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The Continent

Acid flows in Zambia's rivers

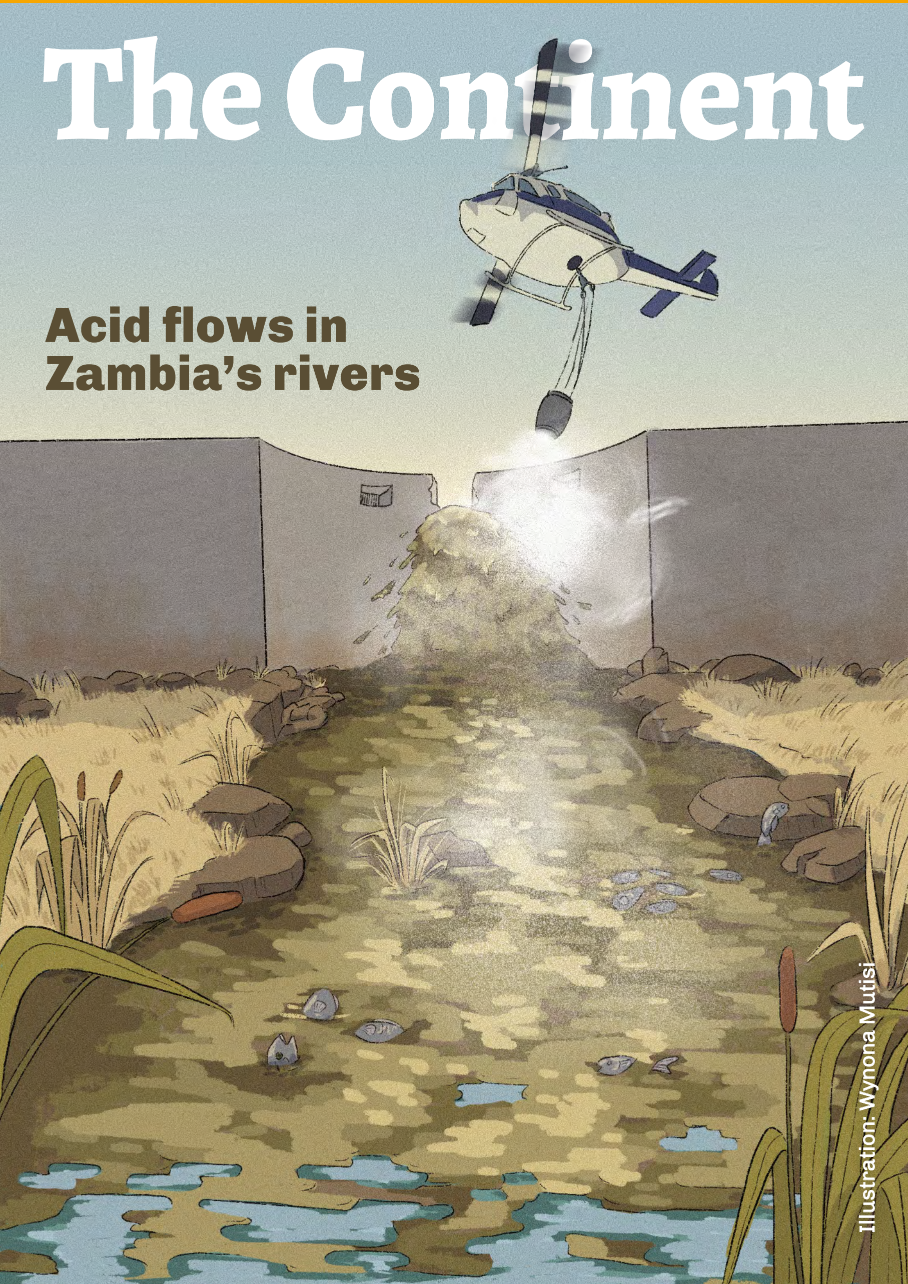
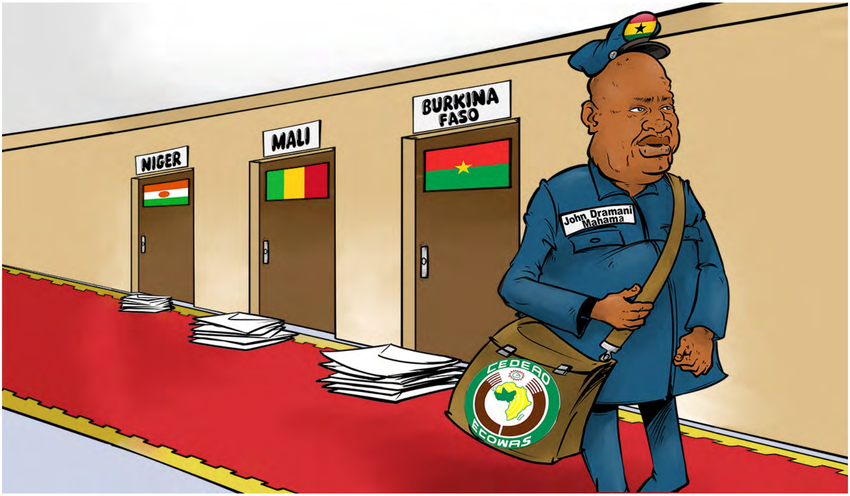


Illustration: Wynona Mutisi

Cover: Zambia's economy depends on copper exports. So its leaders have looked the other way when mines destroy communities and the environment. But then a waste dam at a copper processing plant burst last month, and 50-million litres of acidic sludge flowed into two key rivers. Locals along 200km of river say aquatic life and farms have been devastated. In desperation, military helicopters dropped lime into the rivers to neutralise the acid. And politicians have responded, putting pressure on the Chinese state, a key investor and usually the more powerful partner in this relationship (p12).

Inside:



Ghana's President John Mahama has visited Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali, in a bid to thaw relations between their military juntas and Ecowas, the West African bloc.

UGANDA

Arrested and assaulted for doing their jobs

Several journalists covering an election in Kampala that was won by an opposition politician were arrested, held for hours and beaten. Two major media houses withdrew their reporters from the field. Some of the most egregious violence happened when journalists followed the leader of the opposition in parliament to a compound where vote rigging by ruling party operatives was said to be happening. One of the journalists identified his attackers as soldiers he had earlier seen emerging from the State House compound.

ZIMBABWE

Journalist stays in jail after interview with Mnangagwa foe

Blessed Mhlanga was arrested on 24 February after he interviewed a war veteran who is critical of President Emmerson Mnangagwa. He appeared in court on Wednesday for what his lawyers hoped would be a bail hearing. But the judge adjourned the matter saying he needs more time to review the case. Mhlanga was charged with transmitting messages that incite violence or damage to property – in his interview the subject, Blessed Geza, promised to organise anti-Mnangagwa protests because he has failed to improve the economy.

ANGOLA

Luanda boots Africa's top opposition leaders

Thirteen of 17 prominent politicians invited by Angola's main opposition party, Unita, were stopped at an airport in Luanda and deported. They included former Botswana president Ian Khama and Mozambican opposition leader Venâncio Mondlane. Tanzania's Tundu Lissu, Zanzibar's first vice president Othman Massoud Othman, Uganda's Bobi Wine, former Colombian president Andrés Pastrana and others were also denied entry. Most said they were not given explanations and some carried passports from countries whose nationals enter Angola visa-free.

GEOPOLITICS

SA, EU kiss and make up to spite Trump

At the end of the 8th EU-South Africa summit held in Cape Town this week, Ursula von der Leyen, the president of the European Union Commission, announced that her bloc would invest €5-billion into green energy and vaccine projects in the country. The move is a rapprochement, smoothing over ties which got strained in 2022 after South Africa refused to condemn Russia for invading Ukraine. South Africa is also planning a state visit for Ukraine's president. Both bloc and country are helped in their unity by hostility from the United States.

MALAWI

Bail-skipping Bushiri loses bid to evade SA

A Malawian court ruled on Wednesday that Shepherd Bushiri, the influential and controversial evangelical pastor, and his wife, Mary, can be extradited to South Africa. The pair face a raft of criminal charges including fraud, money laundering and rape. Bushiri skipped bail in South Africa in November 2020 and returned to his native country. The Lilongwe court determined that 10 of the 13 charges levelled against the self-proclaimed prophet are sufficient for prosecution. The pastor plans to appeal.

Fleecing the flock: Shepherd Bushiri, an alleged man of god, is accused of major crimes in SA. Photo: Wikus De Wet/AFP

Action replay: Sundowns boss gets another term. Photo: AFP

FOOTBALL

Patrice Motsepe to re-head footie body

South African billionaire Patrice Motsepe has been re-elected to head the continent's football organising body, the Confederation of African Football. Motsepe owns Sundowns, one of Africa's best teams. Legendary striker Samuel Eto'o also made it onto the executive committee. That's after the Court of Arbitration for Sport cleared him last Friday to run for office. No stranger to controversy, the president of the Cameroon football federation was fined $200,000 last year by the confederation itself for being the brand ambassador for a betting agency. Wealth brings luck and success.

MOZAMBIQUE

Hey Jude, you made it worse

Cyclone Jude, which hit northern Mozambique on Monday, is the third to strike the country in four months. Powered by winds moving at 195km an hour it killed at least six people and destroyed over 900 homes before weakening, authorities reported on Wednesday. January's cyclone, Dikeledi, tore further inland and caused rare flooding in Botswana.

THE PHILIPPINES

Mass murderer/ ex-prez hits Hague

Family feud alert. Former president Rodrigo Duterte is behind bars in The Hague, facing charges of crimes against humanity. The 79-year-old was arrested on Tuesday as he returned to Manila from a trip to Hong Kong. As president and under the pretext of fighting drug cartels, he is alleged to have killed tens of thousands of people. He also waged lawfare against his critics, including Nobel prize-winning journalist Maria Ressa. Duterte ended his presidency with a deal between his family and that of former dictator Ferdinand Marcos: dictator junior (Bongbong) would get to be president while Duterte's daughter (Sara) would be made vice-president. That relationship is now super over.

LIBYA

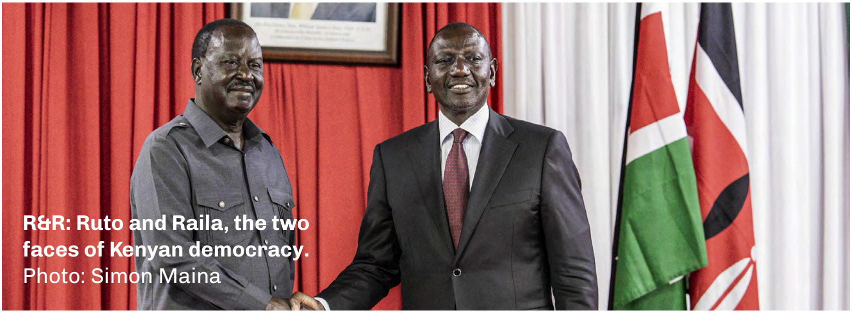
Mabruk's oil flows again, 10 years later

So much of the power in Libya lies with who controls its oil fields. While the civil war that started in 2011 with the fall of Gaddafi officially ended in 2020, its governments have struggled to agree on how to run things. It doesn't help that Russia, Türkiye, Egypt, the UAE and France keep sticking their oars in. On Wednesday, production restarted at the Mabruk oil field 800km east of Tripoli. That's a significant signal of control by the current government.

SOMALIA

Insurgents storm hotel as elders meet

At least 10 people died when al-Shabaab militants attacked a hotel in Beledweyne on Tuesday night. The town, 335km north of Mogadishu, is strategically important in the fight against the group. Local clan elders and government officials were meeting at the hotel to discuss countering the militant group. Witnesses reported significant damage to the hotel building as government troops and gunmen exchanged fire in a day-long siege.



R&R: Ruto and Raila, the two faces of Kenyan democracy.
Photo: Simon Maina

KENYA

Another year, another handshake

The threat of losing power and influence can make friendships flower where there were none. Kenya's political class are masters of spitting fire and fury one day then signing a partnership to "ease the prevailing tensions" the next – or last Friday, to be specific. When Gen Z-led protests demanded change at the top, William Ruto looked like he'd struggle to keep the presidency. But in his hour of need, former foe Raila Odinga, fresh off of his failure to run the African Union, started to get friendly. The two will now work hand-in-hand to run a country they were instrumental in screwing up.

DRC

SADC slinks off as threat of peace rises

Departure of soldiers might mean a negotiated settlement is a real prospect. The DRC president disagrees.

Prosper Heri Ngorora in Goma

The Angolan presidency says direct peace talks between the Democratic Republic of the Congo government and M23 rebels will start in Luanda on Tuesday.

Ahead of that, the Southern African Development Community announced the end of its mission in eastern DRC. After meeting on Thursday, the bloc ordered a "gradual withdrawal" of their troops.

In Goma, which M23 fighters seized in late January, the news was received with marked indifference and even optimism. "I don't see how SADC were of any use to us. Lives were taken in their presence," said Delphin Ashuza, a taxi driver. "Let these forces leave as quickly as possible."

Human rights activist Gentil Mulume speculated that the withdrawal "heralds the end of the war".

Even in Kinshasa, some influential figures have embraced the idea of dialogue with the M23 rebels. Writing in South Africa's *Sunday Times* in late February, former DRC president Joseph Kabila stressed that the DRC crisis required more than a "military solution".

The changing opinions are increasingly sidelining President Félix Tshisekedi, who is still opposed to direct talks with a group he describes as a proxy for the Rwandan government. "I like the lucidity of SADC's communiqué. The whole world thinks we need a negotiated solution, except Mr Tshisekedi," said Patrick Mundeke, a politician with the opposition party Ensemble pour la République.

To avoid breaking bread with a rebel group that is occupying part of his country, Tshisekedi has instead offered a mineral deal to the United States, hoping that the presence of American mining businesses would pacify the region. This is the same argument that US President Donald Trump made to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy when pushing for a critical minerals deal there: the presence of US business would deter Russia from continuing its war on Ukraine.

It's unclear whether Tshisekedi has since had a change of mind and will back the talks announced by Luanda.

South Africa

Green(back) washing

Slick branding and feel-good statements aside, banks aren't doing much about the climate crisis.

Kiri Rupiah

South Africa's economy has long depended on fossil fuel extraction. At the recent Mining Indaba in Cape Town, there was even talk of relabelling coal as a critical mineral, a term generally applied to energy sources important for the transition to renewable energy. South Africa is Africa's largest polluter. By far. And its polluting industries are supported by the banking sector.

That reality is detailed in the *South Africa Banks Climate Accountability Report* by Bank.Green. The volunteer-led group tries to educate the public about the environmental impacts of the finance industry and how to bank "greener". It found that the country's 13 commercial banks are not doing well.

Absa, FirstRand, Nedbank and Investec all received "good" ratings. Discovery was "okay". Standard Bank, Sasfin, Grindrod, African Bank and Bidvest had "bad" ratings. Access, Capitec, and Zenith received the "worst" rating.

The assessment covered all local commercial banks in the country but didn't look into 19 other banking institutions including mutual, co-operative and branches of foreign banks.

Overall, it noted that the banks' policies for avoiding investments in high-emission industries like oil, coal, and gas are weak. Only half had any such policy, and none had strong enough policies to earn points in the rating system. Without strict exclusion policies, banks can continue doling out cash to polluting industries while appearing to take climate action.

Transparency was another issue, with a third of the banks not clearly reporting their financing of fossil fuel or renewable energy projects. Only five of the 13 disclosed their financed emissions, and four set emission reduction targets, but their goals did not include financed emissions, which is a significant part of the problem.

Bank.Green said none of the banks had their climate targets validated by the Science Based Targets initiative, the gold standard for corporate climate goal-setting. That means the banks can set their own targets and score for reaching them. ■

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Big Tech

Death in moderation

Ladi Anzaki Olubunmi's death has renewed focus on the human cost of technological progress – a cost that is disproportionately paid by people in the Global South.

Maureen Kasuku in Nairobi

On Tuesday evening, young people streamed into Siasa Place, a youth centre in Nairobi, for a ceremony to celebrate the life of Ladi Anzaki Olubunmi. Some brought flowers. Others carried candles. All wore black. The event, attended by a few dozen, was as personal as it was political. A pastor gave a sermon on grief, bible verses were recited and hymns sung. When the young people stood up to eulogise Olubunmi, they shared fond memories of her but also their own little sermons on the rights of data workers.

Olubunmi was a Nigerian working in Kenya, for Teleperformance – a massive French multinational outsourcing company that does work for clients including Google, Meta and TikTok.

Her job was as brutal as it was tedious: she watched out for unsavoury content posted to a social media site and removed it if it violated the platform's standards. Former content moderators have said that the job often involves watching extremely violent posts like beheadings, rape and child pornography. Contractors have to move through such clips at speed for hours on end, getting only short breaks and minimal mental health support.

For Olubunmi, the trauma inherent in the job had been compounded by homesickness. She had moved to Nairobi for work in 2022 and had only ever visited home once since. Her employers reportedly stopped her from leaving the country because her work permit was still pending, and they feared she would not be able to return if she exited Kenya.

It's not yet clear how Olubunmi died. She was desperate to go home and often spoke of her exhaustion, but when she didn't turn up for work for three days, her employer allegedly failed to check up on her. It was neighbours who found her decomposing body in her residence in the Lower Kabete area of the city.

"There are so many of us [Nigerians] working under Teleperformance and other similar companies. Most of us don't have work permits. Speaking up can get you in so much trouble," said a data worker who spoke to *The Continent* on the condition of anonymity.

Getting a work permit in Kenya has become more difficult in recent years. International workers, in and outside the technology industry, speak of waiting for months and having to bribe workers at the government's immigration office in Nyayo House to "accelerate" theirs.

Digital sweatshops

Olubunmi's passing has re-ignited a conversation about a Big Tech problem that is just as insidious and prevalent: the poor working conditions of workers who feed the machine through outsourcing firms like Teleperformance.

They execute tasks like data labelling for AI software and content moderation for multibillion-dollar social media platforms – under sweatshop conditions that are a far cry from the posh university-style US campuses where their colleagues further up the food chain work.

In 2023, more than 100 former Facebook moderators in Kenya sued Meta and its outsourcing partner, Sama, citing poor pay, traumatic work environments, and retaliatory firings. The case has not been resolved yet. But those workers' grievances are clearly not isolated cases.

Civic tech organisation Pollicy says that Kenya is becoming a hub for exploitative digital work as tech giants increasingly outsource labour to Africa. "Despite growing scrutiny, companies continue to evade accountability by operating through subcontractors, shielding them from direct responsibility for workers' welfare," says executive director Irene Mwendwa.

In December, workers doing a different kind of tech microtasking formed a union in Kenya: the Data Labelers Association.

"Workers sign exploitative, vague contracts. These contracts lack clear task expectations," Joan Kinyua, who heads the association, told *The Continent*. Often these annotators and moderators are also made to sign nondisclosure agreements that effectively silence them on their work, its harms and the conditions under which they do it.

"Current state protections are either weak or nonexistent," said Kinyua. So weak that the Kenya police stopped Kinyua and others from holding a planned vigil for Olubunmi outside the Teleperformance offices.

Teleperformance said that it did attempt to contact Olubunmi when she did not turn up at work, and has promised to launch an "independent investigation into our operations in Nairobi to better understand these concerns and implement appropriate solutions".

This is not the only controversy facing the company, which is also the largest operator of call centres on the planet, this month.

Deputy CEO Thomas Mackenbrock's revelation that the company is using artificial intelligence software called Sanas to "neutralise" the accents of its call centre operatives in India received mixed reactions online. "When you have an Indian agent on the line, sometimes it's hard to hear, to understand," he told *Bloomberg* in an interview.

Feature

Toxic sludge: The emptied waste dam after it burst. Photo: Transparency International Zambia

Rivers of acid

There are 50-million litres of acidic sludge coursing through Zambia's river network. This was a man-made disaster, but will anyone clean up the toxic mess?

Olga Manda in Lusaka

An estimated 2% of all the world's copper reserves can be found in Zambia. For more than a century, foreign mining companies have flocked to its Copperbelt region to extract this precious resource – often leaving environmental devastation in their wake.

The latest disaster happened in the mining town of Chambishi, on 18 February, when a waste storage dam at a Chinese-run copper operation collapsed.

The broken dam discharged over 50-million litres of acidic sludge, about three-quarters of what it held, into the Mwambashi River. This made the water so acidic that entire schools of fish began dying within a day of the disaster, their bodies floating onto the riverbanks.

Authorities poured 250 tonnes of lime into the river at three points, in an effort to neutralise the acid, but initial readings from the Environmental Management Authority showed only a negligible improvement. Maize fields along the river banks were also scorched by the acid water.

The Mwambashi pours into the Kafue River, which runs through five Zambian provinces and is a key water source for millions of people and wildlife. Within two days, water companies as far downstream as Kitwe – 50km from the disaster site – had cut supply to their customers, fearing the contamination of the river system.

By 24 February, people were reporting sightings of dead or gasping fish near river banks some 240km from the mine. At this point, Sino-Metals Leach Zambia Limited, the company whose dam burst, was throwing bags of lime off bridges on the river system.

But anxiety was growing that the Zambezi River, into which Kafue pours, would soon be contaminated too. The Zambezi, Africa's fourth longest river, flows from Zambia through Angola, Namibia, Botswana and Mozambique before pouring into the Indian Ocean. The Zambian Air Force got involved. By early March, its helicopters were flying over the river, chasing the acidic plume that was heading down the river at 1km/h, pouring lime from the sky.

Rare pushback

As responders battled to control the pollution, public anger was rising.

"This crisis demands more than just emergency interventions. It requires a long-term, justice-driven approach to hold polluters accountable," Maggie Mwape, the executive director of the Centre for Environmental Justice, told *The Continent*.

The February disaster was "symptomatic of a broader pattern of gross corporate negligence and inadequacies in the environmental compliance, oversight and enforcement," said Timothy Phiri, speaking for a new consortium that 10 leading environmental groups have formed to react to the disaster. "These avoidable disasters have devastated communities in Chambishi, Kitwe, Luanshya and Mumbwa districts."

Their voices were joined by others in the local press and on social media, calling for heads to roll over the disaster and wider violations of environmental standards.

Sino-Metals' operations were suspended shortly after authorities learnt of the burst dam and officials started impromptu inspections at other mines. A team of ministers stormed a separate Chinese-owned leach plant, Rongxing Mineral Processing Limited in Kalulushi, for an impromptu inspection. They shut it down, saying that its storage dams were leaking sulphuric acid into local streams including the Lulamba River, which also feeds into the Kafue River.

"Let this serve as a warning to all investors and government officials: we will not tolerate environmental impunity," said Water Minister Collins Nzovu. "Non-compliance will result in severe penalties, prosecution, and imprisonment."

This is an unusually strong stance from Zambia's government, which enjoys close economic relations with China. The Asian superpower holds at least $4.1-billion of Zambia's $13-billion external debt and reportedly funds at least 26 copper projects in the country, bringing in up to $260-million in taxes a year. This buys certain privileges – including, all too often, meekness from public officials.

In recent years, President Hakainde Hichilema has walked a delicate path with China as he has attempted to renegotiate debts to more sustainable terms. Chinese reluctance was a major factor in why

Zambia could not reach a restructuring agreement with its G20 creditors until June 2023, after defaulting in 2020. While payments to all other creditors remained frozen during the impasse, China received a $80-million payment. Zambian authorities say it was accidentally sent.

The February disaster has put Beijing on the defensive in Lusaka. China's deputy ambassador said independent consultants would be brought in to assess the impact of the pollution. An official Chinese delegation also flew into the capital over the weekend to manage the fallout. After travelling to the disaster site, the delegation – whose composition has not been disclosed – held a closed door meeting with Zambian officials, including Nzovu, the irate water minister, on Thursday afternoon. Details of the meeting have not been made public.

Dirty history

Despite robust environmental laws on Zambia's books, they are rarely effectively policed, and community complaints against them are not taken seriously. In 2011 and 2015, communities in the Copperbelt sued Sino-Metals – the company whose dam has now burst – for destroying their fields. The cases remain in judicial limbo. But Sino-Metals is facing a new lawsuit in relation to the recent disaster: it is being sued by a private firm, Panthera Ventures Limited, which wants it closed over the environmental damage.

It is not just Chinese companies: the practice of foreign companies extracting precious resources while damaging the environment has a long and dirty history in Zambia. UK-based Vedanta Resources was sued in 2015 in a British court by nearly 2,000 Zambian villagers after another dam collapse turned water sources toxic and poisoned farmland. The dam was connected to a copper mine owned by a Vedanta subsidiary.

pH deed: A helicopter team pours lime into the Kafue river. Photo: Zambia Air Force

After years of legal battles, Vedanta was forced to offer an undisclosed settlement to the affected communities. For his role in organising the lawsuit, environmental activist Chilekwa Mumba won the 2023 Goldman Environmental Prize.

Dr Pamela Sambo, an environmental law and human rights expert from the University of Zambia said the Sino-Metals dam collapse disaster "underscores usual historical gross carelessness and dereliction of duty by regulators who prioritise mining profits over environmental protection".

Analysis

The Sahel juntas are taking on foreign mining companies – and winning

The price of gold is through the roof, so miners and major players are only too happy to eat the risk.

Duncan Money

People will do strange and desperate things for gold, and its allure is only growing stronger. Five years ago, an ounce of gold (roughly 31 grams) was worth about $1,550. That same ounce is worth over $3,000 today. You could easily hold $10,000-worth in the palm of your hand.

To carry $245-million worth of gold, you would need at least two helicopters. We know this because that is how many helicopters government soldiers in Mali used to seize about three tonnes of gold from the Loulo-Gounkoto mine, which is owned by Canada's Barrick Gold, in January. The government claims Barrick owes them hundreds of millions of dollars in unpaid taxes.

This is part of a broader pattern: pressed for cash, military rulers in the Sahel have turned to more robust approaches to negotiations with the international mining companies that dominate their economies.

In 2023, the Burkina Faso government seized 200kg of gold mined by another Canadian company, Endeavour Mining, for "public necessity".

Last year it nationalised two gold mines from the same company, paying them $80-million in compensation. The company had previously agreed to sell the mines to another company for $300-million.

Last November, the Malian government invited the chief executive of Resolute Mining, an Australian firm, to a meeting in the capital Bamako to resolve a tax dispute. He was arrested immediately after the meeting, with Mali demanding the company pay a $160-million tax bill. After its boss had spent 10 days enjoying the hospitality of Mali's military rulers, the company paid up in full.

An innovative kind of extortion – and it appears to work.

Previously, mining companies would complain if a government so much as increased royalty taxes by 2%. Not in this new operating environment.

Back in 2013, Barrick Gold's chief executive Mark Bristow warned that he wouldn't invest in South Africa – previously the world's biggest gold producer – because of the "very dangerous trend" of the government aiming to increase revenue from the mining sector. Instead, his company invested about $10-billion in Mali.

Before seizing Barrick's gold stocks in Loulo-Gounkoto, Mali had issued an arrest warrant for Bristow and imprisoned four company employees on terrorism and money laundering charges. Barrick has now agreed to pay the government $438-million to settle the dispute over tax.

None of this has discouraged gold mining in the region. None of these companies are pulling out. Some, like Canada's B2BGold, have even increased their investment.

When gold prices are high, companies are willing to endure a lot.

The house always wins

Gold is not as rare as people think. Many countries have at least some gold, and 15 African countries currently mine it. Why a particular place becomes a major gold producer at a particular time is therefore not solely about geology.

The Sahel's gold deposits have been known about and mined for a very long time. The region was the centre of a thriving gold trade from the 7th to the 15th centuries. In modern times, however, it was not until the liberalisation of the mining sector in the late 2000s that the region became a major producer.

Under the liberalising policies, mining companies got a sweet deal in the form of wide-ranging tax exemptions. Highly-profitable mining operations began even as the countries themselves fell apart amid insurgencies and coups. Mali and Burkina Faso are now the second and fourth largest gold producers in Africa.

Wotalotingot: Heavy is the hand that holds the gold.
Photo: Alexis Huguet/AFP

The rush into the Sahel belied a common claim mining companies make: that to invest, they need things like political stability, transparent regulations and clear property rights. None of those things applied to the Sahel states. They got billions of dollars of mining investment anyway.

The companies that made these investments knew the risks, and took the gamble. Even with the gold seizures and the hostage-taking, it may yet pay off.

In any event, being taken hostage by a military junta is not the worst thing that can happen in the Sahel's gold industry. In late January, 13 artisanal miners – including three children – drowned at a mine in southwest Mali after a reservoir collapsed.

People – the desperately hungry and the desperately capitalist – will do desperate things for gold at $3,000 an ounce.

Duncan Money is a historian and researcher whose primary focus is on the mining industry

The Museum of Stolen History

Things can be taken. Their stories must still be told.

Curated by Shola Lawal | Art direction by Wynona Mutisi

Photo: Museum Burg Mylau

Ekori

The ekori – headgear worn by the nomadic Herero and Himba people in what is now Namibia – scared German missionaries so much that they forbade women from wearing it, and branded it as "devilish".

The ekori is made from leather pieces stitched together and decorated with iron beads or tortoise shells. Usually secured with a band, the pointy ekori was worn to signify a woman's status. At wedding ceremonies, the bride's mother would place on her daughter's head a finely decorated ekori, featuring intricate stitching patterns and pointed flaps that symbolised cow horns. For the semi-pastoralist Herero tribes, cattle were the only real marker of wealth and therefore had particular cultural significance. The ekori paid tribute to that belief.

Despite the restrictions they faced, Herero women would eventually find ways to adapt their fashion, even after a long period of harrowing suffering at the hands of German colonial forces.

It began in January 1904. Herero and Nama leaders led a revolt against German colonial soldiers, killing as many as a hundred men of the German colonial army as tensions around a planned displacement of locals grew. At first, the rebels made quick gains. Then the feared German General, Lothar von Trotha, skilled at subjugating local populations across the continent, took command and ordered scorched earth policies that changed the course of the war.

By August 1904, the German soldiers were winning, but it was the Battle of Waterberg that would seal the defeat – and the eventual decimation of the Hereros. There, Von Trotha commanded his soldiers to kill every last Herero. German soldiers drove not just the Herero fighters, but also their women and children, into the Omaheke Desert, which cut them off from water supplies. The troops also went a step further to poison water holes in the desert. Tens of thousands would die of dehydration. After that, German soldiers drove the survivors, most of them women, and survivors from the Nama group who had also faced an extermination campaign, into concentration camps.

In the camps, women were "rented" to German industrial companies for labour, or to individuals who often sexually abused them. They were also given horrid tasks, such as scraping skin off the skulls of fallen Herero and Nama soldiers in the war, so soldiers could send them home for "research". By the time the camps were closed in 1907, over half of the Herero and Nama populations had been wiped out.

Although a 1985 United Nations report declared it was an attempt at the first genocide of the 20th century, it was not until 2015 that Germany acknowledged there had been an attempt to exterminate the people of Namibia. Years of trauma have passed down from generation to generation, according to Esther Muinjangue, a Namibian politician and activist, speaking in a 2022 speech in Berlin while advocating for reparations.

In the decade after their freedom from the concentration camp, Herero women began adapting their fashion to their circumstances. Instead of loincloths, they began to wear full-length cloth dresses modeled after the Victorian-style dresses of the missionaries and colonists. The pointy leather ekori was replaced with a flattened, but no less elaborate cloth headgear: the otjikaiva, or "headgear made from fabric". Today, the dress and hat are worn with pride at major events.

Many artefacts and human remains stolen by German colonial officers and German civilians continue to be exhibited in German museums.

One ekori is shown at the Burg Mylau Museum, in Germany's southern Saxony region. It was donated in 1904 by Ernst Bernhard Kandler, a locksmith who sailed to the then-German Southwest Africa looking for a job.

According to the museum, its origins are still unclear, but because the donation date preceded the start of the genocide in 1904, the museum says it can be concluded that this ekori, at least, did not originate specifically from the war of extermination against the Herero. ■

Illustration note, by Namibian illustrator James Hango: *It is a hot afternoon, and two young Himba women are sitting under a shaded tree. They are helping each other fix their ekori. Community, tradition and custom are important to the Himba people. The ekori, although its form has changed over the years, is part of those traditions, helping to prepare young women for marriage. The green tree in this illustration symbolises the new life that is to come from their marriage.*


Illustration: James Hango
James Hango 2025

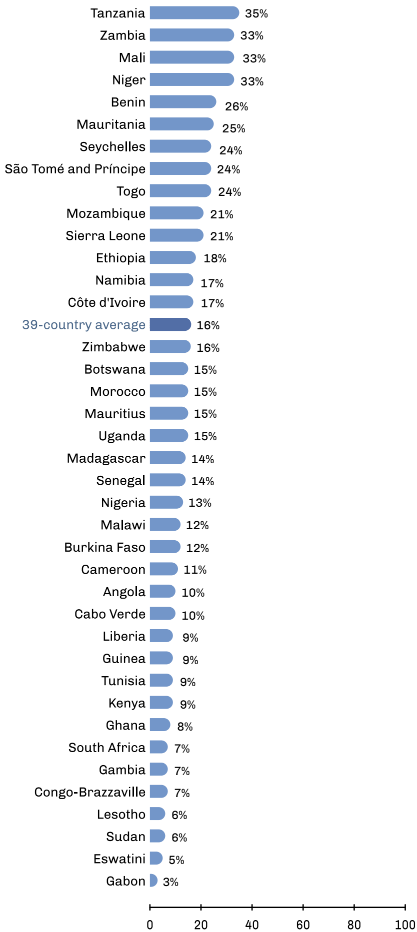
Inequality in action; inaction on inequality

Inequality of income and wealth is extremely high across most of Africa. World Bank estimates of Gini coefficients, a measure of income inequality, suggest that eight of the world's 10 most unequal countries (for which data exist) are in Southern Africa.

Extreme inequality isn't good for social cohesion, democracy, or economic growth. Yet Africans overwhelmingly see their governments as failing to reduce the gap between the rich and the poor. On average across 39 countries, only 16% give their government passing marks on addressing inequality, while 82% say it's doing "fairly badly" or "very badly." Among 17 issues on which respondents evaluated government performance, only inflation control gets a worse rating.

Tanzania (35%) is the only country where more than a third of respondents are satisfied with efforts to reduce inequality. Fewer than one in 10 agree in 12 countries, with Gabon (3%) and Eswatini (5%) at the tail end. As we might expect, the poorest are most disappointed in their governments: Only 12% give a thumbs-up, compared to 22% of the wealthy.

Approval of government performance on reducing inequality | 39 African countries | 2021/2023



Source: *Afrobarometer is a non-partisan African research network that conducts nationally representative surveys on democracy, governance, and quality of life. Face-to-face interviews with 1,200 to 2,400 people in each country yield results with a margin of error of +/- two to three percentage points.*

AFRO BAROMETER
Let the people have a say

The Berlinale is getting it right

Its cultivation of African filmmaking bore rich fruit at the festival's 75th edition in February.

Film Review
Wilfred Okiche

It is hard to think of a first-class film festival that has been as consistently inclusive as the Berlin International Film Festival. Of the big three, Venice is decidedly more interested in Oscar-friendly fare while the specialty focus for Cannes appears to be in francophone regions. This year's Berlinale, which began on 13 February, was just as consistent as ever in supporting African films and professionals on the global stage.

Senegalese-French auteur Mati Diop triumphed at last year's event, becoming the first Black person to win the Golden Bear (the festival's grand prize) for her art reparations documentary, *Dahomey*. And although there was no African film in the main competition this year, there was no lack of an African presence in Berlin.

In 2022, Imran Hamdulay was one of 200 film professionals invited to participate in Berlinale Talents, the festival's flagship development initiative. Three years later, Hamdulay returned with his first feature: *The Heart is a Muscle*, a standout in the festival's progressive Panorama section. Hamdulay wrote and directed this Cape Town-set drama, which explores modern masculinity and generational trauma. "I was a Berlinale Talent," said Hamdulay at a Berlin screening. "So this feels like a homecoming – it's an honour to be here."

The majority of the African filmmakers with feature films selected for this year's festival are debutantes. Most, like Hamdulay, were supported through the festival's industry development initiatives.

Rwandan director Philbert Aimé Mbabazi Sharangabo is also a Berlinale Talent alum. His promising debut feature, *Minimals in a Titanic World*, premiered in the more formally adventurous Forum section. It's a colourful if sparse depiction of the lives of young people in contemporary Kigali, and one of four African films at the festival sponsored by the Berlinale's World Cinema Fund (WCF). "We made a low-budget film," Sharangabo told *The Continent* in Berlin. "But the idea was everyone should be paid, so the support we got was appreciated."

Sharangabo's leading lady, Aline Amike, joined the Berlinale's acting studio programme after completing work on *Minimals*. Excited to be at the festival with a film she starred in, she told *The Continent* it was a transformative experience. "This

Film still from *Ancestral Visions of the Future*.
All Photos: Berlin International Film Festival

changes a lot – it creates a streak that legitimises my career even further."

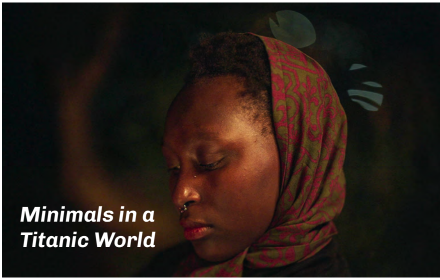
The WCF also supported the Panorama entry *Khartoum*, a creative, self-reflexive documentary about the lives and dreams of five residents of Sudan's capital, before and then during the civil war.

A collaboration between five filmmakers, *Khartoum* won €5,000 in prize money from the independent jury awarding the Peace Film Prize at the festival. The award goes to films that "distinguish themselves through a powerful message of peace and the skilful aesthetic execution".

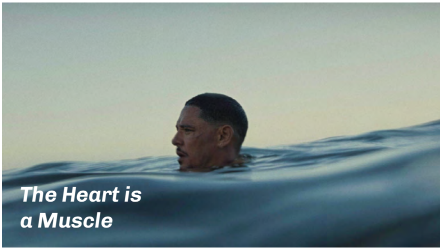
Then there was *The Settlement*, Egyptian director Mohamed Rashad's bleak labour exploitation drama about a young man working in an Alexandria factory as compensation for the accidental death of his father.

The most high-profile of the WCF-supported films is *Ancestral Visions of the Future*, the latest experiment by visionary Berlin-based Mosotho filmmaker Lemohang Mosese.

Playing in the Special section, Mosese's film is an intriguing mosaic of images and text, that establishes a haunting, poetic reflection on dislocation and belonging.



Minimals in a Titanic World



The Heart is a Muscle

These are themes that Mosese has long grappled with in his work. He told *The Continent*: "I am dealing with the same topic all the time: displacement, the land, my mother. But the language is always different, so is the rage, and usually the project finds its own language."

We can't just sit around and wait for debt relief

The debt crisis facing African nations is real. Here is what our governments can do about it.

Aimé Muligo Sindayigaya

Africa's national debt – the amount of money that our governments owe to creditors – reached $1.8-trillion in 2022, up 183% from 2010, according to the latest available figures from the United Nations Trade and Development agency. That increase is extraordinary but also explainable.

First of all, 60% of African countries are among the least developed. They need development financing because they can't generate enough revenue at home. Africa's average tax collections remain low, at just 16% of GDP.

Then, there is the succession of unexpected events, such as the global financial crisis in 2008, the pandemic in 2020, and the ongoing full-scale war in Ukraine that started in 2022. All of these exacerbated Africa's pre-existing social and economic difficulties, and meant that states had to borrow just to deal with these external shocks, while also investing in development.

Finally, development aid to Africa has declined. An increasing proportion of this aid is coming in the form of loans instead. And Africa's creditor composition has changed too. More of the continent's loans are from the private sector, which lends at higher interest rates compared to bilateral and multilateral creditors.

Whatever its triggers and drivers, the current Africa debt situation is alarming.

The number of African states under or at risk of debt distress doubled between 2014 and 2024. Africa's debt interest payments have also skyrocketed, from $61-billion in 2010 to $163-billion by 2024. While public debt has also increased in other regions like Asia and Oceania, Latin America, and the Caribbean, only in Africa has it outpaced GDP growth. Between 2019 and 2021, African states spent more on debt servicing than on health and education.

Growing calls for debt relief

Because many developing countries are struggling with debt payments, calls for relief are getting louder.

The most recent call came from the United Nations Development Programme, which says that the 4th International Conference on Financing for Development in June should focus on three key areas to reform financing at all levels. That is: access to an effective mechanism for restructuring loans for all nations when necessary; debt forgiveness for the poorest countries; and ways to lower the cost of borrowing for developing economies. Former African leaders made a similar proposal on the sidelines of a G20 finance meeting in South Africa in February.

Like the Initiative for Heavily Indebted Poor Countries, which provided debt relief to African countries in the 2000s, the new proposals depend on the goodwill of financiers: developed states and private creditors. But there are various steps African countries can and should take regarding debt that don't put the ball in someone else's court.

Action plan

African states must prioritise the fight against illicit financial flows. These are cross-border movements of money and assets that are illegal in their source, transfer, or usage. Stopping illicit cash flight may net Africa an estimated $89-billion each year.

African governments must also re-evaluate the tax expenditures intended to attract investment. Africa loses 2.5% of its GDP as a result of tax incentives to investors. In 2019 alone, sub-Saharan African countries sacrificed over $46-billion in tax income. That's more than they owe in debt service payments next year ($35-billion).

Inefficiency in government spending, which is higher in Africa than other regions, must also be addressed. It costs African nations more than 2.5% of GDP each year. Data from 2000 to 2017 shows that leaks in education and infrastructure spendings resulted in a loss of more than $40-billion per year.

African states must also be more transparent about their borrowing. Not only would this keep citizens informed about how their governments spend borrowed monies, but it has also been demonstrated that debt-transparent countries have higher credit ratings, reduced borrowing costs, and attract more foreign investment. Unfortunately, according to the World Bank's 2024 debt reporting heat map, just two African states – Burkina Faso and Benin – are transparent and have met all requirements by disclosing debt figures and documentation on national government websites.

Of course, all these reforms will require African nations to strengthen their institutions and governance. Poor institutional quality is one of the enablers of illicit financial flows in Africa and weak governance across public institutions are inefficient spenders. If the latter were rectified, African states could potentially recover more than 50% of the return on infrastructure investments and lower the interest rate premiums levied by creditors when the market perceives African countries as weak in governance.

These measures won't solve the debt crisis on their own. But they are a start – and mean that the continent will be ready to take advantage if and when a broader debt deal is agreed upon.

Aimé Muligo Sindayigaya is an economist with nearly 20 years experience in the financial services industry

THE QUIZ

Photo: Lionel Okito Fataki

1_What is the smallest country by area in continental Africa?
2_Who is the president of the Confederation of African Football?
3_Dharam Gokhool is which country's president?
4_What is the capital of the Central African Republic?
5_Bambara is a language native to which country?
6_ Which country was formerly the "Republic of Upper Volta"?
7_ What are people from Lesotho called?
8_What is Burundi's currency?
9_What is the smallest country in North Africa?
10_The Sozacom building (pictured) is located in which city?

0-3
"I think I need to start reading more newspapers."

4-7
"I can't wait to explore more of this continent."

8-10
"Don't be mad he'd never heard of Lesotho. Be sad he knows of it now."

HOW DID I DO? WhatsApp 'ANSWERS' to +27 73 805 6068 and we'll send the answers to you!

THE BIG PICTURE

Bling fan dangle: A model sports earwear riffing on Rosie the Riveter for a fashion show at Bangui's Missy Momo centre. The Central African Republic kicks off a season of culture this time each year.

Photo: Patrick Meinhardt/AFP

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