



PROFILE

António Guterres and Africa: an unfinished legacy?

**SPECIAL
UNGA
EDITION**

AN IC PUBLICATION

NewAfrican

September / October 2026 • No 625

SPECIAL REPORTS

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why it matters today more than ever
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is it finally taking shape?

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By Anver Versi

Africa braces for new world dispensation

Welcome to our special prestige issue co-edited with the Economic Commission for Africa. This issue is timed to coincide with the slew of activities around the annual UN General Assembly in New York in September.

This year's gathering has particular significance on several fronts. It will mark the winding down of the 10-year period under the leadership of Secretary-General António Guterres and Deputy Sec-Gen Amina Mohammed.

They have presided over one of the most fraught periods in the organisation's 80-year history, during which the geopolitical shape of the world has been changing constantly – and little of it for the better. (See analysis on page 18.)

The organisation itself has come under unprecedented and sustained attacks for trying to stick to its charter when this has come into conflict with the interests of some of the world's most powerful and affluent nations – at precisely the time when the UN's powers to convene conflicted parties and find peaceful solutions is most in demand.

Financial body-blows have also all but crippled some of its most important agencies, especially in the battle against pandemics, rising poverty and violent political instability. For the first time in its eight decades of service to humankind (and the environment), the future existence of the organisation is being seriously questioned.

We sincerely pray that better, healthier winds will blow and that the UN will continue to carry out its unique and irreplaceable work for many more decades to come.

But as the Secretary-General himself says, echoing the demands of the African and emerging market blocs, it badly needs essential reforms – particularly in the composition and conduct of the Security Council's veto system. (See page 14.)

But what has been most encouraging is that while powerful forces have been at play in trying to dismember the global community into spheres of influence, the



We sincerely pray that better, healthier winds will blow and that the UN will continue to carry out its unique and irreplaceable work for many more decades to come.

fightback has started and Africa, with the highest number of regional members in the UN (55) is in the vanguard.

Africa is very much part of the increasingly influential 'emerging markets' section of the current global divide. At the end of the Cold War circa 1989/90, the West (Europe, North America and Japan) controlled 60% of the world's economy. Today, it is down to 39%, with emerging markets now controlling 61% of global GDP. China alone controls 20% of global GDP, the single largest economy in Purchasing Power Parity terms, and India controls 8.5%.

In manufacturing, China now completely dominates Europe and Japan – as well as in frontier, AI and green technology, for example in electric vehicles, wind turbines, telecoms and so forth.

This is important as the world seems to continue fracturing along narrower boundaries in some areas, and new alliances and solidarities are being forged in others. Africa is very much part of the mix – it will need to negotiate a delicate and expert path among competing powers.

Period of transition

This comes at an important period of transition for Africa as the continent looks to reset its priorities and its mindset (see page 66) to a more practical and questioning position rather than relying on slogans and aspirations.

We therefore take a deeper and more nuanced examination of a critical matrix – health, as the basis of success for virtually all sectors; and the current drive towards rapid industrialisation.

Health, the ECA argues, "should be recognised as a core infrastructure asset class that is both essential, is scalable, is investable and capable of delivering financial returns while underpinning the continent's economic transformation".

While pointing out delivery shortfalls, considerably exacerbated by the sudden and steep drop in donor aid, we highlight successes as the continent takes greater control of this all-important sector.

Discussing the commitment towards industrialisation, we argue that the expanded African market created by the AfCFTA, the world's largest free trade area, has changed the dynamics of import-substitution manufacturing. Value addition comes in many forms. (See page 72.)

We take a deep dive into the fascinating story of how cotton, for example, formed the foundation of Europe's industrial revolution and the wealth and power it delivered. Can the same cotton, we ask, now deliver similar goods, including most importantly, modern industrial capabilities to us?

We also examine the progress, or lack of it that the continent has made towards meeting its Sustainable Development Goals, as well as focus on the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, its battles with pandemics and other endemic illnesses and what is being done to win the war.

Although the rapidly shifting shape of the globe is causing considerable worry and consternation all over the world, the mood in Africa is defiantly optimistic – we have been here before, we know what to do. ■

By Prof. Yemi Osinbajo

Africa's healthcare system is in many ways at the core of the continent's development – it influences virtually all other sectors, as well as political and social stability. It can also be a viable commercial enterprise, promising substantial returns on investment.

Why health should be economic, not social policy

Africa's health systems sit at the heart of the continent's development. They shape productivity, household finances, public confidence and even political stability. Healthcare is also a substantial commercial opportunity – one capable of attracting investment and producing competitive long-term returns.

It has been a pleasure to co-edit this special issue of *New African* with colleagues at the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa. For many of us, the magazine was a constant companion during our formative years: a window on Africa, the wider world and the continent's place within it.

This issue focuses on financing Africa's health systems. The timing could hardly be more urgent. Long-standing donors are cutting health assistance just as the continent's needs are increasing.

Yet health cannot be considered in isolation. That is why this edition also examines industrialisation, the potential of cotton and several other questions central to Africa's development. A functioning health system depends on a productive economy. A productive economy, in turn, depends on healthy people.

Claver Gatete, the ECA's Executive Secretary, and I make this case in a joint article. Africa's health-financing challenge is not simply a health problem; it is an economic one. Health must therefore be



The priority is not only expanding the health budget, but efficiency, discipline and value for money.

placed inside the economic machinery of government. To help achieve this, we propose a National Health Financing Compact. (See page 38.)

This special issue will be distributed at the United Nations General Assembly in New York, at an important moment of transition for the UN. António Guterres, Amina Mohammed and their team are approaching the end of their tenure, and the international system itself is being tested.

The edition will reach many of the world's leading decision-makers. But what makes the project especially important is *New African's* reach among Africans themselves. It is read not only by policy-

makers and business leaders, but also by the people in whose name policies are made.

What do Africans want?

At the ECA Conference of Ministers of Finance in Tangier in March 2026, I posed a simple question: what do the people want?

Afrobarometer surveys provide a clear answer. Across Africa, citizens identify jobs as their most pressing concern. Health comes next. But the two are closely connected: poor health is one of the gravest threats to employment, productivity and household income.

That connection should be the starting point for health policy across the continent.

Reliable healthcare also strengthens confidence in government. Evidence suggests that positive experiences of public health services can increase trust in government substantially. For many citizens, a clinic or hospital is their most frequent – and most consequential – encounter with the state.

The stakes are unusually high. In countries where most medical bills are paid directly by patients, illness is also one of the greatest financial risks a family can face. A serious diagnosis may threaten not only life, but also savings, dignity and family stability. The fear is greater when there is no money for treatment.

A citizen who receives competent and humane care

from a public health facility is therefore likely to leave with a better opinion of government. Prioritising health financing is not merely good social policy. It is smart politics.

Poor healthcare may not, by itself, cause a coup. But it steadily erodes the legitimacy and public trust that help protect democratic governments from instability. When citizens lose faith in their government, they may eventually lose faith in democracy itself.

There is another misconception that must be discarded: underinvesting in health does not save money. It merely postpones the bill and converts ordinary costs into crises.

Covid-19 made this painfully clear. Countries that had neglected their health systems did not escape expenditure. They spent more during the emergency, borrowed more heavily and suffered deeper economic losses. Prevention would have been cheaper. Preparedness would have been cheaper still.

The financing gap

African governments must spend more on health. Fewer than five countries consistently meet the commitment made under the Abuja Declaration of 2001 to devote at least 15% of public expenditure to healthcare.

That failure has consequences. Health spending has a powerful multiplier effect: healthier people learn better,



work more productively and participate more fully in the economy.

But greater public spending, though necessary, will not be sufficient. Even if every African country met the Abuja target, the continent would still face an estimated annual health-financing gap of about \$66bn.

This is a structural problem that public budgets alone cannot solve. It also creates a large opportunity for private capital, particularly institutional capital.

Pension funds, insurers, sovereign-wealth funds,

Report, the continent holds more than \$4.4trn in domestic financial assets across its banking systems, pension funds, insurance companies, sovereign wealth funds, and central bank reserves.

No serious attempt to finance African healthcare at scale can ignore these pools of capital. The challenge is to make healthcare a scalable, resilient and investable asset class.

The underlying economics are compelling. Healthcare in Africa combines chronic undersupply with rapidly rising demand. The continent has too few hospital beds, doctors, diagnostic centres, medicines and primary-care facilities. This is not a saturated market searching for marginal growth. It is a vast unmet need.

Demand is also becoming easier to finance. Africa's middle class is growing and spending more on healthcare. Governments are gradually increasing health expenditure. Private insurance is expanding, while health-technology platforms are improving billing and payment collection. Together, these developments can produce more predictable and diversified revenue.

The risks, though real, are often exaggerated. Available global data suggest that default risks in emerging markets are frequently higher in perception than in practice. Blended finance – in which public or philanthropic capital absorbs some initial risk – can make well-designed health projects even more attractive to institutional investors.

More than hospitals

Healthcare is not a single asset class. It is a portfolio of them.

It includes hospitals, clinics and diagnostic centres, but also pharmaceutical manufacturing, insurance, telemedicine, digital health records, medical logistics, health technology and specialised financial services.

Health should therefore be treated as core infrastructure: essential to society, capable of being scaled, open to invest-

ment and able to generate returns while supporting wider economic transformation.

Pharmaceuticals illustrate both the opportunity and the danger. Africa currently imports between 70% and 90% of the medicines it consumes. This is not only a health concern. It is also an economic and sovereignty problem. Heavy dependence on imports exposes African countries to exchange-rate volatility and global supply disruptions. During a crisis, it can leave the continent dependent on decisions made elsewhere – as the pandemic demonstrated.

Africa now has an opportunity to change this. The African Union has endorsed the African Pooled Procurement Mechanism, which is designed to combine demand across countries, create larger and more predictable markets, give greater priority to African manufacturers and strengthen supply-chain resilience.

Continental strategies aim to increase local production of vaccines, medicines and other health products significantly by 2040. The target is ambitious, but it is achievable if procurement, regulation and financing are properly aligned.

Finding the money – and spending it well

African countries must also mobilise more domestic revenue for health. Carefully designed levies on products such as tobacco, alcohol and sugar-sweetened drinks can both discourage unhealthy consumption and generate substantial revenue.

The African diaspora is another underused source of health financing. Its contribution could extend beyond ordinary remittances to diaspora-linked insurance, investment funds and other structured financing vehicles.

But raising more money is only half the task. Governments must also spend it better.

The World Health Organization has estimated that between 20% and 40% of global health expenditure is

lost through inefficiency and waste. Africa cannot afford such losses. Additional funding must be accompanied by stronger procurement, better data, transparent administration and clear accountability for results.

Prevention is generally far cheaper than treatment, particularly when compared with the cost of managing advanced disease. Primary healthcare should therefore be understood as a form of public-liability management. Money not spent on vaccination, screening, maternal care and early treatment does not disappear from the government's balance sheet. It usually returns later as a much larger bill.

A whole-of-government responsibility

The central conclusion is simple: health is too important to be left to health ministries alone.

Finance ministries must treat it as an investment in productivity and fiscal resilience. Industry ministries must support pharmaceutical and medical-equipment manufacturing. Education ministries must train the required workforce. Infrastructure and energy ministries must ensure that hospitals have power, water and connectivity. Digital authorities must help build secure systems for health records, insurance and payments.

Healthcare affects employment, growth, industrialisation, household security, public trust and national sovereignty. Too much rests upon it for health policy to remain confined to an administrative silo.

A government that puts health at the centre of its economic programme is not choosing welfare over growth. It is investing in the people who produce growth – and in the institutions that sustain the state. ■

Prof. Yemi Osinbajo is a Nigerian pastor, lawyer, professor, and politician who served as the 14th vice-president of Nigeria.



Health workers protesting against unemployment in Pretoria, South Africa in early 2024, as underfunding had left many vacancies in public healthcare

foundations and other institutional investors manage close to \$200trn worldwide. That is more than 100 times the combined balance sheets of the multilateral development banks, estimated at about \$1.5trn. Besides, according to the Africa Finance Corporation's 2026 Infrastructure

The mysterious orange-lipped monkey

In 2008, a group of conservation scientists captured a photo of what they believed was a previously unrecorded species of monkey on the Lomami River in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The photo showed only a portion of its body. Its identity remained unresolved until 2018, when John Pierre Kapale from the Lukuru Wildlife Research Foundation managed to capture it on camera again, with several further sightings by him and his team in the subsequent months; but it has taken until now for the little primate to be fully identified.

Known locally as *Likweli* and in the scientific community as *Colobus Congoensis*,

in recognition of where it has been found, this new species' trademarks are in particular, its orange and cream lips, spiky black head fur and the white patch around its rump. Scientists have deduced from DNA testing that its closest relative is the black colobus monkey, found more than 1000km away in western Central Africa.

Its low roar can be heard high up in the forest canopy and although scientists have spoken to the inhabitants of villages next to its habitat, very little is known about the group's lifestyle, diet or behaviours.

The monkeys retain their mystery but research is in full swing to discover more about this watchful-eyed, endearing addition to our natural world.

Historically, Africa has never hosted an Olympic Games due to the complications of finance, infrastructure and the scale of transport and accommodation required. In 2018 that changed and Senegal was awarded the 2022 Youth Olympic Games, which were postponed until this year due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Engagement across Senegal has been high, with competitions being run to find the country's Olympic song, mascot and dance. Senegalese songwriter, composer and singer, Mamy Mbaye came up trumps with her joyful *Teranga*, a song that conveys a message of community spirit and hospitality to the world.

Sixteen-year-old student, Ndeye Mariama Diop, was stunned to discover that from almost 500 entries, her drawing of a smiling lion with a mane resembling the African continent, wearing a traditional Fulani tingandé hat, was the winner of the mascot design prize. Named Ayo, which means 'joy' in Yoruba, the lion symbolises the courage, strength and pride of Senegalese youth.

In July, a competition was

launched for young people aged 18 to 25 to choreograph the Olympic dance to an excerpt from *Teranga*. The results are to be announced in time for rehearsals, with the Games themselves taking place from 31 October to 13 November.

2,700 young sportspeople will descend on the trio of host sites – Dakar, Diamniadio and Saly, to test their skills across a variety of disciplines, from athletics and archery to swimming and skateboarding.

With the necessary infrastructure up to speed, over 400 young Africans have been given the skillset to run large-scale events through specialist training at the Dakar 2026 Learning Academy. The official volunteer programme for the Games has attracted over 6,000 people, to assist in areas like spectator support and transport management.

When the Games end, they will leave a legacy of skilled young people and hopefully, an open door for future African bids.

Ayo the lion is just waiting to roar into action!

SENEGAL HOSTS AFRICA'S FIRST OLYMPIC EVENT



WORLD CUP 2026: AFRICAN FANS' MEMORABLE ADVENTURES

The World Cup is all over now, but it has left an indelible mark, especially for some. Wanderlust Ghana, a group of adventurers famed for their endurance road trips, took on what might stand as the biggest challenge of their lives – driving in convoy from Ghana to the 2026 World Cup in the Americas.

Having gained global attention with their 2023 journey from Ghana to the UK, which took 16 days and saw them clock up around 10,000km, this new challenge took them even further.

Setting off on 26 April, the drivers traversed three continents by car to cheer on Ghana's Black Stars, passing through 12 countries and taking a trans-oceanic journey from London to New York. The journey was not all smooth, with a 48-hour Mauritanian border delay, road

connectivity gaps and spare-part sourcing difficulties, to name a few problems.

They arrived in Toronto, Canada to a rousing reception, in time for their team's opening game on 17 June, and followed the Black Stars until they took their final bow in the Round of 32, losing 1-0 to Colombia. Their epic journey was followed by media outlets across the world.

Elsewhere, whilst he didn't endure a journey over three continents, super-fan Michel Kuka Mboladinga, better known as 'Lumumba Vea', achieved global renown at the World Cup. His performance art involves posing as a 'living statue' in the stands at football games, dressed in a suit fashioned from DRC's national colours, with one arm raised – impersonating a famous monument found in Kinshasa of Patrice Lumum-

ba, the first Prime Minister and independence hero of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

He first started offering his tribute to Lumumba at DRC's national football matches in 2013 and went on to achieve widespread fame with it during the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations.

Mboladinga missed his team's opening game against Portugal in Houston, Texas due to Ebola-related travelling restrictions enforced by US border control, but he made it to their second game in Mexico's Guadalajara stadium, where they lost 1-0 to Colombia. DRC's next two games took place in the US, so sadly, he missed attending the final group game and the round of 32 match against England, which sent *Les Leopards* home along with their No. 1 supporter.



African Youth Survey shows more optimism

Africa's population has for some years been the youngest across the globe. More than 60% of its people are aged under 25 and as the world's fastest-growing youth population, they are integral to shaping the future global labour market for decades to come.

Alongside this responsibility comes their interpretation of the world we live in now, and *The African Youth Survey* founded by South African businessman and philanthropist Ivor Ichikowitz in 2020 certainly gives that insight.

Nearly 5,000 young people from the ages of 18–24 answered the call to the 2026 survey. It included face-to-face interviews and covered 16 countries including South Africa, Chad, Nigeria, Kenya and Liberia, to ensure a pan-African perspective.

Overall, the results show an increase in Afro-opti-

mism, with just shy of half believing their country is heading in the right direction, compared with 2024, when the mainstream opinion was pessimistic, although Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa reflect no change in outlook.

There was a predominant feeling that too few young people hold government leadership positions, and the creation of a 'Minister of Youth' role is widely approved, with a democratic rather than non-democratic government preferred on the proviso that a Western-style model would need to be replaced by an 'African style' that suits the continent.

The most significant areas of concern for young Africans are the need to create new, well-paying jobs and reduce government corruption, followed closely by ensuring better access to basic needs and services. As Nelson Mandela said, "Sometimes it falls upon a generation to be great. You can be that generation."

MEET THE DINOSAUR MUSANGO FROM AFRICA



of Lake Kariba on the Zimbabwe border by boat when he noticed leg bones from an animal protruding from the ground by the shoreline after disembarking.

Bones from the spine, ribs, arms, legs and feet were unearthed and analysis of the fossils and remains (*left and below*) by the team dated the dinosaur to the Late Triassic period – a mere 210m years ago!

Fossils in Africa have been understudied in comparison to their counterparts in Europe and North America, but this and other findings on the continent may well prompt research filling the gap, and lead to an improved understanding of the early evolution of dinosaurs in Africa.

An international collaboration between the UK, South Africa and Zimbabwe has led to the discovery of a new dinosaur, *Musango*. Professor Paul Barrett, a palaeontologist at London's Natural History Museum, was leading an expedition along the shores



Two island nations and South Sudan have had sites included in the World Heritage List for the first time.

The Comoros, a volcanic archipelago in the Indian Ocean off Africa's East Coast, has seen six historic towns included under the designation, *The Medinas of the Historic Sultanates of the Comoros*.

Dating back to the 11th century, the towns boast an abundance of palaces, mosques and public squares that today remain at the heart of everyday life. Some of the oldest structures are extremely vulnerable but their new status should unlock conservation funding and cultural tourism.

In the Gulf of Guinea, Africa's second smallest nation, São Tomé and Príncipe, has had six *roças* listed as a single World Heritage property. These former Portuguese plantations were part of a broader group of colonial estates that made up a large part of the islands' economy through coffee and cocoa production.

The listing recognises the architectural and agricultural importance of the plantations but also preserves a dark time in history, when thousands of people were subjected to forced migration and labour.

In East Africa, South Sudan's *Boma-Badingilo Migratory Landscape* has been enrolled on the World Heritage List as well as on the World Heritage in Danger List due to ongoing multiple threats, including poaching and regional insecurity.

The landscape supports one of the world's largest terrestrial mammal migrations, with an estimated six million antelope moving seasonally across the Great Nile Migration ecosystem. The listing is also a tribute to the significant cultural and linguistic diversity of the area.

Below: The former hospital at Roça Agostinho Neto, São Tomé – one of the island's 100 *roças*, or ex-plantations

THREE NEW AFRICAN COUNTRIES JOIN THE UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE FAMILY



By Sanda Ojiambo

The Global Africa Business Initiative (GABI) was set up five years ago to put Africans and African interests at the heart of all discussions about the continent. The take-up has been remarkable.

Unstoppable Africa moving from premise to delivery



The name *Unstoppable Africa* was chosen to match the momentum seen across the continent's economies: the businesses, entrepreneurs and its dynamic population.

Five years ago, the Global Africa Business Initiative (GABI) set out to change the narrative about Africa. For decades, discussions on building Africa's businesses and economies have not always had business leaders, governments, policy-makers, and investors at the same table. Foreign investors and policymakers spoke about the continent, often without those driving economic growth and job creation being present.

GABI, and its flagship convening initiative *Unstoppable Africa*, was created to change that. The idea was simple: put Africa and the world's business leaders, heads of state, policymakers, entrepreneurs, and development financiers around the same table and in the same discussions and dialogues, and let the agenda be set by what Africa is building, not by what the rest of the world assumes it needs.

The name *Unstoppable Africa* was deliberately chosen to match the scale of momentum already visible across the continent's economies: the businesses, entrepreneurs, and its young, dynamic population.

Five years on, that vision has proven unstoppable. The figures speak volumes. *Unstoppable Africa* has convened more than 6,000 participants, 106 speakers, and nearly 1,000 companies across 17 sessions spanning energy, finance, trade, health, digital, and sports. Supported by 18 funding partners and more than a dozen media partners, it has

Under digital transformation, Cassava Technologies Founder and Executive Chairman Strive Masiyiwa announced a \$720m partnership with Nvidia to build Africa's first network of AI factories. This is a significant investment demonstrating African-led innovation and infrastructure.

Trade was also spotlighted through Angola's President João Lourenço's Lobito Corridor, a major transcontinental trade and logistics project, designed to link the Atlantic and Indian Oceans and attract private investment into production and exports.

Sports brought strong social and economic commitments. WNBA All-Star Chiney Ogwumike launched her foundation to create opportunities for women and girls. NBA Africa also selected Festival Coins through its Startup Accelerator, which offers mentorship and funding to strengthen Africa's sports and startup ecosystem.

The shift from conversation to delivery is most visible in GABI's Action Pathways. Launched at *Unstoppable Africa* last year, the Digital Transformation and Health Action Pathways have been designed to coordinate action and partnerships for delivery, turning commitments made on stage toward implementation.

In May this year, this initiative took a further step. On the sidelines of the Africa CEO Forum in Kigali, the GABI Solutions Lab brought African business leaders, investors, and government officials to-

gether to work through the conditions that make a project bankable, using digital tools as the test case for a much bigger question: how to bring private capital into infrastructure that serves the public interest on a large scale.

New era of sovereignty

The global landscape has evolved alongside GABI's development, but Africa's positioning has changed even more. Despite some credit rating agencies still classifying Africa as 'high risk', it is no longer universally dismissed as 'perpetually emerging'.

The continent is now asserting its sovereignty by taking control of its own narrative, its priorities, and its partnerships. Africa's strategic advantages lie in its young population, its vital mineral resources, which are needed for the global energy transition, and its entrepreneurial spirit, which is encouraging innovation in the fields of fintech, agritech, and the creative industries.

None of this eliminates the challenges that the continent is currently facing. Trade preferences have expired, tariffs have become more unpredictable, and aid and health assistance have been reduced, leaving countries that had integrated these flows into their systems exposed to greater uncertainty.

At the same time, similar disruptions are affecting the rest of the world. Supply chains are moving back to

domestic locations, concerns about mineral security are increasing, and the conflict in the Middle East is disrupting global energy flows and shipping routes.

Nevertheless, these disruptions have also created new opportunities for Africa. For instance, refiners and exporters such as Nigeria are now entering markets that had previously been dependent on supplies from the Gulf and Europe. This is a moment of advantage.

Turning Africa's moment of leverage into long-term progress will require building on the foundation of collaboration that already exists. The private sector, working alongside governments and multilateral institutions,

must now play an even more prominent role in ensuring that Africa's leverage is fully realised in ways that reinforce sovereignty and deliver long-term value.

It is still crucial to have sound policies, stable regulatory conditions, regional coherence, and the creation of frameworks that protect African sovereignty. The strength of GABI lies in the fact that it recognises the role of both the public and private sectors, bringing together role players to explore and discuss mutual priorities and opportunities.

Maintaining momentum

Five years is worth pausing to acknowledge and celebrate. But sustaining momentum is harder than sparking it.

This year's theme, "Powering Business, Scaling Economies, Shaping the Future", captures what the next phase must demand of us: amplifying Africa's business leadership and spotlighting trade and investment opportunities with measurable follow-through.

The way forward is clear. The African Continental Free Trade Area will achieve its full potential when intra-African trade is supported by harmonised standards and adequate infrastructure.

Access to energy is essential but must remain sustainable. The creative industries and sports are significant revenue-generators and are becoming more and more important as agents of global

influence.

Above all, it is a matter of discipline to achieve the transition from promise to delivery. This means turning agreements into factories, converting policy commitments into regulatory action, and transforming panel discussions into lasting partnerships grounded in African sovereignty.

It is only by doing so that the continent's unstoppable journey can be realised. Over the next five years, we need to move from promise to delivery, from commitment to real impact, and from aspiration to action. ■

Sanda Ojiambo is Assistant Secretary-General and CEO of the United Nations Global Compact.

Below: UN Secretary-General António Guterres (seated) with Mohamed Abou El-Enein, the leading Egyptian businessman and politician, at *Unstoppable Africa 2025*





ANTÓNIO GUTERRES

UN Secretary-General

As UN Secretary-General António Guterres winds up his decade-long period in office, it is time to assess his influence and impact on Africa. How did he see the continent and its place in the jigsaw of nationalities and interests that make up the UN? What is his legacy? New York-based **Stéphanie Fillion** and **Dawn Clancy** solicit the views of several people who have worked closely with him.

Guterres and Africa: an unfinished legacy?

Seated at the centre of a long table, surrounded by some of the UN's top African officers, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres (*opposite*) looked up from his prepared remarks and smiled.

"Even after 31 December, wherever I will be and whatever I will be doing, I can guarantee that at the centre of my concerns and my active solidarity, there will always be Africa," he said.

He was speaking at the 39th African Union summit in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, which took place in February. With his second term due to expire at the end of this year, Guterres made clear that his commitment to Africa, a place he once described as "a continent of hope and opportunity", had not wavered. "Like we say in my language, Africa *sempre* (always)," he added.

As his tenure nears its end, the question is not whether Africa mattered to Guterres. It clearly did. The harder question is what that commitment achieved.

"No one can dispute that Africa played a central role for Guterres," says Gustavo de Carvalho, Acting Head of African Governance and Diplomacy at the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA).

He describes the Secretary-General as "rhetorically ambitious" but says that operationally, he has been more "secretary than general". Guterres, he adds, struggled to translate his Africa rhetoric into reality.

Guterres genuinely put Africa high on the UN agenda and helped deepen the UN-AU relationship, while championing African representation, development

and reform. But his record is far less convincing on the continent's wars and his ability to turn rhetoric into political results.

A former Prime Minister of Portugal,

Speaking at the 39th AU summit in Addis Ababa in February, Guterres made clear that his commitment to Africa, a place he once called a "continent of hope and opportunity", had not wavered. "Like we say in my language, Africa *sempre* (always)," he added.

Guterres led the UN's refugee agency between 2005 and 2015. He became the UN Secretary-General in 2017 after a hard-fought campaign, beating 13 strong hopefuls.

For Abdullah Jafar, a former senior programme assistant at UNHCR's Kuwait office who had direct contact with Guterres when he was travelling in the country, his decision to take the humanitarian route after leaving political office shows his passion for helping others.

"He didn't need to be High Commissioner for Refugees at the time, having held the higher rank of Prime Minister," he says. "That shows humility."

Guterres led Portugal as a member of the centre-left Portuguese Socialist

Party. When appointed as the Secretary-General, he told the General Assembly that his decade as High Commissioner for Refugees had helped shape his view of the role.

"Over the past 10 years, I have witnessed at first hand the suffering of the most vulnerable people on earth," he said. "I have visited war zones and refugee camps where one might legitimately ask: what has happened to the dignity and worth of the human person, referred to in the second preambular paragraph of the Charter."

He also promised a "humble approach" to the job, one in which he would not "seek to impose his own views".

Monique Nsanzabaganwa, a former Deputy Chairperson of the African Union Commission (AUC), who is from Rwanda, recalls once encountering Guterres at an airport, alone and carrying his own suitcase. What struck her was the absence of an entourage around a figure of his stature.

"This is what they call servant leadership. You are at that high level, but it is not about you as a person. You are humble and relatable," she says.

That humanitarian background would also shape how Guterres approached Africa as secretary-general.

"Guterres brought genuine depth to the humanitarian dimensions of Africa's crises, especially when it came to displacement, food insecurity and climate change," says Karim Soumana, project director, global order and peacemaking at the International Crisis Group, who was part of Niger's team on the Secu-

rity Council in 2020–2021. “I believe his UNHCR years helped and it showed in his personal engagement on those areas.”

Empowering local voices

When Guterres succeeded Ban Ki-moon as Secretary-General in 2017, he inherited a world already beset by war, terrorism, humanitarian crises and a fraying international order. Nearly a decade later, those pressures have intensified, while new crises have emerged to test the limits of the UN.

In a 2017 op-ed published in *Newsweek*, Guterres wrote of the bloodshed in Syria, global terrorism, the crippling of international law and an uptick in human rights abuses. He called for a surge in diplomacy and for members of the Security Council, the body’s most powerful organ, to “live up to their responsibilities”.

Fast-forward nine years, and the bloodshed has shifted to Gaza, Ukraine and Sudan, while the Security Council remains deadlocked.

A roaring financial crisis has created conditions for the Secretary-General “that no individual could overcome,” Soumana says. “A lot of the failures that were attributed to Guterres were failures of the international system that he leads but does not control. The next SG will also have to navigate those constraints,” he adds – including the nature of the UN’s relationship with the AU.

During his term, Guterres encouraged greater partnership and cooperation between the two organisations, which in turn shone a brighter spotlight on sustainable development in Africa, Security Council reform, and reform of the global financial system.

In his own words, Guterres described a “shared commitment” to Agenda 2063, the AU’s blueprint to transform Africa into a global powerhouse, and the UN’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, a global action plan to promote prosperity for all, as a “central pillar” of the partnership.

Nsanabaganwa credits Guterres and his team for the “turnaround in the institutional relationship”, as the two organisations had historically been at odds. “At the African Union we used to call him a ‘friend of Africa *par excellence*.’” She’s not the only one.

Abiodun Williams, Professor of the Practice of International Politics at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University (US), who previously served in senior UN roles under both Kofi Annan and Ban Ki-moon, described Guterres’ approach to Africa as “normative, institutionalist and multilateralist” in an email.

He continued: “He supports African agency, greater African representation in global institutions, including permanent seats on the Security Council, and believes multilateral institutions

can play an important role in addressing Africa’s challenges.”

Rita Abrahamsen, a Professor of African Studies at Oxford University, believes the approach to the continent is mutually beneficial. “The UN needs Africa at this moment in time, and the Secretary-General is probably aware of that,” she says. “The UN is probably at its weakest. It’s got a very low level of influence and legitimacy in the global sphere. So, how does the UN reinvent itself?”

One clear show of Guterres’ commitment to Africa was the appointment of Amina Mohammed as his number two. Mohammed holds both Nigerian and British nationalities, and has been at the heart of his work on the continent. “You could feel the chemistry, even just by observing them. They shared the same vision about Africa. They pursued it,” Nsanabaganwa says.

Mohammed brought “extensive experience, expertise in sustainable development, and strong relationships across African governments and institutions,” says Williams.

This is 2026 – not 1946

If Guterres worked hard to bring the UN closer to the AU, he has also advocated for empowering African countries and giving them more power in the influential UN Security Council.

The idea of Security Council reform isn’t new in UN circles – it’s almost as

Below: A few of the leaders who attended the Africa Forward Summit in May 2026 pictured alongside UN Sec-Gen Guterres (bottom left). L to r: Ghana’s Pres. Mahama (behind the UN SG), Kenya’s Pres. Ruto (front row, 2nd from left), Nigeria’s Pres. Tinubu, Eswatini’s PM Dlamini, France’s Pres. Macron (front row, centre), Morocco’s PM Akhannouch and Mauritius’ PM Ramgoolam (front row, far right)



old as the UN itself. Still, Guterres has repeatedly advocated for expanding the body to include two permanent seats for Africa, framing their absence as a consequence of colonialism and the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

"Africa was under colonial domination when today's multilateral system was created – and that injustice endures," Guterres said in February 2025. "Look no further than the United Nations Security Council. There is no excuse that Africa still lacks permanent representation in the 21st century."

The current 15-seat Council includes five permanent members with veto power – the US, UK, China, France and Russia – plus 10 rotating non-permanent seats, organised by region.

According to UN estimates, Africa has the world's fastest-growing population. Africa also continues to occupy a substantial share of the Council's agenda.

Additionally, Guterres has used the same historical framing when advocating for reform of the "outdated, dysfunctional and unfair" global financial system and the climate crisis. "Africa has done the least to cause this emergency yet suffers some of its most devastating consequences," he said at a press conference in 2020.

Guterres' approach also acknowledges the organisation's changed landscape. While UN General Assembly resolutions don't carry the same legal weight as those adopted by the Security Council, the largest regional voting bloc in the Assembly is the African group, representing 54 of 193 countries, which gives the group collective voting power.

"Traditionally, and people often forget this, with the emergence of the UN after the Second World War, it was newly decolonised countries in Africa that contributed a lot to the UN's development, and human rights," Abrahamsen says. "At this moment in time, when the commitment of the other superpowers is declining, where can the Secretary-General look for support?"

Conflict resolution failure?

Guterres inherited an organisation built heavily around peacekeeping. During his tenure, that operational footprint contracted by almost half while the UN invested increasingly in diplomacy, development, human rights, coordination and headquarters-based functions. Only with the financial shock that produced the UN80 Reform Initiative did the organisation begin a major effort to reverse the institutional accumulation.

While these decisions are not solely in the Secretary-General's hands, UN expert Richard Gowan writes that Guterres

has not been a keen advocate for blue-helmet peacekeeping, in stark contrast to his predecessors.

"It will be a mixed legacy," Williams says. "He has amplified Africa's voice at the UN, but has fallen short on conflict mediation and resolution. Africa has experienced major conflicts during his tenure, including in Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Guterres has been unable or unwilling to use his political authority as Secretary-General to push for negotiated settlements to ongoing conflicts through creative diplomacy."

If Guterres worked hard to bring the UN closer to the AU, he has also advocated for empowering African countries and giving them more power in the influential Security Council. He has repeatedly advocated for expanding the body to include two permanent seats for Africa.

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, several observers wondered why Guterres didn't hop on a plane sooner to try to prevent Moscow's actions. The UN chief has repeatedly defended himself by saying the UN doesn't hold the guns, and many say his pragmatic approach reflects his understanding of the role itself.

At the 75th celebration of the United Nations in 2020, Guterres said the UN "is only as strong as its members' commitment to its ideals and each other."

Sudan has perhaps become the starkest test of that philosophy. Three years into a war that has produced what the UN calls the world's largest humanitarian crisis, Guterres has increasingly described the conflict in terms of forces beyond his control. In January, he called Sudan a "playground" for international actors, whose interference made it harder for Sudanese parties to reach agreement.

When a journalist subsequently suggested, "You've just said that you don't have the power to stop these atrocities," Guterres did not challenge the premise. Instead, he pointed to the Security Council, arguing that the next Secretary-General's good offices would be more effective only if the Council itself could act.

Whether it's a question of will or way, Soumana also believes that is where Gu-

terres has fallen short during his term.

"Where I think the knowledge has been thinner is on the political architecture of the continent, mainly the dynamics of the AU, and the intricacies of African politics and it has been visible on how his Office engaged with some of the crises," Soumana says.

Mali is perceived as one of the UN's biggest failures during Guterres' term in the region. After successive military coups in the country, the transitional government asked the Security Council for an 'immediate withdrawal' of its peacekeeping troops. The UN leader said at the time that the organisation's work in the West African country was a peacekeeping operation where "there is no peace to keep".

A recent lessons-learned report by UN Peacekeeping found that the mission operated in an increasingly difficult geopolitical environment, as Mali's international alliances shifted and divisions among major powers deepened. The result was a peacekeeping mission caught not only between the Malian government and armed groups on the ground, but one operating amidst a broader contest for influence among international powers, weakening the unified political backing that UN peacekeeping depends on.

There were also some diplomatic breakthroughs during Guterres' tenure, most notably the UN-mediated Libyan ceasefire of 2020.

But his African record also illustrates the limits of the Secretary-General's influence: the most durable advances were generally achieved when African regional powers were united enough to lead, with the UN acting as facilitator rather than peacemaker-in-chief – something he himself pushed for.

Between Trump's shake-up of the UN, the Covid-19 pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the resurgence of violence in the Middle East, Guterres has undoubtedly faced a difficult time as the UN's head. Whether somebody else would have handled it better is an impossible question to answer.

Abdullah Jafar recalls Guterres counselling a politician in Kuwait about what was needed for his role. He told him: "I have one piece of advice for you: and it's patience, patience, patience, patience, patience, patience, patience." The politician answered: "I don't think I have that much patience."

Throughout his term, Guterres has faced waves of criticism, was declared persona non grata by Israel's Foreign Minister, and has been accused by Russia of overstepping his authority.

Still, Guterres has not given up. He has not used up all of his patience yet. ■

The United Nations is under greater strain than ever before in its 80-year history. Its authority, especially in situations of conflict, is being constantly challenged; attacks on its personnel are increasing; and massive cuts in funding and mounting member arrears are stretching its budget beyond the limit. Can this body, which has steered the world through thick and thin for eight decades, survive the new waves of hostility directed at it? Analysis by *New African's* Editor, **Anver Versi**.

Can the UN survive in a hostile world?

Reflecting on his decade-long experience as the Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres said the world had undergone fundamental changes between his first taking office in 2017 and now, as he prepares to leave it.

That same feeling has pervaded the thoughts of a large number of reflective people. Ten years ago, despite several crises, the world seemed a much more solid place and the UN was in many ways the reassuring rock around which the affairs of the world were discussed and conducted.

There had been many failures – especially in containing conflicts such as in Rwanda, Bosnia, Iraq, Sudan and other places, and with the rising tide of people seeking refuge, climate change-induced attrition, human rights abuses, and so forth. However, and despite the sidelining of the UN by world powers, as in the invasion of Iraq, there was at least lip-service to the Rules Based Order that had been in operation since the end of World War Two.

Although it was battered and bruised and the limits of its powers to effect change often cruelly exposed, the UN still mattered. Its multitude of agencies, including the World Health Organisation, carried out invaluable work in some of the world's neediest places.

In addition, the creative economic and innovative energies of production and distribution unleashed by globalisation, lifted billions of people out of poverty and raised hitherto struggling nations such as China, South-East Asia,

India and parts of Latin America to dizzying heights of prosperity.

Africa was also a beneficiary. This mainly took the form of higher commodity prices, a small but relatively significant spike in manufactured exports, as well as an unprecedented increase in infrastructure stock. There was a remarkable increase in the number and quality of roads, railways, new and enlarged ports, modern logistical systems

and an improved education and health matrix.

There was a general atmosphere of optimism that tomorrow would be better than today. The shrinking globe, thanks to an explosion of logistics and trade, was knitting the world together and bringing what had seemed unlikely partners together to solve common problems. There was a palpable confidence that it was in our power to solve whatever crisis we faced. The UN was still the conductor, coordinator and convener-in-chief.

The decade of disillusion

A decade later, the situation has changed completely. Ten years ago, the UN presided over a multilateral world that was working its way, albeit with many missteps, towards greater cohesion and a globalised marketplace that increased not only the total stock of wealth in the world but spread out its distribution of that wealth to those who had been hitherto marginalised.

The indicators set under the UN Millennium Development Goals, developed 15 years earlier, were largely all pointing in the right direction. The world had never eradicated poverty at such speed and depth.

That was then. Today the world has been fragmenting into regional groupings and individual nationalism. Trump's 'America first' slogan, his weaponisation of economic instruments such as tariffs, the regime change efforts through assassinations and kidnapping, the chilling threats, destructive sanctions and outright military muscle-



Above: UN Secretary-General António Guterres (l) with US President Donald Trump at Egypt's Sharm el-Sheikh Peace Summit in October 2025, held to find an end to the war in Gaza

flexing have created an atmosphere of mistrust and instability.

Democratic governments are being challenged by openly fascistic forces, ethno-nationalism is on the rise, and many of the hallmarks of liberal democracies including press and academic freedom and an independent judiciary seem to be under attack.

Hard-gained prosperity is being rolled back and the wealth gap between the rich and the poor is increasing. Swingeing cuts in development aid have condemned millions to suffering early deaths and are playing havoc with the development plans of emerging countries.

Violent conflict has been increasing. The sense of impunity from those that wield power has unmistakeable echoes of the worst atrocities in the last Great War. Even more threatening are the examples being set and followed. Naked power is replacing diplomacy, legality and adherence to rules.

António Guterres himself and his generally admirable staff have often been left wringing their hands in despair, reduced to making heartfelt appeals that are not only ignored but which earn the organisation and its agencies a slew of insults.

What has been happening in Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan, Myanmar and elsewhere demonstrates all too clearly the UN's current impotence to make effective change in the face of such hostility – largely because of an outdated model around the Security Council.

So, in a world where the international Rules Based Order – the overriding principle behind the establishments of the UN – is being trampled underfoot, can the UN survive and function?

An increasing number of commentators, including some people in positions of supreme power, are openly questioning if the UN as we know it has any future at all. Some have even been posing

that US President Donald Trump's Board of Peace is being set up to rival the UN Security Council as a wedge to further erode the position of the UN in global affairs.

Others argue that in fact, the need for a strong, functioning and well-supported – and funded – UN has never been greater than it is now.

"We are unmoored just now. A lot of the certainties that people have grown up with, and banked on to allow them to understand the world, have changed," says Jeremy Bowen, the BBC's International Editor and one of the most experienced journalists in the world. He was discussing the state of the world and the steps that have led to its current shape on a special series of excellent podcasts commissioned by the BBC.

He says that to understand the new world we are in, "It is important to have a historic sensibility about where we have come from, the mistakes we have

Below: Goma residents protesting against drone strikes attributed to government forces on 12 March, a day after a UNICEF staff member was killed. MONUSCO, the UN's peacekeeping mission in the DRC, which has a mandate to protect civilians, is constrained in its work in the city by the presence of M23 militia



made in the past.

"If you look at the various catastrophes that have happened even in relatively recent times – the invasion of Iraq is a very good example in 2003 – there was tremendous ignorance about what they were getting into, the potential consequence of what might happen and that has continued to unfold over the years since then."

Taking a historic sensibility on the same programme, historian Professor Margaret MacMillan of Oxford University casts an eye back to the foundation of the UN and the origin of the Rules Based Order.

"The Rules Based Order is some attempt to regulate the anarchy which exists among states and some attempt to build a better world in which we don't use war as a way of settling disputes, we don't use war as a way of seizing territory from other nations, we don't use war to avenge insults, and we don't try and destroy other societies," she says.

"And the danger of breaking the rules – and we see this in our own societies," she argues, "is that others will follow.

The Rules Based Order is under tremendous strain and we have to hope that it can somehow be maintained and re-constituted."

The UN is without any question the only impartial guarantor of the Rules Based Order, as long as it is not undermined by member states.

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Security Council paralysis

The blame for the UN's perceived lack of effectiveness, for example in enforcing international law when it is broken, should be laid at the door of the current

make-up of the Security Council, according to Guterres.

During an interview with the *Financial Times*, he said that while the UN was involved in a large number of activities, the Security Council is at the centre of its work. But, "the truth is that the Security Council became, during those 10 years, practically paralysed by the geopolitical divides."

For example, he says the succession of vetoes by Russia over Ukraine, and the US over Israeli activities, especially in Gaza as well as in other areas, illustrates "the Security Council has shown a total lack of capacity to intervene". Therefore, he argues, "a sense of impunity is now prevailing".

This, he continues, dramatically diminishes the UN's leverage because "there is not a Security Council able to implement the measures that allow countries to understand that they must behave. If not, they will be punished."

On the more optimistic side, he sees the rise of middle-powers such as Australia, South Korea, Indonesia, Singapore, Vietnam, Malaysia, Canada,

Below: Smoke rises from Israeli airstrikes on al-Mansouri in Lebanon on 25 August, amid Israel's campaign against Hezbollah. The UN Security Council, established to maintain international peace and security, has sought to contain the conflict and prevent regional escalation through a number of resolutions and other actions



Brazil, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, Egypt, United Arab Emirates, South Africa, and Nigeria as “a very positive trend. I think we are moving clearly into multipolarity.”

Properly organised, this multipolarity would lead to multilateral institutions. If it is not properly organised, he insists, multipolarity will lead to more competition and eventually more conflict. He recalls that it was a multipolar world in the early 1900s, “but in the absence of multilateral institutions of governance, the result was the First World War”.

But he wants multilateral institutions that “correspond to the world of today, and not the world of 1945”, when the Council with its permanent members and veto options was established. He says that among the host of UN reforms, such as in efficiency, impact, coordination and management, it is essential to reform power relations and “the distribution of power relations” within the organisation.

“Let’s take an honest look at the Security Council. There are three European members in the Security Council (Russia is a European country) out of five (China and the US are the other two). Europe is not three-fifths of the world. There are no African permanent members, no Latin American permanent members and one Asian permanent member.”

But it is clear, he says, that the reality on the ground will have to prevail. “It is inevitable that the Security Council will have to adapt – like the Bretton Woods system – to what the position is today, and the relative weight of the different powers in the world.”

He admits that the current veto-wielding members are not likely to give up their special powers willingly. “Yes, power is never given, it needs to be taken. The question is how can we organise the international community in order to create the conditions for that power to be taken?”

Therein lies the rub. Indeed, while everybody or almost everybody agrees that the Security Council and its veto system must be reformed if the UN is to truly carry out its functions of enforcing international rules, the question remains: “Who will bell the cat?” Perhaps the next Secretary-General will come up with a solution.

Africa and the reform process

Although the majority of African countries that became members in the 1970s were relatively newcomers, their size and influence has grown and they are now a substantial group.

Today, the Africa Group is composed of 54 members. Amina Mohammed, a

UK-British national, holds the second highest position in the organisation as the Deputy Secretary-General.

The Africa Group is the largest regional group at the UN and hence holds considerable voting power when it comes to the selection of various candidates for UN agencies. Over the past few years, it has also been speaking largely with one voice, amplifying the strength of positions on numerous policy decisions.

The Africa Group has campaigned vigorously for various reforms of the body and its stance has been adopted by other regional members.

By following its own agenda rather than siding with the dominant spheres of influence, it has brought a freshness and independence of thought that has made its interventions a welcome change from the more rigid and predictable utterances of others.

It has also campaigned vigorously for various reforms of the UN and its stance has been adopted by other regional members that also feel the structure of the body, particularly the make-up and conduct of the Security Council, must change. The African Union’s Ezulwini Consensus, for example, proposes expanding the Council to at least 26 members. It demands at least two permanent seats for African nations – complete with full veto power, plus additional non-permanent seats.

The Group also supports proposals led by France, Mexico and a cross-regional group to enjoin permanent members to voluntarily refrain from using the veto in cases of mass atrocity such as genocide or war crimes. It also supports a General Assembly Resolution which mandates a formal debate whenever a veto is cast.

While there is a strong desire especially from emerging nations to change parts of the UN Charter, such as the veto system, the current regulations make it well nigh impossible. To do so would require a two-thirds majority and the unanimous approval of all five permanent members.

But as Guterres says, sooner or later, the Security Council will have to reflect the realities of today’s world rather than those of 1945. He has urged members to continue chipping away and the Africa Group is foremost in working away at the edifice. As the Secretary-General says,

Africa matters, and has always mattered – now perhaps more than ever before.

Financial body blows

In the meantime, the UN has to cope with heavy body blows to its financial system. Total arrears in unpaid contributions are now roughly \$4.5bn. The US accounts for roughly 95% of total unpaid dues, owing about \$2bn to the regular operating budget and over \$2.5bn to peacekeeping budgets. China also owes \$445m.

The US has also slashed voluntary funding to various agencies and withdrawn, or begun to do so, from 31 international bodies. These include the World Health Organisation, UNESCO, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), the UN Democracy Fund and the UN Human Rights Council. It has also cut funding to the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA).

With the huge depletion in its funding, the UN has had to cut 22% of its Secretariat posts. But Guterres remains defiant. He says the writing was on the wall immediately Donald Trump was re-elected. He says they had foreseen what was about to happen and had planned for it.

As agencies drastically reduced their staff and adjusted to the funding available, the organisation did everything possible to minimise the negative impact on “those that matter, the people we care for”.

“Obviously, more people are dying from hunger and more people are dying from lack of vaccines,” he admits but the total predicted collapse of the body in the face of the funding withdrawal has not happened. It soldiers on.

Guterres counts many of the UN’s successes – its unique convening ability that he believes has prevented a multitude of conflicts from escalating, its central role in dealing with epidemics and endemic diseases, its various development strategies, its support for cultures and world heritage, its campaign for better health and gender equality, and its relentless battle against the causes of climate change – as proof positive that the body has served the world as well as it has been allowed to.

What he sees as its crowning glory, however, is that it has helped “to avoid a war among superpowers so far”. That service, he says, remains as important today as it was 80 years ago and justifies the UN remaining at the centre of a multilateral governance system.

To that we say Amen. Long may the UN continue to survive. Its demise will surely usher in the nightmare of ultimate Armageddon. ■

With its programme portfolio expanding from \$30m to more than \$300m in just four years, AUDA-NEPAD is positioning itself as the African Union's premier delivery agency. CEO **Nardos Bekele-Thomas** believes Africa's greatest challenge is no longer defining its development ambitions but building the institutions, partnerships and investment pipelines capable of turning Agenda 2063 into reality.

From vision to delivery: AUDA-NEPAD's billion-dollar ambition

Africa has never been short of vision. From the Lagos Plan of Action to the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), and more recently Agenda 2063 and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), the continent has produced no shortage of ambitious frameworks to guide its economic transformation. The real test has always come afterwards. Turning continental aspirations into roads, power systems, industrial parks, digital infrastructure, healthcare, jobs and investment has proved considerably more difficult.

That implementation gap is one of the defining development challenges facing Africa today. It is also the challenge that AUDA-NEPAD believes it is uniquely positioned to address.

Speaking to development partners during the African Union Executive Council meetings in Addis Ababa, AUDA-NEPAD CEO Nardos Bekele-Thomas presented an institution that has quietly undergone one of the most significant transformations within the African Union system.

Her message was less about celebrating organisational growth than explaining why Africa now needs stronger delivery institutions if Agenda 2063 is to become more than a collection of well-crafted strategies.

"We know what to do," Bekele-Thomas told partners. "The task now is converting that alignment into structural transformation, productive jobs, resilient food systems, environmental sustainability and the domestic financing that will allow Africa to stand increasingly on its own resources."

It was a simple observation, but one

that captures a broader shift taking place across Africa's development architecture. Increasingly, success will be measured not by the quality of policy documents but by the institutions capable of implementing them.

'Our orientation must shift from an Africa that receives concessional support towards an Africa that is genuinely ripe for global investment.'

An agency with a growing mandate

Unlike many continental organisations that focus primarily on policy development or advocacy, AUDA-NEPAD occupies an unusual position within the African Union.

As the Union's development agency, it is mandated to coordinate and implement regional and continental programmes, strengthen the capacity of member states, develop innovative financing approaches and monitor progress towards Agenda 2063.

Few institutions combine policy development, programme implementation and financing under one roof, and fewer still operate across all 55 African Union member states.

Its governance structure reflects that importance. AUDA-NEPAD reports to the Heads of State and Government Orientation Committee, bringing together 33 African leaders and the chairpersons of the Regional Economic Communities. For

Bekele-Thomas, this places the agency firmly at the centre of Africa's development architecture rather than on its periphery.

"When you partner with us," she noted, "you are partnering with an instrument that Africa's own Heads of State have chosen to place at the heart of their development architecture."

That institutional authority has become increasingly significant as African governments seek practical support in implementing continental priorities.

A decade's growth in four years

Perhaps the clearest indication of AUDA-NEPAD's changing role lies in its expansion.

Four years ago, the agency managed a programme portfolio worth around \$30m. Today that portfolio exceeds \$300m, representing more than tenfold growth. During the past year alone, programmes were implemented across every African Union member state and all eight Regional Economic Communities, while fourteen governments formally requested that AUDA-NEPAD establish national offices within their countries.

Those figures represent more than institutional growth. They suggest that governments increasingly see AUDA-NEPAD as an implementation partner capable of translating continental commitments into national programmes.

The ambition now is considerably larger. Bekele-Thomas wants the agency to become a \$1bn delivery organisation by 2029. Importantly, she insists that the figure is not about institutional prestige.

Instead, it reflects the scale of implementation that Africa's own development





Above: Ms Nardos Bekele-Thomas during a bilateral meeting with H.E. João Manuel Gonçalves Lourenço, President of the Republic of Angola and Chair of the AUDA-NEPAD Heads of State and Government Orientation Committee (HSGOC). Discussions centred on AUDA-NEPAD's progress and strategic priorities, preparations for upcoming governance engagements, strengthening Member State support, and opportunities to further deepen AUDA-NEPAD's footprint in Angola

agenda now demands.

"It is a proxy for the scale of delivery capacity Africa's own development agenda now requires of us," she said, describing the target as a measure of the programme portfolio the institution hopes to manage on behalf of the continent within the next four years.

That ambition has been underpinned by a broad coalition of development partners, ranging from the European Union and Germany to Japan, Belgium, New Zealand, the African Development Bank, the World Bank, Afreximbank, philanthropic foundations and several bilateral donors.

Rather than simply funding individual projects, Bekele-Thomas argues that these partnerships have helped transform AUDA-NEPAD into an institution capable of operating at continental scale.

Agenda 2063 reaches a critical moment

The agency's new strategy arrives at a pivotal stage in the implementation of Agenda 2063.

The first *Biennial Review of the Second*

Ten-Year Implementation Plan provides the clearest assessment yet of how Africa is progressing towards its long-term development ambitions.

The overall score stands at 53%. While that figure suggests meaningful progress, it also illustrates how much work remains.

The review found that public institutions are becoming more responsive, scoring 64%, while citizens are becoming more empowered and productive, achieving 63%. Progress towards middle-income status reached 60%, reflecting improvements in poverty reduction and access to basic services.

The more sobering findings lie elsewhere. Regional integration and connectivity scored just 35%, highlighting the continuing gap between political commitments and practical implementation. Africa's capacity to resolve conflicts peacefully stood at 37%, while the continent's ability to finance its own development reached only 41%, underscoring continued dependence on external resources and relatively weak domestic revenue mobilisation.

For Bekele-Thomas, these figures reveal an uncomfortable reality. Africa's strategic vision has advanced faster than its capacity to deliver it. That is precisely where she believes AUDA-NEPAD must play a more prominent role.

Rather than acting as an observer of the continent's progress, the agency intends to become one of the principal mechanisms through which the implementation gap is closed.

Its recently adopted 2025-2029 Strategy has therefore been designed not simply as another planning document, but as an operational blueprint linking Africa's development priorities with practical delivery mechanisms.

Organised around five strategic result areas and five delivery pathways, the strategy recognises the scale of Africa's financing challenge, estimated at \$3.3trn, and the need for much larger, more innovative partnerships to bridge that gap.

Beyond aid to investment

If there was one theme that ran consistently through Bekele-Thomas's address, it



Left: Ms Nardos Bekele-Thomas met with H.E. Paul Kagame, President of the Republic of Rwanda, on the margins of the Africa Food Systems Forum 2026, held in Kigali. The discussion connected the priorities that will shape Africa's next chapter: stronger domestic health financing, resilient food systems, agricultural innovation and soil health

Opposite: Ms Bekele-Thomas held a bilateral meeting to discuss AUDA-NEPAD's relationship with South Africa, one of the founding countries of NEPAD, and the country's role in the Presidential Infrastructure Champion Initiative (PICI). Through PICI, which President Ramaphosa chairs, South Africa and other countries are advancing the cross-border infrastructure needed to connect economies, unlock regional value chains and accelerate the implementation of Agenda 2063

was that Africa's development financing model must evolve.

For decades, grants and concessional finance have underpinned much of the continent's development agenda. They have funded infrastructure, strengthened institutions and supported countless programmes across health, agriculture and education.

Bekele-Thomas was careful to acknowledge that contribution, noting that many of AUDA-NEPAD's own achievements would not have been possible without long-standing development partners.

Yet she argued that Africa has reached a point where grants alone can no longer provide the scale of capital required.

With the continent's development financing gap estimated at \$3.3trn, a different approach is required, one that combines public finance, development finance institutions, commercial capital and private investors within a single investment ecosystem.

"Our orientation," she said, "must shift from an Africa that receives concessional support towards an Africa that is genuinely ripe for global investment."

This represents more than a change in funding sources. It requires a fundamental rethink of the role played by development institutions.

Rather than simply administering donor-funded programmes, AUDA-NEPAD increasingly sees itself as a market maker, preparing projects, reducing investment risk and building the institutional confidence that encourages long-term capital to invest in Africa.

Project preparation, feasibility studies, governance structures and regulatory certainty may lack the visibility of new roads or power stations, but they often determine whether investment reaches a project in the first place.

That philosophy sits behind the proposed Agenda 2063 Development Fund and AUDA-NEPAD's growing collaboration with the Alliance of African Multilateral Financial Institutions (AAMFI). Both initiatives seek to strengthen Africa's capacity to prepare investment-ready projects before they are presented to financiers.

The objective is simple. Rather than approaching investors with a catalogue of aspirations, Africa should present a pipeline of credible, bankable opportunities that can move rapidly towards implementation.

Building a continental project pipeline

That thinking is already shaping AUDA-NEPAD's operations.

The agency currently manages a live pipeline of 50 projects spread across five strategic result areas, with around 85% operating at continental or regional level. Together they span infrastructure, industrialisation, agriculture, the blue economy, healthcare, skills development and institutional governance.

Unlike traditional project lists assembled around donor priorities, Bekele-Thomas emphasised that every initiative has passed through the agency's Programme Board and institutional assessment process before being presented to partners.

The projects are at different stages of maturity, progressing from concept through appraisal and due diligence towards financing and implementation. While additional technical work remains for some, the emphasis is on presenting partners with projects that have already undergone a structured review.

The challenge, however, remains financing. Currently only around one in five projects has secured confirmed funding. Many others remain under discussion with

potential partners, while several are still seeking appropriate financing structures.

The composition of that financing is also beginning to change. Although grants and technical assistance still dominate, blended finance now features in around one third of the project portfolio. By combining concessional funding with commercial investment, AUDA-NEPAD hopes to use relatively modest public resources to mobilise significantly larger pools of private capital.

Infrastructure and industrialisation account for the largest number of projects, reflecting Africa's continued emphasis on manufacturing, regional value chains and transport connectivity.

Agriculture, food systems and the blue economy account for the largest share of financing requirements, while health, skills development and governance remain comparatively underfunded despite growing demand.

Bekele-Thomas's appeal to development partners was therefore notably different from the traditional donor pitch.

"We are not asking you to fund an idea," she said. "We are asking you to help us complete a pipeline that has already been shaped, tested and governed."

That distinction reflects AUDA-NEPAD's broader effort to position itself as a trusted implementation platform, rather than simply another funding recipient.

A changing partnership landscape

The evolution of AUDA-NEPAD's financing model is also reflected in its approach to partnerships.

Traditional partners remain central to the agency's work, including the European Union, Germany, Japan, Belgium, Sweden, Spain, the African Development Bank, the World Bank, Afreximbank and a growing number of philanthropic organisations.

‘We know what to do. The task now is converting that alignment into structural transformation, productive jobs, resilient food systems, environmental sustainability and the domestic financing that will allow Africa to stand increasingly on its own resources.’

Their support has helped build both programme capacity and institutional credibility over many years.

At the same time, Bekele-Thomas made clear that the agency is actively broadening its international relationships.

China features prominently in that strategy. Recent discussions with the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the China Development Bank and the China International Development Cooperation Agency focused not only on infrastructure finance but also on expanding Africa’s manufacturing capacity and making greater use of China’s zero tariff policy for African exports.

Rather than replacing existing partners, the objective is diversification. A broader financing base gives AUDA-NEPAD greater resilience while providing governments with access to a wider range of expertise, financing instruments and investment opportunities.

For Bekele-Thomas, successful partnerships also share common characteristics. They are driven by African priorities rather than externally designed programmes. They connect financing directly to implementation and judge success by measurable development outcomes rather than spending targets.

Credibility as a competitive advantage

As AUDA-NEPAD seeks to manage increasingly large programmes, institutional credibility becomes as important as financial ambition.

Bekele-Thomas devoted considerable attention to governance and accountability, recognising that investors and development partners require confidence in the institutions managing their resources.

The agency has maintained budget execution above 90% for four consecutive years and has consistently received un-



qualified audits. It also remains, according to Bekele-Thomas, the only African Union institution to have successfully completed the European Union’s rigorous Nine Pillar Assessment, an internationally recognised validation of financial management and operational systems.

These achievements are not presented simply as administrative milestones. They are intended to demonstrate that AUDA-NEPAD possesses the governance standards required to manage increasingly sophisticated financing structures, including blended finance and large-scale investment partnerships.

The agency is continuing to strengthen those capabilities through organisational reform, enhanced digital systems and expanded technical expertise. Support from Germany’s GIZ is helping modernise institutional processes, while Afreximbank has embedded specialist advisers across several directorates to strengthen sector expertise.

Looking ahead, Bekele-Thomas identified two priorities that will shape the agency’s next phase of development. The first is expanding AUDA-NEPAD’s physical presence within member states, responding to requests from governments for stronger implementation support closer to national institutions. The second is accelerating digitalisation, enabling better project management, stronger monitoring and real-time reporting for both governments and development partners.

Closing Africa’s implementation gap

AUDA-NEPAD’s ambitions ultimately extend well beyond institutional expansion. The agency sees itself as one of the principal instruments through which Africa can

close the gap between continental vision and practical delivery.

That ambition comes at a time when expectations of African institutions are changing. Governments increasingly want organisations capable not only of producing policy advice but also of mobilising investment, managing complex projects and delivering measurable outcomes.

For the private sector, that evolution is equally significant. As Africa seeks to accelerate industrialisation, strengthen regional value chains, modernise agriculture and expand healthcare systems, implementation capacity will become an increasingly valuable asset.

Investors require credible pipelines, predictable governance and institutions capable of translating political commitments into commercially viable projects.

AUDA-NEPAD is positioning itself to become precisely such an institution. Its ambition to manage a \$1bn programme portfolio by 2029 is therefore not simply a measure of organisational growth. It is an expression of the scale of implementation that Africa believes will be necessary to achieve the aspirations of Agenda 2063.

Whether that ambition is realised will depend on far more than the agency itself. It will require continued political commitment, stronger domestic resource mobilisation, deeper partnerships with development finance institutions and a greater willingness from private investors to view Africa not as a destination for aid but as a long-term investment opportunity.

If Bekele-Thomas’s vision is realised, AUDA-NEPAD’s greatest contribution may not be the programmes it manages, but the confidence it helps build in Africa’s ability to finance, implement and ultimately deliver its own development agenda. ■

By Baffour Ankomah

What is the ideal relationship between parents and children, especially in this age of social media and its influencers? What should guide both the parents and children to strike a perfect balance that benefits both?

How can parents and children strike the perfect balance?

In Ghana, our ancestors have a saying rich in philosophy: "What an elder sees sitting down, the child can't see standing up." The philosophy embedded in this saying is that children are limited in many of the ways of the world: they lack experience, they lack wisdom, they lack perspective. It is a pointer to how the relationship between parents and children should be conducted.

Children are driven by youthful exuberance most of the time, and because they lack experience that gives foresight, they can't see far. They look at today, the here-and-now.

They lack wisdom. Wisdom comes through age, through successes and failures, through mistakes, through getting things done right, through joys, and through tears.

The compendium of this experience gives birth to wisdom, which evades the young because they don't have many years on their side. An African proverb says: "Every time an old man dies, it is as if a library has burnt down."

It is therefore incumbent on parents to have a love-security-respect-and-guidance relationship with their children. I will explain.

Not long ago, somebody on TikTok posted a clip on what the relationship between parent and child should be, using the example of a mother-cocoa-tree and her offshoot.

The mother-cocoa-tree knows that she will die someday, so she gives birth



The best way for parents to teach is to act as models. Parents should remember that children watch them more than they hear them.

to her offshoot to replace her when she is gone. If the offshoot grows up and despises his mother and ancestors or their ways, it will not end well with him, because the truest identity of the mother and the ancestors is also the truest identity of the offshoot.

The young cocoa tree should therefore recognise and respect its roots, i.e., the roots and ways of the mother and the ancestors, if it is to prosper.

The young should not be shallow-rooted because that way brings trouble. The young should rather appreciate the old generation and tap into their deepest roots and ways,

and should not lose awareness of where they come from. After all, another African proverb says, "The White man never forgets Europe".

Parents should consciously have a replacement plan (through their children) because they are mortal. And children should not lose consciousness of their roots because a shallow-rooted tree has a short lifespan.

With such a worldview, the relationship between parents and children then becomes one of mutual self-interest. Parents want (or should want) to perpetuate themselves through their children, and children must recognise and respect their roots because therein lies long life and prosperity.

Therefore, for the parents' replacement plan to be effective, they should start with love, security, respect, and guidance in bringing up the children. Children need love and security at home. They may be tiny, but they are still human beings who need respect, and should not be kicked around at the flimsiest whim or excuse.

The Bible says to Christians: "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." All other religions have their own interpretations. The Quran says "heaven lies under the feet of your mother" – thus making it incumbent for the followers of that religion to not only honour their mothers, but by extension, all women.

Importance of discipline

Which brings us to the all-important factor of guidance. How can parents provide this? Through love, security, respect, and more importantly, discipline. The same philosophy that says to train the child in the way they should go also says: "spare the rod and spoil the child". Or if we want the expanded version: "Whoever spares the rod hates their children, but the one who loves their children is careful to discipline them."

This leads to the modern and vexing debate of 'to smack or not to smack'. In the Western world (or most of it), smacking has become a dirty word and the practice is outlawed, but if we stick to the Biblical line, it says "be careful to discipline". Yes, children need discipline, otherwise we will not have a world to bequeath to them.

In ancient times, a rod or staff (like a shepherd's) was used to guide, protect, and gently steer sheep rather than just inflict pain. Thus, a parent's 'discipline' should correct, not harm or crush. Parents should be firm but with warmth. They should be the authority yet leave the door open for children to approach them.

In short, they should be approachable yet set boundaries. They should teach what is wrong and what is right, and not compromise on these values and principles.

I remember when growing up, our father never smacked

us, our mother did. But our father had a way of keeping all 10 of us children in check. He would open his eyes in such a way you would stop whatever foolish thing had overtaken you. The look on his face was the smack.

So parents are enjoined to teach life disciplines to their children, i.e., character, life skills, respect for the elderly and community and nation, faith, and how to handle successes and mistakes. The best way to teach, however, is for parents to be models of what they teach. Parents should remember that children watch them more than they hear them.

You can't teach children not to steal, while you are stealing from work. In fact an African proverb says, "If

you steal while carrying your son on your back, you teach him to steal". You can't tell children not to lie, while you tell lies to their mother. It doesn't work.

On their part, children are enjoined to honour their parents. They toil and make sacrifices (financial, time, social, work, and material) in bringing up children. Granted, there are some toxic parents about, but most parents are correct and proper and deserve the adoring attention of their children.

Caring for the old

Thank God Africa has not yet come to the depressing point of the Western example, where children pack their elderly parents into old people's homes to spend their last and

miserable days on earth. Mercifully, old people's homes are a rarity in Africa today – we still live with our old people at home, not in institutions. Long may this continue.

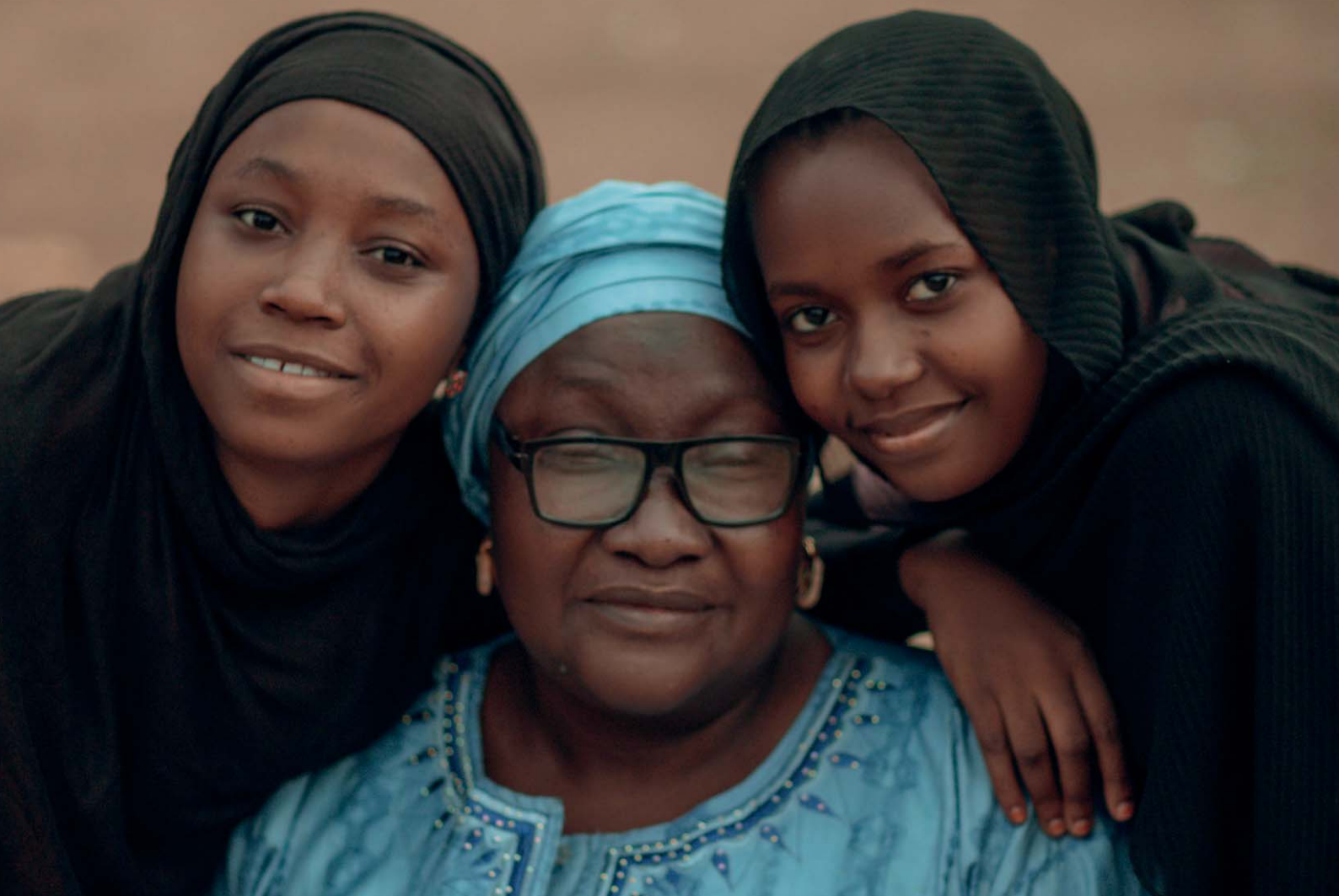
And long may it also continue, the practice of looking after our parents (financially and otherwise) in their old age. A Westerner may not adequately understand this – because in the West, the social welfare system takes care of people generally, including parents and old people who may not have pensions.

In Africa, social welfare systems paid for by the state are a rarity or non-existent. Thus the old adage, "I look after you for your teeth to grow, and you look after me when my teeth begin to fall", is very much the order of the day.

Parents invest all they have in the upbringing of their children, and children reverse-invest in parents in their old age as a way of saying thank you for all that they did in raising them.

May the children who continue to take this adage to heart and honour their parents be blessed. Your days will be long on this earth and it will go well with you. Always remember: what you do for your parents today, your own children will also do for you tomorrow. The measure you give is the measure you receive. ■

Below: A mother and her daughters. In Africa, unlike the West, children are brought up to look after their parents as they grow older, financially and otherwise



By Ivor Ichikowitz

Africa is being torn apart by foreign interests, fighting their battles on African soil using their weapons and destroying lives and countries. The continent does not need more deadly weapons from outside – it needs to build its own security apparatus using the skills that are already available.

For real security, Africa must construct its own defence

When I last wrote in these pages about African security, I argued that a continent which outsources its defence outsources its destiny. I take no satisfaction in how thoroughly events have proven the point.

Consider what has happened since. El Fasher – the capital of North Darfur, Sudan – fell in October 2025 after an 18-month siege in the ongoing civil war and the UN documented more than 6,000 killings in the first three days alone. A fact-finding mission has now concluded that what happened in Darfur bears the hallmarks of genocide.

In the Sahel, jihadist coalitions blockaded the fuel supply of a national capital and launched coordinated attacks across an entire country. The insurgency that was once contained to the tri-border area is now probing Benin, Togo and the coastal states of the Gulf of Guinea. This is not looming insecurity. It is insecurity that has arrived.

And it has arrived with new tools. The character of war has changed faster in the last three years than in the previous 30. In Mali, armed groups that relied on motorcycles and Kalashnikovs a decade ago now field strike drones; recorded drone attacks by Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) alone rose from fewer than 10 in 2024 to around 80 in 2025. Shahed-type loitering

munitions, refined on the battlefields of Ukraine, have appeared in the Sahel. Researchers count more than nine hundred drone strikes across 15 African countries, with thousands of dead. Artificial intelligence is compressing the time between detection and destruction. A weapon that costs less than a motorbike can now destroy an aircraft that costs more than a hospital.

The uncomfortable truth is that Africa has become the proving ground for other people's technology and other people's rivalries. Foreign powers arm proxies on our soil. Foreign missions arrive, fail and withdraw, leaving governments more exposed than they found them.

Mercenaries fill the vacuum and answer to capitals thousands of kilometres away. Every one of these arrangements has the same flaw: the security of Africans is somebody else's business decision. When priorities shift in Washington, Moscow, Paris or Abu Dhabi, the equipment stops arriving, the advisers go home and the ammunition runs out.

Listen to African youth

So what should Africa do? Start by listening to Africans. The 2026 African Youth Survey, commissioned by the Ichikowitz Family Foundation, interviewed 4,901 young people aged 18 to 24 across sixteen countries, including Burkina Faso, Chad, So-



The uncomfortable truth is that Africa has become the proving ground for other people's technology and other people's rivalries.

malia, Mozambique and the DRC, places where insecurity is not an abstraction. Their answers should reframe this entire debate.

Seventy per cent of young Africans say they feel safe in their country, and satisfaction with police and security services is at its highest level since the survey began. But scratch the surface and the picture sharpens. Asked to name the biggest threat to safety in their communities, 54% do not say terrorism or invasion. They say unemployment and poverty. Asked what governments should prioritise to improve security, 56% say job creation for young people,

well ahead of military investment at 35%.

At the same time, 78% worry about armed groups crossing borders, 79% about weapons and drug smuggling and 80% about human trafficking. And when asked what they want from international partners, only 29% prioritise military and security support. They want infrastructure, investment, respect for our resources and technology transfer.

There is no contradiction here. The message is not that Africa needs less security capacity. It is that security cannot be built by military capability alone. Young Africans understand that a secure country needs both the ability to defend its territory and the economic and institutional foundations to make society resilient. They know something that too many security planners do not: security and development are not separate budget lines. They are the same project.

The Global Terrorism Index confirms that the Sahel now accounts for the majority of the world's terrorism deaths, and researchers find that the single biggest driver pushing young recruits into extremist groups is not ideology but abuse at the hands of state security forces, compounded by the absence of work and dignity.

Every unemployed young man in a neglected border region is a recruitment oppor-



tunity for somebody. Every job created is a counterterrorism operation that costs nothing to sustain.

This is why the answer to Africa's security crisis is not simply to buy more weapons from abroad. It is to build defence and security capability at home. Sovereign defence industrial capacity does three things at once. It guarantees that African armies can sustain, repair and adapt their own equipment without waiting for a foreign patron's permission. It creates exactly the skilled industrial jobs – in engineering, electronics, software and advanced manufacturing, that our young people are demanding. And it ensures that the technologies now reshaping war, unmanned systems, counter-drone defences,

AI-enabled surveillance, are developed by people accountable to African governments and African citizens.

A model that works

I have spent more than three decades proving this model works. Technology can be transferred. Production can be localised. African engineers can design and build aircraft, armoured vehicles and unmanned systems that compete with anything in the world, and partner nations can manufacture them on their own soil.

What has been missing is not capability. It is the political will to treat defence industrialisation as a development strategy rather than an indulgence.

The continent also needs

to organise. No single African state can afford to master counter-drone defence, secure communications and AI-enabled intelligence alone.

Regional standardisation of equipment, pooled procurement, shared training academies and a continental framework for responsible use of autonomous systems are not luxuries. They are the minimum requirements for operating in the world that Sudan and the Sahel have revealed.

Rwanda, where 99% of young people told our survey they feel safe, shows what is possible when a state treats the safety of its citizens as the foundation of everything else. Safety builds confidence, confidence attracts investment and investment creates the jobs that make societies resilient.

As leaders gather in New York this September, Africa's message should be unapologetic. We are not asking the world for protection, because rented protection has failed us everywhere it has been tried.

We are asking for partnership on our own terms: investment, technology transfer and the industrial cooperation that lets Africans defend Africans. The young people of this continent have told us, in their tens of thousands, what security means to them. It means a job, a border that holds and a government that delivers. It is time we built all three ourselves. ■

Ivor Ichikowitz is the founder, Paramount Group and chairman, Ichikowitz Family Foundation.

Below: Pro-army volunteers marching to a rally in Omdurman, Sudan, to support the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) in its campaign against the Rapid Support Forces (RSF)



When world leaders adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, they set extraordinarily ambitious targets. There was real optimism that substantial progress could be made towards achieving them but the various shocks of recent years have made them more difficult than ever to reach. However, considerable progress has been made in laying new foundations for progress on most fronts. Report by **Neil Ford**.

The SDGs' roadmap to a better future

The Covid-19 pandemic, wars, rising debt, inflation and growing geopolitical rivalry have all slowed progress. Yet despite being hard-hit by these global factors, Africa has continued to make important strides. The real question is no longer whether every target will be met by 2030, but how effective the SDGs have been in changing the continent's development trajectory.

The SDGs comprise 17 interconnected goals and 169 specific targets covering economic development, social progress and environmental sustainability. They succeeded the Millennium Development Goals in 2016 but take a much broader approach.

The goals also complement the African Union's Agenda 2063, giving the African and international communities a shared framework for long-term planning.

Recent challenges include the pandemic, which disrupted the global economy and national healthcare systems, before the Russian invasion of Ukraine increased food, fertiliser and energy prices. Higher inflation prompted central banks to raise interest rates, increasing borrowing costs just as governments were attempting to recover.

At the same time, conflicts in Sudan, the Sahel and eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo) have displaced millions of people, while climate change has made droughts, floods and food insecurity more common in many parts of the continent. According to the UN's *Sustainable Development Goals Report 2026*, these overlapping crises have slowed global progress on almost every goal.

Yet progress has been made even in the face of these obstacles. More people have access to electricity and healthcare in Africa than ever before. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is also gradually creating a larger in-

Despite being hard-hit by global factors, Africa has continued to make gains. The real question is no longer whether every target will be met by 2030, but how effective the SDGs have been in changing the continent's development trajectory.

tegrated market of 1.4bn people that should lift the continent's long-term economic growth prospects, while mobile banking is driving financial inclusion. The AfCFTA Secretariat has set a goal of doubling intra-African trade volumes between 2024 and 2035.

Areas of limited progress

Poverty remains the greatest challenge. SDG 1 calls for ending extreme poverty in all its forms, but more extremely poor people still live in sub-Saharan Africa than anywhere else in the world.

The World Bank estimates that more than one-third of the region's population continue to live in extreme poverty despite steady economic growth in many countries. Rapid population growth means that even where poverty rates fall, the absolute number of poor people can still increase. The number of Africans living below the poverty line in

early 2026 was 460m.

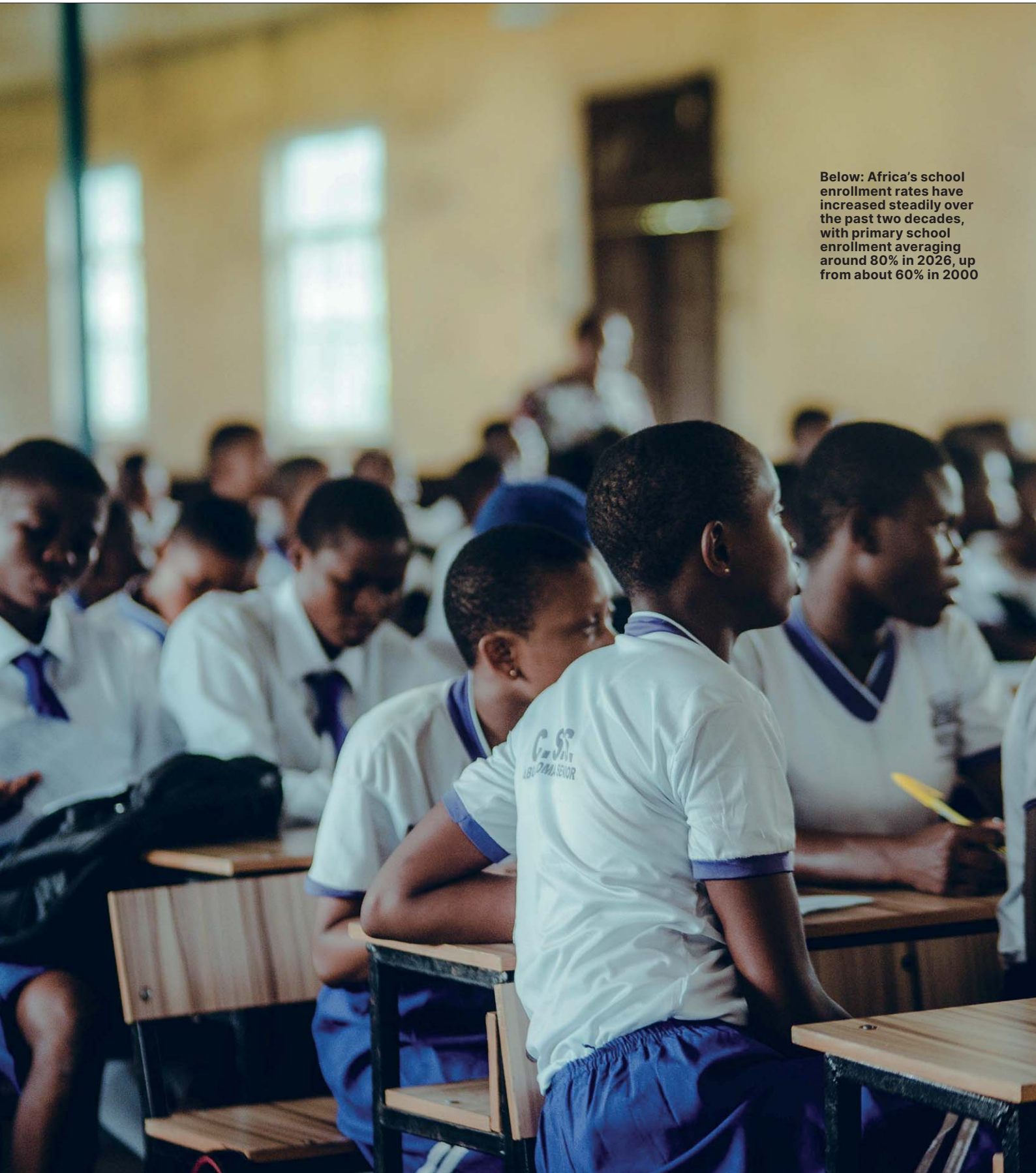
Similarly, Africa possesses around 60% of the world's uncultivated potential arable land, yet food insecurity is too common. Climate change, patchy transport infrastructure and underinvestment in agricultural supply chains have all constrained progress towards SDG 2 on ending hunger. According to the latest UN assessments, more than two-thirds of Africans cannot afford a healthy diet and more investment is needed in irrigation, storage and food processing.

Progress has generally been greater in health and education, although here too the picture varies. Maternal and child mortality rates continue to fall, vaccination programmes have recovered following the pandemic and African pharmaceutical manufacturing capacity is growing.

Between 2000 and 2023, maternal mortality in Africa declined from 727 deaths to 442 deaths per 100,000 live births. Sub-Saharan Africa currently accounts for nearly half of the world's stillbirths and neonatal deaths because of a systemic lack of high-quality prenatal care and clean maternity facilities.

School enrollment rates have increased steadily over the past two decades too, but rapid population growth and a shortage of teachers continue to limit educational quality. The average primary school enrollment rate in Africa has increased from about 60% in 2000 to around 80% this year.

Economic transformation ultimately depends on infrastructure, meaning SDG 9 – building resilient infrastructure, promoting sustainable industrialisation and fostering innovation – can greatly



Below: Africa's school enrollment rates have increased steadily over the past two decades, with primary school enrollment averaging around 80% in 2026, up from about 60% in 2000

influence all the other goals.

Roads, railways, ports, telecommunications and reliable access to electricity all lower business costs, encourage investment and improve access to schools and healthcare. Yet the African Development Bank (AfDB) estimates that the continent faces an annual infrastructure financing gap of \$68–\$108bn.

Access to energy plays a similar role. Africa has made impressive progress on electrification over the past decade, including through mini-grids and off-grid solar. According to the World Bank and International Energy Agency (IEA), the electrification rate in sub-Saharan Africa increased from 40% in 2000 to 48% by 2012 and then 55.1% in 2024.

Renewable energy costs have fallen to become the biggest source of new generation capacity. Morocco's 1.6GW Noor Midelt solar complex, Kenya's 1GW of geothermal power and Egypt's 1.8GW Benban solar park demonstrate how clean energy can improve energy security while supporting industrialisation. Even so, the IEA estimates that around 600m Africans still lack access to electricity, highlighting the scale of the challenge that remains.

Industrialisation offers perhaps the greatest opportunity to accelerate progress on several SDGs at the same time. Africa continues to export many raw materials while importing higher value manufactured products, limiting job creation.

Increasing local agricultural product and critical mineral processing would create skilled employment, strengthen regional value chains and reduce poverty. The AfCFTA provides an important framework for this transition by creating a larger integrated market within which African firms can achieve greater economies of scale.

Climate challenges

Climate change remains the greatest external threat to achieving the SDGs. Although Africa contributes less than 4% of global greenhouse gas emissions, it is already experiencing rising temperatures, prolonged droughts and devastating floods.

Agriculture, which employs more people than any other sector, is particularly vulnerable. According to the UN and World Meteorological Organisation, climate change already costs African countries 2–5% of their GDP through reduced agricultural production, damaged infrastructure and disaster recovery.

Protecting forests, biodiversity and marine ecosystems under SDGs 14 and 15 is often viewed as an environmental

objective, but healthy ecosystems also support agriculture, tourism and water supplies, highlighting the interconnected nature of the goals. Achieving a balance between conservation and economic development will become increasingly important as urbanisation, population growth and industrial expansion place greater pressure on natural resources.

Governance is an often unnoticed SDG. Conflict and political instability continue to undermine progress across large parts of the continent by disrupting education, healthcare, agriculture and investment. The wars in Sudan and eastern DR Congo, together with continuing insecurity across much of the Sahel, demonstrate how quickly devel-

opment gains can be reversed.

Financing may prove the biggest challenge of all. Many African governments are spending an increasing proportion of public revenues on servicing debt, eroding the resources available for healthcare, education and infrastructure. According to data compiled by the World Bank and UNCTAD, the proportion of their revenues African governments need for debt repayment has doubled over the past eight years, from 9% in 2017 to 18% today.

Outlook

With less than four years remaining until the deadline, it is increasingly clear that many SDG targets will not be achieved in full. Yet judging the initiative solely against the 2030 timetable risks missing its wider impact.

The goals have changed how governments plan development, how investors assess projects and how international institutions allocate finance. They have encouraged policymakers to recognise that poverty, health, education, infrastructure, climate resilience and economic growth cannot be tackled separately.

Africa's greatest achievement may therefore prove to be not the number of targets formally met by 2030 but the stronger foundations that have been laid for future development. The continent has expanded access to electricity, healthcare, education and digital services despite a succession of global crises.

Regional integration is deepening through the AfCFTA, renewable energy is becoming an engine of economic transformation and governments increasingly understand that long-term prosperity depends on building more diversified, resilient and inclusive economies.

The next few years will be critical. Continued investment in infrastructure, education, healthcare, renewable energy and regional trade could still accelerate progress across many of the goals. Equally, tackling debt and conflict while financing climate mitigation will require stronger international cooperation than has been evident in recent years.

The SDGs were never simply intended as a checklist to be completed by a fixed deadline. They represent a long-term development vision that extends well beyond 2030. For Africa, the most important legacy of the goals may be that they have helped redefine what successful development looks like, and provided a roadmap for achieving it over the decades ahead. ■



Top: Members of the M23 militia patrol Goma in eastern DRC. The conflict between DRC's government, M23 and other armed groups, which has led to widespread displacement, is one of several in Africa to have slowed progress on the SDGs

Above: Search and rescue teams arriving on the scene after flood damage in Mbaula village, near Giyani in Limpopo Province, South Africa. Heavy rains attributed partly to climate change have afflicted the northeast of the country since late last year, claiming at least 30 lives



INSIDE AFRICA

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Mercy Grimah
Instructor at the Deaf Technology
Foundation in Jos, Nigeria

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By Moky Makura

Netflix's phenomenal hit, *The Polygamist*, demonstrates the power of great storytelling and in the process changes how people see Africa and themselves.

The Polygamist – unashamedly African

I usually approach a 22-episode TV series with suspicion and trepidation. What could the producers possibly have to share that would keep me engaged for 11 hours of my life? The answer, typically, has been: not much.

But every so often, a series comes along that's gripping. Not just because the storyline is compelling and relatable, but because, even as you are watching it, you know you are experiencing a cultural phenomenon.

The Netflix series *The Polygamist* felt just like that.

Love it or hate it, *The Polygamist* put Africa in the global spotlight, and thankfully not for the usual reasons. People across the continent and around the world were talking about an African story – and this really was one – simply because they could not stop watching it.

In just seven weeks, it had 27.6m views across the world and stayed in Netflix's global Top 10 throughout. Like *Squid Game*, *Lupin* and *Money Heist* it transcended its home market and sustained a run in Netflix's Global Top 10. For me it has become a gold-standard case study on how to build continental unity and change narrative.

The Polygamist has done what few politicians have been able to do – unite Africans. The show brought us together in a conversation about ourselves and other complicated moral codes that are so recognisably African.

In Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Malawi, South Africa, audi-



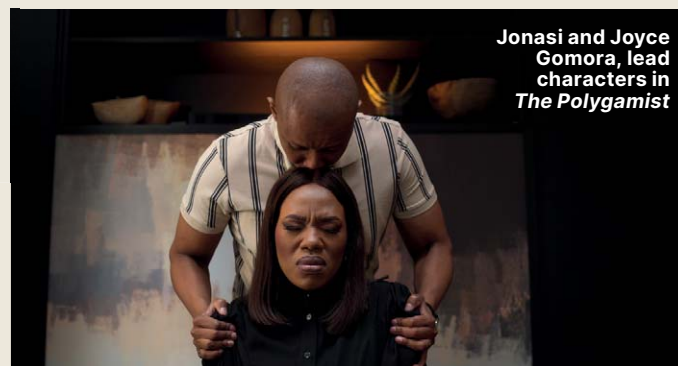
Almost everyone knows a 'Jonasi', the lead character in *The Polygamist* – and it was clear that far more connected us in this story than divided us.

ences were debating the same things – infidelity, family, money, tradition, status, gender roles. Almost everyone knows a 'Jonasi', the lead character – and it was clear that far more connected us in this story than divided us.

We were all debating whether Jonasi was practising culture or just plain old adultery. In an increasingly fragmented world, that kind of cultural connection really matters.

But the series' most powerful impact was entirely inadvertent.

The Polygamist never announced: "Look at modern African wealth." It simply showed it. The houses, fashion, cars and lifestyles were the backdrop, not the storyline. It shouted Africa is sophisticated and traditional



Jonasi and Joyce Gomora, lead characters in *The Polygamist*

all at once by whispering it gently.

That matters.

Six years of leading a narrative change organisation has taught me that great storytelling works. *The Polygamist* landed its message because it was first and foremost a great story with all the twists and turns and conflict needed to make you care.

A great story – not a good, important, positive or necessary story – works because it gives audiences compelling characters and a reason to stay hooked while quietly pushing the boundaries of what they understand to be real.

African filmmakers, particularly in Nollywood, have understood this for decades. Audiences do not necessarily come for the setting, location or special effects – they certainly help – they come for the story.

The Polygamist didn't just tell a compelling story; it told a story that was authentic and rooted. It put South African and African culture and all the tensions that exist around them into the world

without stopping to explain or sanitise.

Like Afrobeats before it, *The Polygamist* was unapologetically African and that is precisely why it travelled. The series felt authentic because it was an entirely Black, African universe that was both aspirational but so relatable.

It's a lesson for us. We don't have to be less African to be more global.

The Polygamist reminded me that the stories with the greatest power to shift narratives are not the ones trying the hardest to do so. They are simply great stories, told authentically. Get that right and a story can entertain, inform and in this case unite us across borders, quietly changing how the world sees Africa and how we see ourselves. ■

Moky Makura is the Executive Director of Africa No Filter, an advocacy organisation that is shifting stereotypical narratives about Africa through storytelling that reflects a dynamic continent of progress, innovation and opportunity.





Health^{of} Africa

TURNING AFRICA'S HEALTH DEFICIT INTO ECONOMIC POWER

In this special issue published in partnership with the Economic Commission for Africa, one of the critical areas of focus is the status of Africa's healthcare. With external development aid having virtually gone over a cliff, Africa has to find ways and means to finance the sector, as it impacts all others. In the pages that follow, we examine some of the most creative and promising directions for the sector, as well as the wider health landscape across the continent, including the challenges and progress being made. Some of Africa's deepest thinkers and experts give their views.



Africa's health sector is not confined to health issues – it has direct and indirect influence on how economies perform. Africa's health financing challenge is therefore not only a health problem, it is an economic one. This is the crux of the argument put forward by **Yemi Osinbajo** and **Claver Gatete**.

Macroeconomics of staying alive – health financing as an economic policy

African Finance Ministers spend much of their working lives measuring constraints. They know what the latest Eurobond cost, how much debt service falls due next quarter, how many months of imports the foreign reserves will cover and what another percentage point of inflation will do to the budget.

Ask a different question: how much did preventable illness cost the economy last year? – and the answer is usually much less precise.

That gap matters. For too long, health financing has been treated chiefly as a health-sector concern, discussed in Ministries of Health, at donor conferences and among global health institutions. Yet a country's ability to finance the health of its people depends just as much on what happens in its treasury: growth, taxation, debt, exchange rates, public spending and the capacity to withstand shocks.

Africa's health-financing challenge is therefore not merely a health problem. It is an economic one.

There is growing agreement that the financing model must change. African countries need greater ownership, stronger domestic financing and partnerships organised around national priorities. But a new paradigm is not yet a plan. Someone must still make the numbers add up within a credible economic framework.

That means bringing health into the machinery of economic policy: medium-term expenditure frameworks, revenue strategies, debt management, procurement systems, public financial management and national development plans.

The need is becoming more urgent. Development assistance for health has fallen sharply from its pandemic-era

peak. At the same time, many African governments spend more servicing debt than they do on health.

Between 2021 and 2023, the averages were roughly \$70 per person on interest payments and \$44 on health. Currencies create another vulnerability. Africa imports more than 70% of the medicines it consumes and almost all its vaccines.

When a currency depreciates, a Health Ministry may receive every unit of currency appropriated by parliament and still be able to buy fewer medicines, diagnostic kits and pieces of equipment. The nominal budget has not been cut; the real health budget has.

These tensions are familiar to anyone who has worked in a Finance Ministry or sat around a cabinet table. A Health Ministry understandably begins with need: how many clinics, health workers

and medicines are required? A treasury starts somewhere else: how much revenue is available, what must be paid to creditors, what is the deficit ceiling, how costly will borrowing be and which obligations are already on the books? Both sets of questions are legitimate. The problem is that they are too often answered separately.

Nigeria's experience during Covid-19 made the consequences plain. The pandemic created an immense and unexpected demand for public money just as lower oil production and revenues, foreign-exchange pressures and a wider fiscal crisis were shrinking the government's room for manoeuvre.

Nigeria mounted an effective public health response in several respects, particularly in national coordination and containment. But shortages of hospital capacity, equipment, diagnostics, isolation facilities and other essential supplies imposed hard limits.

One choice captured the dilemma. Nigeria needed to buy vaccines from abroad to meet an immediate emergency. It also needed to invest in domestic vaccine production to reduce its vulnerability to the next one.

With inadequate resources to do both at the required scale, the government faced a choice between saving lives now and building resilience for the future. This was not a dispute between officials who cared about health and those who did not. It was a collision between urgent needs, scarce resources and different time horizons.

Beyond the Abuja target

For decades, the usual response to inadequate health spending has been to urge African governments to allocate more. The Abuja Declaration's target of

Below: Claver Gatete, Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA)



devoting 15% of public expenditure to health expressed an important political ambition. But the persistent failure to meet it, a quarter of a century later, also reveals the limits of targets insufficiently connected to fiscal reality.

The useful question is no longer simply how much governments ought to spend. It is how economies can create, protect and use the fiscal space needed to finance health sustainably.

Nigeria's efforts to reform its health system offer another lesson. When one of us served as the country's Vice-President (Professor Yemi Osinbajo), Nigeria's disease burden, rapidly growing population and persistent weaknesses in healthcare made the need for reform increasingly urgent.

Estimates suggested that Nigeria faced an annual financing gap of at least \$4bn if it was to make credible progress towards universal health coverage. The Presidential Health Reform Committee and other initiatives examined how the finance and health authorities could reduce waste, improve the use of existing funds and release money for priority services.

By 2022, however, the maximum identifiable savings or additional resources from these efficiency efforts were estimated at about ₦800m (less than \$2m at the time). Against an annual gap of at least \$4bn, the contrast was stark.

Efficiency matters. Not every dollar spent on health is an investment merely because it carries a health label. Money lost through poor procurement, fragmented programmes or inefficient purchasing does not become productive expenditure.

Systems that fail to detect ghost clinics, inflated insurance claims or payment for services never delivered cannot be financed sustainably.

But efficiency is not alchemy. Better procurement and administration cannot, by themselves, close a structural financing gap of such magnitude. African health systems require both better spending and substantially more money.

This changes the economic conversation. A disease outbreak may begin as a public-health emergency, but it rarely remains one. Workers stay at home. Trade slows. Tax revenues fall. Governments are forced to spend more just as their fiscal position deteriorates. In countries dependent on imported medical products, disrupted supply chains and foreign-exchange shortages magnify the shock.

Health is therefore part of economic resilience and national security.

The case for greater health financing

must therefore combine three things: stronger fiscal capacity, transparent institutions and much closer attention to how existing resources are used.

One strategy, not two

What would this mean in practice? Every government should be able to answer a simple question: what would the national health-financing strategy look like if the Finance and Health Ministers had to write it together? There should not be one document describing epidemiological needs and another setting out the macroeconomic framework. There should be a single strategy that reconciles the two.

We propose a National Health Financing Compact, jointly owned by the finance and health authorities and anchored in the government's broader economic programme. It would connect demographic trends and health needs to the fiscal outlook, debt trajectory, domestic-revenue potential, expenditure reforms and objectives for protecting households from medical costs.

It would also state clearly how much external financing is needed, what it will finance and for how long. This must not become another planning document written mainly for development partners. The direction of accountability should be reversed. National institutions should determine the financing strategy; international partners should organise their support around it.

External finance will remain important. Africa's progress against HIV, improvements in immunisation and other public-health achievements show what international solidarity can accomplish. But as concessional finance becomes

scarcer, it must be used more strategically: to build institutions, reduce risk, finance regional and global public goods, and support transitions that domestic resources and private markets cannot yet fund.

African governments must also avoid replacing one form of dependency with another. Innovative financing can be useful, but a bond does not create fiscal space simply because it has an inventive name. Nor does blended finance make an obligation disappear.

Before adopting a new instrument, governments should ask three questions. Who ultimately pays? Who carries the risk? And does the instrument strengthen the country's long-term capacity to finance healthcare, or merely push the bill into the future?

From health expenditure to economic investment

The debate is beginning to change. When African Ministers of Finance, Planning and Economic Development met in Tangier in 2026, health financing was no longer treated merely as a demand from another spending ministry.

The discussion increasingly turned to debt, taxation, productivity, investment and domestic resource mobilisation. Finance Ministers were beginning to treat health as part of their own mandate. That change in ownership may prove more consequential than any new financial instrument.

A national budget is ultimately a record of choices. For too long, health has appeared in that record as something to be funded after the supposedly serious economic priorities have been settled.

In reality, it is part of the foundation on which those priorities depend. Healthy children learn more effectively. Healthy adults work more productively. Families protected against catastrophic medical expenses can save, invest and consume. Economies with resilient health systems withstand epidemics and other shocks at a lower fiscal cost.

The objective is not for African countries to finance everything alone. Pandemics, medical research and other global public goods will always require international co-operation. Nor is the purpose to diminish the role of health ministries or development partners. It is to change the starting point.

Africa's health-financing future must be built around the economic capacity, public institutions and political choices of African states: sovereignty without isolation, and partnership without dependency. Health is not what governments finance after economic policy has been decided. It is economic policy. ■

Below: Prof. Yemi Osinbajo, ECA Champion of the Transforming Health Financing in Africa Initiative



By Pradeep Kakkattil

The sharp decline in health aid may be a blessing in disguise. It is forcing governments to think of health as an economic factor and shift priorities. With more private sector investment in new technologies, the health sector could well also become a major economic driver.

Turning health crisis into an engine of growth



The meeting of Africa's finance and health leaders in Tangier, Morocco in April 2026 for the Economic Commission for Africa's High-Level Forum on Sustainable Health Financing, couldn't have come at a better time – the health sector globally, and in Africa in particular, is facing a crisis moment.

Despite accounting for a quarter of the global disease burden, Africa's share of global health expenditure is less than 2%. On top of this comes the almost 50% decline in development assistance for health in Africa, from approximately \$25.8bn in 2021 to approximately \$13bn by 2025.

Unlike during times of plenty, when health ministries were well-funded, often with parallel financing outside national budgets, they now desperately need the finance ministries to unlock funding to sustain gains made over the last decade.

It is time to move from health as an externally driven and financed expenditure to a truly domestic investment for macroeconomic stabilisation and growth.

The continent has always paid dearly for underinvesting in health. The WHO estimates ill-health, disability and premature death cost the region more than \$2.4trn a year in lost output. Healthcare costs are also a major driver of poverty: govern-

It is time to move from health as an externally driven and financed expenditure to a truly domestic investment for macroeconomic stabilisation and growth.

ments fund less than 41% of health spending on average, and out-of-pocket costs push over 150m Africans into poverty every year.

From HIV over the last three decades to Covid-19 to Ebola – every health crisis is an economic shock that sets Africa back. The AfDB estimates that Covid-19 resulted in cumulative GDP losses of between \$173bn and \$237bn in 2020–21.

The pandemic pushed millions into poverty, disrupted education and employment and left countries with higher

debt and less fiscal space to invest in development.

But there is a silver lining that gives cause for optimism. Despite (or perhaps due to) a rapid decline of development aid for health, there is a serious rethink, willingness and 'freedom' to invest in priorities that are relevant for the countries rather than those dictated by the donors.

A number of common threads are emerging that focus on making the broader health systems fit for purpose to leverage the potential of emerging technologies – a combination of energy, connectivity, artificial intelligence, point-of-care diagnostics, data, advanced therapeutics, local production and health entrepreneurship that can fundamentally help Africa leapfrog and change how healthcare is delivered.

Power equals life

The WHO estimates that 15% of health facilities in sub-Saharan Africa have no electricity at all, while only around 40% have reliable electricity. Only about half of hospitals have reliable power.

For healthcare, electricity is not an optional upgrade – it is core health infrastructure and a life-saving investment. Studies have shown this. In Uganda, women giving birth without electricity were 39 times more likely to die than those in powered facilities. In Ghana, every day with more

than two hours of outages meant a 43% jump in mortality. With solar costs falling significantly, making energy for health infrastructure nationally affordable, this is an investment that Africa can ill afford to neglect.

Connectivity can overcome geography

For too long, Africa's geography has determined who gets healthcare and the quality of service received. More than 95% of people in African cities live within 30 minutes of a health facility, compared with only 65% in villages and dispersed rural areas – and 10–15% of rural populations live more than three hours from a health post.

Distance translates into poorer health and higher mortality: in rural Ethiopia for example, children living more than 1.5 hours from a health centre had two to three times the risk of death.

But geography no longer has to determine access. Satellite connectivity, telemedicine, remote diagnostics and AI can bring specialist expertise, clinical decision support and continuous care to the most remote health facility – turning distance from a barrier into a solvable technology challenge. It helps to change the paradigm from 'bring the patient to the hospital' to 'bring the hospital to the patient'.

For example, Proximie, a



technology company solving the challenge of access to surgery (over 5bn people globally don't have access to surgical care), dramatically improves surgical capacities and outcomes by connecting operating rooms and clinicians in remote areas with those in urban centres, devices and data. It has shown how such digital collaboration can drastically reduce maternal and infant mortality, for example in Kenya.

Frontline AI first

Doctor and specialist shortages have shaped African healthcare for decades, but AI is starting to change that math. Africa accounts for over 70% of global maternal deaths, many preventable with something as simple as a timely ultrasound flagging high-risk pregnancies before they turn into emergencies.

Healium Sono's AI-guided handheld ultrasound lets frontline workers scan patients with real-time AI assistance and remote expert interpretation. Qure.ai does something similar for TB, with AI-assisted chest X-ray analysis deployed across 100-plus countries, including screening in high-risk South African communities. The significance is not simply that a handheld machine can perform an ultrasound. It is that expertise can increasingly travel digitally, while the patient stays in her

community. This is particularly important for maternal and newborn health, where delay can mean the difference between the life and death of the mother and child.

The UK's Stablepharma is trialling a thermostable version of an existing tetanus-diphtheria vaccine that would be the world's first 'fridge-free' vaccine. The implications for Africa, especially if the technology can be extended to other vaccines, are enormous. (See page 50.)

The data fix

While AI in health can be transformative, it does not mean much without solid data to back it up – the goal isn't just digitising records, it's turning health systems from reactive to predictive.

Africa's health data is a mess: some countries run hundreds of parallel, disconnected systems that make it nearly impossible to see the full picture. AI can stitch those fragments into something useful – spotting outbreaks earlier, repositioning medicine stocks before they run dry, redeploying health workers, and directing investment where it will have the most impact.

In the CAR and Nigeria, Dure Technologies' situation room has clearly demonstrated how multiple disease data with real-time community inputs can improve pandemic preparedness and response.

Health innovation powerhouse

HIEx has been investing in female health entrepreneurs over several years. Across Africa, we are seeing a new generation of entrepreneurs tackling problems that traditional health systems have struggled to solve – building solutions in diagnostics, maternal health, telemedicine, supply chains, AI, climate resilience, pharmaceuticals and fintech. A number of examples are emerging from the silicon savannah – echoing what mobile money did via M-Pesa.

Nurturing this must be a priority for health and finance ministries – the African healthcare market is projected to reach approximately \$259bn by 2030, with the potential to create around 16m jobs (UNECA). Africa also attracted approximately \$70bn of FDI in 2025 (UNCTAD).

The real gap, as Afreximbank's Haytham Elmaayergi put it in Tangier, isn't available money but the shortage of scalable, investable healthcare platforms to put it into. African entrepreneurs, if supported appropriately, will be central to overcoming the current dependency on health imports. Africa imports three-quarters of its health commodities – and less than 1% of the vaccines used on the continent are made in Africa.

While traditional pharma

manufacturing should be a priority, newer technologies provide an equally attractive entry point. Platforms such as Immuna Therapeutics, which is developing lower-cost decentralised manufacturing of CAR-T and advanced cell-therapy approaches, including in Africa, illustrate what is possible when scientific innovation is combined with an explicit objective of affordability and access.

Decades of health crises have shown how fast an emergency turns into a macroeconomic one. While the old donor-dependent model fades, a different story is taking shape – with a young population, a fast-growing healthcare market, real capital inflows and entrepreneurs solving real problems – and there is an opportunity to not only transform healthcare but for Africa to become a powerhouse in innovation for health.

Africa has spent too long footing the bill for poor health. The next decade should be the one when it invests ahead of the crisis, turning health from a cost into one of its biggest engines of growth. ■

Pradeep Kakkattil is the founder and CEO of the Geneva-based Health Innovation Exchange (HIEx) and co-founder of Immuna Therapeutics. This article was written with research inputs from Khanak Yadav, student researcher.



A crowd surrounding a helicopter carrying health workers in Muma, Bas-Uélé province, DRC at the start of the May 2017 outbreak of Ebola, which killed four people

DR JEAN KASEYA

Director-General, Africa CDC

It is imperative that we Africans take control of our health systems

Dr Jean Kaseya, Director-General of the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), discusses fighting Ebola amid conflict, rebuilding public trust and the much bigger challenge of strengthening health security across the continent. He is in conversation with **Jamila Versi** and **Omar Ben Yedder**.

Dr Kaseya (*opposite*) is a busy man – sitting at his headquarters in Addis Ababa, he has managed to squeeze us in between several meetings and a flight to Tanzania. Being Director-General of the Africa CDC, especially at this time, is clearly no easy feat.

Kaseya has led the organisation since April 2023, after a career spanning the WHO Meningitis Vaccine Project, Gavi and UNICEF. Now, with his focus firmly on the continent, he is juggling the difficult task of responding to outbreaks as they happen while trying to build the longer-term systems that might stop the next one becoming a crisis.

That tension is particularly stark in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The current outbreak of Ebola has spread across six provinces, while health workers operating in the East have themselves come under attack.

In some communities, mistrust of outside responders runs deep; elsewhere, conflict and displacement have made basic surveillance and contact tracing extraordinarily difficult. Experts have also warned that the true scale of infection may be considerably higher than the official figures suggest.

There has been some progress. The African Health Security Index, published in July 2026, put the continent's score at 41.2, up from 32.9 in 2021. But significant gaps remain, from vaccination and maternal and child mortality to epidemic preparedness.

And that is where Kaseya's argument becomes bigger than Ebola. Africa CDC is increasingly pushing what it calls an agenda of 'African health security and sovereignty': stronger domestic financing, greater local manufacturing, better use of data and a larger African role in shaping the global health system.

We spoke to Kaseya about why the DRC outbreak has proved so difficult to contain, what mistrust has to do with it, and why he believes Africa ultimately needs to move "out of dependency" in health.

Ebola and security

As we go to press, the DRC has had over 6,000 cases of the Bundibugyo strain of the Ebola virus and more than 3,000 deaths, making it the deadliest Ebola outbreak in the country's history.

What is making this Ebola outbreak so difficult to contain?

What makes this outbreak particularly difficult is that transmission is happening in areas affected by insecurity, displacement, high population mobility and fragile health services.

Response teams cannot move freely, and neither can patients, and that is the reason we see some patients coming late or dying in the community. Even my own teams have been attacked. [Attacks on medical health systems, ambulances and volunteers appear to be carried out by rebel groups as well as crowds of people.]

The message we are giving everyone is

that the virus does not choose between rebels and the official army, or between one tribe and another.

It's an opportunity for everyone to become humbler and say, how can we collaborate, at least to save our lives; because rebels are also human beings, they also want to live. And if a bullet cannot kill you, a virus can.

That is why we are requesting international partners to support what we call a "corridor of peace" – an agreement that would allow health teams to continue their work without being attacked. We need to see if everyone will agree to establish this corridor of peace.

What would that corridor of peace actually look like?

We have experience of this from several countries, including the DRC in 2018. Today, areas including Ituri and South Kivu are affected by both Ebola and attacks by armed groups. If neighbouring countries and the international community come together, they can help establish the space we need to continue operating safely.

In what other ways is political insecurity impacting the ability to tackle Ebola?

The political insecurity and lack of safe access to healthcare also creates what we call 'multiple opportunities for transmission' before a case is detected.

More than 70% of deaths are occurring in the community rather than health centres, and more than 65% of

'The message we are giving everyone is that the virus does not choose between rebels and the official army, or between one tribe and another.'



new cases are coming from the community.

When you manage an outbreak, your contact list tells you how much control you have, and that contact list allows you to master the response. If you have a contact list of say, 4,000 people, and all cases are coming from your contact list, you are safe and you can at least control the outbreak.

But currently in the DRC, it's a problem because we've got a lot of cases outside the contact list.

With around 6,000 confirmed cases, you would normally expect between 240,000 and 360,000 contacts. Now, we have only around 28,000.

That tells you there are a lot of people we are simply not reaching in the community. And when people are in the community and you have more cases coming from the community, you are far from being able to achieve your target and controlling the outbreak, and that makes the context a little bit of a challenge.

It also means the real number of deaths is likely to be significantly higher than what has been reported.

There has been a lot of attention around vaccines, with the WHO announcing earlier this week that the new vaccine trials would begin in November. How much difference can they make when insecurity is still such a major problem?

Vaccines are one part of the response. We have four candidate vaccines at different stages of development. For now, we are using Ervebo, the vaccine against the Zaire strain, because we have indications – not yet evidence – that it may offer some cross-protection against Bundibugyo.

We are now testing that through a clinical trial, while also vaccinating frontline workers. Maybe in the next three weeks we will be able to say if there is any cross-protection and then decide to extend the vaccination in other places, including where rebels are, but right now we are not doing any clinical trials where the rebels are. So the current work is happening in places such as Kisangani and Bunia.

How much have mistrust and misinformation complicated the response?

When I talk about taking a village-centred approach to these issues, it is not something coming from my office in Addis Ababa. When I travelled to Ituri in August, I told people: "I'm not bringing a solution to you. I'm coming to listen with humility. Tell me what we can do. Tell me what we did wrong."

Many people are living in [internal] displacement camps without sanitation, water or enough food. They are already dying from violence, cholera, measles and malaria.

Then outsiders arrive and say: 'Ebola



Above: Health workers donning PPE, and practising how to deal with a patient using a manikin at an Ebola simulation treatment centre set up by the charity Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) in Ongata Rongai, Kajiado County, Kenya

is the emergency!' People told me – we are dying every day from bullets because we are killed by rebels. Sometimes we are killed by cholera, by measles, and other diseases. And you are coming just because of Ebola!

For them, Ebola was not a big deal. For them, Ebola was mostly for us, because we were afraid of getting that. That is why they thought we came to them.

The second reason for mistrust is that we are living in a world that is interconnected, and every day these people hear about large amounts of money being announced, and they don't see the effect of any of it – no new health centres, a lack of commodities, and if they have malaria, they must still pay if they go

to the hospital.

Finally, they are unable to understand that after 19 years of Ebola, the world still hasn't developed vaccines and therapeutics. There's a feeling that, if Western people were affected, there would already be vaccines and medicines.

How do you overcome that?

You use people the community already trusts, and you use a village-centred approach, which is based around what we call the head of the village.

In the DRC, a village might be only 10 or 20 houses. The head of that village is chosen by the community. When that person speaks, people listen. So instead of outsiders simply arriving with instructions, you work through local leaders and other trusted people to explain, and they help sensitise and share the appropriate information.

Ultimately, what gets the DRC to the bottom of this outbreak: vaccines, better coordination or more money?

It is a combination of everything you are saying.

This is a huge outbreak, with the case-fatality rate approaching 50%, and as I said, there are a number of issues that are making this outbreak more complicated. This is why better coordination at national level, but also on the ground is key, and funding is critical. We need money that goes not to NGOs, but directly to activities on the ground.

And communities themselves must be part of the response.

That is why we are calling for the village-centred approach, where people within villages are responsible for sharing information and implementing measures such as safe burial.

And we are also thinking that by making progress in what we call the 'medical countermeasures', which means vaccines and therapeutics, that will also help. That's why it's a combination of so many factors that can help us defeat the virus.

Beyond Ebola

For Kaseya, responding to Ebola is only part of the job. The bigger question is how Africa should build health systems that are less vulnerable when the next crisis comes. Africa CDC has put what it calls 'African Health, Security and Sovereignty' at the centre of that agenda – an effort that has become more urgent as overseas aid has fallen.

How much have cuts in foreign aid changed the conversation around health sovereignty?

For a very long time, African countries did not invest enough in their health systems. Much of the funding came either from people paying out of pocket or from external support.

This external support was so critical because it was targeting things like surveillance, laboratories and health workers. But now that the aid has been cut, we see suddenly that these areas are not supported.

For me, the issue is not that the aid has been cut, but that it was cut suddenly. Because if we were informed that in the next five years our partners would be stopping their support for the African health system, action would have been taken, people could have begun investing – but nobody was informed.

But I also see it as a blessing, a blessing for African countries. It is forcing African countries to say: let us invest in our own health systems, so that if tomorrow we have another issue, we are well prepared to respond.

What other public health threats have been competing for the CDC's attention and resources?

Every year, we have around 200 public health threats. Given that there are 365 days in a year, once you remove the weekends and public holidays, you could say that outbreaks are making us busy on a daily basis.

Some are huge, like Ebola, mpox, cholera, measles. Others are smaller and can be controlled relatively quickly. But outbreaks are essentially part of our daily work.

Africa CDC is the public health agency of the continent; we are working in all areas. Responding to outbreaks is only one of the foundations of our work.

We are also working on digital health, health financing, local manufacturing of health products and putting in place some initiatives like the procurement mechanism for the continent.

But yes, when you have a major outbreak, and you see the magnitude of this outbreak, and particularly that it can spread to other countries or continents, you dedicate more time to it. An outbreak can destroy all your initiatives, everything you have built, but we move forward with building.

But if you are asking me on a personal level, I would say I am working at 200% – 100% for Ebola, and another 100% for everything else.

What does 'African Health, Security and Sovereignty' actually mean in practice?

There are five pillars. The first is reforming the global health architecture. Be-

cause we believe that we cannot continue to live in a world where we, as Africans, are facing people outside making decisions and then coming to impose their decisions. And that is why we are supporting this agenda, to see how Africa can become a contributor, a co-architect of the global health system.

The second pillar is pandemic prevention, preparedness and response.

The third is sustainable domestic financing, where we are pushing for African countries to invest more money in the health sector, and where we are pushing for international partners to be aligned with the funding under the leadership of the Ministry.

'If you are asking me personally, I would say I am working at 200%. 100% for Ebola – and another 100% for everything else.'

The fourth pillar is digital transformation – including ensuring that Africa owns and uses the data it generates. We don't want to see African countries just generating data but not using it.

And the fifth and final one is local manufacturing. Africa still imports more than 90% of the health commodities we need. But that one is already changing, we are seeing more African countries manufacturing their products. We hope we are creating a big market for African manufacturers.

Where have you made the most progress?

You know, it takes time to develop a vision. And this vision doesn't come from a lab, it comes from the conversations that you have, from the evidence.

Pandemic preparedness is one area. We have moved from around eight African countries with the capacity to do genomic sequencing [determining the building blocks of someone's DNA].

A few years ago, only this number had that capacity. Today, we are at around 46 out of 54. And this is an amazing development, because it can help us detect and stop early outbreaks.

Today we are talking about Ebola, but what people don't know is how many outbreaks we managed to detect early and stop.

We have also made huge progress in local manufacturing. In Algeria today,

82% of all the medicines they are using are produced nationally. We have also made huge progress by operationalising things across borders, for example through the African pooled procurement mechanism, and operationalising the African Medicines Agency for our regulatory aspect.

The biggest challenge remains sustainable financing. African countries are contributing more, but not yet at the level we need.

If governments want to make the biggest difference quickly, where should they start?

With better planning. Some countries have 20 or 30 different health plans that do not speak to each other. That creates enormous waste. I've told the leaders, by just planning properly, you can cut resource wastage by more than 20%.

Integrated planning, combined with digital systems that can help us stop fraud, can reduce that waste, improve procurement and address problems such as 'ghost workers' being paid from health budgets.

In the DRC that is a huge issue – ghost workers represent a huge proportion of the budget, and they are paying people that don't exist. If we use the money already in the system more efficiently, we create space to invest in everything else.

The President of Namibia [Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah] was telling me a few weeks ago that by putting in place the African pooled procurement mechanism linked to the digital agenda last year, they saved \$200m. So the digital aspect is a crucial component, linked to sustainable financing and integrated planning, and it opens the door to all the other components.

How seriously are African leaders now taking the idea of health sovereignty?

Very seriously. It is increasingly part of the conversation among heads of state. And I believe this is the future for the continent.

If we implement these five pillars properly, you will see that my continent in the next 10 years will be out of dependency. That does not mean isolation. It does not mean we no longer need partners.

It means African countries should be able to provide perhaps 70 or 80% of what their health systems need themselves. Then we'll welcome the external partners, but they will not come to dictate us. They will be aligned with African priorities rather than dictate them. That is my hope. That is my dream. ■



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By **Dr Mohamed Yakub Janabi**, WHO Regional Director for Africa

Diseases, as Covid and Ebola have demonstrated, do not respect borders.

An outbreak in one country or region can quickly move across the continent. How can we provide health security against such threats?

Dealing with borderless health threats

Stand at any border crossing, and the realities of global health come into sharp focus. Health is never an abstract idea. It is a mother carrying a feverish child; it is a truck driver moving food across countries; it is a health worker asking if an alert from one district has reached the next; it is a vaccine that must be kept refrigerated until it reaches a remote clinic.

Diseases move with people, animals, goods, climate shocks and conflict. Antimicrobial resistance can emerge in one place and threaten treatment everywhere. An outbreak in one community can quickly become a regional emergency if information is delayed or supplies are unavailable.

Climate-related floods, droughts and displacement are continuously testing the resilience of health systems across Africa and beyond. The lesson is clear: health threats do not recognise borders. Our health systems cannot afford to either.

When I speak of coordination, I do not mean side-lining national leadership. It must not mean emergency plans designed far from the communities they are intended to serve. Nor should it mean returning to dependency, where countries wait for solutions or supplies to arrive when a crisis is already at their doorstep.

The coordination we need must strengthen national ownership, African agency, local manufacturing, domestic financing and equitable ac-



cess. It must build systems that are ready before emergencies occur, and trusted when they do.

This begins with countries. Strong national health systems underlie regional and global health security. Every country needs resilient primary healthcare, capable laboratories, a trained health workforce, sustainable financing, and communities that are engaged as partners, not as passive recipients of services.

When national systems are weak, international coordination becomes reactive. When they are strong, coordination becomes more effective.

Africa has already demonstrated what is possible. During recent public health emergencies, African countries have strengthened genomic sequencing, expanded emergency operations centres, improved community surveillance and demonstrated the power of regional collaboration.

Uneven progress

Yet progress remains uneven. Too many countries still face shortages of essential medicines, diagnostics, vaccines, oxygen, blood products and health workers. Too many

families still pay out of pocket for services that should be accessible and affordable.

The task before us is to turn proven solutions into systems that can deliver them reliably and at scale. This is why international action remains essential. No country, however strong, can manage borderless threats alone.

We need better data sharing, joint risk assessments, cross-border referral systems, coordinated procurement, interoperable surveillance platforms, faster deployment of emergency teams, and financing that rewards preparedness.

We need global frameworks that foster transparency and trust. And we need partnerships that align with national priorities and strengthen institutions long after the headlines have moved on.

International action must also support African-led science and technology transfer. The future of health security will depend on who has the capacity to scale and deliver innovation.

Vaccines, diagnostics, digital tools and medical technologies must not remain concentrated in a few regions while others wait. Local manufacturing is indispensable. It is a pillar of resilience.

The Zayed Sustainability Prize offers an encouraging example of what this can look like in practice. By recognising and supporting locally led innovation, it demonstrates how international platforms can strengthen national capabilities while connecting practical solutions to global impact.

In the 2026 Health category, two of the three finalists came from Africa: Drop Access from Kenya, advancing solar-powered medical refrigeration for vaccines and medicines, and Healthy Learners from Zambia, transforming schools into frontline health hubs for children. These are practical African-led solutions addressing real health challenges.

With submissions now closed for the 2027 cycle, the Prize received 10,233 entries from 177 countries, demonstrating the appetite for locally driven innovation and international collaboration.

The demand is clear. The question is whether our financing and health systems are ready to support these solutions at scale.

We must therefore move from fragmented projects to connected systems, and from short-term assistance to resilient capacity.

We cannot afford to wait until the next pandemic or climate-related disaster. Preparedness must be built through sustained investment, trusted partnerships and coordinated action long before an emergency unfolds.

There is every reason for optimism. Across Africa, governments are strengthening health systems, scientists are advancing world-class research, and innovators are developing solutions rooted in local realities. Now we need to make sure this momentum is matched by international cooperation that expands opportunity and strengthens national capacity. ■

Some 90% of people in the developing world still place great value on the holistic healing qualities of traditional medicines. Africa's rich depository of health-enhancing plants and herbs constitutes untapped health as well as wealth potential. **Tom Oniro Elenyu** in Uganda talks to the country's leading traditional medicine experts for this report.

Tapping Africa's traditional medicine treasure trove

While it is widely believed that HIV/AIDS originated from monkeys domiciled in the thickly-forested jungles of Central Africa's Democratic Republic of Congo, some species of monkey have developed natural immunity to its Simian counterpart, Simian immunodeficiency virus (SIV) and show no signs of illness.

While the subject is very complex, Prof. Alice Veronica Lamwaka, based at Gulu University in northern Uganda, explains this by saying "nature is indeed our first pharmacy".

She elaborates: "Many antiretroviral medications (ARVs) that we use today, like AZT, were originally derived from plant or microbial compounds. Primates survive in the wild by feeding on a diverse diet of fruit, barks and leaves with anti-inflammatory, antiviral and antioxidant properties."

A distinguished clinical pharmacist, pharmacogenomics expert and researcher, she hastens to explain, however, that while it is not possible to replace the ARVs used for humans living with HIV, "the evidence strongly suggests we should study what animals eat to understand disease resistance. Ethnobotany and biomedical research must work together. The forest may still hold molecules that can extend and improve life."

During her Covid-19 research in the pandemic, Prof. Lamwaka invented Covilycel, a herbal concoction made from indigenous plants, which gained local attention as an alternative supportive therapy.

She is also nationally recognised for her pioneering research making use of indigenous African plants to manage sickle cell disease.

"I believe the future of African health lies in bridging worlds. Let

us not choose between tradition and modernity, but let evidence guide us. Let us invest in research so that the knowledge of our grandmothers is not lost, but is tested, improved and made available to the next generation. Health equity in Africa will come when we

Traditional medicine is entering a new era, as age-old wisdom can be combined with cutting-edge science to offer a more personalised and holistic form of healthcare.

value what is ours and refine it with science," she explains.

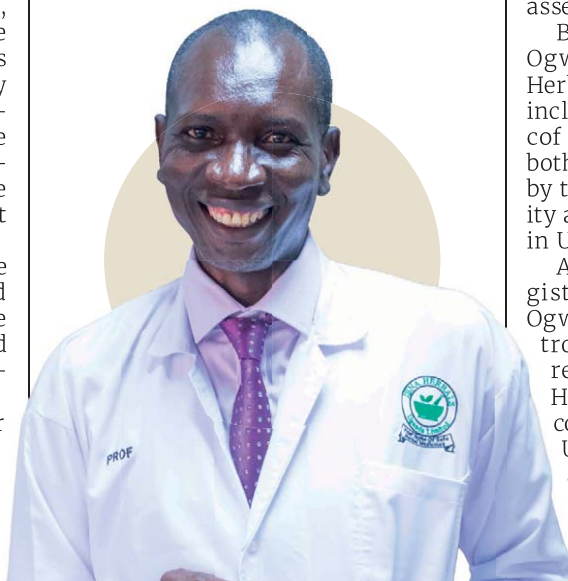
For example, the plant *Sutherlandia microphylla* is being studied in South Africa for use in HIV patients. It is said the plant may increase energy, appetite and body mass in HIV-positive people. Similarly, the Chinese herb *Artemisia annua* has been found to be effective against resistant malaria and could create a breakthrough in preventing almost one million deaths annually.

Traditional medicine still popular

But, according to Prof. Patrick Ogwang, the inventor of Covidex, a herbal remedy for the highly-contagious Covid-19, the origins of HIV remain a mystery, just as with the coronavirus. "But what we know and have proven is that most plants that animals feed on are anti-viral – for example, *Acacia nilotica* has compounds that inhibit HI-1 reverse transcriptase enzymes and protease enzymes that ARVs also inhibit," he asserts.

Besides inventing Covidex, Prof. Ogwang is the brains behind Jena Herbal Products' range of medications, including Jenacid (for ulcers) and Jena-cof and Jenaflu (for cough and flu in both children and adults), duly certified by the statutory National Drug Authority and now available in all pharmacies in Uganda.

A renowned Ugandan pharmacologist, researcher and innovator, Prof. Ogwang has extensive experience in tropical medicine, pharmaceutical research and scientific innovation. He heads the Department of Pharmacology at Soroti University in Eastern Uganda. Outside the lecture rooms and laboratories, he is the Principal Investigator at the Pharm-Bio Technology and Traditional Medicine Centre, aside from being



Executive Chairman of Jena Herbals Uganda Ltd.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), approximately 90% of people in most developing countries report using some form of traditional medicine in healthcare. In this regard, the WHO has called for more research evidence and clearer guidelines to ensure safe, effective use and increased accessibility for all. In 2022, WHO launched the Global Traditional Medicine Centre with support from the government of India to meet this global need.

Talking specifically about the continent and its use of indigenous remedies, Prof. Motlalepula Matsabisa of South Africa, a pharmacologist with research interests in the pharmacology of traditional medicines and medicinal plants, who is co-chair of the WHO Steering Committee on Traditional Medicine, said at last year's Global Summit on Traditional Medicine: "In Africa, we are aware that over 80% of people know that they need to use traditional medicine."

For two decades now, African Traditional Medicine Day, held every 31 August, has celebrated the key role of traditional medicine in the health and welfare of generations of people on the continent. Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni himself once said: "I know herbal medicines. Some of them are incomparable. I was treated with local medicine up to eight years old but I'm now 77."

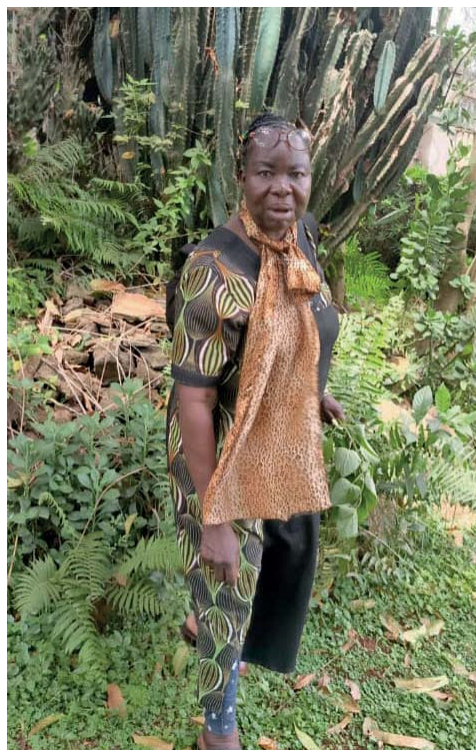
"There is a plant called Ekimara. Since time immemorial, the Banyankole [his tribespeople in western Uganda] used it to treat tape worms, among others. The African people kept this knowledge a secret in their families."

In Burkina Faso, the government has brought together more than 1,000 traditional herbalists as part of efforts to modernise the country's medicine sector. The Ibrahim Traoré government believes herbalists hold generations of knowledge about medicinal plants, and that this deserves proper scientific research and testing.

Untapped economic resource

Although she admits that herbal medicine is "slower acting" compared to "fast-acting" modern medicine, Prof. Lamwaka says that with responsibility, herbal health is wealth. "Africa's biodiversity is an untapped economic and health resource. If we document, standardise and validate our medicinal plants, 'herbal health' can become wealth in three ways – creating better

"I know herbal medicines. Some of them are incomparable. I was treated with local medicine up to eight years old but I'm now 77." – President Yoweri Museveni



Above (top and bottom): Prof. Alice Veronica Lamwaka, a distinguished pharmacist and pharmacogenomics expert at Gulu University, Uganda, at work in the lab and in the field

Opposite: Prof. Patrick Ogwang, Head of the Department of Pharmacology at Soroti University, Eastern Uganda, and Executive Chairman of Jena Herbals Uganda Ltd

health outcomes for our people, reduced health expenditure, and new livelihoods through ethical cultivation and value addition," she explains, adding, "but wealth must not come at the cost of safety. We need quality control, clinical trials and policy support so that herbal medicine is not just traditional, but trusted."

Herbal medicines, according to Prof. Lamwaka, often work more gradually by supporting the body's systems, reducing inflammation and preventing recurrence. "The middle ground is integrative medicine. Use modern medicine for emergencies, surgery and acute infections.

"Use well-researched herbal medicines for chronic disease management, prevention, immune support and for conditions where modern options are limited or costly, such as sickle cell disease. Speed is not the only measure of healing. Safety, affordability, accessibility and sustainability also matter."

For Prof. Ogwang, the idea that herbal health is wealth is a straight yes, "because when you use herbal medicines, you don't get side effects that cause another disease that will also take money to treat. For example, steroid drugs like dexamethasone and prednisolone, used for arthritis, can cause ulcers, diabetes, high blood pressure, osteoporosis, etc."

But herbal medicine hesitancy still remains a barrier. According to Prof. Ogwang: "It is not because herbal medicines are bad or not effective. In Africa, we are highly favoured by nature – so my principle is as follows. My first choice is to use herbal medicine if I am sick, the second choice is herbal medicine plus some chemical medicine, and the last choice is using chemical medicine only."

Prof. Lamwaka's advice is to approach both with wisdom and discernment. Test what is used, she advises, ensure safety and efficacy through research, and engage healthcare providers openly. "Dismissing our indigenous knowledge as 'satanic' risks losing valuable cures, while embracing it blindly risks harm. The middle ground is respect, evidence and collaboration."

Currently, the role of traditional medicine is entering a new era, as age-old wisdom can be combined with cutting-edge science to offer a more personalised and holistic form of healthcare. Ensuring a scientific validation of traditional medicine and its plants is not an alternative. It is essential as herbal medicine can then be used to nurture tomorrow's hopes, by healing pain today. ■

A vaccine that can be stored without refrigeration could remove one of the biggest logistical barriers to immunisation in parts of Africa, where half a million children under five die annually from vaccine-preventable diseases – while also reducing the environmental cost of keeping vaccines cold. **Jamila Versi** spoke with the innovators.

A ‘fridge-free vaccine’ has the potential to transform African immunisation

UK-based pharmaceutical company Stablepharma is preparing for a pivotal Phase 2b clinical trial of ‘SPVX02’, its thermostable version of an existing tetanus-diphtheria vaccine, following the success of a Phase 1 clinical trial. Unlike conventional vaccines which become unusable after a few hours or days out of the fridge, ‘SPVX02’ is the first aluminium-containing vaccine that can be kept in storage at room temperature, potentially making it easier and cheaper to transport vaccines to places where reliable electricity and transport infrastructure cannot be taken for granted.

“It’s important that vaccines can reach people anywhere in the world, so that they are accessible for everyone,” says Laura Murphy of Stablepharma. Combined with the potential reduction in greenhouse-gas emissions from refrigeration, she argues, the technology could address several problems at once.

The challenge of keeping vaccines cold

For most vaccines, refrigeration does not begin when they arrive at a hospital or clinic. It starts at the point of manufacture and continues throughout transport, storage and final delivery.

“The whole cold chain of logistical events from the moment a vaccine is made, to the moment it’s dosed, has to be documented to ensure that vaccines have been kept at controlled refrigerated temperatures for the whole duration,” Karen O’Hanlon, Stablepharma’s Chief Operating Officer told me. “It’s not enough just to say a vaccine feels cold, it has to be documented and validated as being stored at a refrigerated cold temperature.”

Vaccines are typically transferred

from refrigerated manufacturing facilities into temperature-controlled trucks, warehouses and aircraft before reaching another cold-storage facility at their clinical destination. Maintaining that cold chain requires energy and specialist equipment for monitoring and packaging. Failure in this so-called ‘cold chain’ leads to 50% of vaccines being wasted annually, according to the World Health Organisation. “Obviously, those vaccines must be replaced by the manufacturers who make them, which is a waste. So, it’s not just about the ones that have been lost, it’s the reproduction of the ones that have already been produced and put into the cold chain that then failed – and that’s a big cost globally to the environment and healthcare or-

Below: Karen O’Hanlon, Chief Operating Officer, Stablepharma.



ganisations, but also the end user, from a procurement point of view,” Laura Murphy explains.

Turning an existing vaccine into a thermostable one

Stablepharma, founded in 2012, is not developing an entirely new vaccine. Instead, its technology is designed to reformulate existing vaccines, small molecules and biologics so that they remain stable without refrigeration. The new technology uses their proprietary StablevaX technology, where a sugar called ‘trehalose’ – naturally found in resurrection plants, which seem dead during a drought and revitalise during rain – is added to the existing vaccine along with other excipients to produce a thermostable formulation.

“We take the original, existing medicine or vaccine product; we reformulate it with trehalose and other excipients, then freeze-dry it. Our SPVX02 tetanus-diphtheria fridge-free vaccine is presented as a little glass vial with white powder in the bottom that we can reconstitute with sterile water, before administering the vaccine to a patient. So, we don’t really have any massive impact on the manufacturing process – we don’t change the original processes, we simply add to them. There’s no change in the safety or efficacy or immunogenicity of the fridge-free product, everything stays the same as it was in the original product. And that’s kind of the beauty of the work that we do,” explains O’Hanlon.

Stablepharma says its reformulated SPVX02 tetanus-diphtheria vaccine can be stored and transported at room temperature (up to 30°C) without the conventional refrigerated cold chain. Results from the company’s first clini-



cal trial showed that the reformulated vaccine remained comparable with the refrigerated original even after extended storage at 30°C for 24 months.

“What we’ve shown is that the vaccine, even after being stored on a shelf for two years at 30 degrees, is the same as the original product that’s kept in the fridge,” she says.

If the Phase 2b clinical trial and subsequent regulatory reviews confirm these results, the implications could extend well beyond tetanus and diphtheria. Stablepharma’s wider ambition is to apply the same process to other temperature-sensitive pharmaceutical products, especially vaccines.

Immunisation issues in Africa

Cold-chain and refrigeration problems are particularly significant where immunisation systems are already under pressure. Across Africa, more than 30m children each year suffer from ‘vaccine-preventable diseases’, and Africa CDC continues to report major outbreaks of illnesses, including measles and diphtheria across the continent.

Reaching children who have missed routine vaccination is a central aim of the World Health Organization’s Immunization Agenda 2030. Of particular concern are “zero-dose” children, who have not received even the first dose of a diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis (DTP) vaccine. Around 40% of zero-dose and under-immunised children live in conflict-affected settings, where basic health services are difficult to deliver.

This is particularly relevant to SPVX02, Stablepharma’s tetanus-diphtheria approach. Although around 84% of infants globally receive three DTP doses,

more than half of the world’s zero-dose children are concentrated in nine countries, including Nigeria, the DRC, Ethiopia and Angola. WHO estimates that Nigeria alone had 2.3m zero-dose children in 2022.

Low immunisation coverage often overlaps with conflict, displacement and institutional fragility. Across the Sahel, insecurity, poverty and climate pressures have weakened health systems. In rural and conflict-affected areas, poor roads and unreliable electricity make continuous vaccine refrigeration difficult, adding another burden for organisations already struggling to deliver food, medicine and basic care.

Logistics are only part of the problem. Immunisation also depends on public confidence and access to services. The 2003 polio vaccine boycott in northern Nigeria showed how vaccination can become entangled with political tensions and distrust.

Africa’s uneven coverage therefore reflects difficult terrain, weak infrastructure, workforce shortages, mistrust and misinformation. A thermostable vaccine cannot resolve conflict, repair roads or rebuild trust. It could, however, remove one of the most technically demanding constraints. Eliminating continuous refrigeration could make reaching remote and underserved communities simpler, cheaper, and more accessible.

A climate argument as well as a health one

Removing refrigeration could also reduce the environmental footprint of vaccination, a crucial factor during a time of climate change and global warming. According to ‘Health Care Without Harm’, an international NGO, healthcare’s cli-

mate footprint is equivalent to 4.4% of global net emissions – or, if the health sector was a country, it would be the fifth-largest emitter of greenhouse gas emissions on the planet.

For Stablepharma, this makes thermostability both a public health and sustainability issue.

The ideal model, particularly in Africa, would be a self-sufficient in-country production, “and then it’s just distribution in a truck and storage in any location, even in a box on a shelf, without any requirements for refrigeration”. In-country manufacturing would be possible, O’Hanlon explains, because the manufacturing process uses very standard and readily available manufacturing techniques.

What happens next?

Given that Stablepharma is currently moving through further clinical and regulatory work on SPVX02, the product is not yet ready for routine use. The company is reformulating an already established vaccine, so it has a shorter regulatory pathway than would be required for a completely new vaccine – but it will still be a couple of years before SPVX02 reaches the market.

For SPVX02, the company chose to carry out an initial Phase 1 clinical study before progressing to a larger Phase 2b clinical trial, but future products using the same technology could potentially move directly into the later-stage clinical study required by regulators.

And regulatory approval is only one part of the challenge. For the technology to improve vaccine access in African countries, manufacturers, governments and international health organisations would need to determine how it fits into existing immunisation programmes, how much it costs, where it should be produced and which communities would benefit most.

Thermostability cannot solve mistrust, shortages of healthcare workers or weak health systems. Nor can it remove every logistical obstacle to reaching remote populations. But it could remove one important constraint.

For more than a century, refrigeration has helped make modern vaccination possible. It has also shaped where vaccines can travel, how they must be stored and how much infrastructure is needed to deliver them safely.

If vaccines such as SPVX02 ultimately prove that the refrigerator is no longer essential, the consequences could extend far beyond a single tetanus-diphtheria product, helping to tackle some of Africa’s other significant immunisation challenges. ■

By Dr Praise O. Adedeji

Although Africa's health sector continues to be hit by declining financial resources, it is important to identify and eliminate waste in the system, which can amount to 20% of health spending. Can the application of a Japanese efficiency methodology sharply reduce waste?

Can Japanese efficiency help cut out waste in African healthcare?



The perennial issue of healthcare financing in Africa has long been discussed and debated as a question of insufficiency: there is not enough government funding, or private-sector investment, or foreign aid. Yet, in a region where resources are already stretched, another question deserves equal attention: how much of what we already have is lost through inefficiency?

The WHO posits that up to 20% of health spending in Africa is lost due to inefficiency. This could have calamitous consequences for a region already plagued by fragile health systems.

The recent reduction in foreign Official Development Assistance (ODA) makes the issue even more urgent, with the Africa CDC reporting a 70% drop in ODA between 2021 and 2025. The immense need to optimise existing funding streams lends credence to the old English proverb which says, "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush".

As a medical doctor, public health practitioner and occasional patient, I have interacted with African health systems all my life. As a clinician, I recall having to carefully manage needles and syringes, as there were never enough. Doctors were scarce, so we were always overworked. Hospital beds were in short supply, so we often had to treat people on stretchers. But as much as

The focus on scarcity in African healthcare often leads down a single road: a desire to invest more to cover existing gaps, while ignoring waste in the system.

these realities would consume me one minute, by the next I would rehearse to myself what I had been told in school: "This is medicine in Africa."

My public health experience added another layer to this familiar story. What I had seen in tens and hundreds would become thousands and millions at the continental level. Health-worker shortages, medication scarcity and equipment insufficiency would often be discussed through the same prism: the scarcity reality of healthcare in Africa.

And while it is important to face reality, the focus on scarcity often leads down a

single road: a desire to invest more to cover existing gaps, while ignoring the waste and inefficiency embedded within the system. It is akin to someone trying to carry water in a basket; he will do much work, but get little done.

Lean Six Sigma methodology

This is where Lean Six Sigma comes in, offering a structured path to reducing waste, improving processes and optimising outcomes. It could produce tremendous benefits in Africa, a region battling equal parts resource underutilisation and insufficiency.

Lean Six Sigma is a fact-based management methodology that combines 'Lean' waste-reduction principles with 'Six Sigma' defect and variation-reduction tools to improve overall business efficiency and quality. Though developed within the Japanese automobile industry, both have since been successfully applied across different sectors, including healthcare.

Starting with Lean, waste does not refer only to unwanted final products; it can exist in inputs, processes and outputs. One form of waste is inventory: unnecessary accumulation of materials or supplies before the next step in a process. An example is the Covid-19 vaccine wastage in African countries whose storage and distribution systems could not absorb supply. Nigeria, Malawi, South Sudan, DRC, Liberia, Mauritania,

Gambia, Sierra Leone, Guinea and Comoros destroyed over 1.5m expired Covid-19 vaccine doses in 2021. While near-expiry deliveries compounded matters, an exclusive focus on scarcity risks overlooking losses the inefficient healthcare systems produced.

Another type of waste is caused by delays. Long waits at healthcare facilities are often merely the tip of the iceberg. There are delays in diagnosis, treatment, referrals, procurement and public-health responses.

These delays can allow disease progression, and increasing medication use, hospital stays and treatment costs. A study by Walker *et al.* (2020) found that advanced disease increased treatment costs by 177% in HIV patients in South Africa.

A further source of waste is motion and conveyance: the unnecessary movement of people, materials, or information. In procurement systems, for example, drugs and medical equipment may pass through multiple administrative layers and approval processes before reaching the end user, creating avoidable delays. This is often compounded by over-processing, such as repeating laboratory tests when recent and reliable results are already available, sometimes within the same healthcare facility, simply because the patient's managing physician has changed. These inefficiencies lead to

duplication, unnecessary expenditure, and delays in care, ultimately increasing the cost of treatment.

On the Six Sigma side, there is the drive to reduce process variation. Consider malaria programmes across sub-Saharan Africa. National programmes often operate alongside multiple partner initiatives. This programme proliferation is translated into divergent reporting requirements and datasets. Without coordination, competition for funding ensues, aggravated by duplication, rework and waiting as staff reconcile competing monitoring systems.

Variation is also manifested in inequitable health-care quality, access to medicines and the availability of health personnel across rural and urban areas, regions and socioeconomic groups. Such variation threatens the achievement of universal health coverage, a component of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Principle of continuous improvement

So, what can be done? Value Stream Mapping offers a pow-

erful starting point. Policymakers can map the journey of a health service, medicine, payment or patient, examining each process and resource. Which steps add value? Which create delay? Where are the duplications and bottlenecks? Once visible, opportunities for redesign become harder to ignore.

Root-cause analysis can move policymakers beyond symptoms to ask why patterns exist. Was forecasting inadequate? Was procurement delayed? Was distribution poorly planned? Furthermore, the Pareto principle (also known as the 80/20 rule, which states that roughly 80% of outcomes arise from 20% of causes) can identify the causes responsible for the largest share of the problem, allowing scarce resources to be prioritised.

Kaizen, the Japanese concept of continuous improvement, offers another starting point. Policies and programmes should not be treated as finished products, but as systems requiring continual assessment, harmonisation and refinement. Proper evaluation should precede new interven-

tions. The objective should be to improve what works, discard what does not and prevent resources from funding pet projects that lead nowhere.

Finally, there is the Voice-of-the-Customer (VOC) and the identification of Critical-to-Quality requirements (CTQ). In healthcare, the customer is the patient, and patients' priorities are critical. Policy must therefore extend beyond disease treatment to the experience of receiving care: Is it safe? Timely? Clear? Accessible? Multiplied across millions of patients, these become heavy policy questions.

None of this can happen without data. We cannot reduce waste that we cannot see, or improve a process that we cannot measure. Better data on expenditure, procurement, claims, waiting times, stock-outs, medicine expiries and outcomes would engineer the better use of available resources.

Yet Lean Six Sigma should not become another pathway to austerity. There is a real danger that the language of efficiency could be misused to justify cutting already inadequate health budgets or

reducing the workforce.

Efficiency is not the same as spending less. It is about obtaining more value from what is spent. Another danger lies in overregulating an already tightly regulated health system, and worsening bureaucratic delays and bottlenecks. To avoid this, it is important to actively involve the patients and health workers, and feedback should be used for continuous improvement.

In conclusion, Lean Six Sigma cannot independently solve Africa's health-financing crisis or replace urgently needed funding. It can, however, help health systems maximise available income by reducing waste, and prioritising efficiency. As ODA declines and alarm bells ring, now is the time to ensure every dollar on the ground is yielding commensurate healthcare benefits. ■

Dr Praise O. Adedeji is a medical doctor and public health professional with experience in health policy, health diplomacy, quality improvement, research, and programme development across Africa.



One of the biggest health deficits across Africa is the currently unacceptably low levels of immunisation. These are exposing millions, especially children and other vulnerable groups, to deadly diseases that are preventable by the use of vaccines. What are the causes of this fatal shortfall and how can it be overcome? **Jamila Versi** talks to three experts on the subject.

How to break the vicious immunisation cycle

A mother travels down difficult roads to bring her sick child to a health centre. The journey might have taken hours. When she gets there, it is a Tuesday. Had she been there on a Wednesday, she could have gotten the DPT (diphtheria, pertussis [whooping cough] and tetanus) vaccine as well. But the journey is long, and it's not a trek she'll be able to replicate the day after.

For Dr Chigozie Edson Utazi, Associate Professor in Spatial Data Science at Southampton University (UK), who uses geospatial modelling to look at vaccination coverage specifically around zero-dose children, this is a very concrete example of some of the challenges around immunisation.

Vaccines generally have to be kept within a strict cold chain, moving through refrigerators and temperature-controlled boxes until the point when they are administered. In places where electricity is unreliable, or where health facilities are far away from central storage points, this can mean that vaccines are only available on particular days.

This is only one example of why looking at low vaccine rates only through the lens of 'vaccine hesitancy' – mistrust of vaccines, often described as one of the main reasons for under-vaccination across the continent – can miss a much bigger story.

Across conversations with political anthropologist Dr Luisa Enria, an Associate Professor in Global Health and Development at LSHTM (UK), Utazi and GAVI's Chief Country Delivery Officer, Thabani Maphosa, what becomes clear is that there is rarely one reason why a child is unvaccinated.

Mistrust and misinformation can play a role, but so can poverty, conflict, geography, staffing, infrastructure and whether a vaccine is actually available when somebody reaches a clinic.

Sometimes, what looks like vaccine refusal has very little to do with the vaccine itself.

Looking a little further than 'hesitancy'

For the last fifteen years, Enria has been working in Sierra Leone, looking at community experiences, epidemic preparedness and interventions during humanitarian emergencies. She worked on vaccine trials during the West African Ebola outbreak (2014–16), and more recently, has undertaken research on vaccine confidence in Northern Nigeria, and has contributed to the response to the current Ebola outbreak in DRC.

Her work asks us to take a closer look at how the language of 'vaccine hesitancy' is being used.

Misunderstandings and mistrust

There are, of course, long histories of mistrust around vaccination on the continent. In Cameroon in 1990, an anti-tetanus vaccination campaign was

halted amid fears that it would make young girls infertile.

Ebola vaccine trials in Ghana were suspended in 2015 following accusations that researchers were infecting participants with Ebola. And in northern Nigeria, a boycott of the polio vaccine in 2003–2004 was driven partly by beliefs that it contained contraceptives that would render children infertile.

But, Enria argues, unless there is a real understanding of how those ideas came about, simply labelling them misinformation is not particularly useful.

"You can't really control the epidemic without a full understanding of the social dynamics of the affected communities," she says. Often, "everything is sort of being dubbed as resistance or misinformation", when people may actually have quite rational concerns based on what they have seen happen in their communities or through previous experiences with healthcare.

The issue with narratives of vaccine refusal, she argues, "is that it really puts the responsibility and blame on the individual, and very often mothers, because it's often childhood vaccination."

Her work has instead tried to "flip the lens a little bit" and look at the trustworthiness of the health system itself.

And sometimes, the reasons for low uptake are incredibly simple.

During research with community health workers in the borderlands of Sierra Leone, Enria came across communities where vaccination teams were arriving on the same day residents travelled across the border to go to the market.

"People were saying things like, well, you come and vaccinate at the same time as we go to the market across the border. So we're not there. Thus, it's a whole web of factors, but it's easier just to label it under vaccine hesitancy."

There are similar issues around getting vaccines to remote areas. Health-

Below: Dr Luisa Enria, Associate Professor in Global Health and Development at LSHTM (UK)



care workers may not have fuel or money to travel out to communities. People may move backwards and forwards across borders, making it difficult to even calculate population figures accurately. And mistrust of the health service can itself come from bad experiences with healthcare.

Enria points out that health workers in precarious health systems are often extremely underfunded and overworked. Some may not have been paid for months. That can translate into frustration or rudeness towards patients, which can then affect whether somebody wants to come back.

The problem that gets described as 'mistrust' can itself have much more structural causes.

One way of dealing with that has, in Sierra Leone, been to create two-way meetings between health workers and communities, sometimes described as 'peace meetings'. Community members can explain why they are unhappy with the quality of care or why they are worried about vaccines, while health workers can explain the circumstances they themselves are working under.

During the recent Ebola vaccine trials,

people's concern about how much blood researchers were taking from them was addressed by simply holding up large water bottles and visually showing how small the amount of blood being removed actually was.

It sounds basic, but that is partly Enria's point. If you listen closely enough to what somebody is actually worried about, the response can be much more specific.

Her team has also used what they call 'mapping power' – looking at who is actually influential within a community, rather than simply approaching whoever has the most formal authority.

In one example in Sierra Leone, researchers went to male chiefs before finding that a group of female chiefs did not feel represented by them. So, the strategy had to change. It might mean speaking to market traders, teachers or somebody with no formal position at all, but who is influential locally.

The work, I point out, sounds long and quite expensive. "Well, it's less money than it takes to cure an outbreak," says Enria. "My concern is that it's often seen as 'a nice to have', the social science – but actually, it's pretty essential, and it's preventative."

Where are the zero-dose children?

Utazi's work looks at a different side of the same question. He uses geospatial and spatio-temporal modelling to look at vaccination coverage and zero-dose children. In very simple terms, the work is trying to answer: if we know there are millions of children who are not being vaccinated, where exactly are they?

Zero-dose generally refers to children who have not received the first dose of the diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis vaccine. A child usually receives the vaccine at 6 weeks old, so the DTP vaccine functions as a sign of whether a child is accessing vaccination services at all.

National vaccination figures can hide



huge inequalities. A country might have an 80% vaccination rate, Utazi explains, but “that coverage would not be 80% everywhere”.

One area may be doing extremely well while another is doing badly. Even within the same state, an urban centre might have very different coverage levels from rural areas.

“So, this is actually what we are interested in when we do geospatial analysis,” he says. “We want to know how the indicator of interest varies.”

His work takes household survey data and combines it with satellite-derived information and other geographic data to estimate vaccination coverage at lower administrative levels, closer to where programmes are actually being planned and implemented.

Eventually, the information literally becomes a map that is able to give more specific and detailed understandings of the coverage. And that becomes important when looking at zero-dose children.

Nigeria had around 2.2m zero-dose children in 2025, according to figures Utazi cited from WHO and UNICEF.

But saying there are 2.2m children nationally is not enough if you are actually trying to reach them – “You want to know exactly where to find them,” he says. Geospatial modelling offers a way to help show where the resources are actually needed. Utazi calls this “precision public health” – essentially, using limited resources more precisely.

One of the things his research has also shown is that zero-dose status is usually not just about vaccination. “Zero dose actually is a marker of broader deprivation,” he says.

Zero-dose children are more likely to be found in remote rural areas, conflict-affected communities and among the urban poor. Poverty, maternal education and unemployment can all influence whether a child is vaccinated.

“So, it’s not just a failure of the immunisation programme,” he says, but “a combination of a number of social, economic [and] demographic factors.”

He gives the example of a mother waking up in the morning without knowing where the family’s next meal is going to come from. “The last thing they’re going to think about,” he says, “is taking their child to a health facility to get vaccinated. So, poverty is a huge, huge, huge factor.”

Thinking holistically

Nigeria also shows another issue: vaccination campaigns can increase coverage temporarily, but they cannot necessarily compensate for a routine health system that is not working.

Utazi describes a persistent north-south divide in vaccination coverage, with parts of northern Nigeria, which has also been impacted by political instability as well as higher birth rates, continuing to have much lower rates than areas in the south.

Vaccination campaigns may raise coverage, but if the routine immunisation programme is still struggling, the gains can disappear very quickly. “If the routine immunisation programme is not functioning properly... you just get back to square one,” he says.

Conflict makes all of this significantly harder. Health workers may not be able to travel to health facilities safely. Supply chains can be disrupted. Parents may not feel safe leaving home. Families can be displaced into camps or temporary settlements where normal vaccination services are not available.

“If these services are not available there,” Utazi says, “the children that you have in those environments would never get vaccinated.”

His argument is that vaccination programmes therefore cannot always work in isolation. If another programme is already reaching vulnerable children to deal with malnutrition, for example, that could also become an opportunity to vaccinate. “We’re thinking of sort of a more holistic approach,” he says.

Rather than making a family travel separately for every service, different health interventions could be coordinated.

Systems and communication

For Thabani Maphosa, a lot of these issues come down to systems. As the Chief Country Delivery Officer of GAVI, the Vaccine Alliance, he oversees the organisation’s work with countries globally. He

Below: Dr Chigozie Edson Utazi, Associate Professor in Spatial Data Science at Southampton University



describes three things as sitting at the heart of GAVI’s work: equity, systems and sustainability.

Equity includes reaching zero-dose children. But “systems are what really enable our work”, he says. Sustainability is then about countries increasingly taking ownership of their immunisation programmes through domestic financing, political will and stronger health systems.

He describes GAVI’s model as a partnership rather than a charity model, with the aim being for countries to gradually take more responsibility for their own vaccination programmes.

Looking specifically at Africa, one of the first challenges Maphosa points to is demographic. GAVI has partnered with 41 of Africa’s 54 countries, where child populations are also growing extremely quickly. “As we look into the future, Africa is actually squarely the continent where GAVI is going to be,” he says. “Africa is actually the unfinished business.”

The HPV (human papillomavirus) vaccine, which protects against high-risk virus strains that cause cervical, throat, and other cancers, as well as genital warts, is a good example of tackling both structural and community challenges.

Previously, the HPV vaccines required two doses – but now, it only requires one, a “game changer”, says Maphosa. In a conflict setting, reaching somebody once might be possible. Reaching them again months later may not be. “If we reach a girl once, we know she’s protected,” he says.

It has also changed the way vaccination teams think about what they do when they have access to a com-



munity. “When we have a moment to tackle them, how do we bank up services so that we reach them once?” he asks. “Because we don’t know when we are actually going to reach them next.”

From a community perspective, he highlights that the HPV vaccine, when introduced, was critiqued by churches in Kenya out of fears that it encouraged young women to have an early sexual debut.

It took understanding what they saw as the issue to work with and educate the church, by saying, “If we really do miss this opportunity, do you actually want to live in communities where you have missed the window of protection for these women and it catches up with you as cancer?”

It is crucial when talking to communities, he argues, that the argument is tailored the right way. “I never want to stand on a pedestal. You never want to judge another person for not understanding. You want to be caring and compassionate and attuned to understanding each other to form a conversation.”

Immunisation despite conflict

Maphosa also argues, however, that conflict is not always the be-all and end-all to vaccination, as presumed. Sudan is one of the examples he comes back to. Before the current conflict, there was high vaccination coverage in Sudan. When the conflict began, coverage fell dramatically.

But even while the fighting continued, it began to recover. Maphosa says one of the reasons was that humanitarian partners were able to work across conflict lines and reach places that the

government could not.

At some points, vaccines could not even travel through Sudan to reach other parts of the country. Instead, they had to go through neighbouring Chad and then cross back into conflict-affected areas. That required humanitarian organisations, the Sudanese government and the Chadian authorities to work together.

The government’s position on this, argues Maphosa, is the only reason the vaccination coverage was successful.

“The adults may have their problems,” he says, “but when it comes to health, the virus is the enemy and we should make sure that the children are protected regardless of where they are.”

He says Sudan saw a 32% improvement in vaccination coverage over two years, despite the conflict continuing. It also shows why vaccination cannot always be looked at neatly within national borders. Disease does not stop at a border, and neither do displaced populations.

“If we really don’t operate with a transnational approach,” Maphosa says, “we will always be fighting alone and fighting alone is a weak position. We must fight together.”

Fridge-less vaccines

If factors such as poverty and accessibility, as well as miscommunication and mistrust between health workers and communities, offer challenges for vaccination, all the experts are very optimistic about the potential of StablevaX, and micro-array patches, to help ensure immunisation. StablevaX – which would allow vaccines to be stored and transported without needing to be a part of the refrigerator ‘cold-chain’ – has undergone a successful trial.

Utazi describes maintaining the cold

chain as one of the biggest practical difficulties for vaccination programmes in low-resource environments. Vaccines have to remain at particular temperatures while they are being stored and transported. But there are places where electricity is unreliable, or where health facilities are far away from the places where vaccines can safely be stored. (See page 50.)

“I’ve walked behind healthcare workers all over Sierra Leone who’ve opened fridges and said, yup, the fridge temperature is off, we have to throw out the vaccines,” says Enria.

With a solution like StablevaX, the mother who arrives with the sick child at the distant health centre would be able to vaccinate their child, rather than experiencing a “missed opportunity for vaccination”.

In fact, Maphosa says, it’s not only about the cold-chain: “We do need innovation that actually takes us both outside the cold chain, but also reduces the touch points that we need.” With the introduction of more accessible vaccines – or, in the case of micro-array patches, immunisation that doesn’t require needles – vaccination could be distributed far more easily and be much more accessible.

Local manufacturing

There is one final issue sitting further up the chain: manufacturing. The Covid-19 pandemic exposed just how dependent much of the continent remains on vaccine production elsewhere.

Maphosa points to GAVI’s Africa Vaccine Manufacturing Accelerator, a \$1.2bn initiative aimed at supporting local and regional vaccine manufacturing. He describes it as one of the lessons of the “vaccine nationalism” seen during Covid, as African countries found themselves in a weaker position when wealthy countries competed for limited supplies.

The hope is that in another pandemic, Africa has more of the infrastructure it needs “to also step up and produce and defend its own population. If manufacturing capacity is distributed more evenly,” he says, “I think that’s going to do vaccination programmes around the world a huge favour.”

A closer look at immunisation challenges across Africa reveals just how many factors mitigate against successful vaccination outcomes – whether that might be misinformation, difficult roads, conflict, insufficient healthcare workers, or expired vaccines – and just how different expertise from across all fields is required to tackle immunisation holistically. But, as the saying goes, understanding the problem is halfway to solving it. ■

Below: Thabani Maphosa, GAVI’s Chief Country Delivery Officer



By Michel Sidibé

The traditional view of healthcare no longer works as aid declines and national finances are squeezed. Instead we must view health financing as productive capital, as virtually all other sectors depend on a healthy population functioning at peak capacity.

Expenditure on health is productive capital

Africa approaches 2030 as Official Development Assistance is declining, debt is rising and fiscal space is shrinking, while pressures mount.

The challenge is protecting hard-earned gains during fiscal contraction while accelerating progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals. Achieving speed and scale requires a broad political-economy approach. Health financing can no longer be treated as a technical issue confined to the health sector. It is a macroeconomic, sovereignty and accountability imperative.

For decades, domestic expenditure and external assistance saved millions from HIV, tuberculosis, malaria and vaccine-preventable diseases. But this model also produced fragmentation, parallel structures and dependence on donor priorities.

As Minister of Health and number two in Mali's government, I had approximately \$40 per person per year for health services. Yet I had little control over the financing provided by partners or how it was used. The systems were fragmented – not truly ours.

Many Ministers face the same reality: too little fiscal space, too many parallel programmes and limited control of national agendas. Declining ODA reveals more than a financing gap. It exposes a structural vulnerability: systems dependent on external

decisions cannot be fully resilient or sovereign.

The conventional question – ‘How do we increase domestic health financing?’ – is insufficient. Finance Ministries balance health against debt, food insecurity, energy subsidies, employment, security and political stability. Calls for more health spending will fail unless they recognise this reality.

The priority must be health financing resilience: protecting essential services and gains; improving efficiency and reprioritising expenditure; establishing domestic co-financing pathways; and progressively expanding investment as fiscal space improves. This sequences Africa's ambitions intelligently.

Families already finance too much healthcare from their pockets. High out-of-pocket expenditure is not merely a household burden; it signals a failure of pooling, protection and solidarity. It delays care, deepens inequality and can push families into poverty. Reform must reduce this burden, not transfer more costs to citizens.

The years to 2030 must become an emergency implementation window. Countries must determine which services cannot be interrupted, which externally financed programmes should enter national systems and which reforms offer the greatest returns. Success must be measured by continuity, equity and



Every time we wait for aid, we delay our own development. Real power lies in what we choose to fund ourselves.

lower out-of-pocket expenditure – not only by money mobilised.

Health as productive capital

The future begins by changing how health is presented to political leaders and Finance Ministers. Health is not simply social expenditure; it is productive capital.

Health investment strengthens human capital, workforce productivity, economic resilience and national stability. Healthy children learn better. Healthy adults contribute more. Resilient systems protect economies from epi-

demics and shocks.

We must also stop paying predominantly for sickness and start investing in prevention. Sanitation, clean water, primary healthcare and health education are essential economic investments. Prevention is not charity; it is common sense. It protects lives, reduces treatment costs and preserves scarce public resources.

We must speak the language of Finance Ministries. The question is not only what health costs, but what it produces – and what countries lose by failing to invest.

A national health plan should become a national investment compact, jointly owned by the Ministries of Health and Finance and linked to budgets, strategic purchasing, industrial policy and measurable outcomes.

It should define priorities, establish predictable government co-investment and align partners behind one country-led framework. Countries must become conveners of partnerships, not recipients of projects.

Every time we wait for aid, we delay our own development. Real power lies in what we choose to fund ourselves.

Domestic public finance must remain the foundation of equitable systems. Private capital cannot replace the state's responsibility to guarantee essential services and universal access. But national budgets and traditional aid

will not be sufficient alone.

Africa must connect public resources with private, institutional and development finance through blended finance, guarantees, health bonds, debt-for-health swaps, diaspora investment, public-private partnerships and, eventually, African health capital markets.

These instruments must finance investment-ready opportunities: primary health-care infrastructure, digital systems, diagnostics, supply chains, pharmaceutical manufacturing, biotechnology and African-led research.

Public and concessional resources can absorb risk and protect equity. Development finance institutions can de-risk investment. Governments can create predictable demand through pooled procurement and long-term purchasing commitments.

Private capital can finance viable infrastructure, leaving

public resources focused on essential services and populations markets cannot reach.

The objective is not to commercialise the right to health, but to use each form of capital according to its comparative advantage while safeguarding public leadership and social justice.

Africa's dependence on imported medicines, vaccines and technologies is both a health vulnerability and an economic failure. Local production fails not mainly from insufficient factories, but because demand, financing, regulation, data, research and industrial capability remain disconnected.

Sustainable production requires an integrated African market, guaranteed demand, de-risked capital, manufacturing hubs, a strong African Medicines Agency and African-led research and innovation. Connecting financing, procurement, production,

regulation and innovation will create scale, skilled employment and resilience.

Accountability and implementation

No financing model is sustainable without trust. Health financing requires accountability for commitments, allocation, implementation, results and every dollar invested. Data creates visibility, moving us from opacity to accountability. Governments and partners must show not only how much was spent, but whether resources improved access, outcomes and lives.

External financing should strengthen national institutions and use national systems. Partners should catalyse transition and co-investment, not remain perpetual landlords of African health programmes.

Africa has never lacked declarations or strategies. It now needs disciplined execution:

turning commitments into results and investment into impact. The HIV response proved what political leadership, science, solidarity and community mobilisation can achieve. Africa today has stronger institutions, scientific excellence, community leadership, political experience and greater confidence in its capacity.

Our ambition must not simply be to finance more. It must be to decide more, allocate better, innovate more and lead more. The question is no longer how to fill the gap, but how to redesign our systems around resilience, sovereignty and accountability – with the speed and scale that 2030 demands. ■

Michel Sidibé is the AU Special Envoy for the African Medicines Agency (AMA); he is a former Minister of Health and Social Affairs of Mali, and a former Executive Director of UNAIDS and UN Under-Secretary-General

US and Moroccan medical staff working together at a field hospital in Dakhla as part of African Lion 2026. A primarily military exercise, Lion also included medical training and knowledge-sharing



The contrast between a special needs educator's experience of working in her native Sudan, and what she found after moving to the UAE, reflects the wider position for people with disabilities in Africa and globally. While they are poorly served in one instance, they receive the best possible care in another. By **Nicholas Mokua**.

Two worlds of disability support

The fate of children with special needs in most of Africa often depends entirely on whether or not the parents have sufficient funds to cover the essential expenses. It also depends on the facilities available locally and, increasingly, on political stability (or lack of it) in the areas concerned.

Wela Elmahi (*opposite*), a Sudanese special needs educator and music therapist now based in Dubai, has seen the situation from both sides of the divide – as a young professional trying to build a career in a Sudanese system with few resources, and later as a practitioner in one of the world's more heavily resourced systems in the United Arab Emirates.

Her story, and the widening chasm she describes between the two countries, illustrates a theme central to ECA's health financing work: that inclusive, well-financed care and education systems are not a luxury add-on but a foundation for whether children with disabilities get to participate in society at all.

Elmahi's route into special needs work began with an undergraduate degree in psychology followed by a master's in international education and development. Her father, a musician and music therapist himself, was a formative influence. Wela went on to specialise in music therapy herself, moving away from hospital-based clinical work towards children, which she found far more meaningful.

She relocated to the UAE in 2019 after finishing her Master's, but the transition was not smooth. Music therapy roles specifically were scarce, and she spent time working in unrelated sectors including call centres and sales agencies before a brief return to Sudan and a

subsequent move to Turkey. When war broke out in Sudan in 2023, she returned to the UAE and secured a school-based position within two months, launching the career she has built since.

Contrasting the special needs education in the UAE and Sudan, Elmahi notes that Sudan has no shortage of skilled educators. What it lacks is infrastructure and financing. In the UAE, she points to superior facilities, better-resourced educational departments, higher salaries and far greater access to professional development, new techniques, and evolving theories.

Empowering the disabled

That gap reflects deliberate policy choices. The UAE has built a legal and institutional architecture around what it calls 'People of Determination', anchored in the Federal Law of 2006. The National Policy for Empowering People of Determination rests on six pillars including health and rehabilitation, education and social protection.

Government schools are required to adapt to accommodate students with disabilities, dedicated support centres provide diagnosis and family guidance, and a designated Service Officer for the Determined Ones sits inside government institutions to coordinate services.

Dubai has gone further still, with its own 2022 law on the rights of People of Determination and a dedicated committee overseeing implementation.

Families in Sudan face a starkly different reality including high costs for therapy and medication, a near-total absence of specialised departments within mainstream schools and heavy reliance on expensive private clinics that most families simply cannot afford. Without financial resources, many parents are forced to keep children at home, without

professional guidance of any kind, not because they lack the will to help their children, but because the system offers them almost nothing to work with.

The conflict in Sudan, now well into its third year, has deepened this crisis considerably. Recent humanitarian assessments put the number of people in need of assistance across the country at 33.7m for 2026 (over half of them children), with more than 9m people displaced and essential health, water and education infrastructure badly damaged.

Roughly two-thirds of Sudan's population lacks access to essential health-care, and children with disabilities are among those facing the highest risks amid displacement, family separation and collapsing services.

Elmahi has experienced this at first-hand among the families she stays connected to. Many children carry visible trauma from the conflict. Some families have managed to flee to neighbouring countries like Egypt; but a majority remain trapped in rural areas, where support for children with special needs, which was already thin before the war, has effectively disappeared.

Even from Dubai, she continues to advise Sudanese families remotely on managing behavioural challenges: encouraging calm home environments, educating people around special needs children to prevent bullying, and introducing sensory tools to help children cope with overwhelming situations.

It is, by her own account, a limited substitute for in-person, systemic support, but one she offers because so little else is available.

Her longer-term ambition is to open a music therapy centre in Sudan for underprivileged families. For now, competing financial obligations to her own family and losses sustained during the

war make self-funding impossible – a reminder that even skilled, motivated practitioners cannot close a financing gap using personal resources alone.

She is emphatic that government intervention is essential, and that officials need direct exposure to the realities faced by people with special needs if national priorities are to shift meaningfully toward inclusion.

Financing models

Despite the obstacles, Elmahi finds real grounds for hope in her work. This includes children with severe autism who, after a year of consistent intervention, are able to express their needs and emotions for the first time.

Her contribution was recognised when she was named Best Teacher of the Year across the whole of the UAE. She is now looking to pursue a PhD in special education, with the aim of eventually bringing her knowledge of advocacy and intervention models to Africa.

Elmahi's account maps closely onto what global health financing evidence shows more broadly. An estimated 1.3bn people live with a disability worldwide, and inequities in their access to care are driven substantially by how health systems are funded.

In Africa, governments finance less than 41% of total health expenditure on average, and unpredictable donor funding leaves the rest of the gap to be filled largely by out-of-pocket payments, which push over 150m people into poverty every year.

That burden lands hardest on households already carrying the cost of disability-related care, where narrow benefit packages and budgets that ignore the cost of accessibility and reasonable accommodation compound the exclusion Elmahi describes.

The Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) argues that closing this gap requires repositioning health financing from a residual social expense into a macroeconomic stabilisation and growth instrument, embedded in fiscal frameworks, public financial management systems and regional integration strategies rather than left dependent on volatile donor flows.

Its 'Transforming Health Financing in Africa' initiative, running across 25 countries from 2026 to 2030, is built on this premise, and explicitly recognises innovative financing instruments, alongside digital governance, primary health care modernisation, regional public goods, and institutional capacity building as necessary tools for building health systems that can reach populations current models leave behind.

That agenda points towards the kind of structural choices Elmahi's story calls for: financing strategies shaped through direct consultation with persons living with disabilities that target their specific needs within care packages, and use disability-disaggregated data to guide resource allocation.

This contrast between service provision in the UAE and Sudan illustrates what happens when inclusion is a funded government priority, rather than some-

thing left to families, private clinics and the goodwill of individual practitioners working across borders.

As Sudan eventually moves toward recovery and reconstruction, an adequately financed system for children with special needs will need to be part of the agenda from the outset, not an afterthought. It is an area Africa needs to tackle as it confronts the financing gaps created by reduced development financing. ■





NATHALIE DELAPALME

CEO, Mo Ibrahim Foundation

Evidence-based guide to quality African leadership

Africa's real challenge is not a shortage of capital, ideas or natural resources but quality leadership that can build institutions to foster sustainable development and shared prosperity. Twenty years after its founding, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation continues to work on better governance and evidence-led policies to steer the continent. Nathalie Delapalme (*opposite*) is in conversation with **Omar Ben Yedder**.

Twenty years ago, one of Africa's most progressive thinkers, the Sudanese billionaire Mo Ibrahim, launched his Foundation as part of a lifelong campaign to actively improve the quality of Africa's leadership, especially in the political sphere.

He spelt out his beliefs in an article in the UK's *The Guardian* newspaper when he wrote: "... unless you are ruled properly, you cannot move forward. Everything else is second. Everything."

The Foundation has been his vehicle for working to bring about improved governance across Africa through various approaches. Perhaps the best known is the Ibrahim Prize for Achievement in African Leadership, awarded to African leaders who delivered positive change and, importantly, left office peacefully at the end of their tenure.

But while the \$5m cash prize may be the most headline-catching incentive, the Foundation's *Ibrahim Index of African Governance* has been perhaps a more effective barometer for judging improvements in the way African countries are run. Published every two years, the Index assesses countries on over 90 indicators, grouped under four broad categories that constitute overall governance: security and rule of law; participation, rights and inclusion; foundations for economic opportunity; and human development.

Recent geopolitical developments have made the index (the next edi-

tion will be published in October) even more pertinent. With the world fracturing into a larger number of competing regional and national spheres of interest, Africa's development agenda has become a casualty. An increasing amount of funds once dedicated to development are being rechannelled into inflated defence budgets, anti-migrant measures and subsidising the rising cost of living.

As the continent braces itself to these new realities, the quality of its governance may well determine not only its survival as a going concern but whether it can actually thrive in this new epoch.

Nathalie Delapalme, the Foundation's Executive Director since 2010, has a very different interpretation. "The end of aid is not the end of the world for Africa," she says. She points out that the annual ODA, which had been dwindling for a decade, is less than the amount of money the continent loses to illicit financial flows or tax loopholes, and less than what it receives in remittances.

She says that rather than bemoaning the shifting priorities of its benefactors, African leaders must rather ask how they can better harness the wealth their countries already possess. "The resources are there," she argues. "The issue is making them work for Africa."

Doing so will require stronger institutions, better policies and more effective governance, the very things the Foundation seeks to foster.

The value of the Index

Discussing issues raised in one of the Foundation's recent publications, *Financing the Africa We Want*, she says: "It's not so much a question of the amount of financial resources available as the need to define better processes to use them efficiently – one of them being the assessment and the mitigation of African risk. This is a key hurdle to overcome; another is the bankability of projects, and yet another is market size and continental integration."

The report included thoughts from African Presidents, leaders of development finance institutions (DFIs) and international agencies focused on the continent.

It argues, for example, that given Africa's dozens of national currencies, cross-border transactions remain costly and cumbersome. Initiatives such as the Pan-African Payment and Settlement System have begun reducing these costs, but greater financial integration will be essential if the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is to realise its full potential.

Governance is central to attempts to achieve any of this. However, the Foundation's data indicates that after years of gains in education, healthcare and economic opportunity, progress has begun to stall, particularly since 2021. This is driven in part by the deterioration of security in some parts of the region.

These negative factors are self-reinforcing. Delapalme says that military interventions have become popular

in countries where poor security and the inability of governments to deliver public services has deeply eroded trust in democratic institutions.

"There were warning signs in studies conducted by the Foundation. The Index was flashing red ahead of the coups. And those signs are not limited to the countries where the military has already taken over the government."

Swapping out legislative processes for snappy decrees has not been the magic bullet, either, and those countries that have done so continue to grapple with social, economic and security challenges that spurred the interventions in the first place.

But the democratic process must not be merely holding elections. "If the democratically elected governments don't deliver or don't respect the principles of democracy, they're bound to have these coups."

This is where the Index can help out – by giving countries a third party, impartial view of how they are faring on its indicators. Even when there is a red light, they can engage with it to understand why they are not doing as well as they think. But countries are also "interested in looking at why their neighbours are doing better," Delapalme says. "It triggers a kind of competition, which is always useful."

The Index also provides useful insights for investors. "Investors use it a lot," Delapalme says. "There are a lot of banks that are repackaging it and selling it to their clients because it is a dashboard. Instead of just looking at *Doing Business* [the World Bank's ranking of business environments, now discontinued], you have this kind of consolidated dashboard."

For ordinary citizens, the Index provides a way to measure whether political commitments and public policies are translating into tangible improvements in their daily lives.

Given the cost of capital and the risk premium that countries face in the international money markets, Delapalme suggests that the Index can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of country risk by providing a broader and more evidence-based picture of governance performance. "We've been working on it with the rating agencies for some years now, along with the ongoing conversations and reflections on having an African rating agency."

Delapalme insists that the Ibrahim Index is not intended to replace international rating agencies. "It is an index of African governance produced by an African foundation, but it is not an African index," she says. "It is based on more than 50 different sources, most of them being recognised institutions with

a strong reputation."

Establishing an African credit rating agency is not about rejecting existing global agencies, but about improving transparency and ensuring African countries have a better understanding of how assessments are made. "It is about showing African governments how the process works and what indicators need to be followed."

The new Index will once again supply a trove of data, essential to Africa's agenda and aspirations. "You can't have sound policies without sound data," says Delapalme. "It's like driving blind."

More broadly, the Foundation is also putting its weight behind efforts to reform the global financial architecture. Coming at the same time as other pressures, there seem to be a greater receptiveness to the African position that the system is not working and reforms are not merely necessary but essential.

Delapalme however says: "We really need a complete reset of the system," She points to the failures in the re-allocation of \$650bn in Special Drawing Rights created by the IMF in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. "We are still struggling to identify and define the right change in the allocation mechanisms to make sure that these additional SDRs go to the countries that need them," she reflects.

The old institutions, Delapalme says, were created for a world that hardly resembles the one they are intended to oversee and must give way to the fresh thinking and approaches of newer, more nimble bodies. "The so-called multi-lateral system is not the whole of it," she says. "There are the UN and Bretton Woods systems, and then there are alternatives, less western-originated."

Partner, not recipient

That new paradigm must also include a rethink of Africa's role. The continent must be viewed as a partner, rather than merely as a recipient of the world's largesse. When it comes to climate change and the green transition, Africa ought to be seen coming to the table not only with something to receive, but with a lot to offer.

"There will be no green global economy without Africa's green assets," Delapalme stresses. The challenge, she says, is ensuring Africa captures the

value created by these resources instead of repeating the historical model of exporting raw commodities while value addition takes place elsewhere. "We need to monetise these assets properly," she says. "Not simply export them."

That will mean moving beyond carbon credit transactions or mineral exports towards developing local processing industries, manufacturing capacity and climate-smart infrastructure capable of creating jobs and supporting industrialisation.

It also requires a shift in how climate negotiations are conducted. Global climate discussions have largely been driven by developed economies whose populations already enjoy universal access to electricity and basic infrastructure. Their priorities naturally centre on reducing emissions.

Africa's priorities are different, however. Nearly half the continent's population still lacks reliable access to electricity, while many countries continue to face major deficits in transport, housing and industrial infrastructure. "You can't pretend to save the planet at the expense of its people," Delapalme says.

Rather than forcing governments to choose between development and climate action, she believes the two objectives should and can reinforce one another. Climate adaptation, in the African context, means investing in resilient cities, climate-proof transport systems, renewable energy networks, low-carbon industries and climate-sustainable agriculture capable of supporting long-term economic growth.

As Africa takes on these big challenges, data will be an essential tool in measuring not only what has been achieved but also what remains to be done. With the publication of this year's Index, the foundation will once again supply a trove of data, which Delapalme asserts is of critical importance to the continent's agenda and aspirations. "You can't have sound policies without sound data," she says. "It's like driving blind."

According to Delapalme, Mo Ibrahim (right) remains committed to the original task, even if recent developments around the world and his native Sudan are testing his optimism.

If the central thesis holds true that what Africa truly needs above all else is excellent leadership, then perhaps the most cheering indicator might be that Africa's young people, trained at home and overseas, are willing to provide leadership at various levels and that should perhaps be reason enough to hope that the next two decades could be better than the last. ■



At the Africa Mindset Reset Forum, current and former leaders from across the continent argued that achieving Africa's ambitious goals will require a far greater focus on implementation, accountability and institutional capacity. **Kwame Ofori Appiah** reports.

Change mindset to change Africa

The Africa Mindset Reset Forum, hosted by the African School of Governance under the leadership of President Paul Kagame and H.E. Hailemariam Desalegn Boshe, former Prime Minister of Ethiopia, was held in Kigali, Rwanda in August.

Under the theme 'From pan-Africanism to meta-Africanism', the two-day conference brought together political leaders, young organisers, activists, CEOs, entrepreneurs and creatives for intergenerational dialogue on how to transform Africa through a shift in mindset, with young and emerging leaders making up 80% of attendees.

Africa already has many of the plans, policies and resources it needs to achieve its development ambitions. What it has repeatedly struggled to do, leaders at the Forum argued, is turn those commitments into results.

Delivering the keynote address, former South African President Thabo Mbeki said the critical missing ingredient was leadership that has the mindset and commitment to translate continental objectives into practical outcomes. "The real issue is about the people who must act to ensure that our continent achieves these identified objectives. This is about the quality of leadership."

According to Mbeki, Africa needs leaders who see themselves as agents of development above all else and who are committed to the cause of pan-Africanism. "We need leadership with the mindset of a principled and dedicated agent for fundamental change to enable our continent to achieve its Renaissance," he stressed.

With extensive policies and agreements already covering governance, human rights, peace and security, democracy, and women's rights, he argued, the continent should have been much further towards achieving its goals than it currently has. The necessary development cannot simply be imposed from above.



Above: Paul Kagame (top), Rwanda's President, and Thabo Mbeki (bottom), former South African President, at the forum.

Opposite: Businesspeople and politicians appearing at the event included Aja Fatoumata C.M. Jallow-Tambajang (top), former VP of The Gambia; and Yvonne Makolo (bottom), CEO of RwandAir

"It is in reality impossible to rely on leaders who lack legitimacy to act as agents for the genuine transformation of our continent in favour of the ordinary masses of the people," he said.

"In any case, the fundamental transformation of our continent cannot be

achieved as an elite project but has to engage masses of the people as conscious agents of change."

President Paul Kagame of Rwanda echoed Mbeki's argument that Africa already has the people and resources required to succeed – but has repeatedly failed to convert aims into the desired results.

The continent, he argued, can no longer afford to repeatedly discuss its problems without confronting the reasons progress remains slow. "We have to change our continent, but we can't change our continent without changing our behaviour and our attitudes. We can't keep saying what we have to do and then do different things!"

Pan-Africanism requires accountability

African leaders also called for greater courage in holding one another accountable. Sovereignty could not, argued Kagame, be treated as a shield for leaders actively undermining their countries' interests – "when leaders are not doing the right thing, we should have the courage to raise it", he said.

Similarly, Mbeki argued that African governments must hold each other accountable for delivering on shared continental commitments. "As Africans, including as African leaders, we share a common task to work for the unity and the renaissance of our continent. To achieve this historic goal, we must work as one team," he said.

"Africa cannot achieve a renaissance without a leadership with the right mindset driven by a deeply felt pan-Africanism or meta-Africanism."

From ambition to execution

The gap between ambition and execution is particularly visible in the way Africa uses its own economic resources, with substantial capital accumulated across the continent but not effectively deployed towards industrialisation, infrastructure and job creation.

While around \$4trn have been accumulated by African banks, pension funds, insurance pools and sovereign institutions, most has not been directed towards the continent's transformation, which is estimated to require about \$2.4trn in infrastructure investment.

Thabo Mbeki spoke of this chasm. "Capital is accumulating across Africa, but it is not creating jobs at scale, and this is the disconnect we must fix."

Speaking ahead of the Forum's panel discussion, the African Development Bank's President, Dr Sidi Ould Tah made a similar argument: Africa's challenge is not necessarily a lack of assets, rather, it is its inability to convert those assets into productive capacity.

"For too long, Africa has been described through the language of deficiency. A continent lacking capital, lacking skills, lacking infrastructure, lacking technology, and waiting for others to close the gaps," Tah said.

But that framing, he argued, ignores the considerable assets already available to the continent.

"A mineral in the ground is not an industrial strategy. A young population is not automatically a demographic dividend. Savings that leave the continent do not finance African development. A market divided by borders and incompatible systems does not acquire scale merely because we call it continental," he said.

Tah also argued that Africa has for too long exported raw materials with limited processing before importing finished products at greater cost – effectively exporting jobs, technology and productive capacity alongside its commodities.

"A different mindset means that possessing natural wealth can no longer be confused with achieving economic transformation," he said.

Furthermore, Africa should avoid simply reproducing the industrial models developed elsewhere, particularly as the global economy is being transformed by digital and AI technologies, renewable energy, and new production methods.

"Africa must industrialise in the economy that is emerging, not in the economy of yesterday," he said. But transforming the ambition into economic activity requires setting a stable foundation of infrastructure and connectivity.

Tah said stronger infrastructure and connectivity must be matched by greater financial sovereignty, giving African countries more capacity to "mobilise domestic resources, make strategic choices, absorb shocks, and engage external partners from a position of clarity."

Looking inward instead of outward

Kagame criticised what he described as a recurring tendency to admire achievements outside the continent while failing to recognise and replicate successful initiatives within Africa. "Among us, there are people who are capable of doing good things so why don't we join them and do exactly that instead?" he asked.



Similarly, Ghana's Vice President Jane Naana Opoku-Agyemang warned against the continent's continued dependence on external support. "We should move ourselves from a position where we think others must do things for us. Nobody should be doing anything for us. We should be doing it for ourselves – we need to move away from the situation where even our budgets depend on what others are bringing to us."

As long as key decisions continue to be formulated elsewhere and African institutions take on the role of implementation rather than planning, Africa will struggle to execute its own development agenda, she continued.

"We need to go back to the fundamentals and imagine something that our

pan-Africanists imagined – a continent capable of going into negotiations with the proper information, education and the confidence and the willingness to do what is necessary for our continent to grow sustainably."

Changing leadership means changing mindsets

Africa's transformation will ultimately require a shift "from a rent-seeking dominated political economy to a developmental political economy", said former Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn Boshe, calling for a change in leadership culture.

He cautioned that such a shift would take generations, arguing that the African School of Governance could help equip young Africans to carry the continent's transformation agenda forward.

But lasting change, he maintained, could not come from leaders alone. "If we don't involve our masses, we cannot change Africa. Political elites alone cannot change Africa. Business elites alone cannot change Africa. We need the masses behind the agenda."

Hailemariam Desalegn pointed to Ethiopia's response to the 2015 El Niño drought as an example, arguing that financing the response domestically helped shift perceptions of the country from dependency towards self-reliance.

A process of transforming leadership, argued Opoku-Agyemang, must also begin with a better understanding of Africa's own history and of who has traditionally defined the continent's identity and narrative. "I feel one of the things we are missing is to understand our history. Who have we been? Where have we come from? And then, why are we here? What has our past been like? Who has been telling our story?"

She urged the African School of Governance to ensure that its teaching and research are grounded more heavily in African experience, rather than relying primarily on knowledge produced elsewhere.

"I want to humbly suggest that the theories should be based on research we have done and not [on] extending research others have done. Otherwise we'll come back here," she said.

Ultimately, Opoku-Agyemang argued, building the capacity of Africa's young population will be critical if the continent is to change how it leads, makes decisions and understands its own possibilities. Africa must move from being "a victim of circumstance, to an active agent of change". ■

For decades, Africa's mineral endowment has been presented as the foundation of its future prosperity. But speakers at the Africa Mindset Reset Forum challenged that assumption, arguing that the continent's greatest opportunity may lie not beneath the ground, but in the human capital, technology and industrial systems it builds around it. **Kwame Ofori Appiah** takes a closer look.

Rethinking mineral assumptions

Africa's vast mineral wealth is often treated as an unquestionable fact – and as the key to unlocking the continent's development.

But what if both assumptions deserve greater scrutiny? After a century of exploitation, Africa's much-vaunted mineral wealth has not yielded what was expected. During the Africa Mindset Reset Forum in Kigali, Ghanaian public policy analyst and founder of mPedigree, Bright Simons and Ugandan journalist Andrew Mwenda challenged some of the most persistent ideas surrounding Africa's natural resources. They argued that an excessive focus on what lies beneath the ground may be obscuring capabilities that could create far greater economic value.

Simons began by questioning the widely repeated assertion that Africa contains roughly 30% of the world's mineral resources. This claim, he argued, is “so loosely defined that it is meaningless”, highlighting that, of the 5,000 different mineral species that exist globally, the 30% figure rarely specifies which of the minerals are included.

Examining 38 of the world's most traded minerals, Simons said he found Africa's average share to be closer to only 5% – a dramatic difference from the proclaimed 30%.

Africa is exceptionally well endowed in some commodities. South Africa, for instance, holds a lot of platinum-group metals, Morocco many phosphates – but that does not necessarily translate into a broad industrial advantage.

The crucial question, Simons argued, is not simply which minerals Africa possesses, but rather, which ones matter for the industries it wants to build.

Tanzania dominates the global production of tanzanite, however its relatively small market makes it a poor foundation for industrialisation, with the government capturing only around \$20m



annually. By contrast, Brazil, which produces only 16% of global iron ore, earns roughly \$30bn a year from it.

“Don't let somebody use their list of minerals and claim that those minerals are important for you, when your focus

Above and opposite: Young and emerging leaders made up 80% of attendees at the Africa Mindset Reset Forum

Below: Bright Simons, Ghanaian public policy analyst and founder of mPedigree



is on manufacturing,” he said, warning of the dangers of Africa allowing international demand for a handful of ‘in-vogue’ minerals to dictate its industrial strategy whilst overlooking the bulk commodities required to build infrastructure and manufacturing capacity.

The importance of the value chain

Journalist Andrew Mwenda approached the question of mineral wealth through the lens of global value chains. “The process of development takes place in the context of international trade and international trade is a value chain,” he said, whereof each country occupies a different position.

One country may extract iron ore, another turns it into steel, another manufactures a vehicle and another captures much of the final value through design, technology and marketing. “How much you earn from international trade depends on your position in that value chain.”

For Africa, then, the issue is not so much what minerals exist. Instead, the fundamental problem is “the absence of two things – human capital and technology”.

These capabilities determine whether a country can convert minerals into higher value products or even import the minerals from elsewhere and use them to manufacture sophisticated goods.

South Korea and Japan, he pointed out as contrasting examples, built some of the world's most sophisticated industrial economies without large domestic mineral endowments.

“The lie about Africa is that our development will entirely depend on the presence of minerals under our feet.” Africa should look above ground to find its greatest assets.

“Our brightest mine is not in gold, it is in the human capital to generate the technology, to build trade links that can

allow us either to exploit the minerals we have, or to exploit minerals from other countries to create the most advanced products,” said Mwenda.

Beyond extraction – and beyond refining

In any case, Africa currently captures only a fraction of the value generated from the minerals it produces.

Mwenda estimated that Africa generates about \$500bn a year from minerals, yet governments receive only around \$20bn in royalties and taxes. He argued that this gap reflects the extent to which exploration, mining and processing remain controlled by companies outside the continent.

The answer is not simply to mine more. Nor, Simons argued, is it enough to equate “value addition” with refining. “Almost everyone that I often hear talking about value addition thinks of value addition in terms of refining,” he said. But refining itself can be a low-margin activity.

The greater opportunity may lie in the much broader industrial ecosystem surrounding mining: machinery, chemicals, engineering, technology, logistics and other inputs and services.

“Don’t only think of incremental refining,” Simons said. “Think of all the ancillary linkages, think of all the other opportunities around the mineral.” Ghana, for example, has had 120 years of gold production, but still imports relatively simple inputs used by the mining industry.

A genuine “360-degree approach to beneficiation” should therefore ask how much of the wider mining economy African companies can capture – not simply how much raw material can be processed before export.

A strong example of the difference between mining and the economic value generated by mining, Mwenda pointed out, is seen in the United States. America’s non-fuel mineral production may be relatively modest, but those minerals feed into aerospace, electronics and advanced manufacturing, producing vastly greater economic value.

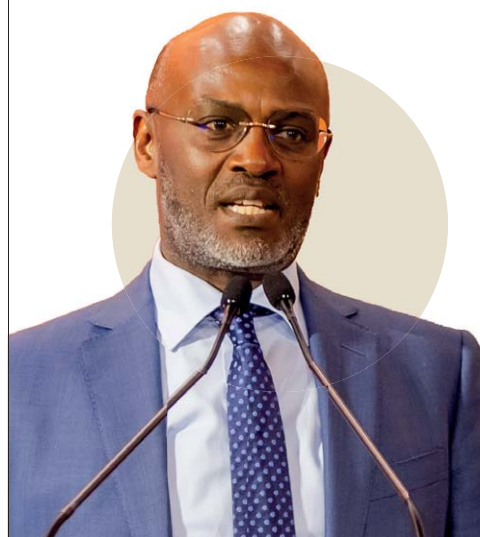
“I think that is what Africa should be discussing,” he said. “How can we convert the little that we have into high value?”

Similarly, the iPhone provides a helpful illustration – with the design and marketing providing “64% of its value”. The greatest value in sophisticated products frequently lies not in the underlying materials but in design, technology, branding, intellectual property and marketing.

“If Africa does not go into the high



Below: Andrew Mwenda, journalist and founder of *The Independent* (Uganda)



value end of the product cycle, you can mine minerals, you can process them, you can sell but as long as you’re not at the highest end of the product cycle in terms of value, you can never benefit,” he said.

Mapping Africa’s minerals

There is a further complication: the continent may not have a sufficiently accurate picture of its own mineral endowment. Mwenda described Africa as “the most underexplored continent in the world when it comes to minerals”, arguing that in many countries, geological knowledge still depends heavily on mapping conducted decades ago, “so we are fighting over something we don’t even know”.

Simons noted that Africa’s share of global exploration spending has fallen from around 16% to 10%, even as the demand for minerals needed for industrialisation and the global energy transition grows.

Attaining geological information should, he argues, itself be treated as an economic asset. Rather than tying mineral data exclusively to companies seeking mining rights, governments could create separate rights around geological information, enabling technology firms and researchers to apply tools such as artificial intelligence to exploration.

Building capability before accelerating extraction

Both speakers also challenged the assumption that foreign mining companies are inherently incompatible with African development.

Indeed, Mwenda argued, multi-national capital could be a vehicle for transformation, given it is created within the right framework, which ensures local capability, technology transfer and wider economic linkages.

Simons, drawing on comparative experiences with Saudi Arabia and Nigeria, similarly argued that governments should build domestic capabilities alongside – and in some cases before – accelerating extraction.

The underlying message was that minerals do not transform economies by themselves, they require structures connecting them to knowledge, infrastructure, finance, technology, industry and trade.

This leaves Africa with a different development question from the one it has traditionally asked. Instead of asking how much mineral wealth lies beneath its soil, the continent may need to ask how much capability it is building above it. ■

Africa's young population is often described as its greatest asset. But speakers at the Africa Mindset Reset Forum warned that turning that demographic promise into prosperity requires more than ambition: governments must deliver basic services, open markets and education systems capable of preparing young Africans for a rapidly changing economy. **Kwame Ofori Appiah** was there.

Big promises, basic needs: Africa's youth can't wait

Speakers at the first Africa Mindset Reset Forum stressed that Africa's transformation will remain elusive unless it closes the gap between its grand ambitions and the practical challenges faced by citizens, particularly its young entrepreneurs.

Convened by the African School of Governance in Kigali, where young and emerging leaders made up 80% of attendees, the forum explored how Africa could turn its demographic advantage into tangible progress.

Phuthuma Nhleko, chairman of the Phembani Group and former chief executive of MTN, warned that without economic growth capable of absorbing its expanding workforce, Africa could face a "socio-economic time bomb".

Economic integration, he argued, should be among the continent's priorities. Developing economic corridors, agricultural basins and larger continental markets would give African businesses the scale to compete internationally.

"If we don't do that, Africa will never have scale. If you don't have scale, you don't have leverage. If you don't have leverage, you don't have power," he said.

Closing the implementation gap

Claver Gatete, executive secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa, argued that Africa did not suffer from a shortage of strategies or institutions.

"We have the African Union Commission, we have the Vision 2063, we have the 10-year implementation plan, we have the seven moonshots, we have the African Continental Free Trade Area and the Yamoussoukro Decision. We have all the institutions. There are no



Top: Wiisichong Bening Ahmed, Secretary-General of the Pan African Youth Union
Above: Phuthuma Nhleko, chairman of the Phembani Group and former CEO of MTN

more institutions that we can create," he said.

The missing ingredient, he argued, was execution. "What is important is the political will to execute. And it's not the political will of the heads of state only, but it's also the political will of the people below them."

Integrating informal economies

In some cases, young Africans are already moving ahead of policymakers.

Rotimi Olawale, executive director of YouthHubAfrica, said young entrepreneurs were building informal cross-border networks that resemble the integrated African economy governments have spent years discussing. A customer in one country might contact a Nigerian vendor over WhatsApp, he said, before finding someone travelling between the two countries to transport the product.

"That's the informal economy that young people in Africa are already building. And so, we have to develop the policy to match them," he said. "We need to ask how we can help our young people. Enough of the talks. Let's put capital in their hands. And not just tokenistic capital. We're talking about capital that will enable them to connect and create wealth for themselves and their colleagues," he added.

Gugulethu Siso, youth engagement officer at the Afrikan Youth Business Council, agreed that young entrepreneurs were finding ways around the slow implementation of regional integration agreements.

"Many of us are already moving goods across the borders, as informally and as illegally as it might be," she said.

Regulations, Siso argued, often fail to distinguish between large corpora-

tions and small youth-led enterprises, while cross-border payments can be so expensive that routing money through international platforms is sometimes cheaper than transferring it directly between African banks.

Wiisichong Bening Ahmed, Secretary-General of the Pan African Youth Union, urged young Africans to push governments to remove visa restrictions and other obstacles to mobility.

“Never lose hope on the possibilities of our continent,” he said, calling on young people not to “give up on African solidarity”. Rather than another wave of policies and frameworks, Ahmed argued, existing commitments needed to be implemented.

“The young people in this room are the foremost domestic resource that needs to be mobilised and harnessed,” he said.

Fixing the fundamentals

Yet mobility, finance and entrepreneurship alone cannot compensate for failures in basic public services.

Ambassador Marie-Antoinette Rose Quatre, CEO of the African Peer Review Mechanism, called for a “back to basics” approach centred on education, healthcare, water, electricity and functioning cities.

She pointed to a contradiction in Africa’s development priorities: while hundreds of data centres are being built across the continent, access to water and sanitation remains limited – even though those same facilities will increase demand for water.

The concern, Quatre argued, is that Africa may be looking in the wrong place – pursuing AI-led transformation, while the infrastructure needed to support it could intensify pressure on scarce water and energy, even as millions still lack access to those basic services.

“We need to fix the fundamentals. We need to invest in education and make sure that we have universal access to it. We need to invest in healthcare. We need to invest in something as basic as waste collection. Without these fundamentals, we will not be able to take off,” she said.

Artificial intelligence, Quatre warned, could also threaten employment prospects, given the continent’s rapidly growing working-age population.

“We’ve been talking about the demographic dividend while sitting on a population bulge on the continent. So Africa stands to be affected by artificial intelligence if we don’t address this issue.”

Phuthuma Nhleko similarly warned policymakers against designing African



Top: Fatoumata Jallow Tambajang, former Vice-President of The Gambia
Above: Ambassador Marie-Antoinette Rose Quatre, CEO of the African Peer Review Mechanism

economies around “yesterday’s realities”, arguing that the continent must prepare for the impact new technologies will have on employment and growth.

Professor Tade Akin Aina, senior programme director for higher education and research in Africa at the Andrew Carnegie Foundation, said that preparation must include a fundamental rethink of education.

As AI increasingly performs routine tasks, Aina argued that schools and universities should place greater emphasis on capabilities machines cannot easily replicate. “The essence of education should be independent thinking, independent action, motivation, critical

thinking,” he said.

Professor PLO Lumumba, Founder and Chairman of the PLO Lumumba Foundation, pushed the argument further, questioning whether Africa’s enthusiasm for new technologies was sufficiently grounded in the continent’s own realities. “You cannot solve that which you do not understand,” he said. “We are very quick to talk about artificial intelligence and I ask, whose artificial intelligence?” Africa, he argued, must first focus on necessities that remain beyond the reach of many citizens.

Lumumba also warned that the continent risked producing generations whose economic and intellectual orientation remained outside Africa unless it took greater ownership of education. Children educated through British or French curricula, he argued, could grow into leaders whose economic and cultural ties remained elsewhere. “Africa will only be a hunting ground,” he cautioned, if the continent does not take control of how its young people are educated and how they understand their own societies.

From self-belief to systems

Former Gambian Vice-President Fatoumata Jallow Tambajang placed some of the responsibility directly on young Africans, urging them to establish clear goals, embrace lifelong learning and see beyond national identities. “Don’t see yourself as Rwandans or Ugandans. See yourself as Africans and see how much you can work together,” she said.

But self-belief must be supported by institutions.

Tambajang proposed a continental database of African expertise, allowing governments and institutions to identify and deploy skills already available on the continent rather than instinctively looking elsewhere. Africa must rely on “our capability, our confidence, our integrity, because no one is going to do it for us”.

Aina also argued that financing constraints should become an opportunity to mobilise more African capital through domestic resources and new financing mechanisms. “Every crisis has an opportunity,” he said, calling for Africa to “break the aid dependency mentality” and “look inwards”.

As Lumumba put it, the real test begins after the conferences end.

Speaking to the youth, he said, “You are living at a time when it is the best of times and the worst of times. It depends on what you do about it. After this conference, will you coordinate or will you wait for another conference?” ■

In the 1980s and earlier, Africa's attempts to use import substitution as a stepping stone towards an industrialised status failed miserably, mainly because of fragmented, tiny markets. Can the same approach now succeed under the unique opportunities offered by the AfCFTA? **Dr Hippolyte Fofack** argues that indeed it can – provided it can also fulfill other conditionalities required for broad-based industrialisation.

Why the AfCFTA has opened the door for Africa's industrialisation

In the 1980s, as the US automotive industry faced significant competitive pressure from Japanese carmakers, Washington negotiated trade relations with Tokyo. Rather than passively allowing Japanese imports to supplant domestic manufacturing, a strategic mix of trade restrictions and the compelling appeal of the US market motivated Japanese manufacturers to establish facilities in the US.

Today, President Donald Trump's extensive application of aggressive tariffs closely mirrors 20th-century import substitution industrialisation – a strategy aimed at replacing foreign imports with domestic production by erecting high tariff walls.

This historical example, together with ongoing efforts by the US and the European Union – both actively employing industrial policies to reduce strategic import reliance and rebuild domestic productive capacity – contrasts with the traditional narrative of free-market competition.

It illustrates how a country and region can utilise their extensive domestic markets as instruments of industrial policy. This same rationale further reinforces arguments in favour of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

By lifting the constraints of fragmented national markets, the AfCFTA fundamentally changes the economic logic of import substitution in Africa.

Historically, import substitution was pursued in relatively small national markets, with individual governments trying to replace imports with domestically produced goods behind protec-



Above: Workers at Kioo Ltd's glass bottle factory in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.
Opposite: The Port of Cape Town, South Africa. Having upgraded its production to meet all of Tanzania's demand for glass containers, Kioo Ltd has gone from replacing imports to exporting to the SADC, EAC and Indian Ocean regions

tive trade barriers. The results were mixed, partly because many African economies lacked the market size, infrastructure, capital, and technological capabilities needed to sustain competitive industries.

The AfCFTA offers an alternative framework for economic development and could facilitate industrialisation, a goal that has remained elusive for Africa for decades.

For too long, the region has been confined to a colonial-era development paradigm centred on resource extraction, which contributes to persistent structural trade deficits, recurring balance-of-payments crises, and widening income disparities between Africa and other regions.

This model results in exporting raw materials and importing manufactured goods at higher costs. By incrementally integrating African economies into a unified continental market, the AfCFTA creates the scale needed to boost competitiveness and make strategic import substitution more feasible. Consequently, Africa can progressively substitute imports at the continental level, moving beyond individual national efforts.

The primary distinction lies between national and continental import substitution. The former aims to produce domestically what a relatively small economy previously imported. The latter endeavours to develop African capacity to manufacture goods that Africa as a whole currently imports from external sources.

This differentiation is of the utmost importance. A nation with a limited domestic market may struggle to sustain

competitive production of manufactured goods such as pharmaceuticals, machinery, fertilisers, vehicles, chemicals, or industrial equipment.

However, a continental market exceeding 1.5bn people – and projected to reach 2.5bn by 2050 – can provide the demand needed to achieve economies of scale and foster domestic manufacturing, reducing excessive reliance on imported industrial products.

A diversified African production system

The AfCFTA provides a strong economic rationale for shifting the focus from national self-sufficiency to continental self-reliance. Africa does not need every country to produce everything. Instead, African countries can specialise in different products and stages of production while trading with one another, allowing raw materials, intermediate goods, and finished products to circulate more easily across the continent.

Developing robust regional value chains enhances the global competitiveness of African industries. This approach will foster the development of a diversified African production system,

rather than autarky.

At present, Africa still relies heavily on imports for essential commodities, including foodstuffs, pharmaceuticals, machinery, fertilisers, refined petroleum products, chemicals, and automobiles.

The ultimate aim should be to transform Africa's enormous and growing import demand into an engine of regional production and structural transformation.

Manufactured consumer goods account for up to 70% of Africa's total imports and represent a significant share of its import expenditure. Moreover, a substantial share of the value generated by these goods is captured outside the continent.

Strategic import substitution can redirect a segment of this expenditure toward African producers, promoting employment, attracting investment, facilitating technological learning, and

enhancing domestic value addition. Such measures can support growth in per capita incomes and turn Africa's demographic potential into a demographic dividend.

This opportunity is particularly important in agriculture and food processing, given that the region allocates more than \$100bn annually to food imports. Africa has more than 60% of the world's remaining arable land and substantial agricultural potential.

The AfCFTA can accelerate the development of continental agro-industrial value chains, enabling Africa to process and transform agricultural commodities domestically.

Instead of exporting cotton and importing textiles, or exporting agricultural products and importing processed foods, African economies are positioned to progressively capture these stages of production.

Growth opportunities are equally significant in the automotive industry, with Africa spending more than \$50bn annually on vehicle imports. The continent's automotive market is positioned for substantial expansion, supported by a low current vehicle ownership rate of



around 73 cars per 1,000 inhabitants (compared to a global average of 300 per 1,000), a growing young population, and rapid urbanisation.

Commodity-based industrialisation

Africa's demographic dynamics present considerable long-term market opportunities as traditional markets mature. These prospects could spur job creation and technology transfer, provided the region capitalises on continental import-substitution strategies to boost domestic production.

Commodity-based industrialisation can serve as the foundational element of this strategy. Africa need not initially focus on manufacturing the most advanced products. Instead, it can advance along the value chain within sectors where it possesses inherent competitive advantages.

Minerals can be refined and processed; crude oil can be refined; and natural resources can supply inputs for chemicals, construction materials, and manufacturing industries.

Additionally, agro-industries can process agricultural products locally, thereby reducing post-harvest losses,

enhancing farmers' access to markets, and increasing the value generated from agricultural production.

The AfCFTA enhances investment attractiveness by giving industrial producers access to a continental market, not just a national one.

Africa should not pursue the blind elimination of imports. International trade remains vital for economic development.

Factories producing fertilisers, pharmaceuticals, machinery, textiles, or processed foods can sell their products across multiple African markets. An expanded customer base enables firms to spread fixed costs over higher production volumes, reducing unit costs and boosting competitiveness.

This creates a virtuous cycle in which efficiency and competitiveness gains promote further investment. As a result, import substitution may serve as a mechanism for industrialisation, rather than being an end in itself.

The distinction between strategic import substitution and protectionism is fundamental – Africa should not pursue the blind elimination of imports. International trade remains vital for economic development, and many imported goods serve as essential inputs for African manufacturing.

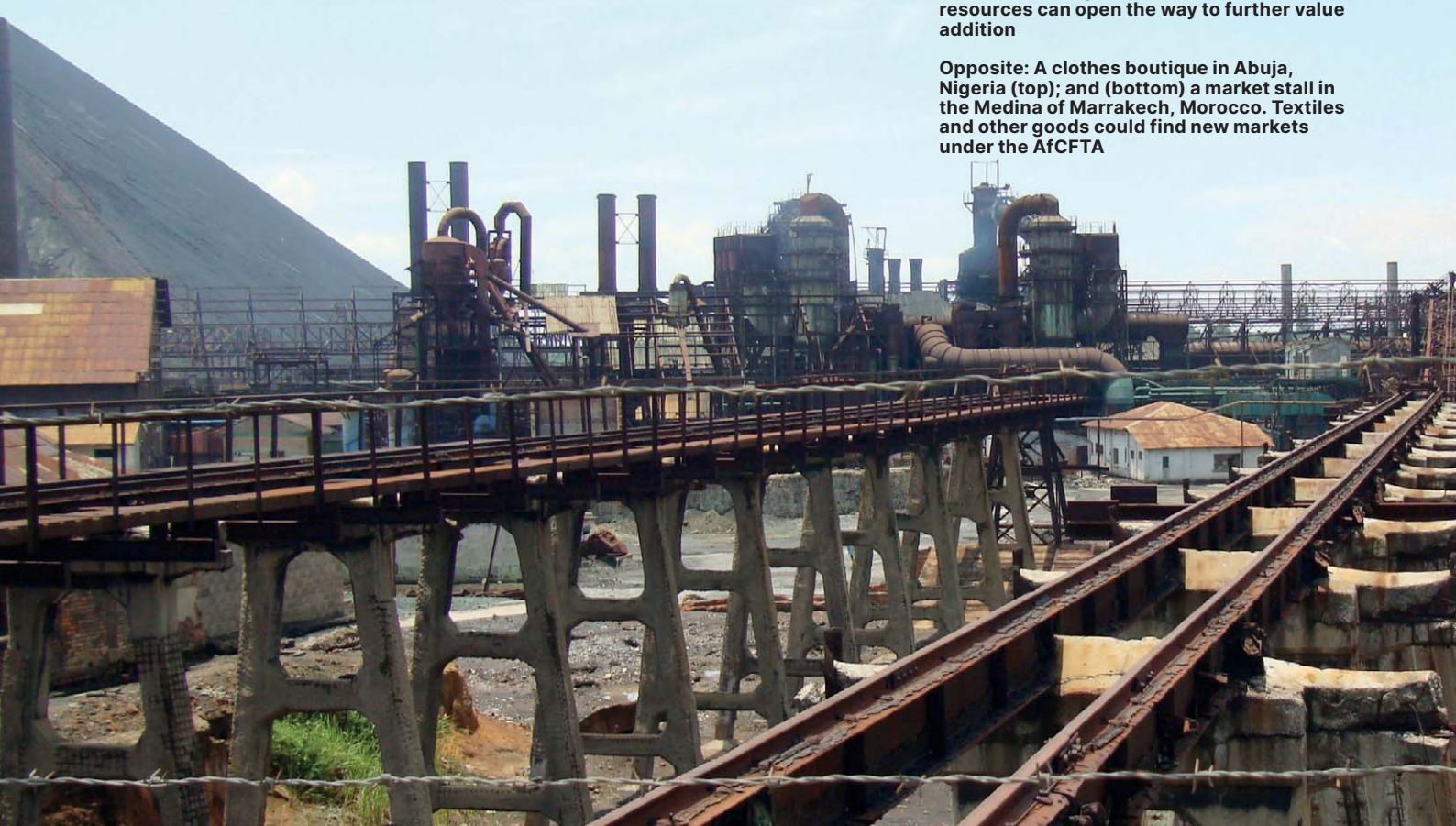
Moreover, governments should not indefinitely shelter inefficient enterprises from competition. Instead, import substitution should target products for which Africa can develop competitive manufacturing capabilities, leveraging the continental market as a training ground and a scale platform for African industry.

Temporary support must be conditioned on quantifiable improvements in productivity, technology, employment, exports, and local value addition, ensuring that African firms acquire the capabilities necessary to compete on the international stage.

The strategy also bears significant implications for economic resilience. Recent global disruptions have highlighted the vulnerabilities arising from excessive dependence on remote suppliers for essential commodities. The

Below: A copper smelter in Lubumbashi, DRC. Processing Africa's rich mineral resources can open the way to further value addition

Opposite: A clothes boutique in Abuja, Nigeria (top); and (bottom) a market stall in the Medina of Marrakech, Morocco. Textiles and other goods could find new markets under the AfCFTA



over-reliance on medical supplies has proved particularly costly, as the region imports over 90% of its pharmaceuticals and critical medical provisions. Events such as the Covid-19 pandemic, geopolitical conflicts, shipping interruptions, and commodity price fluctuations have underscored the need for diversified, resilient supply chains. Enhancing Africa's domestic production capacity for essential goods would not eliminate external reliance, but it would mitigate the risks of excessive supply concentration outside the continent.

Industrialisation through the AfCFTA can also strengthen Africa's international bargaining power. A continent that is both a major producer and a major consumer of manufactured goods is less affected by commodity price cycles and therefore has greater influence in trade negotiations and global supply chains.

If Africa can process its commodities locally, manufacture more essential goods, and develop competitive regional industries, it will no longer be a price taker. External partners will increasingly need to engage with Africa, not only as a supplier of raw materials, but also as a major industrial market and production centre.

Nevertheless, numerous challenges persist in achieving structural transformation through a continental import substitution model, even within the framework of the AfCFTA.

While trade liberalisation can enhance market access, it requires factories, supply chains, skilled labour, technology, and financial resources to leverage that access effectively.

Without productive capacity, the AfCFTA may merely facilitate increased imports from external sources, further increasing the frequency of recurrent balance of payments and debt crises.

Conversely, industrialisation can promote the emergence of competitive African producers, diversify growth and trade sources, and improve fiscal and external balances, thereby strengthening the foundation of long-term growth and macroeconomic stability.

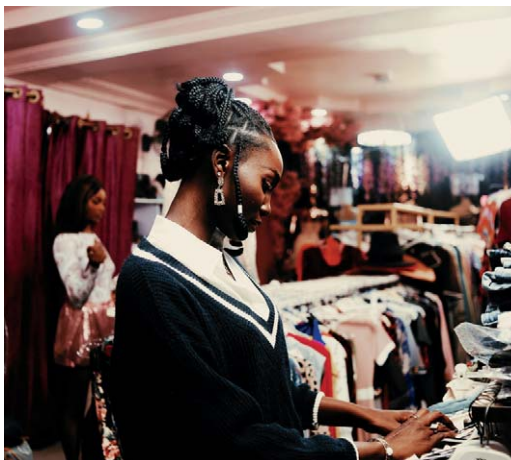
Essential requirements for industrial development

Continental import substitution, however, requires more than the mere removal of tariffs. Africa must urgently confront infrastructure constraints, energy deficiencies, inefficient logistics, border delays, regulatory fragmentation, insufficient financing, and disparities in product standards.

No modern industrial society can operate effectively without a plentiful,

affordable supply of electricity. Factories depend on uninterrupted power to operate machinery, safeguard products, process raw materials, and maintain competitive production costs.

Yet many African nations still face electricity shortages, unreliable power grids, and high energy costs despite the region's huge potential in both renew-



able and non-renewable energy sources.

Human capital is arguably even more important in a region facing a chronic shortage of engineers and scientists. Industrialisation requires workers who can operate machinery, maintain equipment, manage factories, develop new technologies, and solve complex technical problems.

Similarly, industrial development requires patient capital, yet African firms often face high financing costs and short loan maturities. Complementary investment in physical and human capital, along with a deeper continental capital market, would make the AfCFTA's industrial ambitions more achievable.

Ultimately, the AfCFTA shifts the question Africa should ask about import

substitution. Historically, the question has been: "How can each African country produce what it imports?" Under the AfCFTA, it should instead be: "How can Africa collectively produce a greater share of what Africa currently imports while building industries capable of competing globally?"

In essence, the AfCFTA enables Africa to combine the developmental rationale of import substitution with the competitiveness and efficiency gains of regional integration and the discipline of international competition, facilitating a smooth transition to an industrial society.

The AfCFTA provides the market architecture for a new form of African import substitution – one based not on national isolation, but on continental integration; not on permanent protection, but on competitive industrial development; and not on autarky, but on strategic interdependence.

The ultimate objective should be to transform Africa's enormous and growing import demand into an engine of regional production and structural transformation. Every product Africa can produce competitively on the continent is not merely an avoided import that improves the region's trade balance – it is also an opportunity for employment, investment, technological learning, value addition, and industrial capability, strengthening the foundation of growth and macroeconomic stability.

In this sense, the AfCFTA is more than a trade agreement. It provides the economic rationale and market scale for Africa to pursue strategic import substitution as a pathway to industrialisation, economic resilience, and greater economic sovereignty.

The US experience and the revival of industrial policy show that countries have leveraged the size of their domestic markets to implement import substitution successfully and remain at the global technological frontier, enabling sustained per capita income growth.

Continental import substitution has significant potential for growth and structural transformation in Africa. It could propel Africa toward an industrial society and reposition the continent in the architecture of the global economy.

The region's challenge lies in building the financial and physical infrastructure for industrial development, turning its population into an industrial workforce, and strengthening coordination across AfCFTA's member countries to implement a robust industrial policy at the continental level. ■

The widely touted belief that Africa only produces raw materials to export them is not supported by the facts. The continent has viable industries in some centres, although broader industrialisation remains a work in progress.

Neil Ford presents mini-profiles of Africa's major manufacturing nations.

Africa's manufacturing champions

Most of Africa has relied on exporting raw materials and importing manufactured products made from them throughout the colonial and independence periods. Copper, cobalt, cocoa, cotton and crude oil are all shipped from African ports, while vehicles, chemicals, processed foods, textiles and electronics arrive in the opposite direction. Changing that trade balance has become one of the continent's most important economic ambitions.

There are some signs that it is beginning to happen. The African Development Bank's *Africa Industrialisation Index 2025* estimates that African manufacturing value-added increased from \$285bn in 2020 to \$351bn in 2025. Yet Africa still accounts for less than 2% of global manufacturing output and just 1.4% of global manufactured exports.

However, the continent does make more than many assume. South Africa manufactures cars, chemicals, steel, machinery, processed food and pharmaceuticals. Morocco has developed automotive and aerospace industries, while Egypt produces fertilisers, chemicals, textiles and electrical equipment. Kenya has important food processing, cement, consumer goods and pharmaceutical industries, while Nigeria produces cement, food, beverages and other consumer products.

Industrialisation matters because processing agricultural products and minerals locally allows countries to capture more of their value, while factories create employment and support suppliers and logistics companies.

The continent is currently heavily dependent on producing more basic goods, including foodstuffs and construction materials. These industries are important, but as East and South Asia have shown over many decades, industri-

alisation becomes particularly transformative when countries progress into more sophisticated sectors that generate exports and support large domestic supply chains.

Copper, cobalt, cocoa, cotton and crude oil are all shipped from African ports, while vehicles, chemicals, processed foods, textiles and electronics arrive in the opposite direction.

Morocco: building cars for the world

Few African manufacturing industries have expanded as rapidly as Morocco's automotive sector. Renault and Stellantis now anchor a network of more than 250 local and international automotive and component companies. Moroccan industry minister Ryad Mezzour said in late 2025 that the country had reached an annual production capacity of one million vehicles, with a target of two million by 2030.

Local content has reached about 69%, meaning the industry extends far beyond simply assembling imported kits. Morocco produces seats, wiring harnesses, tyres and numerous other components alongside finished vehicles. Exports are driving this investment. The country exported a record D157bn (\$16.8bn) of automotive products in 2024.

Stellantis announced a €1.2bn expansion of its Kenitra complex in 2025 that will more than double capacity to 535,000 vehicles a year. Production includes conventional cars alongside small electric vehicles such as the Citroën Ami,

Fiat Topolino and Opel Rocks-e.

Morocco is also moving into EV batteries. The planned Gotion gigafactory in Kenitra will initially have an annual capacity of 10GWh, with longer-term plans to reach 100GWh. The AfDB has approved \$110m of financing for the first phase.

Morocco's experience demonstrates that African manufacturing does not have to depend primarily on domestic demand. Proximity to Europe, the Tanger Med port, free trade agreements and industrial zones have allowed it to become part of global manufacturing supply chains.

South Africa: the continent's industrial heavyweight

South Africa offers a different model to the rest of Africa because its manufacturing base is so broad. Gauteng, Durban and the Eastern Cape support industries ranging from chemicals and metals to machinery, food processing and vehicles.

Automotive manufacturing remains its flagship. South Africa produced 618,077 vehicles in 2025, with BMW, Ford, Isuzu, Mercedes-Benz, Nissan, Toyota and Volkswagen all manufacturing in the country. It exported a record 414,271 vehicles in 2025, with Germany the biggest market, followed by the UK, France, Belgium and Italy.

The impact on the wider economy is impressive. Vehicle and component exports reached a record R291bn (\$16bn) in 2025 and accounted for 15.6% of all South African exports. Automotive manufacturing generated 23.8% of the value added by the entire manufacturing sector and the broader automotive industry contributed 5.2% of GDP.

Yet electricity shortages, congested ports and railways, weak investment and sluggish economic growth have undermined competitiveness. South Africa

Below: A Fiat Topolino, an electric vehicle produced at Stellantis' plant in Kenitra, Morocco. The country's automotive sector currently produces a million vehicles annually, with the government targeting two million a year by 2030



Below: Tankers traversing the Suez Canal. The route is central to Egypt's exports to European, Middle Eastern and African



demonstrates that maintaining an existing industrial base can sometimes be as challenging as creating one.

Kenya: targeting manufacturing diversity
Nairobi and the industrial corridor linking it with Mombasa support food and beverage processing, cement, pharmaceuticals, plastics, chemicals, steel products and consumer goods manufacturing, helping to drive growth of 4.7% in 2024 and 4.6% in 2025.

Kenya's manufacturers can supply a domestic population of more than 50m while using the East African Community to target other neighbouring markets. Food processing is particularly important. Tea and coffee processing, flour milling, edible oils, beer and packaged foods turn crop cultivation into higher value products. Companies such as East African Breweries, Bidco Africa and Unga Group have built businesses around domestic and regional demand.

Cement and construction materials are another important manufacturing segment. Construction grew by 6.8% in 2025 after contracting by 0.7% in 2024, while mining and quarrying expanded by 14.9%, partly because of an increased production of minerals used to manufacture cement.

Kenya also has one of sub-Saharan Africa's more developed pharmaceutical manufacturing sectors, producing tablets, capsules and syrups, but it still imports many finished pharmaceuticals and the active ingredients used by domestic manufacturers.

The domestic market is playing a huge role in driving investment, as urbanisation and population growth are creating enormous demand for food, construction materials, medicines and consumer goods. Supplying Africans can be as important as supplying Europe.

Egypt: manufacturing at the crossroads of three continents

With a population exceeding 100m, relatively low labour costs, the Suez Canal, major ports and proximity to European, Middle Eastern and African markets, Egypt also represents a diverse manufacturing sector, although the state still plays too big a role in economic life.

It produces chemicals, fertilisers, steel, cement, processed food, textiles and clothing, pharmaceuticals and electrical appliances.

Exports demonstrate that this is more than import-substitution. The country exported \$26bn-worth of goods in the first half of 2025, up 19% on the same period in 2024. Ready-made garments accounted for \$1.6bn of those exports,

fertilisers \$1.4bn, food preparations and pasta \$1.1bn and primary-form plastics \$790m.

Egypt nevertheless demonstrates another African problem: having factories is not enough. Manufacturers need foreign currency to import machinery and components, dependable energy, predictable economic policy and access to financing. Currency shortages and inflation have periodically disrupted manufacturers even when demand remains strong.

Industrialisation becomes particularly transformative when countries progress into more sophisticated sectors that generate exports and support large domestic supply chains.

Nigeria: the advantages of scale

Scale gives Nigeria a different advantage: scale. With 242m people, Nigeria offers one of Africa's largest concentrations of food, beverages, cement, consumer goods and building-material manufacturing around Lagos. Output is growing but not spectacularly, with real manufacturing growth of 3.29% year-on-year in the first quarter of 2026.

Cement is one of the clearest success stories. Dangote Cement has 32.25m tonnes a year of production capacity in Nigeria and 55m tonnes across Africa. It sold 27.5m tonnes of cement and clinker across the group in 2025 and generated revenue of N4.31trn (\$3.1bn).

There is also plenty of competition in the form of Bua Cement and Lafarge Africa. Nigeria has also developed huge food and drink industries, encompassing breweries, flour mills, sugar refining, noodles and packaged foods.

The most dramatic recent example of Nigerian industrialisation lies outside traditional consumer manufacturing. The \$20bn Dangote Petroleum Refinery near Lagos has the capacity to process 650,000 barrels of crude oil a day.

Its emergence is particularly significant because Nigeria spent decades exporting crude oil while importing much of the petrol, diesel and other refined products it consumed. The complex is also developing petrochemical production, potentially creating feedstock for further manufacturing.

Yet unreliable electricity, congested

ports, expensive financing and currency instability add to manufacturers' costs. The naira's sharp depreciation in 2023 and 2024 increased the price of imported machinery and raw materials but also encouraged some import substitution.

Some Nigerian manufacturers turned to local sourcing as a result. Chemical and Allied Products, for example, now obtains about 90% of its calcium carbonate domestically, while the proportion of local raw materials used across Nigerian manufacturing has risen to more than 57%.

Can Africa make the leap?

These examples demonstrate that there is no single African manufacturing model. Morocco uses infrastructure and access to Europe to manufacture cars for export. South Africa relies on industrial capabilities built over generations. Kenya serves a growing regional market. Egypt combines a huge domestic economy with export manufacturing, while Nigeria is trying to turn population growth into increased manufacturing potential.

The African Continental Free Trade Area could eventually connect these models. A continental market of more than 1.4bn people would allow manufacturers to develop cross-border supply chains and reach markets large enough to justify bigger factories.

Yet tariffs are only part of the problem. Manufacturers also compare electricity costs and reliability, logistics efficiency, lending costs, workforce skills and local suppliers. Industrial policy cannot compensate indefinitely for weaknesses in all of them.

There is also a danger of defining success too loosely. Processing food and producing cement locally are valuable achievements, but genuine industrialisation requires economies to develop increasingly sophisticated capabilities. Morocco's progression from vehicle assembly towards components and now EV batteries is a prime example.

Africa is therefore industrialising, but not yet fast enough. Manufacturing value added of \$351bn sounds substantial until it is set against Africa's population and the continent's tiny share of global manufacturing.

The challenge is to turn individual successes into interconnected African supply chains in which raw materials cross borders to factories, components move between manufacturing centres, and finished products are sold across Africa and overseas. 'Made in Africa' then becomes a development strategy and not just little more than an aspirational label. ■

After a period in the doldrums, South Africa is on the rebound. The essential power and logistics sectors are back to almost normal and growth is inching upwards. This is the story that Brand South Africa, the country's official marketing agency, wants the global investor community to hear. **Omar Ben Yedder** reports.

The lights, and optimism are back on in South Africa

For a country widely acknowledged to be Africa's most sophisticated and industrialised economy, South Africa's persistent power cuts were an embarrassing challenge to the country's self-image, adding to a general sense of hopelessness and malaise that some critics had come to associate with the rainbow nation.

Today, however, South Africa is able to tell a different story. "South Africa has turned an important corner on energy security. We have moved from chronic generation shortages to a position where available generation is exceeding current demand and Eskom is maintaining excess capacity in reserve. That is a significant confidence signal to investors and we must now accelerate investment in transmission, distribution and new generation to sustain that advantage," reports Ipeleng Selele, chairperson of Brand South Africa.

"We're not counting outages any more because we've turned a corner," Selele adds, referring to the nation's infamous power shortages. "In fact, we've got a surplus in terms of power."

According to Eskom's latest published operational update, it maintains 5,728MW in cold reserve "due to excess capacity". For the evening peak cited in that update, forecast demand was 23,360MW, against 26,419MW of available capacity. Eskom also reported a year-to-date Energy Availability Factor of 67.87%, its highest in six years, with unplanned outages substantially reduced.

As a result, there has been a dramatic improvement in load-shedding, which businesses and consumers had come to view with expectant dread. In May 2026, Eskom reached 365 consecutive days without load-shedding, and announced

that it had met 100% of national electricity demand during that period. More recently, Eskom reported that generation capacity continues to exceed demand.

The bottom line has also felt the impact. For the financial year ending March 2026, the state utility reported profit after tax of R30.3bn (over \$1.5bn), the second consecutive year of in the black and an increase on the previous year's R14.bn.

That Eskom can turn its fortunes around, Selele says, is a clear sign to investors that South Africa is once again on the up. "Investors want to see that. Before anyone wants to put in their money, their heart and cash into your economy, they want to see where you've improved yourself as a country."

This is the story that Brand South Africa is hoping to sell as it engages with the investor community on the

sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly meetings in New York, USA. The story is that South Africa has the capacity to resolve its structural problems. "Our capability is greater than our challenges," Selele insists.

Tackling economic growth

According to Selele, South Africa's rebound has been structured around three phases. "Phase one was about stabilisation. Phase two was about reform and phase three is now about growth," she explains.

Specifically, the aim is to move economic growth, which has long hovered around 1%, beyond 3% and to add a million more jobs by 2030. These are the goals of Phase 3 of the Government-Business Partnership, which President Cyril Ramaphosa officially launched in August.

The private sector is an essential part of the story and The government is deepening its partnership with private investors. Selele, who herself has a background in the private sector, believes that helps her better understand what investors want to see before they commit their capital.

"Investors don't want fluff. What an investor is really interested in is where you are and what you are doing about some of the areas of improvement that would have been raised before," she points out.

That means offering policy credibility and certainty, improving ease of business and opening up more opportunities, as the government has done in rail, energy and logistics.

Investors also want to see that the government, as a partner, has the quality to deliver on shared goals. "Your story is not believable unless you have

Below: Ipeleng Selele, chairperson of Brand South Africa



a solid team that has built a track record in their own individual businesses, so they can then help the country to turn a corner,” Selele notes. “It’s always about the jockeys behind this process.”

Ports and railways

For some time, South Africa’s ports and railways have been another major constraint on the economy, particularly for the export-intensive mining sector. Congestion, ageing equipment and operational inefficiencies increased costs for mining companies and shipping lines, undermining one of the country’s most important sources of foreign exchange.

Selele says Transnet, the freight transport and logistics company, is beginning to turn the corner in much the same way as the power sector has. The figures support her assertion. In the 2025/26 financial year, vessel arrivals at South Africa’s ports rose 9% year-on-year to 8,630, while cargo throughput across its eight commercial seaports increased 4.2% to about 304m tonnes.

And while the recoveries at Eskom and Transnet are far from complete, Selele says they send an important signal to investors and partners. “There’s still a long way to go,” she acknowledges, but insists that “we have to look at the little milestones which make up what we call success.”

The bigger test will be how these

milestones can help launch the growth that the government is targeting. Mining, one of the sectors identified by the Government-Business Partnership, for example, has tremendous potential for a country with proven wealth in natural resources.

The country is already a major producer of platinum-group metals and vanadium, but Selele argues that the investment opportunity extends beyond extracting those minerals. “Where are the tangible projects that can then demonstrate the very same investment case of mining the commodity, beneficiating it, and then using it?” she asks. Increased local processing would mean capturing more value and consequently, more growth and jobs.

Cultural achievements

Selele also insists that the country has the required human capital for the tasks. The country’s pedigree, she says, is obvious not only in its economic performance but across a wide breadth of achievements, such as sports and culture.

“When you look at the way the [national rugby team] Springboks performs on the international stage and its upcoming global tour against the All Blacks [of New Zealand], you cannot deny that the national brand story of South Africa is enriched by so many different aspects,” Selele says. In addition,

she points to international DJ Black Coffee, singer Tyla and the Amapiano (a trendy musical form) as well as the country’s fashion industry, with MaXhosa participating at the Paris Fashion Week in September, as examples of global excellence and of South African icons that have worldwide appeal.

Brand South Africa’s job is to turn all of these disparate areas of potential and achievement into a simple and compelling story for the audiences at the UN events in New York and for investors around the world. And that story is likely to be that South Africa is facing its problems squarely and has shown that it has the capacity to resolve them.

The country has demonstrated that it can stabilise its electricity system. It is making progress in logistics. It is opening up the rail sector and freight network to private-sector operators. It has institutions and businesses with deep expertise, a substantial mineral endowment and a diversified economy.

“We don’t deny the challenges,” Selele says. “But what we know for sure is that our capability and strength outweighs that and it’s greater.” For Brand South Africa, the task now is to persuade the rest of the world to believe this, not just by repetition but through the numbers posted, the reforms undertaken, and the quality of the people delivering them. ■



South Africa’s President Cyril Ramaphosa (r) welcoming UN Secretary-General António Guterres as he arrives for the opening of the G20 Leaders’ Summit in Johannesburg in November last year



The story of COTTON

Few commodities have shaped human civilisation as profoundly as cotton. It clothed billions, transformed global trade, fuelled the Industrial Revolution and underpinned the rise of modern capitalism. The industry has also been the entry point for the rapid industrialisation of several developing nations.

In this Special Report, we trace the rise and dominance of the cotton industry and its role in empire-building to its modern manifestation in the world and Africa. With a renewed focus on cotton as an agent of industrial growth, we examine the potential as well as the pitfalls of nature's 'white gold'.

In this deeply researched article, **Onyekachi Wambu** delves into the origins of the global cotton trade, its role in Britain's Industrial Revolution, the rise of colonialism and immense wealth, the inhuman Atlantic Slave Trade and the enduring consequences of the industry.

How cotton, slavery and capitalism created the modern world

Cotton, more than any other commodity, was the foundation on which Britain, and later the United States, built vast wealth which enabled the expansion of colonialism and the dominance of these global powers across the centuries.

By 1860, cotton yarn and cloth accounted for nearly 40% of Britain's exports, while raw cotton represented 61% of the value of all American exports. Britain's cotton industry employed hundreds of thousands of workers and dominated the industrial economy of Lancashire, with 60% of the world's mechanical spindles located in its factories. Few commodities occupied such a commanding position in the nineteenth-century global economy.

Yet behind cotton's extraordinary success lies one of history's greatest paradoxes. The Industrial Revolution is often celebrated as a triumph of British ingenuity, entrepreneurship and scientific progress.

Those achievements deserve recognition. James Watt's steam engine, Richard Arkwright's factory system and the remarkable innovations of Lancashire's engineers transformed production on an unprecedented scale.

But machines alone did not create industrial capitalism. They required capital, raw materials, secure markets and a disciplined labour force. Those were supplied by an economic system that stretched from Barbados to Bengal, from Liverpool to Lagos and from Manchester to Mississippi.

The modern world was therefore assembled across four continents: Barbados supplied the organisational blueprint; Britain supplied the machinery; the American South supplied the cotton; India became the captive market; Africa supplied the labour; and the Atlantic economy supplied the finance. Cotton

was the thread that stitched them all together.

Barbados industrial production system

Ironically, the origins of industrial capitalism lay not in the mills of Lancashire but in the sugar plantations of Barbados.

When England colonised Barbados in 1627, few imagined that the island would become one of the most profit-

ers; boiling houses operated around the clock; labour was divided into specialised tasks; and meticulous accounting measured productivity, costs and output.

The plantation anticipated many of the characteristics later associated with industrial production, and later 'Fordism': mechanisation, division of labour, vertical integration, international finance and continuous manufacturing.

Sir Hilary Beckles has described Barbados as Britain's first great capitalist enterprise, while Sidney Mintz famously characterised the Caribbean plantation as a "factory in the field".

There was, however, one fundamental difference between these early production systems and the factories that later emerged in Britain. Their workforce consisted almost entirely of enslaved Africans, kidnapped, trafficked and brutally introduced into the system.

By the late 17th century Barbados had become one of the richest colonies in the British Empire, while also becoming one of its most brutal slave societies; with people treated as chattelised capital assets – ledgers listed them alongside livestock, machinery and land. Creditors and lenders accepted them as collateral. Insurance companies insured them. Their lives were measured largely in economic terms.

The wealth generated by this system flowed back across the Atlantic. Plantation profits financed shipping, banking, marine insurance, dockyards and merchant houses in London, Bristol and Liverpool.

Eric Williams argued that slavery helped finance Britain's industrial development, while Joseph Inikori has shown how Atlantic commerce provided capital, markets and commercial experience that accelerated industrialisation.

Although historians still debate the



Above: The Queen Victoria Monument in Piccadilly Gardens, Manchester, UK

Right: An illustration depicting cotton harvesting in South Carolina, c. 1899

able colonies in the Atlantic world. The introduction of sugar cultivation during the 1640s transformed its economy.

Sugar differed fundamentally from tobacco or grain. Cane had to be harvested, crushed and boiled within hours before it spoiled. Production therefore required continuous coordination between agriculture, machinery, transport and processing.

Windmills powered crushing roll-



scale of slavery's contribution, only a few would now deny that Atlantic commerce formed an important part of Britain's economic ascent.

Sugar first demonstrated that extraordinary wealth could be generated by combining technology, finance and coerced labour. Cotton would inherit that model – and transform it on a global scale.

Mechanisation and the cotton revolution

During the eighteenth-century Europe developed an insatiable appetite for cotton textiles. Yet the finest cotton cloth did not come from Britain. It came from India. Bengali muslins, Gujarati calicoes and chintzes dominated world markets because of their quality, durability and craftsmanship.

Britain's manufacturers responded not by matching Indian craftsmanship but by reinventing production itself. The sequence of technological innovation was remarkable. John Kay's Flying Shuttle (1733) dramatically increased weaving productivity. James Hargreaves' Spinning Jenny (1764) enabled a single worker to spin multiple threads simultaneously.

Richard Arkwright's Water Frame (1769) produce strong cotton yarn at industrial scale, while Samuel Crompton's Spinning Mule (1779) combined the Jenny's capacity for multiple spindles with the Water Frame's product, producing finer, stronger yarn. Edmund Cartwright's Power Loom (1785) helped drive the development of mechanised weaving.

Together these inventions shifted textile manufacture from cottages into factories where machines – and increasingly, steam power – dictated the pace of production.

These innovations transformed Britain into the world's leading textile producer. They also created a new problem. The mills could process cotton faster than farmers could prepare it. The solution came from the United States.

In 1794 Eli Whitney patented the cotton gin, a relatively simple machine capable of separating cotton fibres from their seeds many times faster than manual labour. Contrary to popular mythology, the cotton gin did not reduce the demand for enslaved labour. It increased it dramatically.

Short-staple cotton could now be grown profitably across the Deep South. Plantation agriculture spread rapidly into lands seized from Indigenous peoples. Between 1790 and 1860, approximately one million enslaved African-Americans were forcibly relocated through the domestic slave trade from the eastern seaboard into Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas.

Mechanisation had not replaced slavery. Instead, it made slavery indispensable to industrial capitalism, with every improvement in Lancashire's spinning machinery increasing demand for raw cotton, which then increased the exploitation of enslaved labour in the American South. Britain's Industrial Revolution and American slavery became economically inseparable.

By the late 1850s, American plantations supplied approximately 77% of the cotton consumed by Britain's textile industry. Liverpool had become the world's greatest cotton port, while Manchester proudly styled itself "Cottonopolis".

Cotton yarn and cloth constituted around 40% of British exports, and one-



tenth of all British capital was invested directly or indirectly in the cotton economy. The Industrial Revolution was therefore more than a national achievement, becoming the first truly global industrial system.

Its next transformation would occur not in America or Britain, but in India, where the world's then greatest textile industry would be reshaped by imperial power in ways that would permanently alter the global balance of manufacturing.

Empire, India and the making of industrial Britain

If slavery supplied the labour that fed Britain's cotton mills, empire supplied something equally important: markets. The Industrial Revolution was both a story of technological innovation and political power. Machines made Britain more productive; empire ensured that Britain's products could be sold across an expanding global market, while many of its competitors found themselves increasingly disadvantaged.

Nowhere illustrates this more clearly than India. When the first mechanised

mills were opening in Lancashire, India was still the world's leading producer of cotton textiles. Around 1750, the Indian subcontinent accounted for approximately 24–25% of global manufacturing output, while Britain accounted for less than 2%.

For centuries, fine muslins from Dhaka, calicoes from Gujarat and painted chintzes from the Coromandel Coast had dominated world markets. European merchants crossed oceans not to sell textiles to India but to buy them. As Giorgio Riello observes, Britain's cotton industry began not by replacing Indian textiles but by trying to imitate them.

British consumers developed such an appetite for Indian cottons that Parliament introduced the Calico Acts in the early 18th century to protect domestic wool and linen producers from foreign competition.

British manufacturers simply could not match either the quality or the price of Indian cloth. Technology gradually changed that balance, with military conquest changing it decisively.

The East India Company's victory at the Battle of Plassey in 1757 marked a

turning point in global economic history. Commercial rivalry increasingly gave way to imperial control.

The East India Company, backed by British military power, acquired unprecedented influence over taxation, commercial regulation, legal institutions and access to markets. Indian textiles entering Britain faced restrictions and duties, while British cotton goods gained increasingly favourable access to Indian consumers.

Colonial government also redirected investment, taxation and commercial priorities in ways that favoured British manufacturing over indigenous industry.

Debates continue over the precise scale and causes of India's 19th-century de-industrialisation. Mechanisation itself was undoubtedly transformative, and handloom weavers everywhere struggled to compete with factory production. Yet there is broad agreement that colonial rule accelerated this process through unequal trade, fiscal policy and political power.

By the mid-19th century, large numbers of Indian artisans had seen their livelihoods eroded as machine-made



British textiles displaced locally produced cloth. India increasingly exported raw cotton while importing finished cotton goods from Lancashire. Manchester's spectacular rise was therefore inseparable from Bengal's decline.

The Industrial Revolution was assembled from complementary parts spread across the globe. Finance and the profits it generated connected them all.

No city embodied this transformation and the riches it engendered more completely than Manchester. During the 19th century it became known throughout the world as 'Cottonopolis'.

Chimneys dominated the skyline, canals linked factories to Liverpool's docks, and later the railway network enabled raw cotton to flow rapidly inland before returning as finished cloth for export. Production became increasingly continuous, disciplined and mechanised. What had once been domestic spinning and weaving evolved into one of the largest concentrations of industrial labour ever seen.

Liverpool formed the indispensable partner in this relationship.

Ships arrived carrying raw cotton from New Orleans, Mobile, Savannah and Charleston. They departed laden with finished textiles destined for Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America.

An increasingly sophisticated financial infrastructure grew around this trade. Merchants extended credit to plantation owners months before harvest. Marine insurers underwrote Atlantic cargoes. Banks financed mills, warehouses and machinery. Commodity exchanges standardised contracts and prices.

Cotton became not merely Britain's most important industrial raw material but one of the foundations upon which modern international finance was constructed.

Across the Atlantic, cotton generated approximately 61% of all American export earnings, making it by far the country's most valuable export commodity. Around 3.95m enslaved African-Americans produced this wealth in 1860, while approximately 88% of Britain's raw cotton imports originated in the slave states of the American South (US Census Bureau, 1864).

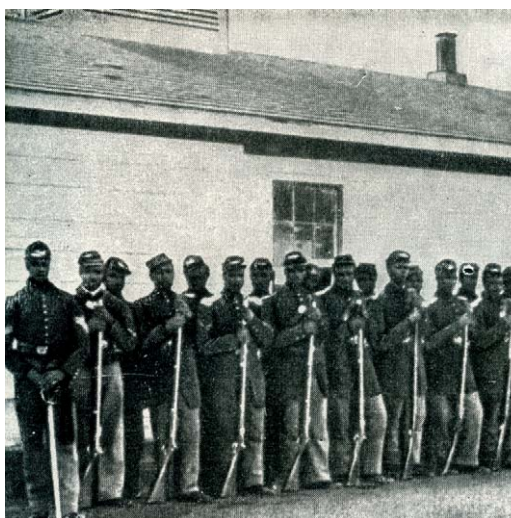
This was not simply international trade. It was arguably the world's first integrated industrial supply chain. A London banker financed a Liverpool merchant. The merchant advanced credit to a Mississippi planter.

Enslaved workers cultivated and harvested the cotton. Ships carried it across the Atlantic. Liverpool brokers sold it to Lancashire manufacturers. Manchester

transformed it into cloth. The finished textiles returned by sea to consumers in Europe, Africa, India and China.

At every stage, wealth accumulated. But it accumulated unevenly. Britain became the world's first industrial nation. The United States emerged as an economic giant. Liverpool, Manchester and Glasgow prospered. India's textile supremacy declined. Africa lost millions of its people through the Atlantic slave trade, while millions more endured lives of bondage in the plantations of the Americas.

The world's most advanced industrial economy depended fundamentally upon one of history's oldest forms of unfree labour. That contradiction would finally be exposed in 1861, when civil war erupted in the United States. The conflict would destroy slavery as a legal institution, but it would not destroy the racial ideologies, imperial relationships and economic inequalities that the cot-



The Industrial Revolution was a story of technological innovation and political power. Machines made Britain more productive; empire ensured that Britain's products could be sold across an expanding global market, while many of its competitors became increasingly disadvantaged.

Above: During the US Civil war, nearly 179,000 African-American men served as soldiers in the Union Army

Left: Bobbin winding, c. 1900. This entailed transferring spun yarn from smaller bobbins to larger packages or cones

ton economy ushered in. Those legacies continue to shape the modern world.

Cotton's long shadow

The American Civil War exposed the fundamental contradiction at the heart of the nineteenth-century cotton economy. For decades southern politicians had insisted that 'King Cotton' made slavery indispensable.

Senator James Henry Hammond's famous declaration in 1858 that 'Cotton is King' was more than political rhetoric; it reflected the extraordinary influence cotton exercised over the global economy. Confederate leaders believed Britain's dependence on southern cotton would force diplomatic recognition and military intervention.

They were mistaken. The Union blockade and Confederate restrictions on exports triggered the Lancashire Cotton Famine, throwing hundreds of thousands of textile workers into hardship. Yet many workers in Manchester and Lancashire publicly supported Abraham Lincoln and the abolition of slavery, despite the economic consequences for their own communities.

Their stance remains one of the most remarkable episodes of international working-class solidarity in modern history. Britain remained officially neutral, and the Confederacy's hopes of winning European support collapsed.

Though the Civil War destroyed slavery as a legal institution, it did not destroy the economic structures or racial ideologies that slavery had helped create.

For more than two centuries slavery had required moral and intellectual justification. Religious arguments, legal distinctions and increasingly elaborate theories of racial hierarchy evolved to legitimise human bondage.

As Barbara Fields argues, race should not simply be understood as the cause of slavery; rather, modern racial ideology became one of the principal means through which slavery and its inequalities were justified and sustained.

The abolition of slavery therefore did not abolish racism. In the United States, Reconstruction was followed by segregation, disfranchisement, racial violence and Jim Crow.

African-Americans were legally free but remained systematically excluded from equal political power, education, land ownership and economic opportunity. The consequences continue to shape American society. Contemporary disparities in wealth, housing, education and health cannot be explained by slavery alone, but neither can they be

understood without recognising slavery's enduring legacy.

The story extends far beyond the United States. Between the 16th and 19th centuries, approximately 12.52m Africans were forced aboard slave ships crossing the Atlantic. Around 10.7m survived to reach the Americas; nearly 1.8m died during the Middle Passage, while countless others perished during capture, forced marches and coastal imprisonment before embarkation. More than 36,000 slave voyages have now been documented by the Slave Voyages Database.

Consequences for Africa

The consequences for Africa were profound. Productive labour was extracted on an immense scale, communities were destabilised by slave raiding and warfare, and political institutions were reshaped by centuries of participation in, or resistance to, the slave trade.

Nathan Nunn's influential research demonstrates a strong relationship between regions most heavily affected by the Atlantic slave trade and lower levels of economic development today, while acknowledging that colonialism, geography and post-independence politics have also played critical roles.

The end of slavery also coincided with the rapid expansion of European colonialism. During the 19th century, Britain extended its authority across Africa and Asia, frequently justifying imperial rule through claims of racial superiority and a supposed "civilising mission".

Though slavery and colonialism were not identical systems, they formed part of a longer continuum in which economic exploitation, political domination and racial ideology repeatedly reinforced one another.

India provides perhaps the clearest illustration of this transition. Before British rule it had been one of the world's leading manufacturing economies; by the late 19th century it had become primarily an exporter of raw materials and a market for British industrial goods.

Mechanisation undoubtedly transformed global manufacturing, but imperial power ensured that its benefits accrued overwhelmingly to Britain rather than to India. Manchester's rise and Bengal's decline were not separate histories. They were interconnected outcomes of the same global economic transformation.

This broader perspective also changes how we understand Britain's Industrial Revolution. The innovations of Watt, Arkwright, Crompton and countless others, Britain's legal institutions,

scientific culture, access to coal and entrepreneurial traditions, existed alongside an imposed supply chain that at its core involved the cruelties and unequal relationships and power derived from slavery and empire.

That history continues to resonate, even today. Modern textile production bears no direct comparison with chattel slavery, yet global supply chains continue to reward producers capable of minimising labour costs while distancing consumers from production itself.

According to the International La-

bour Organisation, 27.6m people remain trapped in forced labour worldwide, generating an estimated \$236bn in illegal annual profits. The forms of coercion have changed, but the global search for cheap labour has not disappeared.

Nor have debates about historical responsibility. Questions surrounding reparations, museum collections, university endowments and the commemoration of imperial figures increasingly ask how nations should remember wealth accumulated through slavery and empire. These are not simply political arguments; they are historical ones. Meaningful debate requires neither inherited guilt nor national defensiveness, but an honest understanding of how modern prosperity emerged.

The history of cotton demonstrates that economic progress is rarely morally straightforward. The same industrial system that generated railways, steamships, universities and rising living standards also depended upon dispossession, coerced labour and imperial conquest. To celebrate one while ignoring the other is not balanced history; it is incomplete history.

Every nation tells stories about its past. Britain celebrates inventors and engineers. America celebrates enterprise and innovation. India remembers the destruction of its textile industry. Africa remembers the loss of millions of its people. Descendants of enslaved families remember centuries of brutalised lives reduced to property.

The task of history is to weave those truths together. The cotton shirt hanging in a wardrobe today is therefore more than a piece of clothing. It is the surviving artefact of a global system that transformed the modern world. Woven into its fibres are the labour of enslaved people, the ingenuity of inventors, the expansion of empire, the rise of global finance and the birth of industrial capitalism – and at its core, the labour of enslaved African people, whose descendants are now demanding an accounting and reparatory justice.

As the June 2026 Next Steps conference noted: "We acknowledge the historic importance of the landmark Resolution A/RES/80/250 which declares the trafficking of enslaved Africans and the racialised chattel enslavement of Africans as the gravest crime against humanity. We consider the United Nations General Assembly's adoption of this Resolution as a reflection of the broad global consensus on the need to address and repair the legacies and enduring consequences of historical injustices." ■



Top: St Katherine's Docks in London, with their huge warehouses, c. 1860. They stood at the heart of Britain's imperial economy

Above: Children at work in a US cotton mill, c. 1900. About a quarter of the mills' workforce comprised children under 16



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Benin, like a handful of other Sahelian states, is a major producer of cotton but virtually all the production is exported to Asian and Western countries to be converted into higher value products, including fabrics. However, an ambitious project centred on a special economic zone is set to change this by processing the crop through all its various stages. **Kwame Appiah** visited the site for this report.

Can Benin serve as a model for African cotton value addition?

On a sprawling industrial estate about 40km from Cotonou, Benin's capital, a bold enterprise is attempting to reverse an economic model that has defined much of the continent's trade with the outside world since European ships first made landfall on the West African coast – instead of exporting its raw materials, Benin wants to process them locally and in the process, spur an industrial boom that will boost its gross domestic product and create much-needed jobs.

That is the central idea behind the Glo-Djigbé Industrial Zone (GDIZ), a joint venture between the government of Benin and Arise Integrated Industrial Platforms, a Dubai-based firm with a history of building similar parks in the region.

According to Faki Adjé, GDIZ's deputy general manager, the project originated during the time of former President Patrice Talon (2016–2026), a businessman who had made his fortune in the cotton industry.

"He wanted to change the paradigm of the economy of the country, to move it from exporting our raw commodities to Bangladesh and elsewhere and to add value to the commodities by processing them. That was the pillar of his idea for industrialisation," Adjé recalls.

Benin, with an output of between 650,000–750,000 tons, is Africa's largest producer of seed cotton. It constitutes some 40% of the country's GDP and 80% of its exports.

Benin, however, lacked an industrial base and the expertise to develop a large-scale industrial platform, so the government partnered with ARISE IIP, which had already developed an indus-

trial zone in Gabon, to establish GDIZ in February 2020.

The park itself stretches over some 1,648 hectares and is being developed in three phases. The first 400 hectares are



Above and right: Cotton production facilities at Glo-Djigbé Industrial Zone (GDIZ) near Cotonou, Benin. GDIZ is designed as an integrated 'farm-to-fashion' ecosystem, in which virtually all stages of value addition take place in the production of finished garments and other textiles.

already fully developed; some 40 investors have already established a presence, with 19 factories already processing cotton, soya, beans, palm oil, cashew, chia, clay and other materials into finished products for the region and beyond.

The company responsible for operating the zone, SIPI-Benin SA, generates revenue from the services it provides to investors. It supplies electricity, gas and optical fibre, while also charging development and management fees to cover the construction, maintenance and management of the infrastructure.

The park has succeeded in attracting €1.4bn, with investors responding to a mix of incentives under Benin's Special Economic Zone regime. These include a 100% exemption on imported equipment and commercial materials during construction, corporate tax holidays of at least 12 years and potentially up to 17 years, salary tax exemptions, and guarantees allowing investors to repatriate revenues.

The government also subsidises electricity, with the current tariff in the zone put at about \$0.10 per kilowatt-hour, with a target of reducing this to between \$0.07 and \$0.08.

Unusual incentive

For textile investors, the government provides another unusual incentive. It pays the salaries of workers under 35 during their first nine to 12 months, while they acquire the skills required by the factory. So far, 1500 people have been trained under the programme. "Some of them started as operators and now they are supervisors, they are quality managers. They are smart and we just need to identify them and give them the training," Adjé says.

Raw cotton from the country's fields is brought to the park and through a number of different companies, emerges as clothes, bedsheets, towels and other finished products bound for shops in Benin, across Africa, Europe, America and as far as South America.

Currently, Adjé says, about 30% of Benin's cotton is being processed by three textile operations in the park. This is only two years after textile production began at GDIZ. Adjé's says that "we are working to be able to process all the cotton that we produce in the country." The complete development of the textile ecosystem, he says, could generate up to 300,000 jobs. The aim is to reach this milestone by 2030.

There are some inherent advantages. Raw materials are plentiful and easily accessible. The region is closer to the major customer destinations of Europe and America than competing hubs in Vietnam, Bangladesh or China.

As Adjé points out, "We are 15 shipping days away from Europe and America. Asia is 30-45 days away." And as wages rise in those other countries, the continent's abundant working age population may become irresistible to manufacturers with a keen eye on costs.

But there are some significant drawbacks, too. Key among them are energy supply and infrastructure. "That is the only area in which Africa finds it difficult to compete," Adjé observes.

It is not the only challenge, however. To be globally competitive, a factory producing in Benin needs markets large

enough to support scale; it needs efficient roads, ports and shipping connections and it needs workers, managers and technicians with the right qualifications.

It also needs trade rules that allow goods to circulate without the continent's existing patchwork of barriers. Despite the hopes associated with the African Continental Free Trade area, the continent is some distance from that Utopia.

Nevertheless, local brands including H&M, US Polo Association and some European football clubs are outsourcing some of their production to Benin Textiles and the Garment Training Centre at the park. A notable coup was FIFA selecting GDIZ to produce some of the jerseys for the 2026 FIFA World Cup.

Raw material advantage

Manufacturing for foreign brands, however, is only part of the ambition. In the last week of July, the president of Afreximbank, Dr George Elombi, launched Obalè Store, an outlet for high-end fashion pieces produced in the park. The bank is a major financial backer of GDIZ and Elombi believes Africa can claim a much larger share of the \$2trn that the global textile industry is estimated to

be worth by 2030.

"Under the vision we have set for the Bank, we are determined to move Africa from exporting raw potential to exporting finished value. As one of the world's major cotton producers, Africa already holds the raw material advantage, making textiles a natural and strategic entry point for rapid value-added transformation," Elombi said at the launch.

Elombi went on to declare that "Made in Africa, branded in Africa, owned in Africa, and distributed to Africa and to the world" is the ultimate ambition. That could prove decisive for the long-term survival and success of the park.

For now, GDIZ offers a model that African nations and institutions are taking note of. In the week before the launch of the Obalè Store, Kashim Shettima, the Vice President of Nigeria, visited Benin. The question is whether the model is replicable in other African countries.

Adjé says that is entirely possible but the first requirement is to build around a country's own comparative advantages. The second is political commitment. "The strong commitment and willingness to make it happen," he says, is essential, including the ability to overcome vested interests. Which may ultimately be the most difficult hurdle to overcome. ■



While Africa grows quality cotton, turning the crop into high-value products has been a consistent challenge. To break the cycle, Afreximbank's African Textile Renaissance Plan aims to create a self-sustaining ecosystem that encompasses all the steps from growth to finished products. **Neil Ford** analyses the plan and discusses its chances of success.

Afreximbank's revolutionary cotton ambition

The governments of Africa's cotton-growing countries have long sought to capture more of the value generated by their crops, but the challenge has been turning those ambitions into factories, jobs and export orders. Yet Afreximbank has now drawn up a cotton industrialisation programme that it believes can create 500,000 new jobs and \$10bn of import substitution by 2030, through the development of a much bigger African textile industry.

At a World Trade Organisation (WTO) meeting in March, participants estimated that about 98% of cotton produced in West and Central Africa was still exported as raw fibre. Beyond cultivation, the other activities in the value chain – spinning, weaving, dyeing, finishing and garment manufacturing, and the jobs associated with them, are largely located in the rest of the world.

Afreximbank wants to change that with its new African Textile Renaissance Plan, launched in 2024 in partnership with industrial zone developer ARISE Integrated Industrial Platforms (ARISE IIP) and Swiss textile machinery manufacturer Rieter. The partners aim to ensure that the continent secures 500,000 tonnes a year of cotton processing capacity within the next three to five years, with the further aspiration of adding another 500,000 tonnes at a later date. The plan aims to support \$5bn in financing to make it a reality.

The strategy is important because it is attempting to ensure the development of all parts of the supply chain and supporting infrastructure simultaneously. Building spinning mills is relatively pointless if they cannot access reliable electricity, skilled technicians or spare parts.

Equally, producing more yarn achieves

little without having customers further down the chain. The objective is therefore to create industrial ecosystems that take cotton from the farm through ginning and spinning into fabric and ultimately, finished clothing.

Afreximbank argues that cotton that currently generates about \$40m as raw exports could earn as much as \$800m when processed into garments, using Benin's Glo-Djigbé Industrial Zone as its example.

Building an industrial ecosystem

ARISE IIP already operates industrial zones in various African countries, including Benin, Togo, Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Chad, Rwanda, Gabon and Malawi. Under the textile plan, the countries involved will be selected partly according to energy availability and whether suitable industrial parks and infrastructure already exist.

Afreximbank also wants to standardise loan documentation and business plans to reduce the application process for textile projects to about two months.

Rieter's involvement tackles another often overlooked problem: machinery. The company plans to establish repair and maintenance facilities in Africa, beginning with a facility at ARISE's industrial park in Benin, alongside spare parts warehousing and possibly machine assembly if volumes justify it. (See page 90.)

Training centres are also planned. Building factories without the tech-

nicians and supply chains required to keep expensive machinery operating would merely create a new dependence on imported expertise.

The potential benefits are huge. Afreximbank argues that cotton that currently generates about \$40m as raw exports could earn as much as \$800m when processed into garments, using Benin's Glo-Djigbé Industrial Zone as its example.

More broadly, the WTO and its partners estimate that \$5bn of investment and capacity-building in the Cotton-4+ countries – Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad and Mali, plus Côte d'Ivoire – could generate about 500,000 direct jobs.

Yet the target and particularly the 2030 target date are extremely ambitious. Textile manufacturing is not simply cotton farming with a few factories attached. Africa must compete against enormous production clusters in China, Bangladesh, Vietnam, India and elsewhere that combine suppliers, skilled workforces, efficient ports and logistics and decades of manufacturing experience. It must also deal with its competitors' established relationships with international buyers.

Africa also needs to attract far more investment. UN Trade and Development – the new name for UNCTAD – says investment announcements in African textiles, clothing and leather reached \$1.78bn in 2024, up 36% from \$1.30bn in 2023. That is encouraging but more is needed.

Creating an African market

Exports alone will not be enough. The \$10bn import substitution ambition implies that Africans themselves must buy a high proportion of African-made clothing. That requires competitive pric-



Below: The Bobo III cotton ginning unit of the Burkinabé Society of Textile Fibres (SOFITEX) in Burkina Faso



Below, and opposite (top): Workers processing cotton into garments for export at a textile factory in the Glo-Djigbé Industrial Zone (GDIZ), Benin. Year by year, Benin competes with Mali for the title of Africa's top cotton producer

Opposite (bottom): A manager checking the quality of textiles at the Hawassa Industrial Park (HIP), Ethiopia. Most garments exported from HIP are made from imported cotton and yarn, but the country is making huge efforts to replace these imports with locally grown cotton



ing, reliable quality and distribution networks capable of supplying consumers from Dakar to Johannesburg.

Imported second-hand clothing makes that particularly difficult. UN data shows that Africa accounted for 19% of global used clothing imports in 2021. Kenya alone has developed a huge *mitumba* economy around imported clothing, supporting an estimated 2m jobs. As a result, simply banning second-hand clothing imports, as some African countries have done with car imports, would carry enormous economic and political costs.

The answer is therefore not protectionism alone. Governments can use procurement to provide textile manufacturers with dependable demand for school uniforms, military and police uniforms, hospital textiles and other public sector requirements.

At the same time, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) should make it easier for cotton from one country to be spun, woven or manufactured into clothing in another.

This is where Afreximbank's plan could become genuinely pan-African. Not every cotton-producing country needs an entire farm-to-fashion industry. Regional specialisation could be more efficient: cotton grown in Burkina Faso or Mali could feed spinning and weaving operations elsewhere where before garments are manufactured closer to major consumer markets. What matters is that more of those stages remain within Africa.

The AGOA effect

The other big question is where African-made clothes will be sold outside the continent. For a quarter of a century, the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) has given eligible sub-Saharan economies preferential access to the US market. Nowhere has its impact been more obvious than in clothing.

The US International Trade Commission (USITC) says that sub-Saharan Africa's apparel industry has benefitted substantially from AGOA. Normal US tariffs on clothing can be high, so any duties saved are important. Crucially, AGOA allows qualifying poorer African countries to make garments from imported yarn and fabric and still receive preferential access.

That concession helped Kenya, Lesotho and Madagascar build export-oriented garment industries without first constructing complete domestic textile supply chains. Kenya's apparel exports to the US jumped from about \$50m in the early years of the new millennium

to \$470m in 2024.

Yet this success also exposes one of AGOA's weaknesses on cotton. USITC found that African apparel producers actually make little direct use of cotton grown in sub-Saharan Africa and rely instead on East Asian yarn and fabric. AGOA has therefore been much more successful at creating African garment manufacturing than at integrating Africa's cotton value chain.

Afreximbank wants to bridge that gap. Rather than shipping African cot-



ton to Asia and importing Asian fabric into African garment factories, the Textile Renaissance Plan envisages cotton being spun and woven within Africa before the finished clothing is exported. In theory, AGOA could then support far more African value addition.

Has Trump weakened AGOA?

However, AGOA has become a much less predictable basis on which to build a factory. The programme expired on 30 September 2025 before President Donald Trump signed legislation in February 2026 restoring it retrospectively, but only until 31 December 2026. The US Senate voted in August to push this extension on to the end of 2028 but this decision still needs to be approved by the House and Trump himself.

Even if that extension is rubber-stamped, uncertainty over AGOA's long-term future matters hugely. A garment manufacturer deciding whether to in-

vest tens or hundreds of millions of dollars needs to know what market access will look like over the lifetime of the investment, not merely in the short term.

The Trump administration has also signalled that any successor will be different. US Trade Representative Jamieson Greer says a modernised AGOA should demand more from participating countries and deliver greater access for US businesses to support Washington's America First trade policy. USTR began consultations on modernisation in April. President Trump has therefore not abolished AGOA yet, but it is less predictable.

That comes on top of the wider disruption caused by the administration's tariff policies. Lesotho, where the clothing industry employs about 30,000 people, was initially threatened with a 50% reciprocal tariff in 2025, while Madagascar faced 47%. Those rates were then suspended as Washington revised its tariff arrangements, but the US tariff regime remains unstable. Afreximbank cannot therefore rely on AGOA to support its own plan.

From cotton producer to clothing exporter

Achieving Afreximbank's targets will require progress at every level of the industry. Farmers need higher yields and reliable buyers; ginneries need sufficient cotton supply; spinning and weaving mills need competitively priced, reliable electricity and finance; dyeing and finishing plants need water, chemicals and environmental controls; garment factories need skills and large orders; and designers, brands and retailers need distribution and marketing.

The 500,000 job target is possible precisely because the value chain is so long but every link has to function. A clothing factory cannot meet international orders if fabric arrives late, while international brands will not shift procurement policies simply because Africa grows cotton. Afreximbank's strategy is therefore less about increasing cotton production than changing what happens after the crop leaves the farm.

AGOA can still accelerate that process, particularly in the huge US clothing market. Yet uncertainty over its future shows why Africa needs to take more control over the economic future of its own cotton sector.

The real measure of success by 2030 will not simply be whether 500,000 jobs have been created, but whether African cotton has begun to support an integrated industry capable of competing across the continent and around the world. ■

The environmental toll of conventional cotton farming has prompted a shift among global fashion and retail brands towards organic, sustainable sourcing. Demand has been rising steadily and Tanzania has emerged as one of the world's prime suppliers. But climate change threatens an industry that could be worth \$2bn. Report by **Lennox Yieke**.

Switch to ethical sourcing raises global demand for Tanzania's organic cotton

The Simiyu region in northern Tanzania is famed not only for the Serengeti National Park and its annual wildebeest migration, but also for its growing reputation as a hub for sustainable agriculture. The region has become the epicentre of organic cotton farming in Tanzania, helping to cement the country's status as Africa's leading producer of certified organic cotton.

According to Anamringi Macha, Simiyu's Regional Commissioner, organic cotton output has grown from 10,300 tonnes in 2021/22 to 12,285 tonnes in 2022/23. This, he says, places Tanzania among the top global producers, alongside market leaders like China, India, Turkey and Tajikistan.

Organic cotton differs fundamentally from conventional cotton in that it is exclusively cultivated from non-genetically modified seeds and grown without the use of synthetic pesticides, herbicides, or fertilisers. Farmers rely instead on natural processes – like crop rotation, composting, and biological pest control – to maintain soil fertility and protect local ecosystems. They typically operate through cooperatives, whilst certification is handled by independent auditors under international organic standards.

By contrast, conventional cotton often relies on monoculture – planting cotton on the same land year after year – supported by heavy use of synthetic fertilisers and pesticides. Over time, this degrades the soil and adversely impacts its ability to retain water.

The steep environmental toll of conventional cotton farming has prompted a shift among some global fashion and

retail brands towards sustainable sourcing. As a result, demand for organic cotton has grown steadily over the years, with Tanzania emerging as a key supplier to international buyers seeking ethically produced fibre.

Rapid rise

Tanzania's organic cotton journey began in the mid 1990s, when NGOs and local cooperatives launched pilot projects in Simiyu and neighbouring regions to test pesticide free cultivation. The model gained traction in the 2000s, and by the mid 2010s, Tanzania had become Africa's largest certified organic producer, with thousands of smallholder farmers trained in ecological farming techniques.

Analysts expect Tanzania's organic cotton farming sector to benefit from a continued rise in demand for ethically sourced fibre in the years ahead. According to 6Wresearch, Tanzania's organic cotton market was estimated at \$1.44bn in 2025 and is projected to reach \$2.05bn by 2032, growing at a compounded annual growth rate (CAGR) of 5.1% during this period.

"This growth trajectory is fuelled by increasing global consumer demand for sustainable and eco-friendly textiles. As awareness of sustainable farming practices rises, more smallholder farmers in Tanzania are adopting organic methods, further enhancing the country's capacity to meet this burgeoning demand," the research firm notes.

The promise of more inclusive growth

One of the more uncomfortable truths about cotton farming – whether conven-

tional or organic – is the precarious socioeconomic position most smallholder farms find themselves in.

In Tanzania and across much of Africa, these farmers often remain trapped in poverty despite years of toil. High input costs, barriers to market access, limited access to formal financial services, volatile global commodity prices, and mounting climate related losses combine to erode their incomes and keep them poor.

Experts argue that given the premium that buyers are willing to pay for certified fibre, organic cotton offers an opportunity for more inclusive growth. Certification also typically comes with added support to the farmer to help them through the transition from conventional cotton to organic varieties.

In Tanzania, schemes such as Cotton made in Africa Organic (CmiA Organic) connect smallholders directly to international textile buyers committed to ethical sourcing. Through these partnerships, farmers gain access to stable contracts and better prices, shielding them from the volatility that plagues conventional cotton markets.

Under the CmiA Organic framework, certified farmers receive a premium of 10 to 20% above the standard farmgate price. This premium is paid through cooperatives and distributed as both cash bonuses and community investments, helping to fund village schools, water wells, and training centres. The model ensures that the benefits of sustainability reach beyond individual households to strengthen entire farming communities.

Moving from conventional to organic cotton is not instantaneous. Farmers

must undergo a three-year transition period during which their fields are monitored to ensure that all synthetic inputs are phased out, and soil health is restored. During this time, yields may temporarily dip, and cotton cannot yet be sold as organic, posing a serious income challenge for families who depend on cotton as their sole cash crop.

To bridge this gap, NGOs and buyers working under the CmiA Organic umbrella in Tanzania provide technical and financial support. Farmers receive training in composting, pest management, and crop diversification, along with access to micro credit and guaranteed purchase agreements. Extension officers visit regularly to guide them through compliance requirements and record keeping.

By the end of the transition, farmers emerge with healthier soils, lower input costs, and access to a lucrative export market that rewards sustainability. Certification thus becomes both a shield against poverty and a lever for empowerment. The Aid by Trade Foundation, which handles CmiA standards, reports that it has certified 9,000 tonnes of Tanzania's organic cotton.

According to the Organic Cotton Accelerator, a global initiative founded in 2016 to strengthen the integrity and

profitability of the organic cotton sector, the success of the model boils down to economics.

"Farmers moving away from synthetic inputs often see yields drop before the soil recovers and organic practices fully take hold. Without price premiums and forward purchase commitments from brands, this period is simply too risky for most smallholders to absorb on their own," it says.

"Income is the starting point. Everything else follows from that. If organic cotton doesn't pay, farmers don't stay with it. It's that straightforward," it adds. "The broader environmental benefits of organic farming are real. Healthier soils, less chemical runoff, lower emissions. But for a smallholder farmer in a low-income context, these don't translate into immediate financial returns."

Climate change poses growing threat

All of Tanzania's organic cotton is rain-fed, a reflection of the limited irrigation infrastructure available to smallholder farmers. While organic certification does not strictly require that cotton to depend solely on rainfall, advocates say the practice helps ease pressure on local water sources and keeps production environmentally sustainable.

Yet this dependence on rain has a

darker side; it exposes farmers to increasingly erratic rainfall patterns driven by climate change.

For generations, farmers have relied on traditional knowledge of the seasons, passed down over generations, to determine when to plant. For the most part this has worked. But those rhythms are now breaking down. Rains that once arrived predictably now come weeks late or in false starts, with brief downpours that trick farmers into early planting followed by long dry spells that kill young seedlings.

The harvest season also brings its own risks. Cotton requires dry conditions for the exposed lint to be picked clean. When unseasonal, torrential rains strike late in the cycle, they can stain or rot the fibre before it reaches the gin, slashing both quality and income.

Beyond the challenge posed by erratic rainfall, rising temperatures combined with sudden droughts deplete moisture in the soil, preventing the development of healthy cotton bolls. Cotton requires stable moisture, particularly during its flowering phase. This yet again illustrates the mounting challenges posed by climate change and the corresponding need to scale up adaptation efforts to cushion smallholder farmers who rely on the crop for their livelihoods. ■

Below: Farm workers harvesting CmiA Organic-certified cotton. (Picture source: Malicky Stanley Boaz for CmiA)



Climate change, especially erratic rainfall, is a threat to cotton production, the foundation of the entire textiles value chain, in Africa. But a range of novel solutions offer ways for the sector to thrive, not just survive, writes **Ben Payton**.

African cotton's resilience against erratic weather

Economists have long argued that the route to prosperity for Africa must involve building a thriving textiles industry. Indeed, Africa has a clear blueprint from South and East Asia that it can follow in using garment manufacturing as a way to create jobs and stimulate industrial growth. (See story on page 100.)

Several African countries have already been relatively successful in establishing themselves as players in the global textile manufacturing industry – the likes of Eswatini, Lesotho and Madagascar have used preferential trade arrangements under the US African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) to become significant garment exporters.

And Africa has a key advantage in

that large parts of the continent have a suitable climate for growing cotton, the key raw material that goes into the t-shirts, jeans and jackets worn around the world. Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad and Mali are among the top African producers, but the ‘white gold’ is grown in a total of 37 African countries, meaning Africa has more cotton-growing countries than any other continent.

However, there are ominous signs that Africa's cotton and textiles ambitions could come unstitched as a result of climate change. Increasingly frequent and more severe droughts are making it more difficult to grow cotton across several of Africa's leading producer countries. Togo, for example, suffered a 66% decline in production between 2019 and

2023, largely due to erratic weather and pest outbreaks.

“Climate change represents a severe and growing challenge for smallholder cotton production in sub-Saharan Africa,” says Alexandra Perschau, head of Standards and Outreach at the non-profit Aid by Trade Foundation.

“Because almost all African cotton is grown using rain-fed agricultural systems, small-scale farmers are uniquely vulnerable to changing weather patterns,” she adds.

Not only is unpredictable rainfall disrupting crop yields, she says, but the changing climate is causing pest behaviour to change, putting African cotton-growers at greater risk of devastating infestations.



With a major El Niño event on the way, and unmistakable signs that longer-term rainfall patterns are becoming less predictable, Africa's cotton-growers face an uncertain future.

Climate impacts

Concern over climate impacts on cotton has been building for several years. According to research commissioned by the multi-stakeholder Cotton 2040 initiative, rising temperatures, shifting rainfall patterns and growing water scarcity will pose a severe threat to half of the world's cotton-growing regions by 2040.

It warns that the growing season is likely to become shorter because of temperature extremes in Mali, Senegal, Burkina Faso and Ghana (although the growing season in some parts of central and southern Africa will become longer).

Worsening droughts will pose major hazards across the Sahel belt, while Egypt and Sudan are projected to receive less than the minimum rainfall required to produce cotton with rain-fed methods.

Conversely, several parts of Africa, including coastal regions in both the west and east of the continent, are expected to receive higher rainfall, increasing the risk of waterlogging that damages cotton production.

Reacting to these findings in 2021, Kai Hughes, then-executive director of the International Cotton Advisory Committee, described the cotton sector as "unprepared for the climate crisis", warning that "many of the pre-existing vulnerabilities and inequalities in its supply chains are likely to be intensified and accelerated."

To irrigate, or not?

Given that the dependence on rain-fed growing methods is increasing the impact of drought in Africa's cotton-producing regions, the obvious solution would appear to be to turn to artificial methods of storing and utilising water.

Koussouwè Kourouféi, president of the Association of African Cotton Producers, a lobby group for smallholder farmers, said last year that rain-fed agriculture was increasingly unsustainable. "Climate change is affecting production, and we believe the solution is to move towards irrigation and grow cotton in the off-season."

The World Bank is also a major advocate for investing in irrigation as a way to support cotton growers and other crop producers in drought-prone countries. Funding for improved irrigation is a key component of a \$215m project announced in March to strengthen agriculture in Burkina Faso, one of Africa's traditional

cotton giants.

A previous programme run by various World Bank agencies along with the local cotton buyer SOFITEX in Burkina Faso reports that it achieved a 23% increase in yields among farmers that received assistance to improve irrigation.

While irrigation has historically relied on major dams that divert rivers, and on diesel-powered pumps, more sustainable solutions are increasingly coming into view. Several companies are working to scale up solar-powered irrigation pumps in Africa, although the upfront cost of this equipment remains problematic.

Yet there is a fierce debate about whether irrigation really is the answer.

The Aid by Trade Foundation runs the Cotton Made in Africa (CmiA) certification scheme, which is designed to link fashion brands with smallholder cotton producers that use sustainable methods. Perschau tells *New African* that artificial irrigation from surface or groundwater sources is "strictly prohibited" under the CmiA.

"This is because operating irrigation pumps leads to high energy costs,

Climate change will pose a severe challenge for cotton in Africa, but the snapshots of success achieved through simple technologies and improved growing methods show that all is not lost.

Below: Alexandra Perschau, Head of Standards & Outreach, Aid by Trade Foundation

Left: A drought-affected cotton field near Banfora, Burkina Faso



depletes aquifers and causes soil salinisation," she says. The ban on irrigation "protects precious water resources," Perschau adds, noting CmiA certified farmers typically use just two litres of water per kilogramme of cotton – an astonishingly low figure compared to the global average of 1,500 to 2,100 litres.

Perschau argues there are better ways for cotton growers to increase the water-holding capacity of the soil. One option, she says, is to use biochar, a charcoal-like substance that boosts soil health. Cover cropping can also help to reduce evaporation, she adds.

"African cotton growers can build resilience against climate change by adopting sustainable and regenerative practices," says Perschau, who points out that using local resources and tapping into local knowledge will also help "reduce dependency on imported fertilisers and pesticides".

Facing the future

The International Trade Centre, a Geneva-based multilateral agency, is another advocate of using biochar as a climate-friendly solution to boost cotton yields.

A spokesperson for the ITC told *New African* that it had seen "astounding results" from a programme in Tanzania and Zambia, in which farmers use the stalks from cotton plants – traditionally seen as a waste product that is burned after harvesting – to produce biochar.

"The biochar reduces soil acidity and also keeps moisture in the soil longer. Together with the natural fertiliser of *bokashi*, the pilot farmers in both countries almost doubled their yields, with some even tripling their productivity. Applied country-wide, that could change the entire cotton sector and as such, the attractiveness for textile investments."

The spokesperson added that the low environmental footprint of Africa's cotton could become a "competitive advantage" that will help the continent build its textiles sector.

While there is no doubt that climate change will pose a severe challenge for cotton in Africa, the snapshots of success achieved through simple technologies and improved growing methods show that all is not lost.

Indeed, despite challenges from climate change in almost all major cotton-producing countries, the UN's Food and Agricultural Organisation projects that yields in 2035 will be 15% higher than today. This optimistic view is based on new technologies, including smart irrigation systems to help manage water use, as well as using drones and satellites that enable improved monitoring of plant health. ■

How can Africa compete in the global cotton-based market currently dominated by Asia, Europe and America? Can textiles made in Africa with distinctive continental flavouring find their own niche in the billion-dollar industry? **Neil Ford** has been finding out.

Africa's opportunity to turn cotton fibre into fashion

The cotton sector is one of Africa's most important links to the global economy. Production from Benin, Burkina Faso and Mali has long been shipped to spinning mills in Bangladesh, garment factories in Asia, and European and North American fashion houses. Yet the continent remains far more significant as a producer and exporter of raw fibre than as a manufacturer of the clothes that ultimately give cotton most of its value. This imbalance is finally now attracting much greater attention.

Africa has the land, labour, agricultural expertise and growing consumer markets needed to expand cotton production and develop a larger textile and apparel industry.

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) provides the framework for a single continental market of 1.4bn people and growing, while global fashion companies are increasingly looking to diversify their sourcing beyond established Asian manufacturing centres. The opportunities are enormous but turning them into reality is far from straightforward.

The global cotton market is dominated by a relatively small group of producers and buyers. The International Cotton Advisory Committee (ICAC) forecasts global cotton production of about 26mt of lint in the 2025–26 season, of which 9.7mt will be traded internationally.

China, India, Brazil, the US and Pakistan are among the industry's most influential national players, combining large-scale production with substantial processing capacity. Africa's collective output is much smaller, but its role in global trade is significant because many of its major cotton-producing countries export most of the lint they produce rather

than processing it domestically.

The continent's leading producers are in West and Central Africa. According to US Department of Agriculture projections for 2025–26, Mali and Benin are neck-and-neck as Africa's leading cotton producer, each with expected output of about 261,000t of lint. Cameroon is forecast to produce 142,000t, with Burkina Faso at roughly 133,000t and Côte d'Ivoire at 121,000t.

Other significant producers include Tanzania, Nigeria, Egypt and Zimbabwe, although their output is considerably below that of the leading West African producers. These figures may differ from national government statistics, which often refer to seed cotton, the raw crop before processing, rather than lint production volumes.

Africa could increase its share of global cotton production, but the larger economic prize would come from increasing the proportion of African cotton that is spun, woven, dyed and manufactured on the continent.

Egypt occupies a particularly important position because of the excellent international reputation of its long-staple cotton, while Ethiopia has ambitions to expand both cotton production and textile manufacturing. The precise rankings change from one season to another because cotton output is highly sensitive to rainfall, pests and the availability of inputs.

Rather than treating Africa as a single cotton market, it is more useful to see it as a collection of regional production systems. Cotton is not only important in terms of generating

foreign exchange export revenues. It also provides rural employment and government revenue, while supporting a supply chain encompassing seed and fertiliser producers, logistics companies, ginners, traders and financial institutions.

In 2003, Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad and Mali formed the Cotton-4 coalition to campaign for a fairer global trading environment and oppose the subsidies given to cotton farmers in wealthy nations. Yet Africa's position remains particularly weak because much of its cotton leaves the continent before it has passed through the most valuable stages of the supply chain.

Farmers grow and harvest the fibre, companies gin it, and exporters ship it overseas. The cotton may then be spun into yarn, woven or knitted into fabric, dyed, cut and sewn into garments before reaching retailers. The greatest concentration of these activities remains in Asia, where textile and garment manufacturers benefit from established industrial clusters, reliable infrastructure and economies of scale.

The role of African producers is largely restricted to the first part of this equation, while capturing relatively little of the value created in the latter stages. African producers could increase yields, improve seed quality and strengthen support for farmers, but much greater gains are likely to come from building supply chains.

Cotton cultivation is overwhelmingly driven by millions of local smallholder farmers working on small family plots rather than massive corporate plantations.

However, the industry in most of West Africa is organised by powerful national cotton companies, although their roles vary from country to country. Mali's Compagnie Malienne pour le Développement des Textiles (CMDT)



plays a central role across the sector, while Burkina Faso's Sofitex is a major player in cotton production and ginning.

In more liberalised African markets, international commodity traders such as Olam Agri are among the companies active in cotton supply chains. UK-based Plexus Cotton is another significant private-sector player in African cotton, with activities spanning cotton sourcing, ginning and trading in parts of eastern and southern Africa.

Severe global competition

A particularly clear case study of both the opportunities and challenges on offer is provided by Benin. The country exported \$500.9m of uncombed cotton in 2024, according to World Bank data, of which \$480.4m was exported to Bangladesh, one of the world's biggest garment producers.

To reduce this dependence on the export of raw cotton, the government of Benin is attempting to promote the creation of a domestic 'farm-to-fashion' value chain, including at the Glo-Djigbé Industrial Zone (GDIZ – pictured below), which it launched alongside Arise IIP in 2020. (See story on page 90.) The big test will be whether such facilities can attract international buyers and remain competitive against established Asian manufacturing centres.

The logic is straightforward. A cotton farmer earns money by selling raw fibre, but a finished garment embodies many additional stages of economic activity.

Spinning, weaving and knitting require machinery and skilled technicians. Dyeing and finishing require chemicals, water management and quality control, while designers, pattern makers, cutters and sewing-machine operators are all involved in garment production. Packaging, branding, transport and retail create still more jobs.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle is that textile production is highly competitive and Africa must compete with countries that have spent decades building industrial ecosystems, such as Bangladesh, China, India, Vietnam, Pakistan and Turkey. The continent therefore needs reliable power supplies, competitive finance and skilled labour to go alongside the cotton cultivation and, in some cases, modern ports that it already possesses.

Distinctively African

There is also an opportunity for Africa to build more distinctive fashion economies, rather than more low-cost manufacturing centres. African designers are already influencing international fashion, while local brands are tapping into traditional craftsmanship and contemporary design. If these creative industries can be connected to domestic cotton production and textile manufacturing, the continent could capture value at both ends of the chain.

However, there is another trend that could support the development of African cotton supply chains. Consumers and brands face increasing pressure to understand where fibres originate,

how garments are produced and what environmental and social impacts are associated with manufacturing. African cotton could benefit from this shift if producers can demonstrate credible traceability and sustainability.

Focusing on intra-African supply chains would support Africa's growing fashion sector, including in Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, Kenya, Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal. The continent has a large and growing community of designers, artisans and independent clothing brands, many of which draw on local textiles, patterns and cultural traditions. Designers provide demand for distinctive fabrics and finished products, while manufacturers can give designers access to reliable local production. (See page 102.)

A country with its own spinning, weaving and garment industries has greater opportunities to diversify its customer bases. It can sell yarn to one market, fabric to another and finished garments to a third. That flexibility does not eliminate commodity-price risk, but it can reduce dependence on a single export channel.

The growth potential is considerable but progress should be measured in terms of value captured rather than tonnes harvested. Africa could increase its share of global cotton production, but the larger economic prize would come from increasing the proportion of African cotton that is spun, woven, dyed and manufactured within the continent. Given the 26mt a year scale of the market, Africa does not need to dominate that market to benefit from it. ■



Africa's fashion designers are increasingly headlining fashion weeks across the world. Instead of following the latest trends, they have been forging their own paths, based on the continent's rich heritage of producing fabrics and styles that are at once contemporary and yet deeply cultural. **Gail Collins** reports.

Africa's designers celebrate continent's rich heritage

To a fashion designer, material is not simply the fabric of a garment, it is the foundation and soul of their ultimate vision. A designer understands that a textile will inspire the form, construction and the experiences of the person who finally wears it. Most of us have items of clothing that make us feel particularly good – the fit, the feel, the flow, the comfort – all endorsements of a good designer and a fabric that tells a tale.

Now, African designers of a new generation are not just clothing us – they are fuelling a textile revolution that combines both ethical production and exploration of a rich cultural diversity.

Many African designers are familiar with artisan fabrics whose qualities cannot be replicated on an industrial scale. In 1960, the Nigerian designer, Shade Thomas-Fahm, returned from her studies at London's St Martin's School of Art and began championing traditional fabrics such as *aso-oke*, a striking, heavy, handwoven cloth; and *adire*, a centuries-old hand-dyed fabric, both originating from the Yoruba people of southwestern Niger.

She went on to mentor and inspire generations of African designers who, following in her footsteps, continue to revive ancient crafts and traditions in our modern world.

According to the United Nations University Centre for Policy Research (UNU-CPR), the clothing industry accounts for around 2% of the world's GDP – but the backlash is that it is also estimated to generate 10% of global pollution.

Africa is marching to a different beat of the drum and is increasingly positioning itself as a leader around the globe in responsible fashion, proving that harmony can be found between modern culture, tradition and ethical

responsibility.

Awa Meité, based in Bamako, Mali has for a long time been ahead of the game. Her artistic talents encompass filmmaking, painting, jewellery and fashion design and she has been presenting Mali's heritage since founding her Routes du Sur organisation in 1988, using a network of artisans across the country to provide the materials for her stunning handmade creations.



In 2007 she established the Daoula Initiative with the aim of bucking the trend of Mali's raw cotton being exported rather than processed locally, and her garments are wholly produced in Mali in alliance with local artisans and seamstresses, showcasing the exceptional qualities of traditionally dyed and woven cotton in modern couture.

Today, rather than concentrate on growth, she allows her collections, under the banner of Awa Meité Design, to organically expand, using simple designs that reflect her heritage in an under-

stated manner, allowing the wearer to sense their own story.

For more than a decade, Meité's work has traversed African borders. Her work has been lauded in the international press and appeared on catwalks from Lagos to Paris. Last year she achieved a significant milestone with an appearance at Shanghai Fashion Week, on a continent where the textile industry faces significant water pollution, carbon emissions and waste issues. Lessons to be learned from Africa perhaps?

Gold standard

In Nigeria, husband and wife team, Oromoa Cookey-Gam and Osione Itegbogbo have pulled their combined expertise together to form THIS IS US, a truly 'Made in Nigeria' brand of contemporary clothing and home textiles.

Curiosity and love for their country led them to Funtua in Katsina State, a place where around 60% of Nigeria's cotton is harvested.

Funtua cotton is graced with being a long-staple fibre cotton, the gold standard of cottons, producing a fabric that is smoother, feels more luxurious and is stronger and more resistant than its short-staple cousin.

Ninety-nine percent of THIS IS US products are made from Funtua cotton. Remaining true to their ethos of minimum waste, leftover fabric is used for merchandise such as patchwork designs and the Funtua Tote bag. The process from field to fabric takes place within an 80km radius, supporting the local economy and employment as well as leaving only a small carbon footprint.

But their journey does not stop in Funtua. 150km to the east lies the ancient city of Kanu, where for more than 500 years the Kofar Mata Dye Pits have been at the heart of West Africa's traditional dyeing process. The pits represent



Below and opposite: Models wearing
creations by the Malian designer
Awa Meité walk the runway at Lagos
Fashion Week 2024

Below: IMPRINT from
South Africa at the Africa
Reimagined fashion show,
held during Shanghai
Fashion Week 2025

Right: Mantsho from South
Africa at Africa Reimagined





centuries of the local Hausa people's tradition, knowledge and craftsmanship. They have survived insurrection, declining visitor numbers and the area's economic downfalls and today proudly dye the Funtua cotton for THIS IS US, using the age-old skill of fermenting leaves from the *Indigofera tinctoria* plant to create the stunning indigo colours themed throughout the brand.

A recent addition to this expertise has been driven by Cookey-Gam and Iteboje, who have introduced cassava paste into the dyeing process, allowing them to give precise patterns to their designs in addition to the signature natural and random patterns obtained from the original indigo tie and dye techniques.

"The tech industry in Nigeria attracts a lot of capital, which drives growth," Iteboje says. "The same needs to happen in fashion. With more investment, people can improve their skills, buy better equipment, and strengthen production processes. Investment is key to solving many of the challenges in the industry."

Travelling eastward across the continent, we find Ethiopian self-taught designer and trained child psychologist, Fikirte Addis, building on the humble

beginnings of a much-loved hobby at school to launch her own label, Yefikir Design (meaning 'The Love Design') in 2009. With her ethos of staying local and using hand-woven traditional Ethiopian cotton, she brought longstanding culture to high-end chic.

She has successfully brought traditional Ethiopian textiles into modern daily life, eschewing industrial machines for traditional hand looms and choosing heritage and sustainability over larger-scale production, providing local weavers and embroiderers with fair and reliable wages and championing something she also holds close to her heart – a child-free labour workforce.

She has stated: "It is important for me not to lose the connection I have to my culture, just giving it a modern twist and bringing it to the international fashion arena. The main fabrics used in all my designs are handmade cotton and the designs are to give comfort with style."

Her work also incorporates the distinctive Ethiopian *tibib* (meaning 'wisdom' or 'love') geometric and decorative borders that embed a deep symbolic visual language into traditional Ethiopian garments.

Following in her wake, Ethiopian designer Mastewal Alemu came onto the scene in Addis Ababa in 2021, having been a fashion design lecturer. Her focus on zero waste, sustainability and handwoven cultural design has continued to champion the use of artisan cotton. Her work has appeared globally in fashion weeks from Moscow to Milan, culminating in her representation of Ethiopia at this year's Africa Fashion Week London.

African fashion has slowly taken on a life of its own, ever-increasing in its appearance on the global stage and now in a world racked by eco-guilt, the voices and ethos of those designers possessing the vision to change how we dress are being listened to.

In an industry driven by fast disposable fashion, Africa has an ace up its sleeve. It has always revealed stories, celebrated culture and supported communities in its fashion and with today's designers choosing the long road instead of the short one, I believe Africa is in a prime position to continue its odyssey into a sustainable, meaningful and proud fashionable future with a little help, of course, from its governments and industry pioneers. ■

There is a long-running myth that Africans did not have clothes until the arrival of Arabs and later, colonisation. In fact, Africans have made their own unique clothing since time immemorial. From Malian mud cloths, which they say are made of the earth, the river and the sun, to the famous red Maasai *shuka*, clothes across the continent carry with them deep and complex histories, both local and global. **Jamila Versi** takes a deeper look at the story behind Ugandan bark cloth and speaks to some experts working with the material today.

The cloth made from the Tree of Life

Scrolling online, you come across a cute brown polka-dot mini-dress. On Shein.com, you can buy it from China and have it shipped to your home for just £6.99. In the world of fast fashion, companies such as Shein pride themselves on speed, moving from design to production in as little as 10 days. The app updates daily with between 2,000 and 10,000 new designs.

But that quick turnaround comes at a cost. According to Earth.org, an NGO, fast fashion is the second-biggest consumer of water and is responsible for 10% of global carbon emissions – more than international flights and maritime shipping combined. The clothes have an equally short lifespan: around 85% of fast-fashion textiles end up in landfill each year.

Much of this discarded clothing is shipped around the world. Ghana has become known as ‘fast fashion’s dumping ground’, with around 15m discarded garments arriving each week. In colloquial terms, they are called *obroni wawu* – ‘dead white man’s clothes’.

The garments are sent to local markets, but around 40% are unusable on arrival because of tears, stains or other damage. Clothing piles up on beaches, creating bleak mounds of waste.

The speed of production has a human cost, too. Investigations into fast-fashion supply chains have reported workers doing up to 17 hours a day and earning as little as £1 an hour.

Fast fashion is built around speed: clothes are designed quickly, produced quickly and discarded quickly. But what



Top: Bark being removed from a tree to begin the transformation process

Above: Creatives from Mekeke Designs inspecting bark cloth

might fashion look like if materials were designed not to exhaust the landscape, but to regenerate it? In Uganda, one ancient textile tradition offers a radically different model.

A life-giving tree

Sitting across from me, José Hendo, a Ugandan-born British designer, cuts an impressive figure. With a bright pink afro, she wears what looks like leather cloth decorated with metal badges around her neck. But this, she explains, is not leather. It is *olubugo* – terracotta-coloured bark cloth, traditionally made in Uganda. The craft is considered one of the world’s oldest textile techniques, and was inscribed in UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2008.

The Mutuba tree, also known as *Ficus natalensis*, grows in tropical regions and has a long cultural history in Uganda, particularly among the Buganda people. The tree stores water during the rainy season and releases it into the surrounding soil during the dry season, “so all the plants around it thrive”, says Hendo.

“So, you knew that if you had that tree in your gardens, you had food all year round. It’s like a life source, a life-giver – it nourished everything around it, not just the people – the animals as well. And when you scrape bark off the tree, the chickens and the hens and the goats and sheep come and start eating it – because they know they benefit from it,” says Hendo.

The tree’s properties may extend even further. A recent study published in the



Photos: Jamie House for Mekele Designs

Above: Dyed bark cloth fabrics hanging up to dry

Journal of Applied Microbiology found that Ugandan bark cloth could inhibit the growth of MRSA – an infection caused by bacteria resistant to many antibiotics – by as much as 99%.

Transforming bark into cloth is a slow process, knowledge of which has been passed down orally for generations. During the rainy season, the bark is carefully removed; incisions are made around the inner bark at the top and bottom of the tree before it is cut vertically and stripped off the tree.

The bark is then boiled, sometimes using solar stoves, for around 20 minutes before being beaten repeatedly with specially designed mallets. The rhythmic, soothing sound echoes through the forest as the bark stretches and softens.

The trees frequently grow beside banana trees, whose leaves are wrapped around the Mutuba tree to protect it as the bark regenerates. It grows back within about nine months. With trees often living between 60 and 100 years, a single tree can produce up to 200m² of bark in its lifetime.

“They pound it and it stretches and stretches and stretches... The knowledge transmitted from generation to generation was that of a father, teaching his son. This tradition has been in the family I work with for more than 350 years, passed from father to son,” says Hondo.

Traditionally, bark cloth has been used in many forms: as royal regalia, for bedding (particularly useful against mosquitoes), burial shrouds, and room dividers.

Hondo explains: “So, imagine you have the cloth that kind of was the fabric of everything in society. If you wanted to buy a cow, you fetched the cloth and you got a cow. And it could be (and still is) used for burial shrouds, bride prices, bridal dresses...”

For Hendo, these uses reflect the deeper significance of the tree. “I don’t want to use the word sacred because it detracts from the practical uses of the tree.”

Ugandan bark cloth began to fall out of fashion as cotton was introduced through Arab trade routes and European textiles became increasingly dominant during the colonial period. But the tradition has survived – Hendo is not the only artist reclaiming the material.

I also sat down with Lesli Robertson and Pamela Kyagera of Mekeka Designs, who use nature-based materials for their products. Like Hendo, they are finding new uses for traditional bark cloth. One challenge they face is the generational divide surrounding the material.



Above: A creation by the Uganda-born designer, José Hendo

Top right: Cloth production involves beating softened bark with mallets to stretch and flatten it into sheets



Traditional craftsmanship, modern flair

At Africa Fashion Week 2026 in Sandton, South Africa, Botswanan designer Keabetswe Mogatusi's 'Technicolour Dreamcoat' glows beneath the bright lights of the runway. An eye-catching piece with bright geometric patterns, its design draws on traditional African craftsmanship, with a modern flair.

The statement coat is part of Mogatusi's Afro-Futurist collection and combines Malian fabrics, hemp-cotton blends and hand-painted textiles, the majority of which are sourced from within Africa. It represents a growing movement among designers to place African materials and craftsmanship at the centre of global fashion.

Across the continent, this movement is drawing renewed attention to Africa's rich textile heritage. From Nigeria's handwoven *aso-oke* and indigo-dyed *adire* to Burkina Faso's *faso dan fani*, to Uganda's bark cloth, traditional fabrics are being reimagined for modern consumers and runways around the world.

Nowhere is this more visible than in Burkina Faso, where *faso dan fani* (a handwoven cotton cloth once at risk of being crowded out by cheaper imports) has become both a fashion statement and an act of economic defiance.

Woven in narrow strips on traditional looms, using cotton grown, spun and dyed within the country, the fabric carries a symbolism that predates its current popularity on the runway. In the 1980s, it was championed by revolutionary leaders as a mark of national self-sufficiency. Designers like François Yaméogo have since used it to create the contemporary silhouettes their models wear, tailoring it into jackets, blouses and skirts.

In Nigeria, the shift is less about re-

viving a single fabric than rethinking how designers source their materials. Labels such as Onalaja and Emmy Kasbit are building direct relationships with weavers producing *aso-oke* and *adire*, transforming the perception of these textiles from ceremonial cloth into daily wear.

That appetite has already reached high fashion. Lisa Folawiyo's Ankara pieces have appeared on international red carpets and in global fashion magazines, showing that local appeal and luxury can coexist.

Her work, alongside similar collections like Mogatusi's, argues for a version of African fashion where the raw material's origin isn't a footnote, or something to be ignored, but rather the main selling point.

Dr George Elombi, the President and Chairman of Afreximbank, said that within 15 to 20 years, Africa should exit the raw cotton export business entirely, moving fully into textile and clothing exports instead.

If Afreximbank's 20-year vision holds firm, the use of cotton in African-made clothing such as Mogatusi's 'Technicolour Dreamcoat' will be the norm, rather than the exception.

The Bank's backing could connect what are now two different sides of the same coin on the continent – industrial-scale clothing manufacturing and heritage revival weaving, such as that involving *faso dan fani*.

Nevertheless, the goal is the same: to keep the financial and heritage value of the plant, and the clothes it becomes, on the same soil where it is grown.

Emily Innes-Whitehouse

"The younger generation fear bark cloth a lot. They can't even come near it. They associate it with dead bodies and then, witchcraft," says Kyagera, Operations Manager and Founding Partner.

But those perceptions often change when young people see how Mekeka Designs is reinventing the material.

"When they see what we've done, they're mesmerised. They wouldn't imagine that it can come out like that. For instance, we add banana silk, which is another indigenous textile we use. And when they see these combinations, they are entranced. The young artists have been very, very much encouraged."

Moving beyond fashion

For both Hendo and Mekeka Designs, working with bark cloth goes beyond the material itself. Whether Hendo is fashioning it into intricate garments or Mekeka is combining it with traditional materials such as raffia, made from palm fibres, to create elaborate wall pieces, sustainability sits at the centre of their practice.

Mekeka collaborates with a tree farmers' organisation for whom bark cloth revitalisation is also tied to community farming and food security.

It is about "really looking at the Mutuba tree as a centre of a polyculture farming practice," says Lesli Robertson, Creative Director and Founding Partner at Mekeka. "Because the Mutuba tree is at the centre, you get five or six different types of foods that can grow in and around the tree's canopy – in addition to all the different uses of this one tree."

The group is also working to geolocate trees and make the bark cloth supply chain more transparent. "We want people to be able to use the technology and say, 'I know where this was sourced, I understand the environmental benefits of using it – there's the tree that this came from, and there's the farmer that made it'."

For Hendo, everything revolves around sustainability. Her project, Bark to the Roots, has launched a campaign to plant one million Mutuba trees while working with communities to ensure the practice of making bark cloth does not disappear.

"I use bark cloth as my ambassador for sustainability," she tells me excitedly. "The tree doesn't die to give you the cloth or all the [other] things the tree gives. As a sustainable designer and artist, when I found this, I was home! I knew the battle was won because I had the weapon, I had the tool to work with to instigate the change I thought needed to happen." ■

By Clayton Goodwin

Reflecting on the UK's long, hot summer, **Clayton Goodwin** finds a welcome new era of racial harmony mixed with right-wing bile. Which will prevail?

Searching for London's soul



With so many African-heritage athletes in Britain's team at the Games, the public was made aware of the integrity of the African diaspora within the national community.

Syndrome, and their carers. They were not shunned as they would have been not long ago, but welcomed and brought into the conversation. The temper of a community can be judged by how it treats its disadvantaged.

On the beach and in the amusement park, African and European day-trippers mingled freely without friction. Muslim women in conspicuous black veils helped their children onto the attractions, sitting next to their Christian, and other, counterparts, and then, without let or hindrance, joined the other mothers chatting together.

Groups of school-children of all known ethnic origins engaged in chasing, running and catching activities with-

out distinction of difference. Right before us, a couple of young girls, Black and White, gleefully played the 'pat-a-cake' hand-game, and they were not alone.

Could this really be Southend in Essex – a county synonymous with right-wing, even racist sentiment, where since the time of Margaret Thatcher the terms 'Essex Man' and 'Essex Girl' had come to define a specific type of person?

Pouring bile

Only a few miles along the coast is Clacton-on-Sea, the Parliamentary seat of Nigel Farage, the politician mostly held responsible for the surge of threatening right-wing influence since Brexit. This is the world into which media, 'influencers' (whatever they are) and politicians seeking headlines and soundbites release their bile to pollute the air.

We didn't see, at Southend, any sign of the small boats bringing in illegal immigrants said to bespeckle the East Coast. It isn't only here, however, that the truth has been traduced.

Never in my long life have I known London to be as socially harmonious – of course, there are the inevitable problems that beset every large city – as it has been under the leadership of Mayor Sadiq Khan, in spite of the mud-slinging and threats to his personal safety from a 'certain section' of society – and, by the way, I am not usually a supporter of his party.

The country, too, has been



united with itself and the wider world this summer in its support of and interest in the Commonwealth Games, which took place in Glasgow, and football's World Cup.

Through the Games, the British public has been made aware of the significance of Africa, and, with so many African-heritage athletes in the Great Britain (and

London and, indeed, the whole of the United Kingdom has been hot this summer. Very hot. Those of sufficient memory look back to 1976 for comparison – a whole half-century before.

It's not too difficult, too, to sense a warming of the mood of the people after the frosty blight in relationships which preceded, and then followed, the country's decision to quit the European Union a decade ago.

This morning I looked out onto the small patch of earth forming our garden, and saw butterflies and bees flitting among the flowers. It gave me some understanding of how the poet Robert Browning felt when he wrote *God's in his heaven – all's right with the world*. The ambience was enough to warm even my heart, chilled by recent ominous social and national trends.

A few days ago my wife and myself took a trip with her Caribbean seniors group to Southend, a popular, traditional coastal resort, which I remember well from childhood excursions. This wasn't the Southend of old, however. The present friendly diversity, and inclusiveness, was striking from the moment we set foot there, and was as integral to the nature of the place as the starlings scurrying along the sea-shore in search of scraps of food.

At the café where we stopped for a belated breakfast, we were joined by a group of youths with various disabilities, including Down's

Northern Ireland) team, of the integrity of the African diaspora within the national community.

While Nigerians led the African nations in athletics honours, there were first-ever medals for Rwanda and Gabon (and Tuvalu), showing how the scope of the Commonwealth itself is expanding. It cannot be mere coincidence that calls for the dissolution of the Commonwealth are now muted.

baller Eusebio set the football World Cup afire, boxer Muhammad Ali defended his world heavyweight championship twice, and Garfield Sobers produced one of the most outstanding individual cricket all-round performances ever to lead West Indies on their triumphant tour. Could there have been a greater gathering of sporting genius of African heritage, or, come to that, of any heritage, in one place at any one time?

The great Pélé, too, was present, ready to play, but was waylaid by injury sustained from persistent fouling by his opponents.

A gathering of greats

Poignantly, Sobers passed away, a few days short of what would have been his 90th birthday, while the World Cup was in progress, and was granted a State Funeral in Barbados, his homeland.

Sobers is regarded as the greatest cricketer ever to have played the game because of his excellence with the bat, the ball, and in the field. With his rise to this pre-eminence from humble circumstances, having lost his father in war-time action as a child, and his achievements matched by modesty and good humour, he has served as an example and inspiration for youngsters of similarly disadvantaged backgrounds in countries far removed from the Caribbean (as well as those nearer home). When he passed, sports fans everywhere felt they had lost a friend, as well as a mentor and master.

Earlier, as this summer started, our family had a party to celebrate my wife's 80th birthday, and my 50th year in full-time journalism. It took place in Bexleyheath on the outskirts of London and was held on the Conservative association premises, put on by people who are Liberal Democrats, and the guests included the Labour Mayor of Gravesend. A visiting taxi-driver remarked he had never seen such a diverse gathering – in ethnicity, age and political opinion.

Bexleyheath – remember that name. Here a generation ago the local police inspector resigned to become an agent/candidate of the ultra-right, and racist, British National Party, whose national headquarters were then just a short distance away. It is close, too, to where Stephen Lawrence was murdered and our own mixed-race, then teenage son suffered a hor-

rendous racist attack.

Which is the real London? The real UK? Does it have the harmony and diversity we witnessed in former hotspots of intolerance, or is it the viciously nasty place that is still portrayed by those who wish our values ill?

To some extent it depends on the example set by the country's leader – though 'leader' is hardly appropriate for those who have held office over the last decade. Two years ago Keir Starmer won a sweeping electoral victory, a mandate for change and a more progressive attitude, which he threw away immediately by aping the policies of right-wing extremism. For whatever reason he did that, he deserved to fail, and did.

As for the new man in charge, Andy Burnham, only time will tell. At least he has started his innings batting on the front foot and, unlike his predecessor, he seems to enjoy the job.

In the new era, will people still be able to go on a break and enjoy a beach-side game with little children of contrasting ethnic backgrounds, or share in the fairground chat with mothers of different religions and cultures? Will the country still welcome the disadvantaged into its midst, support major sporting occasions in which all participate, and encourage a diversity of ethnicity, age and political opinion – or will the haters, the bigots and the downright liars have their way again?

At the end of *Dr Faustus*, Christopher Marlowe's most famous play, the eponymous character, facing damnation, calls out to his paramour: "Come, Helen, come – give me my soul again". And so should we. I think I know where that soul can be found. It lies not within the corridors of power or the mendacious media but among people doing the ordinary things of life ... in cafes, on the beaches, during social occasions, and at the great sports events. We have seen it there this hot, hot summer, and, believe me, it works. ■



Incidentally, it is a pleasure to notice that Jeanette Kwakye, the former sprinter, is now one of the country's most accomplished television sports commentators.

Sport has always brought the country together. It's 60 years since, in 1966, we were graced by the presence in the same months of three all-time sporting greats – foot-

Above: London's Trafalgar Square. According to our columnist, social harmony has improved in the capital under the leadership of Mayor Sadiq Khan



Everybody is talking about the South African TV series *The Polygamist*, which has had social media buzzing with controversy and passionate discussion. But what has made this Netflix title such a massive global hit? **Akumbu Uche** digs deeper.

Why is everybody talking about *The Polygamist*?

Shortly after *The Polygamist*, the 22-episode steamy South African telenovela about a wealthy businessman whose lust leads to his downfall, premiered on Netflix on 12 June 2026, it quickly gained a worldwide following and climbed the ranks of the platform's global top 10 list.

In Africa, Hollywood (as well as Bollywood) films and TV shows do better in attracting continental audiences than indigenous African content. The latter does have dedicated audiences in various countries – Nollywood is one of the biggest producers in West Africa; South Africa has a massive and well-developed film and TV industry; North Africa, especially Egypt, produces series that are watched daily by millions throughout the regions; and East Africa has smaller industries in Kenya and Tanzania. However, audiences for these products tend to be confined to the regions where they are based and rarely, if ever, does a product find an audience outside its language and cultural sphere.

Over the years, Netflix has invested heavily in producing 'ethnic' series and films, for example in Hindi, Korean, Spanish, Japanese, French, Italian, Tamil, Turkish and other languages. The aim has been to increase subscriptions in those regions and perhaps discover global hits.

Some of these series, such as the Spanish *Money Heist*, the Korean *Squid Game*, India's *Sacred Games*, etc., went on to become huge international hits. But the African output hardly moved the needle. That was until the Zulu-language *The Polygamist* broke through the language barrier, accruing a 16.5m global audience by the end of June, according to the first of Netflix's 2026 biannual reports.

Currently, it still dominates the

streaming platform's global top 10 ranking, and judging from records on the independent data tracking site, 'What's On Netflix', it has since amassed a total of 266.6m viewing hours and 27.6m completed views.

The show's success at home in South Africa and in Nigeria and Kenya, fellow regional powerhouses where it earned #1 spots, is to be expected but it has also been a hit as far afield as the Caribbean and Latin American markets, notching up high viewing figures in Argentina, the Bahamas, Bolivia, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Salvador, and Venezuela.

France 24 has called it "an example of an African story resonating beyond the continent" while for the *Guardian UK*, it is the "first African smash hit of the streaming age".

The series has also acquired fans in Hollywood, with celebrities like Taraji P. Henson, Sherri Shepherd, and Joe Jonas (who shares a name with the titular character) taking to social media to share their thoughts and impressions.

Status-signifying position

The television series is an adaptation of the 2012 novel by Zimbabwean author Sue Nyathi. Transposed from its original Bulawayo setting to Johannesburg, the plot centres around Jonasi Gomora (pictured opposite), who begins an affair with Matipa, an ambitious subordinate from work, just as he welcomes the birth of his third child with Joyce, his long-suffering wife – who was at his side long before he made his first million rand.

The more entrenched Matipa becomes in his life, the more his relationship with Joyce deteriorates and

soon, both women are fighting for the status-signifying position of the official Mrs Gomora.

Add to this dysfunction, the discovery of a secret third (but second, chronologically) wife, Essie, who has been posing as Jonasi's sister-in-law. As if that wasn't messy enough, Jonasi steps into the role of sugar daddy to Lindani, his daughter's best friend, whom he has known since she was eight years old.

With the series spawning wild reaction and analysis videos on Youtube and TikTok, lead screenwriter Busisiwe Zwane has called the response to the show "overwhelming".

But long before *The Polygamist* hit the screens, there were signs that it was geared to make a big impression. In the build-up to the show's premiere, Netflix's marketing department went into overdrive, inundating social media platforms like X and YouTube with promotional tweets and multiple trailers to prime television viewers.

Releasing all the episodes in one fell swoop was another strategic decision that made it easy to binge-watch.

So what is it about *The Polygamist* that has captured the hearts and minds of audiences worldwide?

First, the plotting follows the time-tested soap opera formula of sex, surprise, and scandal. The Gomora family is upper class, which plays into the fascination people have for watching the flawed and messy lives of the rich and famous.

In addition, the characters' unapologetic display of wealth is at odds with stereotypical portrayals of poor and starving Africans in Western media, and presents an alternative narrative that many non-African viewers may be encountering for the first time. As the renowned actress and talkshow host Sherri Shepherd explained to her



Instagram followers, “I thought *Crazy Rich Asians* was something, but crazy rich Africans is a whole other level.”

In the wake of recent xenophobic attacks against Black African foreigners, South Africa has been in the news for all the wrong reasons. With the show’s release coinciding with this moment, it offers a countering, positive view of the country.

Interestingly, the creative team behind the project shows how much embracing pan-Africanism stands to benefit the South African creative economy. Nyathi, the author whose novel the series is adapted from, is from Zimbabwe, while the showrunner, Akin Omotoso is of Nigerian heritage. (See page 116.)

The show’s preoccupation with polygamy and its accompanying drama is another key part of its appeal. We might live in the age of open relationships and polyamory, yet in many countries around the world, polygamy is illegal. On the other hand, polygamy is a commonplace cultural practice in many parts of Africa, and is legal in South Africa, where the series is set.

Cultural underpinnings?

Jacob Zuma, former President of South Africa, is a noted polygamist. Married six times, he had four concurrent wives during his tenure, and two of his daughters, Gugu Zuma-Ncube and Thuli Zuma, are credited as executive producers on the show, with a third, Nkosazana Zuma-Mncube,

listed as a screenwriter.

There are times when the show’s portrayal of the ins and outs of such a marriage – the logistics of managing multiple households and emotional tensions, and the effects it has on the family – can feel like watching a documentary or reality show.

The Polygamist is not just another popular show; it is a watershed moment for South African TV, and proof of how far good-quality African storytelling can travel.

There has been controversy about whether Jonasi is a polygamist in the traditional sense of the word, something conducted with cultural requirements and expectations in mind, or whether he is a philanderer, driven by base appetites. His name hints at the Biblical Sodom and Gomorrah, which has become a metaphor for licentious behaviour.

In a modern world different from the times that necessitated them, traditional cultural practices can be abused and there exist polygamists who, like Jonasi, embrace the institution as a cover for their selfishness, greed, lust, and possibly, sex addiction.

While it would be easy to dismiss

The Polygamist as pure escapist fun, the show takes itself seriously. Peel back the scenes depicting unrestrained emotional displays, fighting and wig-snatching, and you get a show weaving in critical discussions about gender-based violence, family trauma and HIV, which is rampant in South Africa.

South African actors S’dumo Mtshali and Gugu Gumede not only deliver strong performances as Jonasi and Joyce Gomora, they also do a good job shouldering the weight of the entire series.

Mtshali has come a long way, from winning the acting competition show *Class Act* in 2010 to taking on a succession of leading roles. In the hands of a less skilful actor, his part could have easily devolved into a caricature of a TV villain, but Mtshali’s Jonasi is equal parts charming and manipulative, and even as viewers love to hate him, it’s easy for them to identify with the women in his life, who despite their disappointments still find him irresistible.

Gugu Gumede first came to prominence through a role in the long-running soap opera, *Generations*. Her Joyce is a steely but emotionally vulnerable first wife who is intent on saving her marriage, if only to keep up appearances, but Jonasi’s behaviour tests her limits.

While *The Polygamist* is explicit about the physical and emotional toll Jonasi’s behaviour takes on his wives, they are far from textbook victims. They are presented as intelligent, ambitious and savvy in their unique ways, but ultimately, flawed.

Collectively, they present a subtle critique of male-centred women. Every one of them could forge an independent life from Jonasi, but they have all been conditioned to downplay their worth and personal achievements, making them susceptible to manipulation and abuse from Jonasi.

Noluthando Shabalala (Mpume), Lwazie Keith Mfeka (Sarah) and Wonder Ndlovu (Menzi) deliver moving performances as Jonasi’s young adult children, navigating the hurt and trauma his neglect and behaviour have caused them, and their screen time adds an intergenerational dimension to the show.

The Polygamist is not just another popular show; it is a watershed moment for South African TV, proof of how far good quality African storytelling can travel, and it serves as an encouraging reminder to African creatives that African intellectual property is financially and culturally viable and should be tapped into. ■

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Akin Omotoso, Director and Showrunner, *The Polygamist*

Coming from a family of storytellers, the Nigerian director of the hit South African Netflix show is a master storyteller himself. He tells **Toni Kan** how literature has shaped his approach to directing.

Literature fuels storytelling fire

There is a particular kind of creative confidence that comes from knowing the exact origins of one's artistic impulses. For Akin Omotoso, director and showrunner of the hit Netflix series *The Polygamist*, that confidence is rooted in literature.

The series is based on a novel by Zimbabwean author Sue Nyathi, with creative leadership from Omotoso and executive producer Gugu Zuma-Ncube. (See review, page 112.)

Beginning with a melodramatic scene set around the funeral of the lead character, the story unfolds in flashbacks. The series has been praised for its sheer storytelling power, which has kept audiences glued to their TV sets over 22 episodes and leaving them calling out for more.

This is hardly surprising – Omotoso comes from a famous family of storytellers. His father was the renowned academic and novelist, Kole Omotoso, while his sister is the critically acclaimed novelist, Yewande Omotoso.

Storytelling is thus much more than a profession for him, it is his lineage. “I plug into the storyteller in me – the one who directs, and the one who aspires to write a book one day.” The novelist within him is alive, waiting, and gathering material with every frame he composes.

His sensitivity to narrative becomes even more clear as we step into the delicate terrain of literary adaptation. Sue Nyathi's novel is a story rooted in Zimbabwean realities, family dynamics, and cultural tensions, while in *The Polygamist*, it is transplanted to the screen with Johannesburg as its setting.

Adaptations often provoke friction, with many authors bristling at changes, audiences debating fidelity to the original, and filmmakers defending their choices, but in the case of *The Polygamist*, the transition from page to TV seems to

have happened with unusual harmony. “Sue gave us a gift that we all treasured. She is very happy,” the director says.

The shift in location from Zimbabwe

His vision is one of African storytelling as a global force, not peripheral or niche, but central to the world's cultural conversation.

to South Africa, the adjustments in family structure, the liberties taken to serve the rhythm of television – all of it was embraced rather than contested and speaks not just to mutual trust between creator and interpreter, but a shared belief in the story's ability to transcend its original borders, something that has been borne out by the positive global reception.

Borders, in fact, are central to the director's worldview. He thinks in expanses; geographic, emotional, artistic. This expansiveness is evident in the show's structure: 22 episodes released in one sweeping arc. In an era where streaming platforms often favour shorter seasons and staggered releases, the decision to deliver the entire narrative at once was bold.

But for Omotoso, it was intuitive and a nod to the storyteller in him. “Judging from the response, the format worked well. It's nice to give audiences everything all at once every now and then – like a treat.”

Long arcs

The treat, in this case, is full immersion in the fictional universe of *The Polygamist*, a chance for viewers to fall into the world of the series without interruption, to live with its characters in a continu-

ous emotional flow.

Omotoso's career, too, has unfolded in long arcs rather than abrupt chapters. Starting with several short films, he moved into full-length features, including *God is African*, and *Man on Ground*, which focused on violence spawned by xenophobia. Other titles include *Tell Me Sweet Something*, and *Vaya*. *Vaya* won him an Africa Movie Academy Award for Best Director, and he earned critical acclaim for Disney's *Rise*, which was about the Greek-Nigerian superstar basketball, Giannis Antetokounmpo.

How has his craft as a director improved since his humble beginnings? He resists the temptation to compare past and present, allowing only that “every directing experience is its own journey and, in many ways, incomparable. I'm grateful for everything I've worked on, and grown from in between.”

That evolution has occurred alongside dramatic shifts in the African film landscape. He praises South Africa's film infrastructure – its grants, its training programmes, its institutional support, but he is equally attuned to Nigeria's explosive creative energy.

Today, he sees both ecosystems as being in motion. “The film and TV landscapes have changed a lot these last years, both locally and globally. I'm amazed by how professionals in both countries continue to grow, learn and create!”

The future is already unfolding. *The Polygamist* is rapidly becoming one of Africa's biggest Netflix hits, drawing audiences across borders and continents.

“I'm obviously happy and thankful that our work resonated with so many people in so many places. Every such story – and especially those that transcend geographical borders – reminds us that we're not that different after all, and is likely to generate interest

in stories and storytellers from places and contexts we haven't been exposed to before."

It is a vision of African storytelling as a global force, not peripheral or niche, but central to the world's cultural conversation.

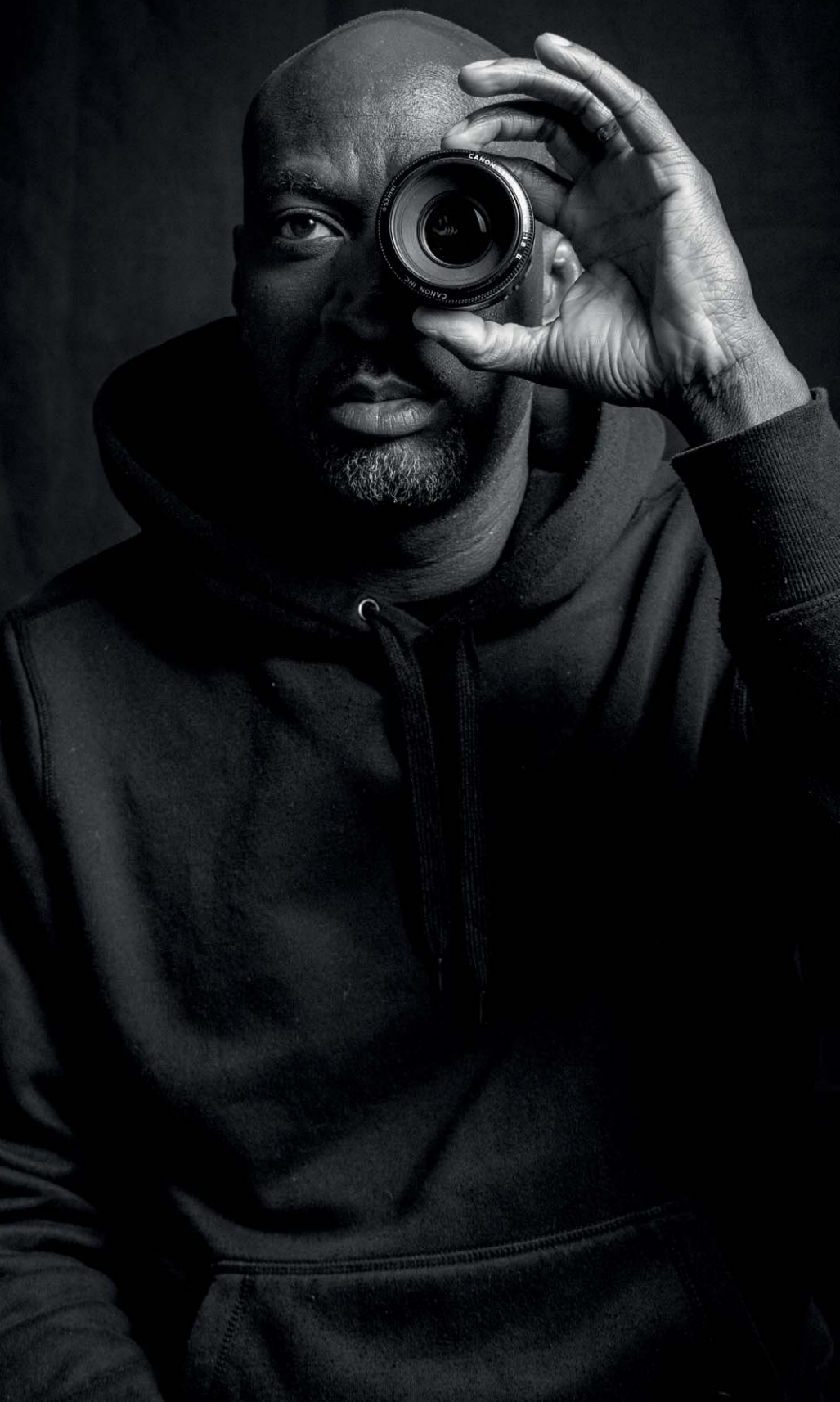
Unique cultural space

Despite his growing stature behind the camera, he has not entirely abandoned the possibility of returning in front of it, having also worked as an actor in many films to date. When drawn on his next role, he hints playfully at a future cameo. "Maybe one in *The Carniverous City*."

His reflections on the world around him are equally layered. As a Nigeria-born director who has created some of the most compelling South African films of the past decade, and now a successful South African TV series, he occupies a unique cultural space, one shaped by migration, identity, and the tensions of xenophobia.

Yet when probed to comment on the xenophobia unfolding in South Africa, his response is measured. "Every era has its moments – many of them recurring, and with the risk of sounding like a broken record nationally and globally," he says, adding, "As always, I'm more interested in human beings at every moment" – something that is evident from his oeuvre, which is ultimately about people: their contradictions, their desires, their resilience.

This human-centred approach explains the remarkable range of his work, incorporating short films, a fantasy, a documentary, a sports drama and now, a sprawling, sensual, emotionally charged series. And when asked what comes next – whether a leap into the Marvel universe or another unexpected genre – he answers with humility, "Only God knows, but continued growth, I hope." ■



S'dumo Mtshali rocketed to global stardom with his searing portrayal of the principal character in *The Polygamist*. What is he like in real life? **Toni Kan** finds out.

Playing the most hated man on Netflix

In real life, the South African actor S'dumo Mtshali, who plays the odious central character Jonasi Gomora (r) in Netflix's hit epic *The Polygamist*, is nothing like his fictitious character.

He comes across as easy-going, with a ready sense of humour. How does he feel being 'the most hated man on Netflix', as some have described his role? The 43-year-old actor laughs and brushes it off with a casual, "You know what they say!"

Watching *The Polygamist* is like looking at a car crash. It is bloody and gory and revolting, yet you can't tear your gaze away. How has S'dumo responded to the hatred and bile from viewers amazed by his character? "It's interesting, especially when you get messages in different languages and you have no idea what they're saying. Then you check and it says 'I hate you, I hate you, I hate you,'" he says with another laugh.

"But that's a good thing because this character was created to shock, to stir, to bring awareness, and I feel like that was achieved. That was accomplished by the great production company, and I'll give a shout-out to the directors Akin Omotoso, Rolie Nikiwe, and Nthabi Tau, who brought the story to life. Also, a huge shout-out to Sue Nyathi for an amazing book that's transcended so much."

Jonasi Gomora has become synonymous with chaos, betrayal and moral decay. So how did S'dumo feel about being saddled with a name so heavily loaded with Biblical resonance?

"I mean, that's the first thing that hits you. You are Jonasi Gomora, and then you realise that it's from the Bible and he is Gomorrah. In the end, he lacks any kind of good morals. He probably had them once in his life. But as time went by, he lived up to his family name."

The conversation turns to Sue Nyathi,

whose novel forms the backbone of the series. There are often tensions with adaptations, due to the author being unhappy with changes to their work, sometimes created by directors pushing for new directions and interpretations. But that was not the case, S'dumo says, on the set of *The Polygamist*.

"She was there. I got to meet her on set, which was beautiful. She spent so much time with our lead actress Gugu and of course, all of us as well."

S'dumo is a fan of literary adaptations and is fascinated by the transition from the page to the screen. "I think adaptation is just the best form of storytelling, especially when it comes to motion pictures. I think adaptation is the way to go because you can take the story and extend it, or set it wherever you want."

He believes that despite the differences between Nyathi's book and the way it has turned out on screen, the soul of the story remains intact. "The essence of Jonasi is still there. I think that with every single character, the spirit of the original comes over, and Sue Nyathi's motive is apparent too. That's why the series truly resonates."

Stunned by global reaction

S'dumo first came to prominence as an actor when he emerged as the winner of the SABC1 reality TV competition, *Class Act*, in 2010. He snagged his first lead role soon after, in the drama series *Intersexions*. After a raft of other leading TV roles down the years, including in the long-running South African drama series *Isabaya*, as well as notable parts in films, *The Polygamist* has propelled him onto the global stage.

He says he expected *The Polygamist* to do well in South Africa, but the wider reaction stunned him. "I was quite surprised by what it did everywhere else in the world. I mean, we've done similar stories in the past. Such stories are

present in South Africa."

Polygamy is not foreign to African societies. The former South African President, Jacob Zuma, has six wives and across Africa, many men still have multiple wives. So, why did the world respond to the story so viscerally?

"It's the overall themes of lust, betrayal, generational curses, and of course the sexual diseases material. Yes, everything was piled up in the book by Sue Nyathi and of course, in the screenplay itself."

People also saw themselves in the characters, he insists. "You can deny it all you want, but each one of these characters, each one of the themes and stories, resonated with viewers. We all know Jonasi. We all know Joyce. We all know Essie."

Sixteen years after *Intersexions*, HIV remains a central theme in African storytelling. Has all the health advocacy worked? Are people more educated and aware? "I believe they are. But at the same time, we know we're still human beings, capable of making stupid choices. I mean, look at Jonasi himself – someone like him, who's so educated, who's in an influential position, and he decides not to take his medicine."

The refusal to take antiretrovirals is still a big issue in South Africa and across the continent. "We're just there to raise awareness and to put up a mirror for society."

Explaining his philosophy of acting, S'dumo says, "The actor doesn't borrow anything from the character, but the character borrows from the actor constantly." So while the themes may echo those of *Rhythm City*, or *Isabaya*, in *The Polygamist* "the characters are totally different. Every single one of them."

As a boy, he dreamed of acting. Now he has global acting renown. How does that feel? "For me it's never been about



the fame, it's always been about how far I can push African stories." His dream, he says, is to elevate African storytelling to attain worldwide recognition and respect. "So, if you call the outcome global, sure, I'll take that."

Electric chemistry

Though he had never worked with Gugu Gemede (who plays Joyce Gomora) before this project, their on-screen chemistry is electric, but the darkness of Jonasi's behaviour raises questions. Where did his cruelty come from?

"That's part of the theme, and something we're trying to raise; it comes from within the society that he was brought up in," S'dumo explains.

Jonasi's character comes from broken male role models. "He has a poor background, and that streak is down to the fact he's not raised by good men. He literally raised himself, so whatever he's doing, it's something that he picked up along the way."

While the sins of the father are passed from father to son, his brother Magesh seems cut from a different cloth. "Magesh is not a perfect man, but he's certainly a good man."

Will there be a part two to *The Polygamist*? S'dumo is hopeful there will be. "I think it would be great if they have a second season, because these issues don't end there," he says, adding that the show also created a lot of employment and spotlighted African storytelling worldwide. "If people can watch *Fast and the Furious* until season 10, then of course."

He has a Peabody award in the bag for *Intersexions*. *The Polygamist* must be a candidate for the 2027 Emmy Awards, I suggest. "With God anything is possible... So, if you say it deserves an Emmy, thank you."

As the interview draws to a close, the subject shifts to the TV industry, remuneration and regulation. "This industry is not regulated," S'dumo says with feeling. "Actors are still dying poor. We have a serious lack of infrastructure. We've even marched to parliament to fight for fair pay."

So, what's next for S'dumo Mtshali? He points out he is currently in *The Four of Us*, a family drama about legacy and conflict. It's on Netflix, but only available in certain territories. "It's much lighter and it is such fun working with Cheetah Productions," he adds.

Will he direct or produce in the future? He smiles. "I've got my own passion project, and I'm the producer. The details will come out when it's ready – but it's been an interesting journey, being behind and in front of the camera." ■

Rooted in African lineages yet refusing replication, Mbari Kola is Nigerian curator and art collector Ugoma Ebilah's striking new cultural institution in Lagos. It is a living space where art, ideas, community and hospitality converge, writes **Toni Kan**.

Lagos' new culture space: familiar and yet entirely new

When you step into the grounds of curator, art collector and cultural convener Ugoma Ebilah's beautifully intriguing cultural space, Mbari Kola, in Ikoyi, Lagos, you are struck by a sensation that is difficult to articulate. The exterior and interior feel familiar yet entirely new, rooted in history but not beholden to it, intimate yet expansive.

Asked whether she agrees with this sense of *déjà vu*, of something new, something old, something borrowed, she smiles at the suggestion but offers a more nuanced interpretation. "I understand that feeling, although I might describe it slightly differently. I think what people are responding to is familiarity without imitation."

That phrase – familiarity without imitation – becomes the key to understanding Mbari Kola. It is not a replica of anything that has come before, nor is it a nostalgic reconstruction of a cultural moment. Instead, it is the physical manifestation of Ebilah's long personal journey in the word of art.

"There are elements of Mbari Kola that may evoke things people have encountered before," she concedes, "But Mbari Kola is not an attempt to recreate any place or period. I am interested in lineage, but I am not interested in replication."

Ebilah's journey through art and culture has always been animated by a central question: how can culture bring people together? Mbari Kola is her answer; a contemporary house of art, culture, ideas and belonging. "It is all really the physical expression of a long personal journey for me... as someone who has spent a great deal of their life thinking about how art and culture can bring people together."

The name itself carries layers of meaning. 'Mbari' echoes across African languages – Swahili, Yoruba, Igbo – but

for Ebilah, its deepest resonance comes from the Owerri Igbo tradition. "The Mbari that speaks most directly to me comes from the Owerri Igbo tradition: sacred communal structures created as offerings through art, storytelling, and devotion."

She is equally inspired by the post-independence Mbari Clubs, where writers, artists, and thinkers gathered to imagine new cultural identities. Yet she insists Mbari Kola is not a recreation of those spaces. "I am interested in what those traditions reveal about the possibilities of culture, rather than in reproducing their forms."

Then there is 'kola', the kola nut. "Across Nigeria, the kola nut is such a powerful symbol of welcome, peace, hospitality, and shared humanity. As the Igbo people say, *he who brings kola brings life*. That is very close to my understanding of what this place should be."

Below: Ugoma Ebilah, the Nigerian curator and art collector

Opposite: Mbari Kola in Ikoyi, Lagos



The kola nut, she explains, is a gesture that cements the intentional act of gathering. "It is a space where art can be an offering, but also a conversation... where you can come to see an exhibition, hear music, encounter an idea, meet an artist, have dinner, read a book, make a connection or simply sit with other people."

A sacred space

Culture, she insists, is most powerful when lived. "Mbari Kola is a sacred space in the broadest sense – not because it is religious, but because we have made the act of gathering, creating, sharing and belonging important again."

The building itself is 800 square metres and nestled by the waterside. "I think its character is better understood through the different experiences it contains rather than simply its footprint."

It contains the Magic Room – intimate and mysterious – and the Great Gallery, the principal exhibition space, designed for museum-quality shows. There are areas for reading, conversation, hospitality, and a residency cottage that extends the institution's purpose beyond exhibition into creation.

Movement, networking, and conviviality are central to the experience. Visitors may come for art and stay for conversation, arrive for dinner and encounter an idea that shifts something within them.

Stepping inside Mbari Kola, one of the first things the visitor notices is a wall featuring framed portraits of Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo, Chinua Achebe, and J.P. Clark, literary figures associated with the original Mbari Club.

Ebilah clarifies that this is not a curated Hall of Fame: "Those works came together much more organically through my own history as a collector."

It is not a historical pantheon but a personal constellation – artworks she loved, collected and carried with her,



now finding a home where they can speak to one another. “If I were constructing a pantheon, then the question would quite rightly become, ‘Where is this person? Where is that person?’ That isn’t the exercise.”

Many Lagosians remember The Life House, Ebilah’s earlier cultural space. Mbari Kola may evoke echoes of it, but she is clear: “Mbari Kola is not The Life House 2.0.”

The Life House was one expression of her journey; Mbari Kola is another, with different ambitions and architecture. “The true precursors are much broader... The Life House was an experiment... Mbari Kola is intended to have longevity. The Life House was an important chapter... but Mbari Kola is not looking backwards at that chapter. It is looking forward.”

Striking architecture

Mbari Kola is a membership society, but not in the transactional sense. “Membership is deliberately more meaningful than simply paying for access to a beautiful space.”

Members gain access to exhibitions, salons, performances, programmes, and cultural concierge services. But the deeper benefit is belonging. “You be-

come part of a network of patrons... interested in the arts, ideas, culture, collecting, creativity, and the broader question of what we are building and leaving behind.”

Mbari Kola’s architecture is striking – oblique, futuristic, yet grounded in African textures and colours. It features a stained-glass porthole by Victor Ehikhamenor, with the burnt orange palette of its exterior walls recalling the walls of houses in Marrakech, Morocco.

Working closely with architect Kel-echi Odu to translate her vision into an architectural language, she says: “I didn’t want a building that looked like it belonged to a single historical or architectural category... I wanted it to be African without being trapped by the expectation of what an ‘African’ building should look like.”

Ultimately, she wanted the building to behave like the institution: “unexpected, layered, warm, contemporary and deeply rooted without being nostalgic.”

Ebilah is famous for Bloom Art, her gallery and curatorial practice. She holds the distinction of being the first Nigerian curator and dealer to successfully sell a modern art piece valued at \$1,000,000 – a feat only previously achieved by in-

ternational auction houses.

But “Bloom Art is not moving into Mbari Kola... Mbari Kola isn’t a commercial gallery, and Bloom Art isn’t being absorbed into it.”

Instead, the two will coexist within a broader ecosystem, each retaining its identity while benefitting from synergies. “What you are seeing instead is an ecosystem in which different aspects of my work can coexist while retaining their own identities.”

Activities include exhibitions, salons, music, readings, performances, private collections, artistic engagements, residencies, publications, and educational initiatives.

Following a soft launch in May 2026, Mbari Kola is already very much alive and operating. The focus now is on expanding programming, growing membership, strengthening partnerships, and deepening outreach. “For me, the most exciting thing is that Mbari Kola isn’t a project waiting to begin. It has begun.”

What comes next is the full expression of its cultural ambition – a living institution rooted in history but oriented toward the future, a place where art, ideas and people meet in ways that feel both familiar and entirely new. ■

By Onyekachi Wambu

The race to become the next UN Secretary-General is in full swing but Africa does not have a credible candidate. What is behind this lack of motivation?

UN Sec-Gen race: Africa's missing candidate

In an age when wars rage with impunity, great powers ignore international law, and multilateral institutions appear increasingly marginal, does the office of the United Nations Secretary-General (SG) still matter? Many argue, yes!

Perhaps not as originally conceived in 1945. Despite the various constraints and limitations, the office remains the world's chief diplomat, its chief mediator, and, often, its last resort when others have stopped talking. The UN oversees a vast area: conflict mediation; humanitarian coordination; climate diplomacy and institutional reform.

Which makes Africa's absentmindedness in the current selection process all the more baffling. The continent argues for global reform and greater African representation, but has struggled to rally behind a candidate capable of commanding broad continental and international confidence. Perhaps it is because of the current divisions between influential countries like South Africa and Nigeria, and a lack of universally respected continental leaders.

Instead, two candidates have emerged: the former Ugandan Foreign Minister and UN Under-Secretary-General Olara Otunnu, and Senegal's former President, Macky Sall. Both campaigns appear to have stalled at an early stage, after the first informal Security Council 'straw poll' reportedly produced more discouraging than encouraging votes.

Further rounds remain, but early polling has often proved an important indicator of a candidate's viability.

The question is not simply why both candidates have struggled. The larger question is why Africa entered such an important contest without first forging a continental consensus around a candidate whose credentials were likely to command confidence across regions and among the Security Council's permanent members.

The African frontrunner, Macky Sall's candidacy was always likely to divide opinion. His final years in office left a bitter political legacy in Senegal. His attempt to manoeuvre towards a controversial third term was widely seen as an assault on one of West Africa's strongest democratic traditions. Following his departure from office, he left immediately for Morocco, was proposed by Burundi, and only secured a last-minute Senegalese endorsement.

Was he truly Africa's candidate? Or France's candidate, as has been alleged? Contrast this with the emergence of Kofi Annan three decades ago. Annan was not simply a Ghanaian candidate. He was widely viewed as an international civil servant of exceptional competence whose integrity, diplomatic skill and deep knowledge of the United Nations commanded confidence well beyond Africa.

UN leadership qualities

That experience raises an uncomfortable question. If Afri-



The continent argues for global reform and greater African representation, but has struggled to find a candidate capable of commanding broad international confidence.

ca believes the office remains strategically important, what qualities should it seek in a future Secretary-General?

The answer should perhaps begin with integrity, followed by proven executive leadership for managing one of the world's largest and most complex international organisations, requiring experience in administration, budgeting, institutional reform and coalition-building.

Proven diplomatic and mediation skills should be included, as well as intellectual independence beyond the bloc systems, and a genuinely African-first worldview, anchored within a universal framework.

Finally, our candidate should possess long-term strategic vision and an understanding of the international financial architecture, including the Bretton Woods institutions and global climate/development finance challenges confronting the Global South.

Such individuals exist in Africa, but why did they not emerge? There may, of course, be another explanation. Perhaps African governments concluded that the informal regional rotation guiding previous appointments pointed this time toward Latin America or the Caribbean, so stepped back.

Or perhaps something deeper is occurring as the post-1945 so-called rules-based international order comes under increasing strain; some African leaders may already be looking beyond the existing architecture rather than investing political capital in its leadership. If so, that would itself be a significant statement.

Yet even if a new system emerges, it will involve multilateralism of some kind, which still needs to be prepared for, not treated as an afterthought.

Leadership begins long before the election. It begins with identifying exceptional individuals, building continental consensus, and persuading the world.

This time, Africa has fallen short. For a continent seeking a larger role in shaping the twenty-first century, this has not been its finest hour. ■



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