Africa feels the negative economic waves of COVID-19 outbreak
The African continent is mostly reported as a land of poverty, civil strife and endless lines of begging hands. Problems facing the continent are portrayed and communicated mostly by foreign eyes through the monopoly-controlled news media.

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By end of March, Africa is expected to record 1.4 percent decline in economic growth, amounting to a loss of $29b thanks to the outbreak of the corona virus which has now been reported in 15 African countries.

The decline is linked to direct trade links with China where the outbreak started from, Europe, the US and the rest of the world which have been affected one way or the other by the pandemic. China is Africa’s single largest trading partner with total trade of $208bn in 2019 representing a modest annual growth of 2.2% compared to 2018. China’s imports from Africa fell by 3.8 per cent in the period to US$95.5 billion, while exports rose 7.9 per cent to US$113.2 billion as China looked for ways to compensate for the effects of the trade war launched by the United States. Trade with Africa was thus already beginning to decline but this has been aggravated as both imports from and exports to China are feeling the effects of economic waves created by the COVID-19 outbreak.

The Covid-19 pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus is having a negative economic impact on Africa, an effect that is likely to continue for months to come, *writes Cornelius Adedze.*

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An estimate by The Economist Intelligence Unit says that the coronavirus could take 0.5 to 1 percent off China’s GDP growth. This is likely to reduce China’s demand for Africa’s exports, including minerals, petroleum products, and other raw materials, it concluded. Some analysts put the impact of reduced exports, even if limited to a few months, at $4 billion in lost revenues to Africa from China alone.

Indications already foretell difficult times for Africa this year with shock falls in demand and price declines for commodities. Without a serious study of the impact of the virus, oil consumption is said to have been reduced by 1.5mn barrels per day in the first quarter of the year and demand for copper is forecast to fall by 300,000 metric tons in the year. Prices of some of Africa’s key commodities, like copper, oil and thermal coal have already fallen by 20% since mid-January. Some Chinese buyers have postponed overseas orders, some declaring force majeure.

Oil exporters like Angola and Nigeria, and mineral exporters like the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and South Africa could thus face reduced sales. According to the MIT’s Observatory of Economic Complexity, China accounted for 95 per cent of South Sudan’s exports and 61 per cent of Angola’s shipments. Sierra Leone, Lesotho and Zambia are other countries that will be hard hit.

Meanwhile African oil exporters are in double agony as apart from the coronavirus drawback, an escalating oil price war has taken off with Saudi Arabia announcing that it will supply the oil market with 12.3mn barrels a day beginning April. This is 2.5m barrels a day more than what it was producing before and will flood the market leading to further drop in the price of oil from the current low of $36 per barrel, which is devastating news to African oil producers already reeling from the low demand and price for the commodity thanks to coronavirus. A scenario projected by the UNECA shows that even if the same volumes of barrels of oil are exported in 2020 as in the period 2016-18 and the price is pegged at $35, the impact of the coronavirus and price wars will make revenue for Africa exporters fall to $101b, a loss of over $65b. Indeed, the price wars resulting from tensions between Saudi Arabia and Russia, two major oil producers, could degenerate as Russia in response to the Saudi action, has also indicated it could raise its production by 500,000 b/d very soon.

“It is a catastrophe that is unfold-
“On the supply or import side, quite a number of African countries will be impacted. The telecom sector is one major area that Africa may suffer from greatly. Chinese Telecom giant, Huawei, is a major player on the African continent as far as telecom infrastructure, hardware and software are concerned.”

ing,” Bank of Namibia Governor Ipumbu Shiimi told reporters after cutting interest rates on Feb. 19. “We don’t know exactly where and when it is going to peak but I think it is already starting to disrupt economic activities.”

For a country that sells close to a fifth of its exports, mostly diamonds and copper, to China, any disruption in trade with China could prove catastrophic.

The global economy, according to the IMF was already slowing, and so its new forecasts in January had revised down both China’s expected growth (6 percent in 2020) and that of sub-Saharan Africa (3.5 percent in 2020) before the virus hit. The IMF predicts that 21 African countries that it defines as resource-intensive will make “their growth move in slow gear” of about 2.5 per cent. The UNECA has also revised the continent’s growth from 3.2 percent to 1.8 percent this year in its recent publication, Economic Impact of COVID-19 on Africa. (Graph provided)

It is not just the extractive sector which is at risk but such food supplies to China like Namibian beef, Rwandan coffee, Kenyan avocados and South African citrus among others.

The airline industry has not been left out as African airlines, RwandAir, Kenya Airways, Royal Air Maroc, EgyptAir, Air Madagascar, Air Mauritius, and AirTanzania, have cancelled flights to China. The particular case of Angola, analysts say, could be very damaging. Exports to China account for 23 per cent of Angola’s GDP, according to data compiled by Renaissance Capital. The longer the fall in oil prices the more devastating it would be for Angola’s IMF programme, as the government had put its hope on prices staying at an average of $55 a barrel to help stabilise public finances. Falling oil prices and dwindling demands from China would thus be “a double whammy” to the country.

South Africa is another country that stands to lose a lot according to a study by PwC as China is its largest supplier of imports, and its biggest buyer of exports. On the export side China’s steel and copper manufacturing industries rely a lot on South African minerals so the shutdown of industries in China will hit South African minerals exports hard. Another area that may take a hit from the fallout is the tourism sector. Some 95,000 Chinese are reported to visit South Africa yearly, it is estimated that there will be at least more than 15 percent drop in tourist arrivals from China with a “potential loss of R200 million in Chinese tourist spending”.

On the supply or import side, quite a number of African countries will be impacted. The telecom sector is one major area that Africa may suffer from greatly. Chinese Telecom giant, Huawei, is a major player on the African continent as far as telecom infrastructure, hardware and software are concerned. In South Africa’s telecoms sector one report suggests mobile phones are South Africa’s largest import category by value from China, with 85% of South Africa’s mobile phone imports. In addition, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique and Ghana are other countries that also import large quantities of equipment and machinery from China and the longer the situation continues the more likely they are to be hugely affected.

Manufacturers in Africa whose inputs come from China are not left out. Tsedenia Mekbib, managing director of the Ethiopian operations of Pittards, a UK leather and apparel producer, bemoans the impact on their company’s supply chain as they import thread and packing materials from a plant in Tianjin, northern China, but the factory there had not resumed operations since the lunar new year holiday.

“Not much is happening at the moment. Until that is cleared, we’re just living off our stock,” she added. “Everybody is affected by coronavirus. We are heavily dependent on China for inputs.”

At the global level analysts expect a 2% reduction in China’s output on an
“For now, health-wise, Africa, may not be seeing huge numbers of those infected by the virus, which is good but the longer the situation persists and the more people that get infected, the more dire Africa’s response mechanism becomes. With dwindling economic fortunes, the continent may find it an uphill task coping with the virus as some of its largest economies may get trapped further and deeper in debt crisis.”

Annual basis and this contraction will cause an estimated fall of about US$50 billion in exports across countries, an UNCTAD report has stated. The report continues that with 20 percent of global trade in the manufacture of intermediate products originating from China (up from 4 percent in 2002) it means Chinese manufacturing “is essential to many global value chains, especially those related to precision instruments, machinery, automotive and communication equipment. Any significant disruption in China’s supply in these sectors is deemed to substantially affect producers in the rest of the world.”

The EU and the US are expected to lose $15.6 billion and $5.8 billion, respectively, due to Chinese supply disruptions. These also have implications for Africa with an increasing interlocking global economy and especially as the EU and the US are major trade partners of Africa. The continent will thus be doubly impacted, directly from China and indirectly from the non-Chinese partners who are also dependent on China.

Additionally, China has become a major player in the investment and building of infrastructure in Africa over the last couple of decades. Some of these infrastructure are through loans guaranteed by resource concessions. Angola, Zambia, Guinea and Ghana in recent times are some of the countries that have leveraged their natural resources, especially oil and minerals for infrastructure with the Chinese.

Falling commodity prices, falling demands for the commodities may not only lead to delays in the projects but also more indebtedness to China in the long run. Meanwhile, the many ongoing or about to be launched Chinese projects across the continent may come to a complete halt or be suspended as the millions of Chinese workers on the various projects are either quarantined or could not return after celebrating the Chinese new year at home.

For now, health-wise, Africa, may not be seeing huge numbers of those infected by the virus, which is good but the longer the situation persists and the more people that get infected, the more dire Africa’s response mechanism becomes. With dwindling economic fortunes, the continent may find it an uphill task coping with the virus as some of its largest economies may get trapped further and deeper in debt crisis. Above is a scenario presented by the UNECA of the fiscal pressures some African countries may face.

African countries are net importers of pharmaceuticals and medical products (94 percent, with Europe, India and China 80 percent) and given the financial squeeze they will find themselves challenged in finding resources to fight the pandemic. Unfortunately, with 116 countries affected by the virus and mostly in the developed world help might not be as forthcoming as in the case of other outbreaks like ebola which originated from Africa. Procuring and making basic items like sanitizers, masks, test kits among others available may become a huge challenge to Africa, if the shortages in the developed countries are anything to go by. Inadequate and ill-equipped health infrastructure and personnel as well as non-preparedness to deal with the pandemic are major medium to long term issues that will come from lack of resources.

The economic malaise that has befallen the continent following the outbreak is thus likely to compound its well-known crippling poverty, unemployment, and poor social infrastructure.

* Cornelius Adedze is editor of African Agenda
Recently, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo said, “We have an epidemic caused by Coronavirus, but we have a pandemic caused by fear”. This fear is worsened by how news agencies report the outbreak. These are some examples.

“Bodies ‘pile up’ in morgue as Iran feels strain of coronavirus” – CNN.

“First UK death from coronavirus confirmed as cases surge to 115” – The Guardian UK.

“Coronavirus: Global death toll exceeds 3,000” – Premium Times Nigeria.

“Death toll from coronavirus in Italy rises to 148: Live updates” – Al Jazeera.

“Coronavirus update, map as death toll reaches 3,200. Infections soar in Italy, Iran and South Korea” – Newsweek.

News outlets are often quick to report the number of infected and deaths due to Coronavirus. However, they do not highlight as prominently the number of Coronavirus survivors. Yet, there are many survivors.

There are currently 110,624 reported cases; 62,397 have recovered, 44,396 are currently infected, with 3,831 deaths. Herefore, there are 16 times as many people who have survived Coronavirus as those who have died from it. A breakdown of Coronavirus survivors in some countries are as follows, China: 58,721, Iran: 2,134, Italy: 622 and South Korea: 166. The much-reported Diamond Princess Ship has 245 survivors, and this is hardly reported.

The Nigerian writer, Chimamanda Adichie describes this act of only focusing on one side of a story as the danger of the single story. In her TEDGlobal Talk, Chimamanda affirms that we are vulne-
rable and impressionable in the face of a story. She went further to say that, show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become.

These Coronavirus headlines by major news agencies spell death, gloom and despair. Unconsciously, people are only associating deaths with the Coronavirus outbreak. They are taking extreme measures, closing businesses and schools. Currently, nearly 300 million children are out of school because of fear.

On the extreme end, the National Association of Funeral Directors in the United Kingdom indicate that if Coronavirus is declared a Pandemic, they would consider streaming funeral services online. According to the Association, this is to prevent the spread of the infection and give the bereaved a chance to mourn their loss. However, this could be counterproductive because internet trolls may use such videos to propagate fear and panic.

This must change. Indeed, reporting the complete picture of the outbreak gives hope and builds confidence in people that being infected is not a death sentence. In contrast, continuing the negative reporting of COVID-19 increases hysteria, fear and panic associated with the outbreak. It perpetuates the narrative that people do not survive the infection. Fortunately, the data show the contrary.

Henceforth, these are four ways to ensure balanced reporting by news organisations:

First, news agencies must begin to write the complete story and always mention numbers of survivors in their headlines. Their articles on the Coronavirus outbreak should be aspirational as well as factual. Leaving out the thousands of people who survive the infection is a great disservice to survivors and paints an incomplete picture.

Second, we need to hear Coronavirus survivors speak about their experiences. Journalists should interview these survivors and document their journeys. There is a great lesson in this regard from the CNN Global Town Hall on Coronavirus. During the townhall meeting, Carl Goldman, a survivor at the Nebraska University Teaching Hospital was interviewed. He got infected while aboard the Diamond Princess Cruise Ship. Watching him share the symptoms he experienced, how he was treated by health workers and his recovery was liberating. More of such interviews should be done with survivors to encourage us all.

Third, news agencies must keep reiterating preventative measures in their reporting. People should know that doing these would reduce their risks of getting infected. Avoid touching their eyes, nose and mouth with unwashed hands; wash their hands with soap under running water; cough/sneeze into a tissue paper or the curve of the elbows, maintain a distance of at least 5 feet from anyone coughing or sneezing, and contact their healthcare providers when in doubt.

Fourth, news agencies should be cautious about the types of information they share with the public. The World Health Organisation acknowledges that there is currently an infodemic – an overwhelming amount of true and false information on social media and websites. When the public is overloaded with only news of death, it could lead to internet trolls using such to create misinformation.

To keep fear from spreading faster than the actual virus, organizations must self-regulate and report the Coronavirus outbreak in a complete manner. It is the ethical thing to do. It is for public good and public health.

*Dr. Ifeanyi Nsofor is a medical doctor, the CEO of EpiAFRIC, Director of Policy and Advocacy for Nigeria Health Watch.
UN Report: Rising inequality affects more than 70% of the globe

Inequality is growing for more than 70 per cent of the global population, exacerbating the risks of divisions and hampering economic and social development. But the rise is far from inevitable and can be tackled at a national and international level, says a flagship study released by the UN.

The World Social Report 2020, published by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), shows that income inequality has increased in most developed countries, and some middle-income countries – including China, which has the world’s fastest growing economy.

The challenges are underscored by UN chief António Guterres in the foreword, in which he states that the world is confronting “the harsh realities of a deeply unequal global landscape”, in which economic woes, inequalities and job insecurity have led to mass protests in both developed and developing countries.

“Income disparities and a lack of opportunities”, he writes, “are creating a vicious cycle of inequality, frustration and discontent across generations.”

The study shows that the richest one per cent of the population are the big winners in the changing global economy, increasing their share of income between 1990 and 2015, while at the other end of the scale, the bottom 40 per cent earned less than a quarter of income in all countries surveyed.

One of the consequences of inequality within societies, notes the report, is slower economic growth. In unequal societies, with wide disparities in areas such as health care and education, people are more likely to remain trapped in poverty, across several generations.

Between countries, the difference in
average incomes is reducing, with China and other Asian nations driving growth in the global economy. Nevertheless, there are still stark differences between the richest and poorest countries and regions: the average income in North America, for example, is 16 times higher than that of people in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The report looks at the impact that four powerful global forces, or mega-trends, are having on inequality around the world: technological innovation, climate change, urbanization and international migration.

Whilst technological innovation can support economic growth, offering new possibilities in fields such as health care, education, communication and productivity, there is also evidence to show that it can lead to increased wage inequality, and displace workers.

Rapid advances in areas such as biology and genetics, as well as robotics and artificial intelligence, are transforming societies at pace. New technology has the potential to eliminate entire categories of jobs, but, equally, may generate entirely new jobs and innovations.

For now, however, highly skilled workers are reaping the benefits of the so-called “fourth industrial revolution”, whilst low-skilled and middle-skilled workers engaged in routine manual and cognitive tasks, are seeing their opportunities shrink.

As the UN’s 2020 report on the global economy showed last Thursday, the climate crisis is having a negative impact on quality of life, and vulnerable populations are bearing the brunt of environmental degradation and extreme weather events. Climate change, according to the World Social Report, is making the world’s poorest countries even poorer, and could reverse progress made in reducing inequality among countries.

If action to tackle the climate crisis progresses as hoped, there will be job losses in carbon-intensive sectors, such as the coal industry, but the “greening” of the global economy could result in overall net employment gains, with the creation of many new jobs worldwide.

For the first time in history, more people live in urban than rural areas, a trend that is expected to continue over the coming years. Although cities drive economic growth, they are more unequal than rural areas, with the extremely wealthy living alongside the very poor.

The scale of inequality varies widely from city to city, even within a single country: as they grow and develop, some cities have become more unequal whilst, in others, inequality has declined.

The fourth megatrend, international migration, is described as both a “powerful symbol of global inequality”, and “a force for equality under the right conditions”.

Migration within countries, notes the report, tends to increase once countries begin to develop and industrialize, and more inhabitants of middle-income countries than low-income countries migrate abroad.

International migration is seen, generally, as benefiting both migrants, their countries of origin (as money is sent home) and their host countries.

In some cases, where migrants compete for low-skilled work, wages may be pushed down, increasing inequality but, if they offer skills that are in short supply, or take on work that others are not willing to do, they can have a positive effect on unemployment.

Despite a clear widening of the gap between the haves and have-nots worldwide, the report points out that this situation can be reversed. Although the megatrends have the potential to continue divisions in society, they can also, as the Secretary-General says in his foreword, “be harnessed for a more equitable and sustainable world”. Both national governments and international organizations have a role to play in levelling the playing field and creating a fairer world for all.

Reducing inequality should, says the report, play a central role in policy-making. This means ensuring that the potential of new technology is used to reduce poverty and create jobs; that vulnerable people grow more resilient to the effects of climate change; cities are more inclusive; and migration takes place in a safe, orderly and regular manner.

Three strategies for making countries more egalitarian are suggested in the report: the promotion of equal access to opportunities (through, for example, universal access to education); fiscal policies that include measures for social policies, such as unemployment and disability benefits; and legislation that tackles prejudice and discrimination, whilst promoting greater participation of disadvantaged groups.”

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While action at a national level is crucial, the report declares that “concerted, coordinated and multilateral action” is needed to tackle major challenges affecting inequality within and among countries.

The report’s authors conclude that, given the importance of international co-operation, multilateral institutions such as the UN should be strengthened and action to create a fairer world must be urgently accelerated.

The UN’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which provides the blueprint for a better future for people and the planet, recognizes that major challenges require internationally coordinated solutions, and contains concrete and specific targets to reduce inequality, based on income.
Intellectual Property raises costs of living

Many medicines and medical tests are unaffordable to most of humanity owing to the ability of typically transnational pharmaceutical giants to abuse their monopoly powers, enforced by intellectual property laws, to set prices to maximize profits over the long-term, contend Claire Lim and Jomo Kwame Sundaram.

Most basic research is funded by government grants, and in recent years, by philanthropic initiatives. When a profitable opportunity presents itself, venture capitalists fund ‘last leg’ efforts to patent an innovation and ‘take it to market’, as the patent holder ‘takes all’.

Patents, a form of intellectual property rights (IPRs), are believed by many to be necessary to incentivise innovation, and to recover research and development costs, by creating a temporary legal monopoly.

After securing patents, patent holders typically take additional measures to deter and undermine potential competitors, and to consolidate and extend their monopoly position for as long as possible by any means available. Private companies have then used their monopolies to charge exorbitant prices.

In 2015, Turing Pharmaceuticals bought the rights to Daraprim—a drug used by cancer and HIV patients to fight deadly parasitic infections—raising its price 50-fold from USD13.50 to USD750! The ‘price gouging’ company was controlled by Martin Shkreli, dubbed ‘Pharma Bro’ by the US media.
and once deemed ‘America’s most hated man’.

Private companies eager to extend their monopolies try to ‘evergreen’ them, by registering ‘follow-on’ patents involving minor variations closely linked to the original invention. By ‘evergreening’, the patents system has been used by companies to create long term monopolies.

Others engage in ‘patent trolling’, obtaining many patents to profit from litigation or licensing, without inventing anything or making products of their own. Trolling enables patent owners to blackmail those in need to their patents, sometimes by creating ‘patent thickets’—webs of overlapping IPRs—and related bottlenecks, limiting utilization of patented knowledge and effectively hindering further innovation.

Before the US withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in January 2017, TPP provisions would have extended IP protections to cover ‘biologics’, i.e., naturally occurring substances, such as insulin for diabetes patients.

These onerous TPP provisions have been suspended in the successor Comprehensive and Progressive TPP (CPTPP) following US withdrawal, but can easily be reinstated, e.g., to induce the US to rejoin the TPP.

Through various means, US-style IPR regimes have spread worldwide since adoption of the World Trade Organization’s (WTO) agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS).

Under TRIPS, all WTO members have to provide a minimum level of IP protection which includes, among other things, patent protection for a minimum of 20 years, including for imported IPRs registered in other countries.

TRIPS also stipulates conditions for using the ‘compulsory licence’ concession allowing governments to license the use of a patented invention to a third party or government agency without the consent of the patent-holder.

There is moot evidence that TRIPS benefits developing countries by attracting foreign investment, promoting technological transfer and increasing innovation. Instead, TRIPS has imposed substantial, avoidable costs on developing countries.

Where developing countries have made use of TRIPS concessions, they have faced international pressure from pharmaceutical giants and their governments to limit, if not eliminate the scope of these exceptions.

Malaysia is the first country to use ‘compulsory licencing’ under TRIPS to produce sofosbuvir for Hepatitis C treatment. The drug, from patent owner Gilead, costs almost RM300,000 (USD68,000) for the full course, while generic substitutes cost just over RM1000. US ‘big pharma’ has applied pressure on Malaysia to stop using its ‘compulsory licence’.

Developing countries are generally unable to check the monopolistic practices of transnational pharmaceutical conglomerates due to underdeveloped antitrust regimes, weak law enforcement capacities and their influential partners. Such companies may ‘re-package’ medicinal products and processes from developing countries’ ‘traditional knowledge systems’ to secure patents on them, including naturally occurring substances known as ‘biologics’.

Turmeric is widely used in India for medicine, food and dye among other things. In 1995, the US granted the University of Mississippi Medical Center a patent for the use and administration of turmeric powder to heal wounds, granting it an exclusive right to sell and distribute turmeric.

The Indian Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) objected, arguing that turmeric had been so used in India for centuries, providing historical references in Sanskrit, Urdu, Hindi and other languages. The US patent was eventually revoked because it lacked the ‘novelty’ element, but it required Herculean efforts.

Developing countries are now no longer able to require technology transfer, further limiting their ability to develop their own technological capacities and capabilities. Hence, many developing country governments are told they have no other way to industrialize except by generously inducing transnational companies to locate parts of their ‘value-adding’ activities in their economies.

“Innovation, Intellectual Property and Development, by Joseph Stiglitz, Dean Baker and Arjun Jayadev, suggests alternatives to incentivise innovation, especially relevant for developed economies. These include: centralized direct R&D financing; decentralized funding through tax breaks for research spending; using prizes to recognize and reward innovative research; and establishing open source platforms to promote free knowledge flows.

Without the strong private monopolies enabled by current IP rules, the currently unaffordable prices of medicines and other products can be significantly reduced while developing countries will have much better prospects for developing internationally competitive industrial capacities and technological capabilities.”

*Claire Lim is a lawyer who used to practice in England. Jomo Kwame Sundaram was a university professor and senior UN official. Both work with the Khazanah Research Institute, whose views are not expressed here.
The Beijing Declaration built on the human rights inscribed in the Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979, whose articles 7 and 8 clearly states the need for removing all discriminations preventing women from leadership.

On September 1995, the Beijing Platform of Action took full ownership of the human rights agenda initially contained in CEDAW, advanced women’s rights and strongly reaffirmed the universal commitment to women’s power and leadership. Women took ownership of the human rights agenda and redefined it to ensure that gender equality and women’s empowerment would be at its core.

At the time, world leaders committed to the extraordinary Platform for Action with tangible and ambitious commitments in strategic areas, from peace to development, and designed roadmaps to get us there.

Since 1995, the world continued the march to make the world more gender equal and to enhance women’s leadership and participation in peace, security and development processes.

In 2000, following decades of advocacy led by women civil society organizations and women human rights activists, the United Nations Security Council adopted resolution 1325, the global commitment to ensure that women are systematically and sustainably integrated into peace and security processes.

The international community furthered the women, peace and security agenda in 2009 by recognizing the harmful impact of sexual violence in conflict on women and communities, making this scourge punishable under International Human Rights Law and International Criminal Law.

In the last twenty-five years, African women have made substantive progress in political, economic and social arenas but also have faced numerous constraints.

The positive picture reflects enhanced political and legislative leadership to ensure that women do have a seat for action! Uniting for Africa’s transformation

Twenty-five years ago, thousands of representatives adopted the Beijing Declaration, one of the most progressive universal agreement to advance women’s rights. *Sahle-Work Zewde* and *Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka* look back over the years since and call for action to deliver on the promises.

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In the last twenty-five years, African women have made substantive progress in political, economic and social arenas but also have faced numerous constraints.

The positive picture reflects enhanced political and legislative leadership to ensure that women do have a seat for action! Uniting for Africa’s transformation

Twenty-five years ago, thousands of representatives adopted the Beijing Declaration, one of the most progressive universal agreement to advance women’s rights. *Sahle-Work Zewde* and *Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka* look back over the years since and call for action to deliver on the promises.
at the table of key decision-making processes.

Today, Rwanda has the highest percentage of women members of parliament in the world: 61%. Namibia, Senegal and South Africa follow closely with at least over 40% of women holding seats in Parliament.

Ethiopia not only made great strides by electing its first female President in October 2018, but Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed also raised the bar high for national governments by ensuring a gender equal cabinet with 50% of its members being women.

Across Africa, women have taken the seat at the top table, including President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia, President Joyce Banda of Malawi, President Catherine Samba-Panza of the Central African Republic and President Ameenah Gurib-Fakim of Mauritius.

More women are being elected in public office or appointed to ministerial positions. These changes have not happened by coincidence but as the result of deliberate policy decisions and grassroots action.

In many cases, this transformation was realized through hard-fought constitutional amendments and parity legislation aimed at reserving the necessary space for women and youth.

At continental level, the African Union has developed an extensive and progressive body of legal instruments as well as innovative solutions and platforms in its various thematic areas of work. The years 2010–2020 marked the African Women’s Decade.

The AU Strategy for Gender Equality & Women’s Empowerment (2018 – 2028) is informed by global standards that include instruments like the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs – whose Goal 5 is on “Gender Equality”).

Other human rights instruments of the African Union such as the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights consider women’s rights as an integral component of the key rights. The AU has appointed Heads of State as champions and leaders to push for implementation of commitments under various thematic areas of the work of the Union.

Despite these great achievements, we must admit that the world – and we as leaders – did not keep our promise to ensure that every woman and girl, wherever she may live, could be assured to enjoy her full human rights reach her full potential.

The reality is that we have failed women and girls. Some of the best minds remain excluded because we failed to provide access to education to all women and girls. Many of the potential pillars of our societies remain marginalized because we failed to properly address and eradicate gender inequality and violence against women.

Our continent is lagging behind in creating the peaceful and developed societies we seek to realize, in part, because we failed to offer women and girls the necessary opportunities and tools, which would allow them to thrive and be full contributors.

And despite the elections of some women to high and highest offices, and existing legislative and legal frameworks, by and large, across Africa women are still struggling to gain a seat at the decision-making table or in peace and security processes.

Despite the existing evidence revealing that gender perspective drives the sustainability of peace and security processes, there is still a blunt implementation gap in terms of ensuring women’s participation in peace processes.
We support the advancement of African women through six (6) flagship projects in peace and security, governance, finance, agriculture, young women’s leadership and social mobilization. The Network further provides peer learning, experience sharing and cross-generational dialogues in order to bolster women’s contributions to building and sustaining peace, sustainable economies and social transformation.

Women are making a crucial difference in the lives of the people they serve at local level. In this spirit, the AWLN national chapters are the cornerstones of movement building for the Network and support its localization at grassroots level and represent a major milestone benefiting all African women and ensuring that their voices are better heard, and their issues better addressed, in order to increase women’s ownership in the transformation of the continent and the 2063 Agenda “The Africa We Want.”

Since 2017, the AWLN has established 11 national chapters in (chronologically) the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Cote d’Ivoire, the Central African Republic, Sierra Leone, the Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Seychelles, Ethiopia, Liberia, Morocco and Cameroon. The Network, with the support of UN Women and the AU, plans to have a total of 25 national chapters established by March 2020, in line with UN Women’s Generation Gender Equality Campaign, and to ensure that a critical mass of women is leading the movement throughout the continent.

We are working closely with women’s groups, the UN System, the African Union and development partners to ensure that, beyond women’s participation, all efforts are undertaken to create a conducive environment for women empowerment and the protection of their rights and freedoms.

We encourage all African Member States to speed up the process and to offer the necessary support to women and young people coming together for Africa’s transformation. The time for action is now to build irreversible positive changes for gender equality in Africa.

In 2020, 25 years after the Beijing Declaration and 20 years after Security Council resolution 1325, it is clear that we must accelerate our efforts, move faster on the roadmap towards the targets we want to reach, and deliver tangible actions for the people we serve.

As I write these words, we are still very far away from achieving gender parity and full women’s empowerment in Africa. We must build on the positive strides that we have made so far to achieve this urgent ambition.

As African women, we call on all African men – leaders in politics and business, elders and young, neighbors in our cities and villages, fathers, brothers and sons – to join women in a great partnership for human rights, peace and development.

We call on them to lead and invest in change at a national level with the African Women Leaders Network National Chapters and women’s movements for peace to address the gender equality gaps that we know persist.

Africa has already adopted strong protocols, including the Maputo Protocol, and instruments that bind us, and through which Heads of State and Government have already agreed on Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment. Women must be meaningfully included in peace, security and development negotiations and in the politics of their country.

We are asking all our allies to use their power and influence to support African women in taking their rightful place in the next chapter of the continent and building a future where women and girls can live out their lives freely, in purpose and happiness.

The movement of African women across the continent is a rally for action. A movement to ensure that leaders keep on their commitments and promises. It is time for action.

Together, we can unite for Africa’s transformation.

* Sable-Work Zewde, is President of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, and Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, is Executive Director of UN Women. This article is part of special IPS coverage of International Women’s Day 2020.
Bridging Africa’s great Gender-financing divide

What stands between Soi Cate Chelang and her dream of turning her small pallet-making business into a major enterprise is capital, writes *Miriam Gathigah.*

In Kenya, Chelang may well be a pioneer in making seats out of wooden pallets — the flat pieces of wood used to support goods or containers during shipping.

While she has no formal training in carpentry, Chelang tells IPS that she comes from a long line of carpenters, having trained under her grandfather and uncle. And what she doesn’t know, she learns from online lessons on carpentry.

She started the business more than a decade ago — before anyone else was doing it — and her products have been popular with consumers.

“My designs stand out because I combine many different elements. It is not just about turning wood into a seat. I use colourful fabrics and female clients enjoy fabrics that brighten their homes. I also make kids furniture from pallets and use fabric that have popular cartoons on them,” she expounds. Chelang sells her three-seater household pallet sofa for 100 to 300 dollars, depending on the design and material used.

Clients seek her services through her social media pages where she markets her products under the name Soi Pallet Designs.

But the 35-year-old is worried that the opportunity to cash in on her unique designs is passing her by.

“I do not have the money to set up a proper workshop and showroom. I cannot apply for contracts to make pallet seats for major entertainment clubs in the city because I do not have capital to
finance such big orders,” she says, explaining that such clubs are interested in her designs.

“I managed to take one order of 5,000 dollars in 2018 because one of my mentors provided me with the capital to finance the order,” she says.

But that was a once-off. Because without collateral, she says, the banks will grant her a business loan. So for now she has to make seats to order. Even in this instance her clients must first pay 30 to 50 percent of the total cost to enable her to purchase materials and pay for some of her labour costs.

“I work with three carpenters who I pay on a daily basis. We only take one order at a time because I do not have a proper workshop and I cannot afford to hire more carpenters,” Chelang explains.

The circumstances have served to confine her business to her home in Kisumu City some 350 kilometres away from Kenya’s capital Nairobi.

But Chelang’s inability to expand her business is not a new story. According to the MasterCard Index of Women Entrepreneurs 2017, a lack of capital is one of the major challenges facing women doing business in Africa today, especially in sub-Saharan Africa.

This is despite data by the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) report of 2017-18 showing that sub-Saharan Africa has taken the lead as the only region where women form the majority of self-employed individuals.

- According to the report, globally, Africa has the most positive attitudes towards entrepreneurship as 76 percent of working age adults consider entrepreneurship a good career choice, while another 75 percent believe that entrepreneurs are admired in their societies.
- Over the last decade, the number of women joining entrepreneurship is on a steady rise, the GEM report states. Women are high-technology developers in Kenya or, like Chelang, are making waves in the informal sector.
- Female entrepreneurs are also in the steel manufacturing business in South Africa, and in the cocoa agro-processing businesses in Ivory Coast and the larger West African region.
- Even more impressive, the Master Card Index of Women Entrepreneurs 2017 indicates that Uganda and Botswana have the highest percentage of women entrepreneurs globally. Other countries in this league include Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria and Zambia.

Aware of the financial constraints facing women in business, the African Development Bank (AfDB) is making concerted efforts to address the widening financing gap between male and female entrepreneurs in Africa.

The pan-African bank has placed the financing gap between male and female entrepreneurs across Africa, at a whopping 42 billion dollars.

To address this gap, the African Heads of State launched the Affirmative Finance Action for Women in Africa (AFAWA) programme back in 2016.

- As a joint pan-African initiative between AfDB and the African Guarantee Fund, AFAWA is a risk-sharing facility that will de-risk lending to women-owned and women-led businesses.
- During the most recent Global Gender Summit held in Kigali in 2019, AFAWA was officially launched in Rwanda. The affirmative action programme received a one-million-dollar commitment from the Rwandese government. Still in 2019, G7 leaders approved a package totalling 251 million dollars in support of AFAWA.
- Additionally, Attijariwafa Bank, a Moroccan multinational commercial bank, and the African Guarantee Fund have signed a 50 million dollar Memorandum of Understanding towards risk lending to women through partial guarantees.

By using a holistic approach, this affirmative action programme will address the major factors preventing women in Africa, including the access of financial products and services such as loans. Consequently these financial services will also be accessible and affordable as well.

AFAWA finance will unlock three billion dollars in credit for women in businesses and enterprises in Africa. Towards this goal, this programme will work with existing commercial banks and microfinance institutions to engineer lasting structural changes, to the benefit of women across the continent.

Further, there will be a rating system to evaluate financial institutions based on the extent to which they lend to women, and the consequent socio-economic impact. Top institutions will receive preferential terms from the pan-African bank.

Financial experts such as Irene Omari say the AFAWA is important for women’s financial inclusion. A banker and leading entrepreneur in the Lakeside City of Kisumu, Omari tells IPS that “banks do not take female entrepreneurs seriously. Banks are still a long way from embracing women doing business. We are still considered very high risk by financial institutions because we lack collateral”.

As the sole proprietor of Top Strategy Achievers Limited, a multi-million-shilling branding and printing company, she is all too familiar with the financial challenges facing women in business today.

“I started working at 23 years old in the hospitality industry. I would also...
Women act as a middle person between branding companies and clients. In Kisumu City this services were hard to find. I saved every coin that I made and used it as capital,” she says.

Omari registered her company in 2013. She began operations in the same year while still employed at a local bank. “My salary paid the two staff that I had in the beginning, office rent, and all other overheads until the company could stand on its feet,” she says.

She says that because women, like Chelang, are not considered bankable they are significantly constrained in setting up solid, physical infrastructures to drive the growth and sustainability of their businesses.

“This is the reason why women are in self-employment where they basically work for themselves and not in entrepreneurship where they bring as many employees on board as possible,” Omari expounds.

• In Omari’s case she is an entrepreneur and need not be at the place of work at all times because the business can thrive and be sustainable even in their absence. In self-employment, the presence of the business owner must be felt at all times.

Francis Kibe Kiragu, a lecturer in gender and development studies at the University of Nairobi, tells IPS that while women have sufficiently demonstrated a desire to run their own enterprises, they suffer crippling financial exclusion.

“Women in self-employment or entrepreneurship are therefore driven by necessity and not innovation. They just want to meet their basic needs and as a result, they are perceived as contributing very little to the economy,” he observes.

Because of these challenges, he says that women are more likely than men to discontinue running a business. The GEM 2017 report confirms Kiragu’s assertions as it indicates that, while Africa may have the highest number of women running start-ups, the number of women running established businesses is lower.

In fact, in the sub-Saharan Africa region alone, there are two women starting a new business venture for every one woman running an established business, the report indicates.

“I started designing, making and marketing my pallet seats at 25 years old. Ten years later I am still facing the same financial challenges I faced when I started. Many times I have come close to abandoning this dream and finding employment,” says Chelang.

Through the AFAWA it is hoped that women like Chelang will soon be able to leverage financial instruments to their and their businesses’ benefit.

*Miriam Gathigah writes for the IPS from Nairobi, Kenya.
Climate change is likely to have some adverse effects on Sub-Saharan Africa in first half of the year *Esther Ngumbi* writes quoting a UNWFP report.

United Nations World Food Program recently released 2020 Global Hotspots Report. According to the report, millions of citizens from Sub-Saharan African countries will face hunger in the first half of 2020 for several reasons including conflict, political instability and climate-related events such as below-average rainfall and flooding.

Focusing in on the latter, climate-related extreme events have already caused 52 million people across Africa to go hungry and over 1 million people to be displaced by flooding. Of course, African countries are not alone in this challenge and Italy, Southern California, and Southern France have recently been impacted by flooding linked to the changing climate. Australia has equally suffered from massive bushfires linked to the changing climate.

It is clear already that tackling recurring and persistent food insecurity chal-
CLIMATE CHANGE

“The foundation of resilient agriculture begins with healthy soil. Healthy soils, that have soil organic matter, improve the activities of microorganisms that live in the soil, which in turn help plants to utilize nutrients and cope with climate-related stresses such as drought and flooding while combating pests and diseases.”

Challenges brought about by climate-related extreme events is by no means an easy task. So, how can countries navigate a future that will consistently be challenged by these types of climate change-related disasters? How can countries improve the strategies and approaches they are currently employing to mitigate climate change?

First, to deal with unpredictable and catastrophic climate-related events and ensure citizens have food to eat, countries must strengthen their predictive frameworks. Foresight is key.

Many African countries are strengthening their predictive capabilities. For instance, there are several centers that provide climate-hydro-agricultural monitoring and outlooks including AGRHYMET in West Africa, The IGAD Climate Prediction and Applications Centre in Eastern Africa, and SADC drought monitoring center in southern Africa.

Furthermore, in 2019, three Southeast African countries, Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe, along with four Southwest Indian Ocean countries launched the Disaster Risk Reduction Management Platform, with the goal of sharing disaster prevention information.

In addition, individual countries are doing their best to implement predictive frameworks. Kenya, for example, has a Predictive livestock early warning system to help pastoralist communities. Uganda has a National Climate Change Policy, a supporting political structure for its implementation and has continued to step up its efforts on addressing climate change. Ghana has a national climate change adaptation strategy and in 2018, UNEP worked with Ghana to implement a drought early warning system.

Beyond Africa, the international community is helping developing countries to improve their predictive capabilities. Recently, twelve international organizations launched the Alliance for Hydromet Development initiative, committing to ramp up actions that strengthen capacities of developing countries to deliver high-quality weather forecasts, and early warning systems among other services.

However, even with so many predictive frameworks initiatives, the African continent is yet to protect its citizens from climate-change related disasters. Clearly, disaster predictive frameworks can only go so far.

Thus, African countries must double down and implement many other complementing efforts to mitigate climate change and help farmers and citizens of African countries to stay on top. After all, even if predictive frameworks succeed, farmers must still be able to prevent disastrous climate change impacts such as drought.

Once crops have been planted, for example, farmers are still limited in...
actions they can take to protect their growing crops from extremities such as drought and flooding.

The foundation of resilient agriculture begins with healthy soil. Healthy soils, that have soil organic matter, improve the activities of microorganisms that live in the soil, which in turn help plants to utilize nutrients and cope with climate-related stresses such as drought and flooding while combatting pests and diseases.

Of course, it matters what crop varieties that farmers plant. As such, there is need for more investment on science that is geared towards developing crop varieties that are resilient to drought and flooding.

More than ever, initiatives such as stress tolerant maize, the Wheat rust resistant seed and initiatives aimed at breeding disease resistant and improved cassava plants, must be sustained, and the varieties developed from these efforts must be deployed to farmers. But, only with healthy soils as a base will all the complementing measures fully deliver on their promise.

Equally important is the need to have investments and funds by African governments and other stakeholders such as the Rockefeller Foundation and African Development Bank that are heavily committed to help the African Continent cope with climate change.

These funds can be set aside to finance promising innovations for solving climate change and to finance grand challenges to find efforts that can help those who are most vulnerable to the effects of climate change.

It is exciting to see the formation of initiatives such as the Global Innovation Lab for Climate Finance, an initiative of over 60 public and private investors and institutions continue with the efforts that include financing crop insurance schemes and providing technical assistance and subsidized-rate loans or guarantees to smallholder farmers in West Africa.

Finally, investments, which support climate smart agriculture, an integrated approach that addresses both the challenges of food security and climate change with the aim to enhance resilience, increase productivity and reduce emissions, must continue.

The World Bank is currently working with several African countries including Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Rwanda, Zimbabwe, in an effort to identify concrete actions that these countries can take to boost and scale up climate-smart agriculture.

Climate-smart agriculture success stories coming out from African countries show that indeed, adopting these practices has the potential help African citizens to deal with the new and harsh realities accompanying the changing climate.

It is clear that climate-related disasters and food insecurity will continue to challenge many sub-Saharan African countries in 2020. By strengthening predictive frameworks and doubling up by planting drought and flooding tolerant crop varieties as well as continuing to invest in climate-smart agriculture, governments and citizens can confront these challenges while building the resilience they need to rebound back when disasters strike.

*Dr. Esther Ngumbi is an Assistant Professor at the Entomology Department, University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign. She is a Senior Food security fellow with the Aspen Institute and has written opinion pieces for various outlets including NPR, CNN, Los Angeles Times, Al Jazeera and New York Times. You can follow Esther on Twitter @EstherNgumbi.*
US Mideast Peace Plan: Israelis offered the cheese & Palestinians the holes

The Israeli human rights organization B’Tselem has described the much-ballyhooed US Middle East peace plan as “more like Swiss cheese— with the cheese being offered to the Israelis and the holes to the Palestinians”, reports Thalif Deen.

“There are many ways to end the occupation, but the only legitimate options are those based on equality and human rights for all,” said the Jerusalem-based B’Tselem, the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories.

“This is why the current plan which legitimizes, entrenches and even expands the scope of Israel’s human rights abuses, perpetuated now for over 52 years, is utterly unacceptable”, it said.

The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, based in Johannesburg, drew a parallel between Israel and apartheid South Africa of a bygone era.

“We concur with our Israeli comrades, and we painfully recall how Apartheid South Africa tried to impose its own plan during the 1980s where white people would own South Africa and the indigenous Black South Africans needed to be happy with small enclaves called Bantustans.”

“We rejected this then in Apartheid South Africa, and we, today, join those in rejecting it in Palestine-Israel,” said BDS in a statement released here.

Mouin Rabbani, co-editor Jadaliyya, an ezine focusing on the Middle East and produced by the Arab Studies Institute (ASI), told IPS the Trump Plan is not a peace initiative, that seeks to lay the basis for meaningful negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians to resolve the core issues of the conflict.

Rather, it seeks to unilaterally implement a permanent status reality that is tantamount to the extreme reaches of the Israeli political spectrum, with the imper-
Istanbul, told IPS the Deal of the Century is a complete American acquiescence to the right-wing mentality that has ruled Israel for more than a decade.

This is certainly not an American peace overture, he pointed out, but an egregious act of bullying.

However, it is hardly a deviation from previous rounds of “peace-making,” where Washington always took Israel’s side, blamed Palestinians and failed to hold Tel Aviv accountable to its violations of previously signed treaties and international law, he noted.

“In truth, the Deal of the Century is not a ‘peace plan’, nor was it ever intended to be, despite what its chief architect and White House adviser Jared Kushner has been claiming”,

As expected, said Baroud, Trump has handed Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu everything that he and Israel ever wanted.

He also pointed out that the Middle East Plan does not demand the uprooting of a single illegal Jewish settlement and recognizes Jerusalem as Israel’s ‘undivided’ capital.

“It speaks of a conditioned and disfigured Palestinian state that can only be achieved based on vague conditions, rejects the Right of Return for Palestinian refugees, and doesn’t mention the word ‘occupation’ even once”, said Baroud, author of the newly-released book These Chains Will Be Broken: Palestinian Stories of Struggle and Defiance in Israeli Prisons.

According to Cable News Network (CNN), the Trump administration unveiled its much-anticipated Middle East plan, which it’s touting as a “realistic two-state solution.”

But Palestinians definitely don’t see it that way. The plan caters to nearly every major Israeli demand, including the annexation of its settlements in the contested West Bank region, said CNN.

“A future Palestinian state, meanwhile, would get a capital in eastern Jerusalem, physically separated from the rest of the city. The plan doesn’t lay out what would happen to Palestinian refugees displaced by ongoing conflict”.

In a brutally frank comment, Robert Malley, president of the International Crisis Group, was quoted as saying: “The message to the Palestinians, boiled down to its essence, is: You’ve lost, get over it.”

Rabbani said the peace plan is also not a framework for a two-state settlement.

“The potential Palestinian entity presented in the initiative, assuming it comes to pass, does not have any – I repeat, any – of the attributes of statehood as commonly understood.”

He said its objective is not the establishment of a Palestinian state but rather the permanent expansion of the Israeli state into occupied territory, less those areas heavily populated by Palestinians that Israel does not intend to annex.

The Palestinian entity, or rather the patchwork of Palestinian-populated regions within Israel according to this plan, are held together by some 15 bridges and tunnels, he noted.

“The purpose here is not Palestinian statehood, but rather achieving Israel’s long-term objective of maximum territory with minimum Arabs – an objective additionally furthered by the proposed transfer of Palestinian population centers within Israel to the jurisdiction of this entity”.

The broader purpose of this initiative, he argued, is to utilize the weakness, fragmentation, and polarisation of the Palestinians, and the Arab world more generally, to ram through a unilateral settlement of this conflict while the opportunity presents itself.

A second objective is to facilitate the formalisation of Israeli-Arab normalisation, though given the contours of this plan that is unlikely to be achieved.

In a word, the formalisation of Palestinian capitulation to not only Israel but a particularly extremist Israeli agenda, he declared.

More broadly, said Rabbani, it seeks to replace international law and the international consensus with the principle that might make right and thus the law of the jungle in which power is the sole principle for the resolution of international disputes.

From the Trump administration’s perspective this therefore has much broader application than only the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, he declared.

Baroud said the so-called ‘Deal of the Century’ has confirmed what many have argued for years: a just and peaceful future in Palestine and Israel cannot be achieved with Washington at the helm.

“So obviously only Israel benefits from the plan, as the Zionist discourse, predicated on maximum territorial gains with minimal Palestinian presence, has finally prevailed.”

He said every Israeli request has been met, to the last one. Meanwhile, Palestinians get nothing, aside from the promise of chasing another mirage of a Palestinian state that has no territorial continuity and no true sovereignty.

Not only will Trump’s plan fail to resolve the conflict, he argued, it will exasperate it as well; it will divide the region into blocs, with some Arabs normalisation with Israel and others refusing to do so, especially while Palestinians continue to live in perpetual suffering.

As for the economic component of Trump’s plan, history has proven that there can be no economic prosperity under military occupation. Netanyahu and others before him tried such dubious methods, of ‘economic peace’ and such, and all have miserably failed.

“Time and again, the UN has made it clear that it follows a different political trajectory than that followed by Washington, and that all US decisions regarding the status of Jerusalem, the illegal settlements and the Golan Heights, are null and void; only international law matters, and none of Trump’s actions in recent years have succeeded in significantly altering international consensus on the rights of Palestinians”.

As for the status of and Palestinian rights in their occupied city, said Baroud, East Jerusalem, renaming a few neighborhoods – Kafr Aqab, the eastern part of Shuafat and Abu Dis – as al-Quds, or East Jerusalem is an old Israeli plan that failed in the past.

The late Yasser Arafat rejected it, and neither Mahmoud Abbas or any other Palestinian official would dare compromise on the historic and legal Palestinian rights in the city.
The multinational Nestle  
a new colonial power

Nestlé has a leadership position in imposing corporate control over democratic institutions in order to have access to natural resources like water, writes *Franklin Frederick.

On 14 November 2019 the Canadian group Wellington Water Watchers organized the “All Eyes on Nestlé” conference in the city of Guelph, Ontario, bringing together indigenous peoples and citizens’ movements fighting Nestlé’s water takings from Canada, the US, France and Brazil. Following this public event, the representatives of the organizations involved met for a workshop to exchange information and discuss possible common strategies of resistance to this giant corporation water grabbing.

From the experiences and stories shared by groups as different as the Collectif Eau 88 – from the city of Vittel, France – Save Our Water – from Elora, Canada – or the Michigan Citizens for Water Conservation – from the US – it became clear that there is a common pattern in all these places where Nestlé takes water for its bottling facilities, contrary to this company’s claim that any problem is always just a local issue.

This common pattern shows, for instance, that the amounts of water taken...
Another pattern that repeats itself in most of the cases, governments very often side with the corporation against the citizens. Even worse, in many places Nestlé "merges" with the local authorities.

For which Nestlé pays close to nothing – usually causes groundwater levels to sink, affects ecosystems and endangers the water supply of the local citizens. In Vittel, for instance, Nestlé and the community take water from the same aquifer and French state institutions recognized that this situation put at risk the aquifer, since the water takings went faster than its natural replenishing.

The solution proposed by the French authorities? To build a pipeline of about 14 km to bring water from another place for the inhabitants of Vittel, so that Nestlé could continue undisturbed its business pumping the groundwater from Vittel!

Thanks to the resistance of the Collectif Eau 88, the pipeline project was politically defeated and another solution has to be found to protect the aquifer. But if it were not for this citizens’ movement, the pipeline project would have been built with taxpayers money.

In Wellington County, Nestlé Waters Canada has permission to extract 4.7 million litres of water a day in wells at Hillsburgh and Aberfoyle and according to Mike Balkwill from Wellington Water Watchers, "the company has applied to renew those permits, while it extracts water without the consent of Six Nations, on whose territory it operates, and despite public opposition from several indigenous organizations”.

And again, thanks to the resistance of both Six Nations and other citizens’ movements, the moratorium on water permits that would end on 1 January 2020 was recently extended by the authorities to October 2020.

The situation is the same in Florida, where although the local water authority considers that the water system is in recovery from overexploitation, Nestlé still wants to pump water from Ginnie Springs. The common pattern emerging from these and other cases – in the State of Michigan or in the small city of São Lourenço in Brazil – also shows that it is always local groups that defend water, not the State’s water or environmental authorities.

On the contrary, another pattern that repeats itself in most of the cases, governments very often side with the corporation against the citizens. Even worse, in many places Nestlé “merges” with the local authorities, as in Maine where a Nestlé manager was on the State’s environmental protection agency board or in Vittel where a deputy mayor was sued for a conflict of interest concerning the pipeline project: this deputy, departmental councillor Claudie Pruvost, was married to a Nestlé executive from Vittel, president of an association that had been chosen to bring the Water Development and Management Project to the Local Water Commission that Mrs Pruvost chaired.

The trial was delayed because the case had to be moved from the court in the city of Epinal – the closest to Vittel – to the city of Nancy because the vice-president of the court in Epinal was also married to the Director of Nestlé Waters in Vittel.

Nestlé always tries to establish alliances or partnerships with Governments to protect itself and its bottling operations, especially in its home country, Switzerland, where its image has to be more carefully protected. Recently, the ex-Nestlé’s Head of Public Affairs, Christian Frutiger, was appointed Vice-Director of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation – SDC, the Swiss Government Agency responsible for Development Aid programmes – where he will be responsible for SDC’s Global WATER programme!

The ecological damage caused by Nestlé’s water takings and bottling facilities are not locally limited either. PET water bottles are one of the main sources of plastic waste worldwide. One single example suffices to give an idea of the contribution of Nestlé to this problem: according to Wellington Water Watchers, if the Government approves Nestlé’s permits to take water from commercial bottling in Wellington County, the company will produce more than 3 billion 500 ml. of plastic bottles per year – laid end-to-end, that number would circle the earth 16 times!

And this amount of plastic comes just from two sites in Wellington County! Nestlé has dozens of such bottling facilities all over the world, using huge amounts of fossil fuels to produce more billions of plastic bottles. If we add to that all the fuel consumed to transport all these bottles – mainly by truck – we can also see the significant impact of Nestlé on climate change.

Such patterns are intrinsic to Nestlé’s bottling operations worldwide and to the economic and political power of this giant multinational corporation. Countries such as Canada, the US or France are among the wealthiest and most traditional democratic societies in our planet and still their citizens have to fight very hard and for very long just to achieve some minimum level of protection of ground and surface waters, ecosystems and for their access to water in the future – things that in a democracy we would take for granted as an obligation of the State.

But if Nestlé can manage to have governments on its side and against the citizens even in such traditional democracies as the US, Canada and France, what then may happen to communities facing Nestlé’s water grabbing in much less democratic and much more vulnerable societies in Africa, Latin America or Asia?

In our time, multinational corporations became the main source of economic and political power, as explained by Paul A. Baran and Paul M. Sweezy in their classic work “Monopoly Capital”:

"Votes are the nominal source of political power and money is the real source: the system, in other words, is democratic in form and plutocratic in content. (...) Suffice it to say that all the political activities and functions which may be said to constitute the essential characteristics of the system – indoctrinating and propagandizing the voting public, organizing and maintaining political parties, run-
ning electoral campaigns – can be carried out only by means of money, lots of money. And since in monopoly capitalism the big corporations are the source of big money, they are also the main source of political power."

In fact, some transnational corporations have profits bigger than the GNP of the large majority of the countries in the world. One example may give a better view of the economic power of such corporations as compared to other international institutions: in 2017 Nestlé spent US$7.2 billion on global advertising efforts.

The World Health Organization proposed budget for 2016-2017 was US$4,384.9 million. It is important to understand as well that the modern transnational corporation is also the ‘natural’ successor of the old colonial powers, with the difference that while the old colonial powers concentrated in exploiting the global south, their contemporary heirs are able to exploit the global NORTH as well, when the resources they need are located there, as Paul Sweezy explained in this quote from “Modern Capitalism and Other Essays”:

“(…) there is no reason to suppose that a corporation would willingly exempt foreign markets and sources of supply from its planning horizon just because they happen to be outside a particular set of national boundaries.”

In fact, communities in Canada, France and the US trying to protect their water resources from Nestlé are fighting the same battles that communities in the global south always had to fight in order to protect their own resources from colonial grabbing. The old colonial powers used local oligarchies submissive to their politics and economic views as rulers in their colonies, which became the “governance model” in most of the global south.

Under neoliberalism, this model has been exported to the global north where transnational corporations are gradually taking over the democratic space and the political power, turning many places in the north into mirror images of colonised communities in the global south. Under this new colonial power, governments in the south as in the north become willing servants of the corporate sector, making sure that despite environmental and social damage the corporations get access to the resources they need.

But this fact creates an important new opening for communication, solidarity, understanding and common action between citizens’ groups fighting water privatization in the global north and in the global south. The fight, south or north, is the same: to keep water in public hands under democratic control. And to fight for water is also to fight for our endangered democracies under the authoritarian threat of corporate control, south or north.

A new alliance between south and north can emerge that will be a powerful movement challenging the corporate sector and its servants. The corporations, of course, will fight back and Nestlé, again, has already a long and successful history of fighting civil society.

In the 1970s an international boycott was launched against Nestlé due to its practices of promoting bottle feeding and discouraging breast feeding, causing infant illness and death in southern poorer countries. This campaign, known at the time as “Nestlé kills babies”, had an unprecedented impact on the company, much damaging its image.

To fight this campaign Nestlé hired Raphael Pagan, an Army Intelligence Officer at the US Department of Defence. Pagan advised US Presidents Nixon, Reagan and Bush on Third World Policies – which means, on how to fight back Third World Liberation movements. In fact, Nixon was the US President who gave support to General Pinochet coup d’état against elected President Salvador Allende in Chile, throwing this country in a murderous military dictatorship that lasted for years.

Pagan received a Life Achievement Award from President Reagan – the US President waging war against the Nicaraguan Sandinista Government, killing and terrorizing thousands of people in Central America. Raphael Pagan was very effective in fighting back the inter-
national boycott against Nestlé, mainly by designing a strategy to divide the civil society groups organizing the campaign. This partnership with military intelligence to fight civil society organizations was so successful that Nestlé went deeper in this collaboration.

In 2002 Nestlé hired John Hedley, an ex-MI6 agent – British military intelligence – as Head of Security. Among other things, Hedley was responsible for organizing an operation to spy civil society groups critical to Nestlé in Switzerland, mainly the ATTAC group. When this operation was unveiled by a Swiss investigative journalist that denounced it in the Swiss TV, Nestlé had to face a court case and was condemned by the Swiss justice for it.

Nestlé also developed what is known as the “War Room”, a high-tech communication centre that tracks in real time any mention to Nestlé in social media, so that the company can react fast to any “threats” posed by people. In 2011 Nestlé organized its annual “Creating Shared Values” conference in Washington in partnership with “The Atlantic Council” – a U.S. based organization that brings together big business, politicians and the military.

The main panel discussion at this event was with Nestlé’s CEO Peter Brabeck and the President and CEO of The Atlantic Council Frederick Kempe, with the title:

‘Creating Shared Value in Latin America: Opportunities, Obstacles and Future Directions in Nutrition, WATER, Rural Development’

I guess that what the panel called ‘obstacles’ was – and still is – civil society movements trying to keep their natural resources – including water – in public hands. When challenged with this kind of resistance from society, corporations like Nestlé may find it very useful to have NATO at their side to help “convincing” rebel governments to give away their natural resources for the corporate sector profit – not for the development of the country.


Maybe just to keep the close links with the US military, since, as far as I know, there is no Nestlé special programme to hire ex-Swiss or ex-French military people, just US ones….

These examples suffice to show that Nestlé has a leadership position in imposing corporate control over democratic institutions in order to have access to natural resources like water. The examples also show that Nestlé is far ahead in developing strategies and partnerships to fight back civil society resistance.

“...and still is – civil society movements trying to keep their natural resources – including water – in public hands. When challenged with this kind of resistance from society, corporations like Nestlé may find it very useful to have NATO at their side to help “convincing” rebel governments to give away their natural resources for the corporate sector profit – not for the development of the country.

Only united, north and south, can we hope to protect our waters from corporate grabbing and our democracies from corporate control. There is no other way.

* Franklin Frederick is a Brazilian writer and political activist. The article is reproduced from Third World Network Features.
Jamillah Nabunjo, 33, had fallen into a coma at Hospital General Ciudad Juárez by the time her name rose to the top of the waiting list for a US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) interview. The story of her subsequent death was recounted by CLINIC, a legal aid organisation assisting asylum seekers at the border, and by two of Nabunjo’s fellow travellers from Uganda and Cameroon, who were interviewed by The New Humanitarian in Juárez.

Her companions questioned whether Nabunjo’s death could have been prevented if she hadn’t been forced to wait for five months in Mexico, where they say the language barrier hindered her medical care.

One member of the group, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he fears challenging the US immigration system while his own asylum case is pending, was a doctor in Uganda and said he suspected Nabunjo died of tuberculosis. The disease is a significant public health problem in their home country, and Nabunjo’s symptoms were in line with its profile, the doctor said. She was exposed to the disease through her sister, developed a cough in April, and was

Death of Ugandan shows risks for African asylum seekers in Mexico

The fate of a Ugandan woman who died in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico in September may be an early warning sign of the risks a burgeoning number of African migrants face as they seek asylum at the southern US border, asserts *Anna-Catherine Brigida.*
complaining of chest pain, a rapid heartbeat, and night sweats when she was admitted to the hospital in September.

Migrants in Mexico are eligible for three months of government healthcare, which can be extended if they stay in the country longer. But accessing services can be difficult for Africans, who usually speak French or English rather than Spanish. Nabunjo spoke English.

The Ugandan doctor she befriended at the immigration shelter in Juárez tried to communicate his concerns about tuberculosis to the Spanish-speaking hospital staff, but struggled to make himself understood.

“Her death was very preventable,” he said.

Hospital officials declined to confirm Nabunjo’s cause of death to anyone other than a family member.

“The US system that kept her waiting in Juárez is known as metering, and limits the number of migrants processed each day to no more than 40, depending on the port of entry. When Nabunjo arrived in Juárez, she was number 12,636 on the metering list, according to CLINIC.

A growing number of migrants at the southern US border are from Africa. More than 5,000 people from the continent were apprehended in Mexico in the first nine months of 2019, more than double the year before, as traditional exit routes through Libya and across the Mediterranean have become increasingly difficult to pass for African economic migrants and those fleeing repressive regimes and armed conflicts.

“Metering kills people. It does not give migrants the chance to apply for asylum.”

Activists say metering exposes migrants to danger in the Mexican border cities where they’re detained. Asked by TNH about the case and their wider border policies, the CBP wouldn’t comment on Nabunjo’s death and rejected the term metering, instead calling the practice necessary “queue management”.

An October 2019 report by Human Rights First documented hundreds of cases of police abuse, rape, and brutal attacks of asylum seekers in Mexican border cities. In addition, the Cameroon American Council documented about two dozen cases of human rights violations against Cameroonians forced to stay in Mexico under metering, and the group estimates there could be many more.

“Metering has existed for a long time, and it’s not correct,” said Tania Guerrero, a CLINIC lawyer who worked on Nabunjo’s asylum case. “Metering kills people. It does not give migrants the chance to apply for asylum.”

While the system has created additional barriers for all asylum seekers at the US-Mexico border, Africans face even greater obstacles due to discrimination, said Savitri Arvey, a graduate student researcher with the Center for US-Mexican Studies at the University of California San Diego who has worked with asylum seekers in the Mexican border city of Tijuana.

There, just getting on the metering list has reportedly been more difficult for Africans than for other migrants. The city’s list is managed by the Mexican government organisation Grupo Beta in consultation with asylum seekers chosen by their peers, and Africans have reported being required to provide more documentation than Latin Americans.

The allegations sparked a protest in July, during which more than 100 asylum seekers from Cameroon blocked Mexican immigration vans until authorities agreed to meet. Negotiators emerged with a deal under which Mexican officials agreed to allow African representatives the right to review the metering list each day to ensure numbers were being called in order rather than based on special treatment, according to reporting by San Diego-based KPBS News. Fewer
problems have been reported since then, Arvey said.

Mexican officials acknowledge the need to better address the unique needs of the growing African population in their northern cities, though no specifics have been announced.

“They are doubly vulnerable if they don’t speak Spanish,” said Enrique Valenzuela, head of the State Population Council in Juárez. “They need additional attention.”

Because African migrants stand out physically, they’re easily identified as targets by organised crime gangs and local delinquents.

Feambinda Goodlove, a Cameroonian asylum seeker, said he fled his homeland after spending three months in jail for allegedly supporting a government separatist movement. When interviewed by TNH in November, he had already been waiting another three months in Tijuana for his metering number to be called.

“We can’t stand up for what’s right, because we are scared.”

He said he rarely left his hotel for fear of crime or of somehow running afoul of corrupt authorities.

“We can’t stand up for what’s right, because we are scared,” Goddlove said. “When you have a difference with a Mexican, they just threaten to call immigration.”

Africans also report racism in a country that is becoming increasingly hostile toward migrants, as President Donald Trump’s administration strives to keep all undocumented foreigners in Mexico and stop the flow northwards into the United States.

This discrimination exists within a broader context of racism toward Afro-Latino populations in Mexico and Central America, said Sylvie Bello, founder and CEO of the Cameroon American Council, which works with asylum seekers along the border and in US cities.

Mexico only recently recognised the Afro-Mexican population in its census, and Afro-Central American populations are systematically excluded from work opportunities. They’ve also been the victims of exploitative land grabs in their home countries of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras.

“Basically wherever the bottom of the totem pole is, they are beneath that,” Bello said.

African migrants traversing Mexico became even more vulnerable in August, when the government stopped issuing humanitarian visas that had allowed them temporary legal status in the country.

Still, Imelda Maynard, a lawyer for Catholic Charities who often works in Juárez, says African migrants have some of the strongest asylum cases because “it’s their home government, the military, or police who have beaten them for a political reason”. This means their asylum claims usually fit clearly into the 1951 UN Refugee Convention that defines a refugee as someone fleeing persecution “for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion”.

In Cameroon, for example, a conflict between the government and armed opposition groups has led to more than 437,000 internally displaced people, according to the UN’s refugee agency, UNHCR.

And in Uganda, the country Nabunjo was fleeing when she died in Juárez, Human Rights Watch has reported that authorities often torture and arrest people for opposing President Yoweri Museveni, who has been in power for more than three decades.

CLINIC, the legal aid group that worked with Nabunjo, said she had faced political persecution and harassment there.

“She had a valid claim,” Guerrero said. “She was stripped of her rights. She died in a foreign country with no one around.”

“Anna-Catherine Brigida is a freelance journalist based in San Salvador covering migration, human rights, and security in Mexico and Central America”

Additional reporting by Emily Green in Tijuana, and reporting assistance from Clemente Sanchez.
South Africa’s ‘Afrophobia’ problem

South Africa’s xenophobic attacks on other Africans seems to have become an unending challenge with all ills that plague the South Africa society from crime, poverty, unemployment among others put at their doorsteps, writes Guy Oliver.

The stand-off has focused on the Central Methodist Church on Greenmarket Square, where some 700 refugees were given temporary sanctuary. But their numbers meant a makeshift camp quickly grew on the pavements outside the 19th century church – an area that is one of the city’s main tourist attractions.

Police enforced a court order on 1 March and evicted the demonstrators, including women and children, from the square. But protesters remain not only in the church; there is also now a new camp outside the District Six Museum – a building that commemorates forced removals under South Africa’s apartheid regime.

As the stand-off with the authorities continues, this briefing examines the rising tide of xenophobia in South Africa, a country that hosts over 260,000 refugees and asylum seekers – mainly from Somalia, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo – and many more economic migrants.

The protest action followed a surge in violence in September 2019 in Johannesburg and Cape Town, aimed almost exclusively at African nationals, that killed 12 people, displaced thousands, and left shops looted and vandalised.

The first sit-in began at the offices of the UN’s refugee agency, UNHCR, in St. Michael’s Mall in Cape Town at the beginning of October, with the protesters...
demanding to be relocated to a third country – not their country of origin or South Africa. It lasted for three weeks until it was chaotically broken up by riot police implementing an eviction order.

UNHCR had told the demonstrators it was “not in a position to resettle or relocate” them. Resettlement is a process that requires the third country to agree to admit the refugees and give them permanent residence.

South Africa once had one of the most progressive systems of refugee protection in the world. Asylum seekers can still technically live and work anywhere in the country until their refugee status is determined, and for the most part they are entitled to the same public services as South African citizens.

But the generosity has waned, and South Africa has moved to a policy of deterrence more in line with the rest of the world. Ever-growing wait times for status decisions, barriers to applications and renewal of permits, compounded by “endemic corruption and mismanagement in the Department of Home Affairs”, has transformed the asylum system into one that violates the constitution and international conventions, according to a 2018 report by the Helen Suzman Foundation.

A new Amended Refugee Act, gazetted in January, adds “severe restrictions [to] the refugee system”, notes the NGO Sonke Gender Justice. It limits rights to work and education, and hands the Minister of Home Affairs the power to remove any asylum seeker or refugee on ill-defined grounds of “national security”.

Congolese refugee Sandra Bahibitugu, a member of a refugee-founded non-profit, Women and Children at Concern, said the sit-ins were planned after she and colleagues attended an August 2019 parliamentary session and discovered the new law “means we have to have a government certificate to sell tomatoes in the street”.

Nobody really knows. According to the UN’s migration agency, IOM, there are around four million “international migrants” – migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers – in the country, out of an overall population of 56 million. The 2011 census put the figure at 2.2 million.

But inflated numbers swirl on social media, stoking xenophobic sentiment. In a 2017 social attitudes survey, South Africa’s Human Sciences Research Council found that three out of four South African adults agree that immigrants increase crime rates, steal jobs and spread disease. There is no supporting evidence for the beliefs.

Despite all the headlines in Europe about Mediterranean crossings from Libya, 70 percent of migration in Africa is within the continent. South Africa, with its sophisticated economy, is an attractive destination, especially for countries in the sub-region, which share history and cultural links.

But South Africa imposes strict limits on formal immigration. A loophole is an asylum seekers permit, which allows you to work until your asylum claim is settled – which can take years.

Between 2006 and 2012, South Africa had the world’s highest number of asylum seekers – many of them Zimbabwean migrants fleeing the country’s economic meltdown. As a result, the asylum system “became contorted into something of a ‘catch all’ for generalised migration into South Africa”, a report by the Southern African Migration Programme noted.

This has deepened the antagonism felt by some South Africans.

What occurs in South Africa can more accurately be described as Afropho-
Afrophobia has gathered pace since the end of apartheid and the arrival of migrants from beyond the southern Africa region.

The first large-scale outbreak of violence was in 2008, beginning in Johannesburg’s Alexandra township. It quickly spread nationally. Officially, more than 62 people were killed, and hundreds of thousands displaced.

There have been further spikes, including in 2015 in the port city of Durban when five people died.

Between March 2018 and April 2019, South Africa’s Road Freight Association, representing road freight providers, said more than 200 drivers – mostly foreign nationals – were killed. The attackers used Molotov cocktails, knives, and rocks.

The All Truck Drivers Foundation, a local drivers association, went on strike demanding the sacking of all foreigners. “We are sick of you [foreign nationals] now, and we are not going to let you take our job [sic],” an ATDF statement said.

The government’s usual position is that violence is just crime related rather than a reflection of xenophobia.

Anti-immigrant sentiment is far from universal in South Africa. Many senior government officials spent the apartheid years in exile in African countries and, along with many ordinary South Africans, speak the language of pan-Africanism and ubuntu – a South African concept of humanity towards others.

There was also initial public sympathy for the protesters in Greenmarket Square, although that faded as the sit-in dragged on.

South Africa’s apartheid economic system has largely remained intact and the country remains the world’s most unequal society – compounded by a near 30 percent unemployment rate.

Successive governments largely failed to support micro-businesses – preferring to focus on the mainstream economy. With few other opportunities available, foreign African nationals flocked to the informal commercial sector, where they are a visible success.

The niche that foreign traders occupy in the townships and inner cities is a source of friction among both unemployed South Africans and local business people who regard them as unfair competition.

That sentiment was echoed at a political rally in March 2018 by President Cyril Ramaphosa.

“He is going to bring this to an end. And those who are operating illegally, wherever they come from, must now know.”

Refugees and asylum seekers have proved a useful scapegoat for politicians seeking to avoid blame for performance failures, and some of the smears can be extremely crude.

Former Johannesburg mayor Herman Mashaba said in a 2018 tweet: “We are not going to sit back and allow people like you to bring us Ebolas in the name of small business. Health of our people first. Our health facilities are already stretched to the limit.”

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Official programmes to combat xenophobia have been piecemeal.

After consulting with civil society groups, the government launched a five-year National Action Plan in 2019, but, according to Human Rights Watch, it “fails to address a key challenge fuelling the problem: the lack of accountability for xenophobic crimes.”

*Guy Oliver, is a South African-based freelance journalist.*
Does Africa’s food future really lie with young farmers?

For years concerns have been raised about the dwindling farmer population of Africa, especially, with the youth not showing much interest in farming and fears of this leading to food shortage and importation of food but as *Busani Bafana asks are the involvement of youth in farming really the answer to food security in Africa?

Africa will starve or survive on expensive food imports because it is not growing new farmers, research shows. And the challenge remains among researchers, policy makers, public and private sector actors to get African youth interested in agriculture on a continent where a growing number of people go to bed hungry every night.

The International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA), a global research institute that generates agricultural innovations to meet Africa’s most pressing challenges of hunger, malnutrition and poverty, has long been promoting several programmes to attract and keep youth in agriculture.

But it has been a tall order to convince the youth that agriculture is the key to creating food and jobs in Africa, IITA Director General Nteranya Sanginga told IPS.

“I have wanted the youth to define what agriculture is all about, for them agriculture is pain, penury and poverty,” Sanginga said. “We need to transform that mind-set and get them to understand that agriculture could be a source of wealth, business and pleasure.”

In 2012 the institution launched the IITA Youth Agripreneur, a programme that enrols 60 youth for hands on training in agriculture and entrepreneurship in 24 centres across Africa each year.

Sanginga said unless Africa promotes new and innovative farmers, the continent will be at the mercy of other regions for its food security.

- Africa has 257 million hungry people, according to the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO).
- While Africa holds 65 percent of the world’s uncultivated, arable land and adequate water resources, the continent spends more than $35 billion annually importing food — a bill projected by the African Development Bank (AfDB) to balloon to $110 billion by 2025.
- About 237 million people in sub-Saharan Africa are suffering from chronic under nutrition, which is derailing past gains in eradicating hunger and poverty, said the FAO in a joint 2019 report, Africa Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition.
- The report underlines the need to accelerate action to achieve the U.N. Sustainable Development Goal of achieving zero hunger as well as global nutrition targets amidst challenges of youth unemployment and climate change.
- “Agriculture and the rural sector must play a key role in creating decent jobs for the 10 to 12 million
youths that join the labour market each year,” the FAO said.

At the heart of the food challenge is the diminishing labour pool. Smallholder farmers keep Africa fed. Agriculture contributes about 30 percent to the continent’s GDP but the sector is hampered by poor productivity and low investment and the average age of a smallholder farmer in Africa is 60. Yet young farmers are not being produced fast enough to close the labour gap in agriculture production.

Agriculture has a negative image of not being attractive enough for the more ambitious, tech-savvy youth who would rather hustle in urban areas than become farmers.

“When we project farming as a viable economic opportunity for young people, we should tell them it is a process and you have to get your hands dirty,” says Lawrence Afere (35), founder of Springboard, an online network of producers and rural entrepreneurs in Ondo State of Nigeria.

Springboard is working with more than 3,000 members across six states in Nigeria growing plantains, beans and rice. The network gives the farmers inputs and training and buys back the produce for processing and value addition.

The solutions to tackling youth unemployment in Africa are varied but a key solution is to sell agriculture as a business, says Sanginga who initiated the “Start Them Early Programme (STEP)”, which promotes agribusiness studies to primary and secondary school students through club participation, course work and experimental learning.

Furthermore, the IITA has taken a research approach to getting more young people in agriculture.

- The institute launched a fellowship programme under a three-year research grant called “Enhancing Capacity to Apply Research Evidence (CARE)”, a policy for youth engagement in agribusiness and rural economic activities in Africa.
- The action-oriented fellowship targets young academics and professionals and graduate students at the post-course work/research

“At the heart of the food challenge is the diminishing labour pool. Smallholder farmers keep Africa fed. Agriculture contributes about 30 percent to the continent’s GDP but the sector is hampered by poor productivity and low investment and the average age of a smallholder farmer in Africa is 60. Yet young farmers are not being produced fast enough to close the labour gap in agriculture production.”
stage of their programmes. It is funded by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and has awarded 30 research fellowships in 2019.

- The fellowship provides opportunities for the youth by improving the availability and use of evidence for inclusive and "youth friendly" policies on youth engagement in agribusiness and rural economic activities. The duration of the research is six months and youth are trained on production of research evidence for policy-making.

University researcher Akilimali Ephrem is a 2019 fellow under the CARE programme. He is researching traits for successful agripreneurs in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

“I identified that young people were not attracted towards agriculture. They underestimate the value of agriculture and this has to do with our culture in the DRC,” Akilimali told IPS in an interview.

“Youths are struggling to get jobs yet they are completing their studies and I saw that this CARE project was a way forward because it looks at how best we can engage the youth in agribusiness as an alternative to employment,” said Akilimali, whose research title is ‘Perceived social norms, psychological capital and youth agripreneurial intention in DRC’.

“Everyone is saying that the youth should find a life in agriculture and agribusiness but nobody has ever asked whether these youth would like to do so or have a desire to do so. Probably we should start by increasing their desire to go into agribusiness otherwise we shall be targeting the wrong people,” said Akilimali, who identified psychological capital – a positive developmental mind set – as a key ingredient for any successful agribusiness entrepreneur.

- Young people in Africa will make up 42 percent of the global youth population and account for 75 percent of people under the age of 35 on the continent, according to the 2019 World Population Data Sheet published by the Population Reference Bureau, a United States-based organisation that informs on population, health and the environment.

- In the parlance of the youth, agriculture is not 'cool' because of its association with back breaking long hours of work in the field for little gain.
- Limited access to credit, finance, land and appropriate productivity boosting technology has combined to exclude the youth from the business of farming.

Already, Africa’s food and beverage markets are projected to reach $1 trillion by 2030, according to the AfDB.

AfDB president, Akinumwi Adesina has said making agriculture profitable and 'cool' for young people through investment is the solution to pulling millions of Africans out of poverty and a means to stem the tide of youth migration to Europe in search for a better life.

But development researcher Jim Sumberg, from the Institute of Development Studies in the United Kingdom, is not convinced agriculture is the silver bullet.

Sumberg says the idea of agriculture as a vast domain of entrepreneurial opportunity for young people is being grossly over sold, noting there are opportunities for some and for others it is a case of hard work for little reward.

“I believe the idea that a large proportion of young people are leaving rural areas and/or farming is over-played,” Sumberg, told IPS via e-mail.

“There is no real evidence. Further, why would anyone want to “lure” young people into tedious, poorly paid work? It makes no sense! It is true that a modernised agriculture will provide some job opportunities (for youth and others), but I doubt it will be the millions and millions of jobs often promised.”

Sumberg said he had little patience with the idea of changing people's mind sets so that they see “farming as a business”. It can only be a business if there is the potential for profit, and at the moment there are many situations where the potential is not there.

* Busi Bafana writes for the IPS.
Chinese-built Soubre Hydropower Dam, Côte d'Ivoire