctor tested for the Nipah virus and the outbreak could be traced back to Sabith. This disease had

never been seen in Kerala before. After 2018, there were three further Nipah outbreaks in the state. The most recent one was reported in August this year, and by mid-September it had claimed two lives.

Nipah is an infectious disease caused by a pathogen that humans acquire from animals. Such diseases are called “zoonotic”. The coronavirus belongs in this category too.

Kyasanur Forest Disease (KFD) is another zoonotic disease that haunts parts of South India. This haemorrhagic fever is transmitted by a tick-borne virus and carries the name of the town in the state of Karnataka where it was first discovered in 1957. Since then, 400 to 500 cases have been reported annually, with mortality rates between two and 20%.

## NIPAH VIRUS

The deadly Nipah outbreak in Kerala in 2018 briefly affected the region’s economy and

daily life. Quick action by public health officials and laboratory scientists kept the outbreak under control. The episode was a mere prelude to the far more fearsome global pandemic to come. What Nipah and Covid-19 have in common, however, is the likely spillover from bats.

Nipah was first discovered in the Malaysian town Kampung Sungai Nipah, after which it was named. It infected a large number of pigs and their human handlers, who then passed it on to their families. In the resulting outbreak, half of the infected died.

Subsequently, there were at least 11 outbreaks in Bangladesh between 2001 and 2011, in which close to 200 people were infected and more than 150 died. The major cause for the disease here was people drinking raw date palm sap carrying the pathogen. Nipah has also claimed several dozen human lives in West Bengal, the Indian state bordering Bangladesh.

Studies from both Malaysia and Bangladesh show that the virus most likely spilled over from the *Pteropus* genus of bats, which are also called “fruit bats” as well as “flying foxes”. These bats are the major reservoir for the Nipah virus.

Malaysia’s intensively managed commercial pig farms had fruit trees where bats

could drop partially eaten fruit into pig stalls. Pigs eating fruit contaminated with bat saliva became amplifiers of the Nipah virus. In Bangladesh, date palm sap was likely already contaminated with saliva from bats who also drink the sap.

Pteropus bats are present in various parts of South Asia. In India, seropositive animals have been found not only in Kerala in the south, but also in the north (Haryana State) and east (West Bengal and Assam). Seropositivity means that, at some point, a Nipah infection triggered an immune response in the bat concerned.

The Nipah outbreak in Kerala started in a small forest village in Kozhikode district. Researchers so far have been unable to establish exactly how Sabith, the first patient, picked up the pathogen.

However, the local forest is home to several bat species, including Pteropus. The researchers found bat bite marks on fruit such as mango and guava in the area where Sabith often worked. Neighbours said that Sabith and his brother had cleaned out a bat-infested well. It is also possible that Sabith handled a Nipah-infected baby bat as a pet. Researchers believe that later outbreaks in Kerala were also caused by sporadic virus spillovers from bats to humans.

Deforestation makes such events more likely. Kerala has almost 39,000 square kilometres of land. In 1973, more than 70% were covered with natural forest, according to an analysis by a research group from the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore. By 2016, that share had dropped below 50%. Development work and encroachment are still causing deforestation, driving fruit bats out of their natural habitats. Over the years, residents of Kerala have been reporting increased interactions with bats.

Pragya Yadav of the National Institute of Virology thinks that bats have probably been carrying the virus for some time before the 2018 outbreak and there may actually have been a few human infections that were not reported. In her eyes, environmental destruction is increasing the risk: “Now we are cutting trees, disturbing the ecology and moving closer to these animals”. Jayakrishnan Thayyil of KMCT Medical College in Kozhikode points out that groves with large trees and rich biodiversity have been destroyed in Kerala and that construction work is often done “without considering the environmental impact”.

In May this year, Reuters published an analysis of the world’s most likely places for viruses to “jump” from animals to humans, which are called “jump-zones”. The authors found not only that Kerala had some of the leading jump-zones internationally, but also that jump-zones are quickly expanding across India. That trend was also said to be evident in West Africa, China and Brazil.



The Reuters team reported that Kerala has more than 40 species of bats and 35 million people. It added: “Its mountain forests and wooded hillocks, prime bat habitat, have been progressively cleared to make way for homes, agriculture, businesses and industry, with major rail and highway projects still on the agenda.” The report showed that, in 2018, conditions in 83% of the state were conducive to zoonotic spillovers. That was an increase from 58% in 2002.

### KYASANUR FOREST DISEASE

KFD has been known in India for close to 60 years. Infections repeatedly occurred in five districts of Karnataka, but the disease has spread to Goa and Kerala as well. Researchers initially thought monkeys played a key role in the transmission, so the illness is still sometimes called “monkey fever”. Indeed, monkeys often carry the ticks that spread KFD but so do other mammals and birds.

PV Rajagopalan, the researcher who first investigated KFD, thought that initial outbreaks were most likely linked to the construction of a large hydro-power dam. It may well have displaced tick-bearing wild animals, with ticks finding new hosts in domestic animals. When human handlers are

bitten by infected ticks, they acquire the virus and the infection.

Bethan Purse of the UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology specialises in diseases transmitted by ticks and insects. While it is impossible to tell exactly why, how and where KFD first jumped from animals to people, she sees a pattern of infection risks being higher among people whose livelihood depends on forest areas. “In the 1950s, you had fragmentation for roads and human settlements,” says Purse. “Then there has been a shift to cashew and arecanut plantations and also paddy cultivation that has fragmented the forest and brought people into closer contact with infected ticks.”

A recent research paper shows that the risk of KFD outbreaks is associated with lower species richness resulting from deforestation. It was written by a research group led by Michael G. Walsh of Sydney University.

Ongoing land-use changes contribute to the further spread of the ticks and the disease. For decades, primary forests have kept giving way to infrastructure, agriculture, horticulture and forest plantations. The plantations are commercially attractive, but they lack the biological diversity and resilience of undisturbed nature.

Nipah and KFD are only two of many zoonotic spillover events across India. India has a long list of reported wildlife-related zoonoses. Recent events include

- Avian influenza caused by H1N1 in Maharashtra and H5N1 in Assam,
- Crimean Congo fever in Gujarat and
- Hanta virus infections in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka.

In view of the risk and in the wake of Covid-19, India is preparing a national “One Health” policy. One Health is the idea that public health should recognise the connection between people, animals, plants and the environment. Therefore, a multisectoral, coordinated, collaborative and transdisciplinary approach is needed.

At the same time, the Indian government has amended the Forest Conservation Act to allow large tracts of forest land to be opened up for non-forest activity. Accordingly, the risk of zoonotic diseases will grow.



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## EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY

# Unbalanced

**One Health has become a hot topic in international debate. Experts have emerged overnight, and some of them actually lack proper training as well as an understanding of the concept's history. What humankind now really needs is international cooperation that pays close attention to the experience of low- and middle-income countries.**

By Christina Pettan-Brewer

The modern scientific concept of One Health (OH) has been evolving for over two decades. The term stands for an integrated transdisciplinary approach. It recognises that human health is closely linked to the health of animals, plants and the environment.

Related insights, of course, are nothing new. OH has historical precedents that go back more than 10,000 years. Traditional indigenous knowledge still considers health in a truly interconnected world, with profound spiritualism and a deep connection to nature. In practical terms, OH action often reflects traditional knowledge, holistic-system pastoralist customs and ancient agricultural practices.

The Covid-19 pandemic has put OH high on the international agenda, including the global economy. The previously unknown disease is an anthrozoosis which spilled most likely over from wild animals to human beings. How and when Covid-19 really started remains an open question. Scientists and policymakers who specialise in OH had predicted for many years that habitat destruction and species interaction would eventually result in something like this. In the event, they finally got global attention.

Unfortunately, some now believe that zoonotic diseases are the core concern of OH. In truth, OH is about much more. Relevant topics include anti-microbial resistances, neglected and emerging diseases, healthy food and sovereignty, healthy ecosystems (both on land and marine), biodiversity conservation, climate change, migration, economics health and world peace.

Pollution of soils, air and water matter very much, and so do the impacts of global warming. Wildlife trade has OH dimensions, and the quality of healthcare systems and surveillance data are of crucial relevance.

OH is a concept of great complexity. Different scholars and institutions have developed different approaches, sometimes still taught and applied erroneously. The current concept was published by the “Quadripartite”, which was established by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the World Health Organization (WHO), the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH). Though the Quadripartite’s “One Health joint plan of action” was certainly a worthy effort, it must not be mis-

taken for the final and decisive document on the matter.

An authentic OH approach must consider health at all levels, from the health of the planet to the health of local communities, from the health of the natural environment to the health of agriculture and urban areas. They are intrinsically interrelated – and interdependent.

Moreover, an authentic OH approach must take into account social disparities. That is true at global, national and subnational levels. While access to healthcare is important, other dimensions of social injustice matter too. The exposure to health risks is quite unequal after all. Typically, disparities coincide with divisions of race, gender and ethnicity. Medically underserved communities are often forced to live and work in environments that are comparatively dangerous for various reasons. The natural conditions can be hazardous, but habitat degradation, pollution and other human-made issues can be detrimental to humans, animals, plants and the ecosystems.



An illustration prepared on behalf of One Health Colombia, a non-governmental initiative, for a conference.



Another One Health Colombia illustration.

The point is that OH experiences differ from culture to culture and place to place, so policy approaches must differ too. It is striking, for example, that OH tends to be a bottom-up issue in low- and middle-income countries. Grassroots movements play an important role. There is a pattern of university researchers focusing on the health concerns of local – and especially marginalised – communities. In most cases, the people involved get hardly access to funding. Research is typically done ad-hoc in small individual projects.

In high-income countries, by contrast, OH is typically a top-down issue, with governments drafting and implementing policies. State capacities and government revenues tend to be strong in these countries. Indeed, some low-income countries depend on rich nations' official development assistance (ODA). To some extent, middle-income countries benefit from ODA too. One implication is that international agendas are disproportionately set by what is generally called the global north.

International imbalances in scientific and medical research exacerbate the disparity. Many of the brightest minds from less fortunate countries migrate to higher-learning institutions in the global north. They either do so as graduate students or as full-fledged researchers. They are attracted by higher pay, more abundant resources and academic institutions' greater prestige. Moreover, they typically get more attention from their su-

perisors and professors. The move to the more prosperous country often turns out to be permanent. Generally speaking, this kind of brain drain has two outcomes:

- Many scholars shift their focus away from the concerns of the developing world to those of advanced nations. After all, funding is easily available for these topics.
- Others stay interested in the issues of their countries of origin. They donate time, but little funding to related research. Their intentions are good, but the impact often remains limited.
- For these reasons, research on local-level problems in disadvantaged countries is not organised systematically. There is a lack of well-funded, comprehensive research programmes. Individual projects, however, face serious bureaucratic obstacles and require long meetings.

Compounding the problems, scientific hierarchies are marked by inequalities too. In spite of promising rhetoric, they offer fewer opportunities to women and people from marginalised communities. Scientific attention is thus systemically distracted from those who are most in need.

### PROMISING INITIATIVES

On the upside, several African, Asian and Latin American countries have nonetheless started to adopt meaningful OH strategies. Action-oriented policies are based in a holistic understanding of health. Good innovations can result from evidence and cross-sectoral collaboration. They can lead to better health at lower costs. A new generation of systemically thinking people is emerging, and better monitoring can help to accelerate policy interventions when – and even before – a health crisis begins.

Latin America, a continent of middle-income countries, is a pioneer in some ways. Brazil and Colombia, for example, have been applying the One Health concept since 2007 and 2003 respectively, and celebrating 3 November as the international One Health Day since 2017. In Brazil, OH legislation is in place and both the National Centre of Science and the Senate support the implementation of a comprehensive policy. The federal ministries for education, agriculture, environment and health are involved, along with other institutions. Similar progress is evident in Colombia as well as in Central American countries with major rainforest

coverage, including Mexico, Guatemala and Belize, for example.

In 2016, the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO) committed in its meeting of member countries' ministers to "One Health and the Sustainable Development Goals". The PAHO has kept promoting related causes. As a matter of fact, it hosted a ministerial meeting on health and agriculture as early as 1968.

In Africa, Rwanda is setting a good example. It belongs to the group of least-developed countries, but its OH movement benefits from the country's elaborate network of community health workers, existing rapid response teams and international research partnerships. Efforts to boost research capacities in Rwanda (see Beth Kaplin on page 7 in this Digital Monthly) are paying off too. Efforts to achieve gender equity among health professionals are remarkable. Health is being considered in a holistic way.

This is the way forward. What the international community needs is cooperation that benefits from the strengths of the global north and takes into account the "hands on" experience of the global south. In this regard, the initiatives Nature for Health (N4H) and the International Alliance against Health Risks in Wildlife Trade are quite promising. N4H is supported by Germany's Federal Government and involves several multilateral and intergovernmental organisations. The purpose is to provide technical support to OH programmes in low- and middle-income countries. At the end of the day, sustainable public policies in One Health that respect and include native stakeholders and local OH experts – who are familiar with their national realities and culture – are essential.

### LINKS

**Quadripartite: One health joint plan of action.**

<https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/363518/9789240059139-eng.pdf?sequence=1>



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Liberian healthcare workers in 2014. Medical anthropologists were on site during the Ebola outbreak that was happening at that time.

#### MEDICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

## Global health and social inequalities

**The Covid-19 pandemic showed how closely connected health issues are to global contexts and social inequalities. Medical anthropologists study these connections and examine the impact on individual and societal health in an increasingly globalised world.**

By Hansjörg Dilger

The Covid-19 pandemic revealed the extent to which health challenges are embedded in both global contexts and social inequalities. Starting in 2020, the infectious disease

spread worldwide with breath-taking speed – even within high-income countries, which were largely spared from major previous epidemics including SARS, MERS or Ebola.

The Covid-19 pandemic also illustrated that both infection risks and access to healthcare (including vaccinations) are extremely unequally distributed. That is so within societies as well as globally. In Germany, for example, some groups were at particularly high risk of serious illness. They included the elderly as well as people with pre-existing conditions like obesity or diabetes mellitus. These health risks were

entangled with socio-economic factors. In particular, members of socially disadvantaged groups – like people working in so-called systemically-relevant industries such as nursing, construction or food service – were less able to protect themselves from infection.

In the global context, social and structural inequalities in healthcare and in the ability to protect oneself from serious infection became similarly apparent. For one thing, these inequalities affected the resources of any given healthcare system. Infected people in India or Brazil often did not get an adequate supply of oxygen, for example. For another, vaccine shortages became obvious in low-income countries, many of which are in Africa.

#### MEDICAL ANTHROPOLOGY AS A FIELD OF RESEARCH

The Covid-19-related questions of socially and demographically specific health risks

as well as socially and globally unequal access to healthcare are the focus of medical anthropology. Since the 1960s, this subfield of social and cultural anthropology has become the largest branch of the discipline, especially in North America. That is evident in terms of teaching, research programmes and fields of work.

Medical anthropologists research how gender, social background and cultural norms shape perceptions of illness and wellbeing. They focus on how affected people experience specific health phenomena and examine how health challenges are addressed in interaction with their personal

“An important aspect of medical anthropological research concerning global health is the ability to translate between different social and cultural contexts.”

respective networks. Relevant research issues include the prevention and treatment of physical and mental illness. Reproductive health matters too, of course.

Particularly in world regions with few resources, people rely heavily on support from non-governmental organisations as well as on extended families and local communities. This is less so in industrialised nations, where far more people are covered by health insurance, and formal healthcare infrastructure is much stronger. However, there are significant differences in health protection between high-income nations too, for instance between the welfare states of northern Europe and the mostly private health-care systems of North America.

Individual and collective experiences of health issues obviously depend on the conditions of the healthcare systems in which they occur. Political and economic factors are therefore highly relevant to the field of medical anthropology.

Within high-income countries, inequalities in access to healthcare persist largely due to social, cultural and linguistic barriers. They greatly disadvantage migrants, for example. Global inequalities are particularly concerning in resource-poor

countries that often depend on international funding. In many places, corporate profit-interests tend to determine whether people get access to medication (for malaria or HIV/AIDS, for instance).

Ultimately historical and political factors determine the kind of medical care that is available in any given country. Biomedicine – defined as medicine based on biological science – is dominant in western industrialised nations. In Africa, Asia and Latin America its history is closely connected to the violent colonial past. In those world regions, people often rely on a broad variety of forms of healthcare (including “traditional” practitioners, faith healers or medical systems like Ayurveda or homeopathy). These options coexist with biomedicine. Of course, there is a growing market for spiritual or alternative medicine in western nations as well, but the difference is that these options are used especially by better-off patients.

## MEDICAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND GLOBAL HEALTH

The field of global health has created new challenges and opportunities for medical anthropology. “Global health” has become a fast-growing field of work and study. Universities around the world have launched programmes on the topic. Medical anthropologists are involved in a variety of multidisciplinary collaborations. Others work for one of the many international health organisations in this field.

An important aspect of medical anthropological research concerning global health is the ability to translate between different social and cultural contexts. Medical anthropologists dive deep into local communities in long-term field work, gaining the trust needed to understand how people engage with specific treatment or prevention services – or why they reject them in response, for instance, to new health challenges like Covid-19.

Medical anthropology also reveals what resources people mobilise, depending on their circumstances, when faced with life-threatening or chronic illnesses. It also shows what role new and old networks of solidarity (familial, religious and other communities) play.

At the same time, medical anthropology makes clear which groups suffer most

from discrimination in a society, such as those who have a disability or stigmatised illnesses like HIV/AIDS. Researchers can also determine what medical, material, psychological and linguistic services would best meet marginalised people’s specific needs.

Ultimately medical anthropologists focus not only on the mechanisms of healthcare itself and the question of how treatment, care and prevention can be improved in general. They also pay attention to the social context and its underlying implications. Outreach and the practice of prevention programmes and vaccine campaigns that aim to reach people of different ages, genders and social backgrounds can benefit from such research.

Governmental and non-governmental action in new epidemics also demonstrates the challenges that health organisations are facing in a globalised world. In particular, the “emergency responses” of international organisations to epidemics like Ebola have shown that affected societies in resource-poor settings often deeply mistrust such interventions. Organisations typically take too little time to engage with specific local conditions and needs and are therefore often implicated in the long history of colonial and postcolonial dominance.

In all of these situations, medical anthropologists are in a position to mediate between different contexts, helping to build mutual trust. Their focus is on the resources and potential for action of individual people and local communities – anywhere in the world.

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Handing over emergency trauma kits to AoG's Ukraine coordination team.

#### MEDICATION SUPPLY

## Unprecedented changes

Since the beginning of Russia's war against Ukraine, the non-profit organisation **Apotheker ohne Grenzen (AoG – Pharmacists Without Borders)** has had to cope with its largest emergency aid mission to date. This has also led them to consider their future.

By Christian Splett

Russia attacked Ukraine on 24 February 2022. For many people, it was unimaginable that there could ever be another war in Europe. Thousands of Ukrainians were killed or injured, while millions were internally displaced or fled abroad. Six months after the war broke out, about a million refugees had registered in Germany alone, most of them women and children.

Within a few days, many non-profit organisations began caring for refugees arriving in Germany or organising shipments of food and clothing into Ukraine. The aid organisation AoG was one of them.

Typically, the Munich-based organization offers timely emergency assistance by collaborating with volunteer pharmacists, such as during the aftermath of cyclone Idai in Mozambique in 2019. AoG also manages

long-term projects like the hospital pharmacy at the Benedictine abbey in Hanga, Tanzania.

The Covid-19 pandemic had already put the organisation to the test: it was often impossible to travel abroad to see partners, even though there was an even greater need

“We held discussions about whether we should reserve money for long-term projects, but we decided that was unethical.”

to provide hygiene services and medication. In 2021, in addition to this, a regional flood disaster occurred in western Germany, prompting the organization to provide emergency relief within its own country after careful consideration.

From the outset, the war in Ukraine presented AoG with unfamiliar challenges again, which raised many questions: Should AoG once more provide emergency assistance in its own country, Germany? What is the legal situation regarding this? How can

donations be used quickly and appropriately? Where can AoG find staff? Can it send its emergency personnel into a war zone? How long can emergency assistance be sustained?

“After posting a call for help on Facebook, we had tens of thousands of interactions there, the phone never stopped ringing and a new email arrived every minute,” reports board member Andreas Portugal, who was one of the first to coordinate AoG's Ukraine relief effort in late February 2022. Requests are made for bandages and antibiotics for acute illnesses and injuries, as well as insulin and cardiovascular drugs for people with chronic diseases. “The government actually didn't make it difficult for us, but we still had to apply for a separate license to be able to export pharmaceuticals,” Portugal explains.

Every request has to specify exactly what medication is needed, along with the quality and quantity. The recipients on-site have to be professionally qualified and transport into Ukraine has to be secure. Many requests come directly from clinics in Kirovohrad, Lviv, Rivne, Mykolaiv, Kyiv or Kharkiv. “The difference to other projects is that we don't have any of our own staff in Ukraine, because we don't send anyone into a war zone on principle”, Portugal says.

However, just a few weeks after war broke out, AoG sent fact-finding teams of two on multiple-day trips to border countries like Poland and Romania. This is the way AoG usually assesses the precise need and finds local partners, but in the case of Ukraine, the war made it impossible to travel to the country itself. Nevertheless, the organisation was able to find new partners via neighbouring countries, such as the Ukrainian pilots' organisation Air Rescue. AoG also relies on long-standing partners in Ukraine like German Doctors or action medeor.

#### RISKY DELIVERIES

It is not uncommon for AoG's vans to carry deliveries worth €10,000, and sometimes they have to be reloaded at the border. The receipt of every delivery is confirmed with photos, emails and phone calls. Using this method, over 160 deliveries have been made to 40 different cities and communities in Ukraine by the end of 2022. Not a single shipment has been lost so far.

According to Portugal, the ongoing high demand is the largest challenge. At the

same time, Jochen Schreeck, then chairman of the AoG board, emphasised: “We had never received so many donations.” In the first months of 2022 alone, the organisation had collected €2 million for Ukraine, which is twice as much as it normally spends in a year on all its projects worldwide.

Donations for Ukraine in Germany are now declining. But Schreeck expects that a lot of money will be needed to rebuild supply structures in Ukraine. Board member Portugal confirms: “We held discussions about whether we should reserve money for long-term projects, but we decided that was unethical.” At least until the end of 2023, the donations that have been received so far should suffice for deliveries to Ukraine. However, long-term projects in countries like the Philippines or Argentina (see box) will also have to be taken up with renewed intensity now that Covid-19 restrictions have been lifted.

The aid organisation had to make personnel changes too. During the initial weeks, the project was mostly managed around the clock by three volunteers like Andreas Portugal. However, as of May 2022, this was no longer manageable. Consequently, AoG created three temporary paid positions – a first,

which significantly increased the size of the office.

As a founding member, Schreeck knows the organisation well: “We started in 2000, because we wanted to better distribute medication in low-income countries”. After its 2014 mission in response to the tsunami in Southeast Asia, the organisation professionalised. It now only sends trained experts on emergency aid missions. Every year, AoG offers one basic and one advanced training course for pharmacists and other specialists, who then become part of a personnel pool.

“When it comes to Ukraine aid, the question now is how to continue to strengthen our efforts in the future,” says Schreeck. He is convinced that the concept of a small office and numerous volunteers has proven itself. “Volunteer work is difficult to quantify, however, because it is not financially compensated,” notes the former head of the organisation, who has since been named an honorary member.

Providing aid to Ukraine not only forced the organisation to make financial and personnel changes; it also posed challenges with regard to AoG’s concept and mission. “In the past, we concentrated on providing pharmaceutical knowledge about

how medications work, but in Ukraine, our logistical knowledge about purchasing and transporting drugs is also very important,” Schreeck says. At the same time, thanks to its growing profile, the organisation is receiving more professional recognition for its pharmaceutical activities.

For AoG and other non-profit groups, the war in Ukraine is an ongoing challenge. They need to keep delivering aid fast to ease suffering. They also need to plan how to rebuild for the long term. And they should think about what they can learn from this situation to be better prepared in the future, improving how they plan, organize and staff their missions.

LINK:

<https://www.apotheker-ohne-grenzen.de>



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## Slum pharmacy in Buenos Aires

Before the start of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine (see main text), a pharmacy in Argentina with an annual volume of about €300,000 was the largest project of the non-profit organisation Apotheker ohne Grenzen (AoG – Pharmacists Without Borders).

In 2022, the pharmacy celebrated its twentieth anniversary. “We started with a five-square-meter pharmacy and now reliably supply medication to up to 2,000 patients,” says Carina Vetye, an Argentinian-German pharmacist who founded and still runs the pro-

ject in her hometown Buenos Aires.

The pharmacy, which has five part-time employees, is integrated into a health centre in the slum of Villa Zagala, where good hygiene, nutrition and healthcare cannot be taken for granted. “We want to give sick people what they need – the right medication at the right time, regularly and free of charge,” Vetye says with regard to chronically ill patients.

The project, which has a total of 14 local employees, places particular emphasis on dental hygiene. Toothaches can severely impact daily life

– eating becomes difficult, children stay home from school and adults with missing teeth have a harder time finding jobs. For that reason, Vetye not only



Carina Vetye in Villa Zagala.

works in the pharmacy, but also teaches dental hygiene classes for children and adults at nursery and primary schools and distributes plaque disclosing tablets and toothbrushes for prevention.

Now the first generation of young slum residents without dental problems is growing up. Vetye sees the ongoing uncertainty in drug supplies as well as the high staff turnover in the health centre as challenges for the coming years. “When consulting with doctors and dentists, we always have to start over from the beginning,” she says, summing up: “We have to take the long view. These problems developed over decades. There are no quick fixes.”

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Childaid orientation on nutrition and other maternal health issues in Ramechhap district, 2023.

## HEALTHCARE

## A multi-layered challenge

**More education on health issues is needed in Nepal, especially for women and girls. Local health centres and Female Community Health Volunteers play a crucial role.**

By Sattish Chandra Aryal

Nepal, like many other developing countries, faces significant health challenges. Mothers and their children are particularly affected, especially in rural areas with limited access to healthcare and resources. Women still face numerous obstacles when it comes to family planning, safe mother-

hood, childcare, nutrition and menstrual hygiene practices.

The greatest risks for mothers and children include:

- lack of medical knowledge and awareness,
- limited availability of medical professionals and facilities as well as
- difficulties in accessing healthcare due to transportation limitations.

Nepal has a high maternal mortality rate, standing at 151 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2021. Approximately five percent of all deaths among women of reproductive

age are due to maternal causes (Nepal Ministry of Health and Population 2023). This alarming situation calls for immediate attention and action to address the root causes and improve the overall health outcomes for women and their children.

The Nepalese government has taken steps to reduce healthcare disparities and enhance accessibility for vulnerable populations, particularly those in rural areas. Various initiatives have been implemented, such as standard treatment protocols (STPs), free healthcare programmes and incentive schemes promoting safe healthcare practices. However, addressing Nepal's challenges requires going beyond such initiatives.

### STRENGTHENING LOCAL ACTORS

It is important to address the core issues affecting healthcare accessibility by effectively utilising existing resources and structures. One key area that needs attention is the enhancement of local health posts and the effectiveness of their staff. In Nepal, a country of about 30 million people, over 5000 health facilities spread across the country. They play a crucial role in providing primary healthcare services to communities and can potentially provide comprehensive care for almost all citizens.

However, these facilities often lack adequate resources and trained staff to deliver high-quality care, so upgrading and targeted trainings are needed. Moreover, mentorship and monitoring of these health facilities by all 753 local governments of Nepal is necessary to ensure the delivery of high-quality services.

Local governments should also collaborate with schools and health facilities to conduct health awareness campaigns

## Childaid Network Foundation

Childaid Network Foundation is a non-profit foundation based in Germany that currently gives needy children and young persons access to education, training and health facilities in four countries in South

Asia (India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Myanmar).

In 2022, over 150,000 children and young persons and around 2000 teachers and multipliers were directly supported for the first time

in around 50 education and child-protection projects at over 1000 project locations. The organisation is funded by public grants, private donations, funding partners and companies.

In Nepal, Childaid is working in the field of education, school and community-based health and vocational

training. It is currently operating in the districts of Ramechhap, Dolakha and Sindhuli east of Kathmandu.

In partnership with Childaid, Green Tara Nepal, a national NGO, is collaborating with local stakeholders, civil society and schools to implement community and school health projects. SCA

specifically targeted at adolescent girls. By focusing on this vulnerable group, we can empower them with knowledge and awareness of their reproductive health, menstrual hygiene and other essential health practices. This initiative not only benefits adolescent girls but also contributes to the overall health and well-being for students of public schools in the country, as well as their communities.

Another critical component of Nepal's healthcare system is the Female Community Health Volunteers (FCHVs). These dedicated individuals, numbering more than 50,000 nationwide, play a vital role in:

- providing essential health education,
- supporting mothers and families,
- registering pregnant and postpartum women and
- distributing medications and contraceptives within their communities.

Their tireless efforts have contributed to a significant reduction in maternal mortality rates over the years.

However, to effectively fulfil their role, FCHVs require specific training and capacity-building programmes addressing various health issues. Collaborative efforts between FCHVs and health posts can improve community health. They can, for example, increase awareness, empower marginalised groups to seek support and promote children's health through school-based interventions like regular health screenings. This comprehensive approach ensures that health promotion and preventive measures are instilled at an early age, leading to healthier communities in the future.

Strong coordination between FCHVs and other stakeholders is crucial for the success of these initiatives. Engaging local governments, community leaders and civil-society organisations like Childaid (see box) in collaborative efforts will amplify the impact and sustainability of these interventions.

Addressing Nepal's healthcare challenges requires a holistic and multi-faceted approach. By effectively utilising existing

resources and structures and focusing on primary healthcare at the grassroots level, we can make significant progress in improving the health outcomes for mothers and children, especially in rural areas. Strengthening local health posts, enhancing the role of Female Community Health Volunteers and promoting collaboration among stakeholders will pave the way for a healthier and thriving Nepal.

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#### LINK

**Nepal Ministry of Health and Population, 2023: National population and housing census 2021 – a report on maternal mortality.**  
<https://mohp.gov.np/uploads/Resources/Nepal%20Maternal%20Mortality%20Report%202021.pdf>



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#### MULTILATERAL INSTITUTION

## Ecology and human health

**Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, awareness of zoonotic diseases has increased everywhere. These illnesses can be transmitted from animals to human beings. Chronic diseases too are often linked to ecological problems. Healthcare planners should therefore pay more attention to environmental issues, demands a policy paper that was prepared on behalf of the World Health Organization's European Regional Office.**

By Isah Shafiq

The One Health approach emphasizes the interdependency of human, animal and environmental health. More and better cooperation of medical doctors with veterinarians and eco-scientists is important. According to the WHO paper, however, policymakers

who focus on health issues tend to neglect the expertise of the latter two groups.

The WHO authors list three main reasons why this must change:

- The natural environment is a reservoir in which substances and nutrients accumulate and circulate. Human-caused pollution with toxins, antibiotics or pathogens eventually finds its way into human bodies.
- Many environmental dynamics have impacts on human health and depend on ecosystems which have been modified by human action. As a result, illnesses evolve faster and pathogen populations increase.
- Environmental interactions lead to genes, pathogens and chemicals being transmitted between humans and animals with impacts on bodies' immune systems.

Human influences disturb the natural balance of ecosystems. The WHO publication warns that this makes the emergence and spread of zoonoses more likely. Land-use changes are especially important. As fields and commercial forestry expand, natural woodlands are destroyed and biodiversity is depleted. Zoonoses are prone to break out where human settlements encroach on wilderness, making host animals interact with people more often (see Nayatara Narayanan on page 23 of this issue).

Urbanization generally means more contact of people with host animals, the WHO reports. Indeed, host animals are increasingly becoming common in cities, where high population density can accelerate the spreading of a disease.

The loss of biodiversity matters too, the WHO authors warn. Great biodiversity serves as a kind of buffer against transmissions. Where many different species interact with one another, the interaction of two specific species becomes less likely.

Consumption of wildlife meat is risky, according to the WHO. On the one hand,





Meat vendor in Wuhan: the global Covid-19 pandemic's epicentre was a wet market in this Chinese city.

hunting reduces biodiversity. On the other hand, meat of infected animals may be infectious itself. The report stresses that scientists trace the zoonotic Coronavirus pandemic back to a wet market in Wuhan.

As is true of many environmental problems, climate change is a catalyst of deteriorating ecosystem health. The WHO study states that rising temperatures are making pathogens and host animals migrate to new areas. Higher temperatures also shorten incubation periods and accelerate replication rates.

Air pollution too may boost zoonosis risks. Unhealthy air weakens immune systems of both people and animals, the WHO points out, so disease susceptibility grows. Moreover, air pollution is a driver of biodiversity loss.

## NON-COMMUNICABLE DISEASES

The conditions of the natural environment have a bearing on non-communicable diseases too, the WHO authors insist. Meat and dairy products are sometimes contaminat-

ed with toxic chemicals, they warn. Moreover, water pollution with heavy metals like mercury or lead means that fish is often contaminated too. Microplastics are increasingly found in various food items, the authors add (see Adaze Okeyaya-inneh on page 34 of this issue).

On the other hand, immune systems benefit from a healthy environment, according to the WHO. After all, immune systems are based on microbiomes on our skin and in our digestive system, and these microbiomes are composed of a multitude of viruses and bacteria. A polluted environment may easily disturb them.

The WHO even sees a link between One Health and food security. The point is that depletion of biodiversity can hurt agricultural production. That is the case when cultivars lose their resistance against pests and diseases or lose their resilience to flooding or draught. Genetically very homogeneous cultivars are especially at risk.

Not all human beings face the same risks, the WHO authors point out. People with higher incomes have better chances

to get medical treatment, adapt to risks or avoid risks in the first place. The same applies to nations. High incomes and strong infrastructure boost resilience.

In this sense, the One Health approach amounts to an appeal to reduce global inequalities. Among other things, the WHO authors want the trade in – and the consumption of – wild animals to be reduced. Moreover, they appreciate preventive action against deforestation and the destruction of ecosystems.

### LINK:

**WHO, Regional Office for Europe, 2022:**  
A health perspective on the role of the environment in One Health.

<https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/354574>



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## WATER POLLUTION

# Wastewater treatment must improve

In a recent report, the European Investment Bank shows how human activities contaminate the environment with ever more microplastics and micropollutants. Infrastructure investments would make a difference.

By Adaze Okeaya-inneh

Microplastics are small, fragmented particles of plastic. They are less than five millimetres long and can harm humans as well as the environment. Typically, the eye does not notice them, and the smallest items are invisible. Nonetheless, microplastics are increasingly present in food, air, water and cosmetics products.

They are also found in water bodies including rivers, lakes and oceans. About half of the microplastics that end up in oceans result from city dust and tyre use on roads, according to a report of the European Investment Bank (EIB) released in 2023. The other half is mostly linked to consumption patterns, with one-third stemming from synthetic textile. The EIB is an international development bank which belongs to the member countries of the EU.

The report shows that microplastic harms animals in aquatic habitats. The particles gather in the digestive system, and large quantities can kill an animal. Microplastic pollution has been proven to increase the mortality of aquatic animals.

It is worrisome that these particles have become part of the food chain. If you have ever eaten seafood, chances are some particles of microplastics reside in your body. The EIB states clearly that research carried out on human blood showed the presence of small plastics. Less pollution, moreover, has been shown to go along with fewer negative health impacts in humans. The benefits include increased fertility.

Accordingly, European citizens are worried. The EIB states that 89% express fear for their health, while 88% express anxiety about the environment.

Some key steps proposed by the EU for the reduction of plastic pollution in water include:

- deliberate restriction of microplastic addition to products,
- assessment of how well urban wastewater regulations are working and
- efforts to reduce the accidental release of microplastics from textiles, tires and plastic.

Microplastic release into the oceans is a global phenomenon. The EU accounts for



<https://www.eib.org/en/publications/20230042-microplastics-and-micropollutants-in-water>

10% of the world's microplastic release into the oceans. East Asia and Oceania (including China) lead with 31%, followed by South Asia (including India) with 18% and North America (including the USA) with 17%. Africa, the Middle East and South America are each said to release nine percent.

Conventional treatment plants of the kind that process about 90% of the EU's wastewater remove microplastics, the EIB writes. However, run-off water from roads and city streets is not treated that way. Moreover, the EIB admits that sludge from treatment plants remains a problem. Around the world, of course, more conventional treatment would help.

Micropollutants are another serious challenge. They are intangible contaminants (less than one microgramme per litre) that result from both natural and industrial processes. Conventional treatment plants do not affect them.

According to the EIB, these particles often change into more toxic compounds than their initial form. Research findings reveal that in humans, micropollutants accumulate in breast milk, blood and fat, causing potentially serious harm to the human body.

Antibiotics are another cause of concern. They are useful to cure bacterial infections, but their effectiveness is waning as an increasing number of pathogens are becoming antibiotic resistant. The more these pharmaceuticals are spread as micropollutants in the environment, the more antibiotic-resistant pathogen strains are likely to emerge.

The EIB argues that more advanced water-treatment plants can make a difference regarding micropollutants. It thus appreciates EU plans to introduce "fourth" or "quaternary" treatment on top of three conventional treatment stages so far. Quite obviously, that will require massive investments.

The EIB supports the reduction of micropollutants by providing long-term financing to water-resource managers, raising public awareness and facilitating technical assistance. For example, it lends money to public and private institutions for projects designed to reduce microplastic pollution.

## LINK

EIB, 2023: Microplastics and micropollutants in water.

<https://www.eib.org/en/publications/20230042-microplastics-and-micropollutants-in-water>



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