



NEW AGENDA

SOUTH AFRICAN JOURNAL OF SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC POLICY

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Do corporate investments entrench existing patterns of resource distribution?

INSIDE:

**The legacy of Fees Must Fall, ten years later
Is SA any further along the road to a national consensus?
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Shocked

Green energy and energy export, but no affordable electricity

Editorial by Martin Nicol

South Africa's encouragement of renewable electricity and the push for green hydrogen, driven by global demand, raises a critical question: Will this energy transition truly benefit local communities, or will it simply create a new form of resource exploitation?





Fred Cornell was a prospector who identified the diamond fields in Alexander Bay in South Africa's Northern Cape. In 1910 he wrote this, later published in his book, *The Glamour of Prospecting*:

The daily event [is] the departure of the miniature train carrying coke to O'okiep for the smelting out of the copper ore, which the return train brings back ... in hundreds of tons, ready for shipment to Europe to help swell the profits of that great quasi monopoly, the Cape Copper Company ... one cannot but deplore the fact that the many millions profit it has made since its inception some forty years ago have done so little towards the general development of Namaqualand, and that their railway-line of nearly 100 miles should have tended so little to open up the surrounding country. Indeed, but for the wharves, tugs, and primitive facilities for shipping copper at Port Nolloth, the mine at O'okiep, and the railway, Namaqualand generally is little the richer for the CCC. (1920, p. 95)

The copper is now depleted, and the even greater monopoly, De Beers, has left the diamond fields. Minerals are a wasting asset. When they have been exploited and mined out, they are gone. This is, however, not the case with a new natural resource that is about to come out of the Northern Cape – green hydrogen and its parent, renewable energy.

The Northern Cape has attracted “the lion's share” (IPPO, 2021 p.8) of the renewable energy projects undertaken by independent commercial generators of electricity in South Africa to date. A total of 47 of the 90 projects that are operational are in the Northern Cape. These comprise more than half of the capacity of all the projects initiated under the government's policy to allow independent electricity providers to supply power for the national grid. As much as 61% of the total number of jobs created by the programme since its inception in 2010 have been in the Northern Cape. These numbered 52,705 for the province up to March 2025. In onshore wind, solar PV, and concentrated solar power investment, the Northern Cape leads all the other provinces (IPPO, 2025; Supplemental file).

Stephanie Borchardt, in her article, “Extractive legacies, local struggles, and the pursuit of social justice: Green energy development in South Africa's Northern Cape,” questions whether the new wave of development could “genuinely uplift local communities, or will it replicate the ‘boom-and-bust’ cycles of the past?”.

There are already worrying signs that positive impacts on the local economies do not last after initial local employment to construct the wind and sun power plants and the supporting infrastructure.



Although the Northern Cape is sending its renewable electricity into the national power grid (and is set to provide it also for the local production of energy-intensive hydrogen for export industries), “none of the operating producers have addressed local energy poverty or incorporated community energy needs into the Social and Economic Development (SED) programmes” which they have committed to.

The underlying intention of SED and Enterprise Development (ED) interventions is “meaningful, long-term benefits for local communities”. In this context, affordable electricity for all communities should surely underpin the development platform to be created when renewable energy is the new resource being produced?

Renewable energy plants are being dotted across the whole Northern Cape area, with its tiny settlements and poor inhabitants. And tens of thousands of jobs are promised for a new deep-water port 50km from Port Nolloth, which is planned for the Boegoebaai Special Economic Zone (SEZ) with chemical plants and electrolyzers producing green hydrogen.

Borchardt states that “robust regulatory oversight is essential to ensure that development benefits are equitably shared”. Robust oversight is not something for which South Africa is specially known. And it is hard to establish what the rules for SED commitments are.¹ They seem to be little more than vague guidelines.

Renewable energy investors in the Northern Cape have already spent R1,921.4 million on SED and R579.9m on ED (IPPO, 2025). SED programmes ought to encompass community energy needs – but they do not. Borchardt provides incisive commentary on the issue, suggesting that oversight of the actual terms of the renewable energy programme itself is what is needed.

Specifically: “A just transition must begin with ensuring reliable, affordable energy access for the communities most directly affected by energy infrastructure development.”

Other authors have concentrated comment on why renewables are desperately needed “to keep the lights on” (Swilling, 2023), on Eskom’s grid challenges and on the effects on communities in Mpumalanga of decommissioning coal. In the Northern Cape, the transition could provide both a mechanism for local development and resolve the need to improve the miserable prospects of rural communities.



Photo by John Grobler © Oxpeckers Investigative Environmental Journalism.

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But disappointments are as common as hardships in the history of this region. The Cape Copper Company ceased operations in June 1919, just before Fred Cornell's book was published. He added a footnote: "This closing down of the only industry in Namaqualand caused endless suffering to the wretchedly poor inhabitants, and was followed by a general exodus of the population."

He calls Port Nolloth "that fag end of creation itself". Admittedly this slur came after he described a hellish journey down the coast from "Buchu Bay" – "...crammed with more discomfort than all the rest of the trip put together! ... We were in rags, and so frayed and blistered by exposure that we were not recognised by people who knew us well in the little dorp."

The attraction of the area now is, ironically, the sun and wind Cornell found so troublesome. PV solar and wind can provide renewable energy to produce "green hydrogen".

There is a picture in *Glamour* of "two strangely shaped mountains, known as the Buchu Bergen":

Directly below the steep face of Buchu Mountain we came across the most perfect little boat bay imaginable, surrounded by high rocks and almost circular, but with room only for a few lighters and small craft ... The whole coast is indescribably lonely and desolate, and, to add to its dreariness, scattered along the beach far above the high-water mark lie piles of driftwood, the accumulation of centuries... (p. 108)



The electrical energy that will become available from the investments in the power projects across the province will more than meet the Northern Cape's own needs, according to the Independent Power Producers Office (IPPO), "effectively making it a net exporter of electricity to other provinces in future" (IPPO, 2021, p.8).

This is the statement of an exploiter, not a developer. Northern Cape communities will have to look sharp.

In the second academic article in this issue Abdel-Hakeem Mohamed and Eden Jacobs contribute an analysis on China's trade, investment and cross-border payment mechanisms in the SADC region. This was one of the outputs from a seminar on the Changing Political Economy of Africa held at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) in 2024 with the support of the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS).

The commentary section of the journal contains contributions on disparate themes, some of which emerged from IFAA Forums. Shose Kessi reflects on the ten year anniversary of the "fallist" movement which began at the University of Cape Town with demonstrations against the legacy of Cecil John Rhodes, and then reverberated through student activism across South Africa and ultimately around the world.

Fred Hendricks takes up a current urgent debate on what is meant by academic freedom, and the appropriateness of 'university neutrality' in a time of extreme acts of state violence, including genocide.

IFAA staff member Bruce Kadalie and Boichoko Ditlhake from Kagiso Trust, who was the chairperson of the organising committee behind the Convention on National Dialogue of South Africa, elaborate on the presentations made at an IFAA Forum in August on the importance of the Social Compact, a timely intervention in the run-up to the National Dialogue later that month. Kenny Manduna weaves together the strands of a presentation he made to an IFAA Forum on artisanal and small scale mining in Africa.

Finally, we were deeply saddened by the death of Mary Turok, at the age of 92, who was one of the founding lights of both *New Agenda* and IFAA. We publish an inspiring tribute by her son Ivan, which



chronicles her lifetime of struggle against apartheid and in support of a better life for all.



Mary Turok, flanked by her son, Ivan, grand-daughter Caitlin (left) and daughter-in-law Elizabeth.
Photo supplied by Turok family.

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ENDNOTE

¹ The government office that runs the programme to procure investments from potential producers of renewable energy releases an enormous quantity of data on performance every quarter. The reports are thick on infographics, but the details of the requirements regarding Economic Development are available only to "potential bidders who are required to purchase" the Request for Pre-Qualification and Proposal (RFP) document – for R25,000. However, "the RFP does not specify any mandatory Economic Development qualification criteria", the requirements being "aligned with the concept of 'specific goals' in the Preferential Procurement Policy Framework Act" (IPPO, 2024, pp. 2, 13).

Extractive legacies, local struggles, and the pursuit of social justice

Green energy development in South Africa's Northern Cape

By Stephanie Borchardt

With its substantial solar and wind resources, South Africa's Northern Cape province has the potential to become a strategic hub for green energy development. As the province emerges as the centrepiece of South Africa's renewable energy transition, STEPHANIE BORCHARDT warns the energy boom could also present serious risks to socio-economic justice if historical patterns of exclusion emerge under the banner of sustainability.

Photo: Stephanie Borchardt



Extractive legacies, local struggles, and the pursuit of social justice

Green energy development in South Africa's Northern Cape

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Abstract

South Africa's transition to renewable energy, including green hydrogen development, is positioned as a pathway to sustainability and economic growth. However, this transition is characterised by persistent socio-economic inequalities, infrastructural limitations, and unevenly distributed benefits. This article critically examines the socio-political implications of large-scale renewable energy projects, particularly in historically marginalised regions such as the Northern Cape province. Employing an energy justice framework, the study explores how corporate-led energy transitions risk reinforcing patterns of resource dispossession and exclusion, rather than fostering equitable development. By interrogating the tensions between national energy ambitions and local realities, the paper highlights the need for greater institutional capacity, meaningful community engagement, and policy interventions that prioritise energy justice. The findings stress the importance of moving beyond extractivist paradigms to ensure a just and inclusive energy transition.

This is a peer reviewed article, published following a double blind peer review process.



Introduction

The global shift towards renewable energy has positioned South Africa's Northern Cape province as a strategic hub for green energy development, given its extensive arid landscapes and substantial solar and wind resources (Gauché et al., 2013; Ayodele et al., 2013). This has spurred the expansion of large-scale solar and wind farms, green hydrogen production initiatives, and renewed interest in critical mineral extraction. While these developments are widely framed by the government as drivers of economic growth, decarbonisation, and sustainable energy futures (Presidential Climate Commission [PCC], 2022; The Presidency, 2023), they also raise critical questions about social justice, particularly regarding land, governance, and socio-economic inclusion.

A just transition, as defined by South Africa's PCC, is one that builds economic and social resilience through “affordable, decentralised, and diversely owned renewable energy; equitable access to water”; a healthy environment; and inclusive land use, particularly for vulnerable groups (PCC, 2022: p. 7). The PCC's framework is based on the principles of distributive, restorative,¹ and procedural justice.

This article applies an energy justice framework, grounded in distributive, procedural, and recognition justice (Jenkins et al., 2016), to examine how large-scale energy transitions shape inclusion and exclusion in South Africa's Northern Cape. It draws on Laes et al.'s (2023) pragmatic dialogue model, which prioritises enabling stakeholders to voice moral claims, fostering genuine deliberation and pluralistic engagement rather than imposing predetermined solutions.

The global shift to green energy presents a profound opportunity for sustainable development and building a more equitable society, but ensuring its success is a moral imperative rooted in justice. The procedural framework presented here directly addresses these issues:

- Recognition justice ensures the acknowledgement of affected groups and their historical rights. It is also about recognising the underlying systemic injustices.
- Distributive justice demands a clear examination of the fairness of benefit and burden distribution.
- Procedural justice aims to identify and implement inclusive decision-making strategies, ensuring communities are actively engaged in discussions about their land and livelihoods, not merely presented with pre-determined plans.



The success of the green energy transition depends on ensuring it addresses these issues of fairness and justice, rather than focusing solely on technical and economic factors. As Sovacool et al., (2017: pp. 688-689) argue, energy systems often contribute to resource depletion, unfairly distribute negative effects (such as environmental damage), and reinforce exclusion or biased decision-making. They warn that if these justice issues are ignored, they may become accepted as the norm, perpetuating inequality in energy policies and energy development. This article highlights the moral dilemmas in energy development and explores how renewable energy projects intersect with local governance, economic vulnerabilities, and historical patterns of exclusion in marginalised communities.

This study draws predominantly on an extensive literature review of the institutional capacity of local municipalities in the Namakwa District,² green hydrogen research by Nzo and Mahabir (2023) and Parkin (2024), and fieldwork on the role of the Renewable Energy Independent Power Producer Procurement Programme (REIPPPP), which are shaping local socio-economic landscapes in host towns (Borchardt, 2023). This article argues that without meaningful attention to local participation, economic redistribution, and historical inequities, the green energy transition risks deepening longstanding structural injustices in the semi-arid Northern Cape province.

Contested landscapes: vulnerability and exclusion in the Northern Cape

The Northern Cape province (see Figure 1), South Africa's largest province, spans nearly 30% of the country's landmass yet remains sparsely populated, home to just 2.1% of the national population (Statistics South Africa, 2022: p. 4). Despite its vast mineral wealth, including diamonds, iron ore, lead, copper, and manganese, the province remains socio-economically marginalised. Mining contributes 24.6% of the Northern Cape's Gross Domestic Product (Trade & Industrial Policy Strategies, 2022), yet unemployment continues to rise,³ with 43% of residents now dependent on social grants as their primary source of income (Cowling, 2024).

Marked by arid landscapes, poor infrastructure maintenance, and recurring droughts, the province's development trajectory has long been shaped by colonial dispossession and extractive industries (Beinart, 2003; Penn, 2005; Walker and Hoffman, 2024). The economic decline of agriculture, once a cornerstone of local livelihood, has severely impacted municipal revenues and service delivery, particularly in smaller towns



Marked by arid landscapes, poor infrastructure maintenance, and recurring droughts, the province's development trajectory has long been shaped by colonial dispossession and extractive industries.

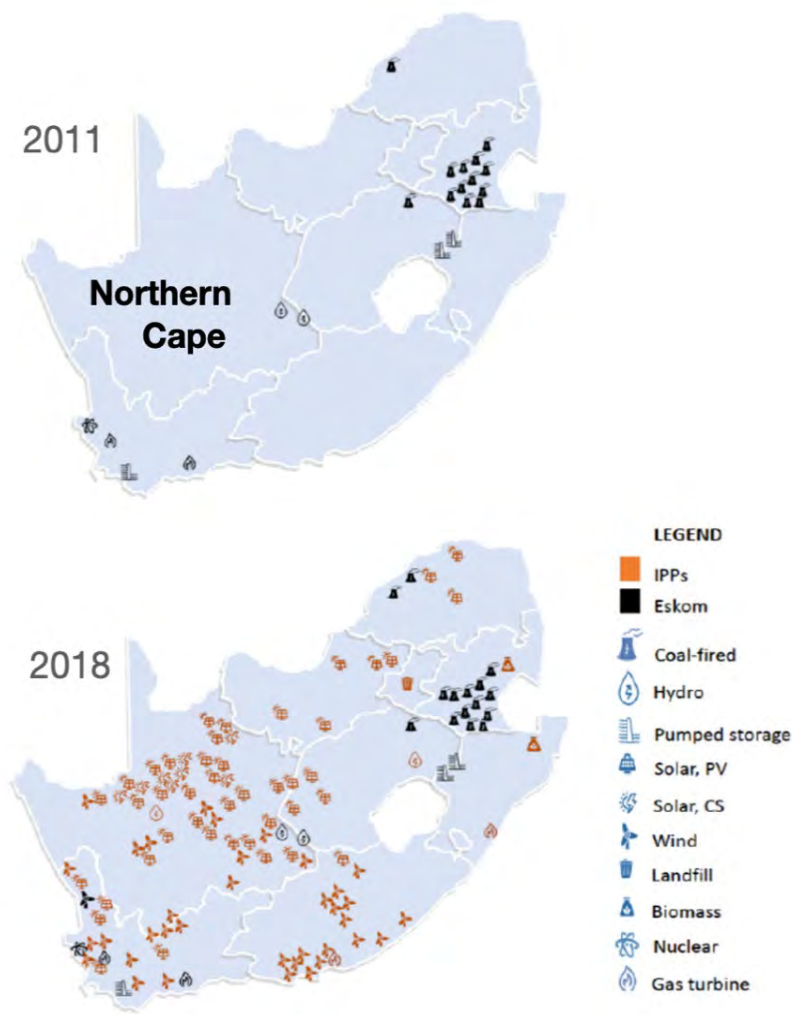
(Walker and Vorster, 2024). The result is a region that has long been exploited for its mineral wealth, yet remains deeply vulnerable to structural inequality and persistent development neglect.

Socio-economic household surveys conducted by the South African Research Chair in the Sociology of Land, Environment and Sustainable Development⁴ between 2016 and 2025 in Vanwyksvlei, Sutherland, Loeriesfontein, and Williston revealed widespread poverty, high unemployment, and significant reliance on state social grants. Additionally, social challenges such as substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, and school dropouts were prevalent across these towns, exacerbating existing socio-economic hardships (Eigelaar-Meets and Groenewald, 2025; Walker and Vorster, 2024; Chinigò, 2019; Gastrow and Oppelt, 2019).

The province's economic trajectory has long been defined by cycles of resource extraction. Historically, copper mining⁵ was central to the region, but it left behind lasting environmental degradation and socio-economic instability (Smalberger, 1969; Luttig, 2018). Similar boom-and-bust dynamics occurred in diamond mining along the Orange River and in Kimberley, where early industrial operations entrenched South Africa's racialised labour systems (Turrell, 1987). While diamond wealth benefitted mining companies and global markets, local communities bore the costs of resource depletion, dangerous labour conditions, and the collapse of mining economies (Turrell, 1987; Human, 2024b).



Figure 1: The Northern Cape stands out in this depiction of the change in the geographic distribution of South Africa's utility-scale generation plants since 2011



Source of maps: Power Futures Lab, UCT



Figure 2: Map of the Northern Cape province, indicating the five district municipalities and 27 local municipalities.



Source: Municipalities.co.za

South Africa's energy transition to renewable energy is vital for decarbonising the economy and improving energy security (Swilling, 2023). However, this shift comes with significant justice trade-offs. The current dominant approach is plagued by energy poverty, weak institutional capacity, and inadequate community engagement. These historical and socio-economic realities, therefore, form a critical backdrop for understanding the contemporary challenges of the green energy transition. The influx of large-scale renewable energy projects into a region marked by persistent poverty and extractive economic legacies raises a central question: Will this new wave of development genuinely



uplift local communities, or will it replicate the ‘boom-and-bust’ cycles of the past?

This article now turns to an analysis of two case studies, Sutherland⁶ and De Aar,⁷ to explore how the implementation of the country's renewable energy programme has, in practice, intersected with household energy poverty.

Renewable energy for whom? Local realities and the limits of development mandates

The Independent Power Producer (IPP) programme, launched in 2010, aimed to diversify South Africa's energy mix and promote socio-economic development. Through the REIPPPP, projects are required to invest in local development initiatives initially within a 50km radius of the solar or wind farm, broadly encompassing education, social welfare, healthcare, and enterprise development (IPPO, 2021). Yet, the extent to which these investments genuinely benefit local communities remains debatable. With more than 104 renewable energy IPP projects having reached financial close as of March 2025 (IPPO, 2025), questions remain about whether these investments translate into meaningful, long-term benefits for local communities or merely serve as compliance-driven contributions with limited impact on structural socio-economic challenges.

Corporate-led development often follows a ‘magic bullet’ approach, framing technical solutions as fixes for entrenched socio-economic issues (McEwan et al., 2017). Key concerns include contested definitions of ‘community’ (Tait et al., 2013), the disconnect between corporate initiatives and local policies (Borchardt, 2023), top-down governance that undermines local participation (Marais et al., 2017), and corporate-driven branding efforts that fail to address structural inequalities (Malope and Borchardt, forthcoming).

Despite promises of socio-economic upliftment, renewable energy projects in the Northern Cape have yielded unequal benefit distribution (Nzo, 2021; Borchardt, 2023; Pressend, 2023). These development efforts are often concentrated around renewable energy sites, creating what McEwan et al. (2017: p. 42) term “islands of development... in a larger sea of under-development”. IPPs often donate tablets or sports equipment to schools, yet these initiatives fail to address core development needs. While IPPs cannot be held responsible for resolving local development failures, an obligation assigned to local municipalities, many communities near renewable energy projects



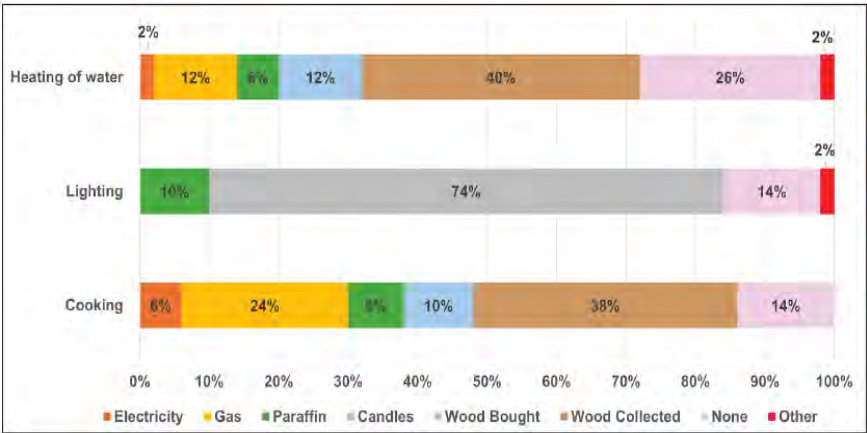
continue to experience energy insecurity. They face high electricity tariffs, limited energy access, and dependence on alternative fuels such as firewood, paraffin, and gas (Borchardt, 2023).

A household socio-economic survey conducted by the SARCHI Chair in Sociology of Land, Environment and Sustainable Development (Eigelaar-Meets and Groenewald, 2025) revealed a striking paradox in Sutherland, a small Northern Cape town. Despite nearly universal access (89,7%) to electricity, residents continue to rely heavily on firewood, gas, and charcoal as primary heating sources.

In Sutherland, one of South Africa’s coldest towns,⁸ residents face significant heating challenges. The Sutherland socio-economic survey (Eigelaar-Meets and Groenewald, 2025) found that only 10.6% of households use electric geysers. While most residents have access to electricity, they rely on firewood, gas, and charcoal for heating because of the high cost of running electrical appliances.

Borchardt (2023) documented similar patterns in Kareeville, a low-income residential area in De Aar. Despite having access to electricity, most households struggle with affordability and resort to alternative energy sources when the prepaid meters run out (see Figure 3). Energy poverty affects 58% of surveyed households (N=50), who reported insufficient electricity for cooking and water heating due to cost constraints. Though 86% used electric kettles for heating water, many still relied on firewood, gas, or paraffin stoves as backups.

Figure 3 Usage of secondary sources of energy in Kareeville residential area, De Aar (2018)



Source: Borchardt (2024:274).



Despite De Aar and Sutherland being surrounded by Renewable Energy Independent Power Producers (REIPPs) mandated to invest locally, none of the operating IPPs have addressed local energy poverty or incorporated community energy needs into their Social and Economic Development (SED) programmes (Danny, IPP representative, interview, August 2024). This highlights a stark disconnect between large-scale renewable energy production and the everyday energy struggles of local communities, representing missed opportunities to enhance household energy security through measures such as subsidised electricity or affordable solar home systems (Borchardt, 2024: p. 274).

Large-scale projects, such as wind and solar farms, frequently fail to deliver meaningful local economic improvements (Eberhard and Naude, 2016; Funder et al., 2021). While significant capital has flowed into the sector, local communities often see minimal long-term gains in employment, skills development, and infrastructure (McDaid, 2016; Mohlakoana et al., 2024).

This disparity is reflected in community narratives, such as that of a De Aar resident whose partner worked in the solar sector during its initial construction phase:

People thought they would work for a long time, and then the contracts just ended... you're happy that people have work, but it was just for that time [during construction]. People want permanent work to keep going, so things are good for three or four months, and then it's bad again, much worse, because you get used to the salary, and then it just disappears. (Maria, local resident, interview, April 2019).

According to Pandarum (2023), despite the launch of the REIPPPP more than 15 years ago, South Africa only introduced its first Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) course for renewable energy in 2022. The slow pace of labour development and local capacity-building raises concerns that renewable energy investments may continue to mirror extractive economic models rather than fostering inclusivity. Unless these structural disparities are addressed, the transition risks reinforcing existing economic asymmetries, where benefits flow disproportionately to investors while local communities remain marginalised.

The lack of local ownership further raises concerns about green extractivism, as communities have little control over project implementation. Studies by McDaid (2016), Mohlakoana et al. (2024) and Nzo (2021) on the IPP programme highlight elite capture and a lack of



transparency, concentrating benefits among investors rather than residents. Given that IPPs are private companies prioritising profit, expecting them to prioritise community development is unrealistic.

Similarly, Müller and Claar (2021) argue that South Africa's REIPPPP prioritises transnational capital over distributive and procedural justice. While localised ownership models could offer greater socio-economic benefits, current policies do not adequately address justice concerns. To foster a just transition, they recommend:

- Implementing regional bidding rounds to ensure local participation.
- Strengthening local ownership incentives in renewable energy projects.
- Increasing investment in renewable energy research and skills development.
- Enhancing stakeholder engagement to promote procedural justice.

Without addressing these structural inequalities, South Africa's renewable energy transition risks replicating past extractive models, leaving local communities in the dust while international investors reap the rewards. A more inclusive approach is needed to ensure that the transition prioritises both local development and community empowerment.



Sign near the Okiep Copper Mine.

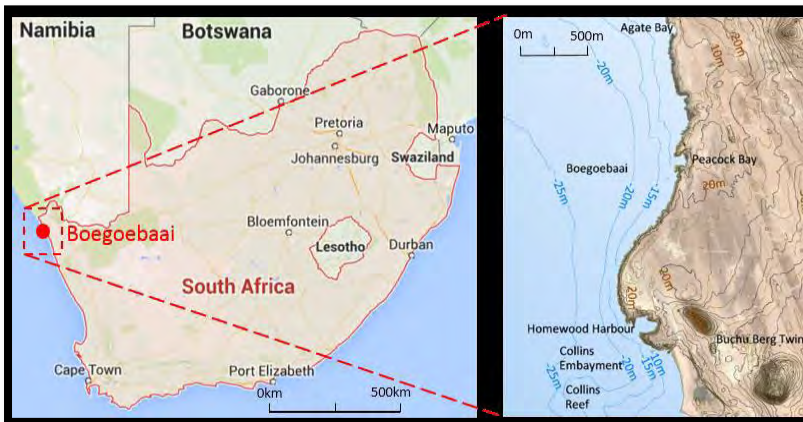
Photo: Stephanie Borchardt



Green hydrogen and the risk of new extractivism

The Northern Cape has also emerged as a focal point for South Africa's green hydrogen ambitions (NCEDA, 2023), with Boegoebaai as a strategic hub for large-scale production and export (see Figure 4). Positioned along the Atlantic coastline, Boegoebaai has been earmarked for a deepwater port to facilitate hydrogen exports, primarily to European and Asian markets seeking low-carbon energy sources (Schreiner et al., 2024). These projects form part of South Africa's broader Just Energy Transition (JET) Plan, yet their implementation raises pressing questions about local socio-economic benefits, land use, and community participation.

Figure 4: Map of South Africa showing the Boegoebaai area designated for a deep-water port.



Source: Global Africa Network,
<https://www.globalafricanetwork.com/featured/boegoebaai-port-and-green-hydrogen-cluster/>

Green hydrogen is produced via the electrolysis of water, a process that splits water molecules into hydrogen and oxygen (World Economic Forum, 2021). The designation 'green' signifies that the electricity used for this process is sourced from renewables, such as solar or wind power, resulting in a zero-carbon production method (Department of Science and Innovation, 2021).

The Boegoebaai Special Economic Zone (SEZ), near Port Nolloth in the Richtersveld municipality close to the Namibian border, is planned as South Africa's largest green hydrogen export hub. It will include 10 GW of renewable energy and 5 GW of green hydrogen production



(Department of Science and Innovation, 2021). The success of South Africa's green hydrogen sector depends on more than just its potential to boost the economy and meet climate goals (Presidential Climate Commission, 2022; Salma and Tsafos, 2022). It must also address significant national challenges, including a heavy reliance on coal (Baser, 2023), limited grid capacity (Burkhardt, 2024), and widespread energy poverty affecting 43% of households (Mohlakoana and Wolpe, 2021).

South Africa's push for green hydrogen, driven by global demand, raises a critical question: Will this energy transition truly benefit local communities, or will it simply create a new form of resource exploitation? Researchers are concerned that these large-scale projects, with their top-down decision-making and exclusion of local voices, could repeat the patterns that have historically marginalised communities (Kalt et al., 2023). Governance challenges, financial constraints, and the exclusion of locals from decision-making processes suggest that, without significant structural reforms, green hydrogen projects risk becoming yet another iteration of externally controlled resource exploitation (Nzo and Mahabir, 2023; Parkin, 2024).

This 'green extractivist' model, focused on serving European climate goals, risks turning the Northern Cape into a 'sacrifice zone', a concept originally used by Fox (1999) to describe regions where resources are exploited for the benefit of distant centres, leaving local communities with environmental damage and persistent inequality. Contemporary interpretations of the term refer to areas where resources are extracted for global markets, while entrenched local inequalities remain unaddressed (Scott and Smith, 2017; Zografos and Robbins, 2020).

For the green hydrogen projects to be truly *just*, they must move beyond an extractive model and become a source of local empowerment, rather than replicating current resource extractive models (Nzo and Mahabir, 2023; Parkin, 2024). This is not merely a moral imperative; it is a strategic necessity. Projects that fail to address local justice concerns risk social unrest, protest, and operational disruption. Additionally, adopting ethical practices provides regulatory foresight, helping companies avoid legal battles by staying ahead of new land use and community consent laws. A genuinely inclusive and redistributive approach offers a more sustainable model for companies, one that fosters long-term stability, community trust, and shared benefit. Industries that align with these frameworks, rather than circumvent them, are more likely to secure long-term operational licences and community goodwill.



The governance of communal land designated for hydrogen infrastructure in the Namakwa District has become a contentious issue, particularly due to the role of Community Property Associations (CPAs). A CPA is a legal entity established in South Africa under the Communal Property Associations Act 28 of 1996. Its primary purpose is to allow communities that are beneficiaries of the land reform, restitution, and redistribution programmes to collectively acquire, hold, and manage land. The CPA provides a legal framework for these communities to own and control their land as a group. In 1998, a claim was lodged by the Richtersveld Community, located in the Namakwa District in terms of the Restitution of Land Rights Act 22 of 1994. A communal property association called the Richtersveld Sida!Hub was formed to pursue the claim (The Commission on Restitution of Land Rights, 2017).⁹ The Richtersveld Sida !Hub Communal Property Association (RCPA) successfully reclaimed 85,000 hectares of land from the state-owned diamond company, Alexkor, in 2003 after the Constitutional Court ruled that their dispossession was due to racial discrimination.¹⁰

New challenges have emerged with the proposed green hydrogen export hub on land claimed by the RCPA, and the government seeking to lease 60,000 hectares to German interests (Human, 2024a). As legal custodians of these lands, this CPA faces internal governance disputes and struggles with limited financial and administrative capacity, making it difficult to negotiate equitable terms with developers (Human, 2024a; Human, 2024b). This has led to growing concerns about land security, transparency, and fair representation in decision-making processes, while weak municipal oversight mechanisms further limit the ability of local governments to ensure accountability (Namakwa District Municipality, 2023; Khai-Ma Municipality, 2023; Richtersveld Municipality, 2024; Kamiesberg Municipality, 2024; Nama-Khoi Municipality, 2024).

Parkin's (2024) fieldwork reveals deep-seated mistrust within the Richtersveld Local Municipality, where tensions between activists, local municipal officials, and the RCPA have intensified. Activists accuse the municipality and the RCPA of withholding critical information and downplaying concerns surrounding the green hydrogen project to prevent public opposition (Protect The West Coast, 2024). Andy, a land claim activist, voiced frustration, arguing that the RCPA prioritises land sales over community interests and fails to provide transparent communication about ongoing negotiations (local land activist, interview, April 2024).



Conversely, the municipality and RCPA perceive activists as disruptive, believing they are intent on exposing governance failures or provoking conflict, leading to cautious and guarded interactions (Parkin, 2024). This mutual distrust has created a fractured dialogue, further complicating efforts to establish inclusive governance structures that balance economic development with community rights.

The environmental implications of this development are also significant. Local fishers fear the deep-sea port will disrupt marine ecosystems and traditional livelihoods (NCEDA, 2023; Parkin, 2024), with one fisherman stating, “[A]ll the decisions were made top-down. Our coastlines are destroyed because of past mines...our graves are still there; they are ocean grabbing!” (Liam, local fisherman, interview, April 2024). This conflict highlights a tension between industrial development and ecological resilience in a region often mischaracterised as a “wasteland” (SANParks, 2025).¹¹

The Richtersveld, where green hydrogen production is planned, is a site of exceptional ecological and cultural significance. Its rare plant diversity, dramatic geology, and traditional land-use practices underpin its Unesco World Heritage status. Beyond biodiversity, it is a living cultural landscape shaped by generations of Nama pastoralists who have sustained the land through careful stewardship. The tension between economic ambition and conservation imperatives raises pressing questions about land sovereignty, environmental justice, and the pursuit of equitable development.

Tools like the Green Hydrogen Community Development Toolkit (Wesso et al., 2023) offer a framework for inclusive development. However, for it to be effective in places like Boegoebaai and Port Nolloth, such a framework must be meaningfully integrated into local governance structures and economic systems. Without this contextual adaptation, the toolkit risks falling short, potentially reinforcing a “sacrifice zone” in which international investors thrive at the cost of locals.

Distributive justice: who benefits from renewable energy?

Achieving genuine inclusion, empowerment, and justice for marginalised communities requires policy frameworks that move beyond surface-level financial redistribution. In the Northern Cape, renewable energy projects have generated substantial capital flows and attracted significant investment. Yet, this wealth remains disproportionately concentrated among private developers and international investors, while local communities continue to shoulder the burdens of underdevelopment and economic precarity.



Despite repeated promises of socio-economic upliftment, many renewable energy initiatives have deepened existing inequalities. Anticipated benefits, such as employment, infrastructure upgrades, and support for local enterprise, have often failed to materialise in meaningful or sustained ways (Malope, 2022; Nzo, 2021). Most jobs vanish after the construction phase, leaving residents with limited post-construction employment and few pathways for skills development or long-term work (McEwan, 2017; Borchardt, 2023). These patterns not only entrench economic exclusion but also foster social fragmentation and growing disillusionment with renewable energy as a vehicle for justice.

Recognitional justice: addressing historical land dispossession

McEwan (2017) highlights that renewable energy transitions are inherently spatial and political, particularly in South Africa where they reshape land ownership and governance. These transitions revive longstanding land disputes, as renewable energy developments recentre land as a critical resource, once again framing the question around ownership and control. While white landowners, particularly farmers, benefit substantially from leasing land to IPPs, local municipalities find themselves unable to generate sufficient revenue from electricity and water sales and are thus increasingly reliant on infrastructure grants to operate (Borchardt, 2023).

In 2021, a local municipality in the Karoo introduced renewable energy service tariffs, or augmentation fees, to fund infrastructure upgrades for new developments. The municipality planned to charge IPP developers a once-off fee, but farmers were also held responsible as property owners (Borchardt, 2023). However, three farmers stated in interviews that their contracts with IPPs exempted them from additional taxation, and they refused to pay the tariffs. This dispute over land values



Richtersveld National Park, Unesco World Heritage site.

Photo: Flickr



and property went to court, the outcome of which was not known at the time of writing (Jaco, local farmer, interview, April 2021).

The exclusion of communities and communal land users from key green hydrogen discussions in the Northern Cape reflects broader patterns of dispossession. CPAs in the Namakwa District, for example, are consistently sidelined, while land-use decisions remain in the hands of national policymakers and private developers. This mirrors historical extractive economies, where local voices were systematically excluded from decision-making. Walker (2024) argues that effective land reform must go beyond simple redistribution. Instead, she contends reform should integrate sustainable resource management, inclusive governance, and local empowerment to not only redress historical injustices but also to build resilience in the face of rapid social change.

Procedural justice: the politics of participation and decision-making

Beyond economic injustice, the lack of transparency in renewable energy agreements and inadequate consultation processes undermine procedural justice. My research on institutional capacity in the Namakwa District highlights that local municipalities lack the technical expertise, financial resources, and legal support to negotiate fair agreements with energy developers. In Boegoebaai, green hydrogen consultations have been criticised for their top-down approach, where affected communities were presented with pre-determined project plans rather than included in meaningful discussions about land use, environmental risks, and benefit-sharing (Nzo and Mahabir, 2023; Parkin, 2024).

As discussed in Nzo and Mahabir (2023), community activists have observed that the public consultation process for green hydrogen development in Boegoebaai closely mirrors their past experiences with public engagement in mineral extraction projects. They note similarities in how participation is initiated, raising concerns about whether community voices are genuinely considered in decision-making. Although some consultation has taken place, Nzo and Mahabir (2023) and Parkin (2024 p. 42) emphasise the absence of meaningful public engagement in green hydrogen development. As one resident noted, “[I]f you ask people what green hydrogen is, they only answer ‘job.’ Even after attending meetings, they still don’t know what it actually is... just job” (Liam, fisherman, interview, April 2024).

This comment highlights a persistent concern: that community engagement efforts prioritise economic promises over substantive



education about the technology's broader implications. When support for green hydrogen is driven primarily by the hope of employment, rather than an informed understanding of its social, environmental, and technical dimensions, the risk is clear: if the 'job' is the only perceived benefit, what happens when those jobs fail to materialise?

Nzo and Mahabir (2023) highlight how exclusionary practices have undermined the consultation process for green hydrogen development in Boegoebaai. They cite allegations of political interference in the Richtersveld CPA, the entity responsible for leasing land to green hydrogen developers, which has eroded trust among stakeholders. Environmental activists also argue that some CPA members were influenced by political elites in exchange for cooperation, exacerbating divisions within the community. This distrust has manifested in resistance amongst CPA members to leasing agreements for the project.

Poor consultation and fragmented community ownership risk politically and economically isolating rural communities, raising concerns about the inclusivity and equitable distribution of benefits in South Africa's just energy transition. Achieving a just transition requires more than symbolic inclusion; it demands structural change to ensure meaningful participation and decision-making power for local communities. Without dismantling systemic barriers that prevent equitable negotiations, green energy development risks reinforcing historical inequalities rather than addressing them.

Towards a just green energy future

The urgency of decarbonising South Africa's energy system has brought unprecedented attention to renewable energy projects, particularly under the REIPPPP. Yet, as several studies have shown, without careful attention to justice concerns, the green energy transition risks replicating and deepening existing inequalities. Large-scale projects, while contributing to national energy generation and climate goals, have too often prioritised corporate returns over local benefits, leaving host communities marginalised from decision-making and with limited improvements in livelihoods or energy security.

To address these shortcomings, this article draws on the pragmatic and pluralist framework for energy justice proposed by Laes et al. (2023). Their approach rejects a one-size-fits-all checklist of justice principles, instead advocating for an integrative, context-sensitive application of multiple justice dimensions, distributive, procedural, and recognitional, while acknowledging the justice trade-offs and tensions that inevitably arise. The following actionable recommendations could



steer South Africa's energy transition towards greater equity and inclusivity. Key recommendations include:

Prioritising energy security and affordability: A just transition must begin with ensuring reliable, affordable energy access for the communities most directly affected by energy infrastructure development. While IPPs have operated in South Africa for over a decade, their contribution to local energy security remains uneven, as the provision of electricity to local communities is often not a consideration. From a distributive justice perspective, robust regulatory oversight is essential to ensure that development benefits are equitably shared. This includes making community consultation genuinely participatory rather than a procedural formality and requires socio-economic development programmes to be fully transparent and open to public scrutiny, enabling communities to track funding flows, evaluate tangible outcomes, and hold developers accountable.

Institutionalising meaningful community participation: Laes et al. (2023) emphasise the importance of fair, inclusive decision-making processes. This principle demands more than once-off consultations; it requires mandatory legal frameworks for community engagement, backed by capacity-building initiatives that equip local actors with the skills and knowledge to negotiate fair agreements. Such measures ensure that affected communities have a genuine voice in shaping the energy projects that alter their landscapes and livelihoods.

Integrating land justice into energy planning: Acknowledging and addressing South Africa's history of land dispossession is central to recognitional and restorative justice. Energy policy should embed land justice principles, including fair compensation, secure tenure arrangements, and opportunities for affected communities to derive lasting benefits from land-use changes. This approach moves beyond mere mitigation of harm towards actively repairing historical injustices.

Maximising local economic benefits: Energy projects should be structured to generate sustained local economic value through decent work, skills development, and infrastructure investment. True empowerment requires going beyond financial transfers to build local capacity, enabling communities to participate as active agents in the transition. Vocational training, technical support, and inclusive economic policies can ensure that renewable energy developments become drivers of broad-based local development.

Strengthening public oversight and accountability: Laes et al.'s (2023) pragmatic model highlights the need for workable institutional



arrangements that can adapt over time. Strengthening the capacity of local and district municipal governments to regulate, monitor, and enforce social and environmental commitments is essential. Adequate financial and technical support should be provided to these institutions to ensure that justice principles are implemented in practice, not only in policy.

Conclusion

The Northern Cape's green energy boom presents both profound opportunities and serious risks for socio-economic justice. As the province emerges as the centrepiece of South Africa's renewable energy transition, historical patterns of exclusion threaten to resurface under the banner of sustainability.

Drawing on Laes et al.'s (2023) pragmatic and pluralist framework, this article has applied the principles of distributive, procedural, and recognitional justice to critically assess these developments. The analysis shows how corporate-led projects frequently prioritise export-oriented markets and profit over local development, while governance structures remain fragmented and community engagement is too often procedural rather than transformative. Without deliberate redistribution of economic benefits, structural reform of decision-making processes, and recognition of historical and cultural claims to land, the transition risks entrenching rather than alleviating inequality.

A genuinely *just* green energy future demands a fundamental reconfiguration of governance to embed local agency, sustained investment in capacity-building so communities can negotiate and benefit on equal terms, and the design of projects that create lasting local economic value. Integrating justice considerations at every stage of energy planning is not an optional add-on; it is the condition for aligning South Africa's decarbonisation goals with its constitutional commitment to equality. Only through such an approach can the green energy transition advance both environmental sustainability and social equity, rather than perpetuating the injustices it seeks to overcome.

INTERVIEWS

(All names are pseudonyms.)

Maria, resident - interview, April 2019

Jaco, farmer - interview, April 2021

Liam, fisherman - interview, April 2024

Danny, IPP representative, manager - interview, August 2024

Andy, land activist - interview, August 2024



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ENDNOTES

¹ Restorative justice is described by the PCC (2022:9) as follows: "historical damages against individuals, communities, and the environment must be addressed, with a particular focus on rectifying or ameliorating the situations of harmed or disenfranchised communities. It is about redress: healing people and the land".

² Richtersveld Local Municipality, Nama-Khoi Local Municipality, Kamiesberg Local Municipality, Khâi-Ma Local Municipality.

³ The Northern Cape recorded the sharpest rise in unemployment in South Africa during the second quarter of 2025 (Statistics South Africa, 2025). For more see: <https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0211/P02112ndQuarter2025.pdf>

⁴ To view the reports see: <https://cosmopolitankaroo.co.za/research-outputs-2/research-reports/>

⁵ The copper mine near Okiep in Namaqualand, proclaimed a mining district in 1852, was the first industrial mine in South Africa (Smalberger, 1969).

⁶ Located in the Karoo Hoogland Municipality.

⁷ Located in the Emthangeni Municipality.

⁸ With temperatures reaching -16°C .

⁹ For more see: https://pmg.org.za/files/220608Richtersveld_CPA_-_Presentation.pptx

¹⁰ The case *RICHTERSVELD COMMUNITY v ALEXKOR LTD & ANOTHER* [2004] 3 All SA 244 (LCC). For more See: <https://cer.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Richtersveld-Community-v-Alexcore-Ltd.pdf>

¹¹ SANParks (2025) describes the region on its website as "a desolate and forbidding landscape, seemingly devoid of life, except for some people dotted along the horizon." This characterisation reinforces perceptions of remoteness, yet the Karoo holds significant ecological and cultural value that is often overlooked.

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Changing political economy in Africa

China's trade, investment and cross-border payment mechanisms in the SADC

By Abdel-Hakeem Mohamed & Eden Jacobs

As China's economic interaction with African countries surpasses that of traditional Western trading partners, emerging financial infrastructure for trade, investment, and cross-border payments is repositioning the continent within the global economy. ABDEL-HAKEEM MOHAMED & EDEN JACOBS describe these as political tools that reduce the continent's reliance on Western intermediaries and strengthen Sino-African economic relations.

Part of China's Belt and Road Initiative – supplying desalinated water across the Namib desert.



Changing political economy in Africa

China's trade, investment and cross-border payment mechanisms in the SADC

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**Abstract**

This article explores the changing political economy of Africa through a focused analysis of China's trade, investment, and cross-border payment mechanisms in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region. Over the past two decades, China has surpassed traditional Western partners such as the United States in trade volume and foreign direct investment flows – in terms of jobs and capital invested – across Africa. China has played a significant role in Africa's development, however concerns persist about the motives driving its engagement on the continent. These concerns have sparked debates around neo-colonialism, raising the question of whether China's involvement will ultimately hinder Africa's progress or contribute to its sustainable development. The SADC region provides an ideal case for investigating these dynamics due to its institutional maturity, regional integration efforts, and the pivotal role played by South Africa.

In this article we examine how mechanisms like the Pan-African Payment and Settlement System and the SADC Real-Time Gross Settlement System are shaping regional financial architecture and facilitating Sino-African economic relations. The analysis further interrogates the ongoing geopolitical tensions and the introduction of digital currencies such as China's e-CNY.

The study concludes that while China's growing footprint offers opportunities for development and trade diversification, African states must strengthen regulatory frameworks and strategic capacity to derive mutual benefit and safeguard national interests. This article argues that regional payment systems and trade agreements under the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) agreement will be central in repositioning Africa within a multipolar global economy.

Keywords: South African Development Community, China, Trade, Investments, Cross-border payments



Introduction

China's expanding economic influence in the Global South is reshaping the dynamics of African trade and investment, particularly within the Southern African Development Community (SADC). This article investigates how China's trade and investment patterns intersect with evolving cross-border payment mechanisms in the SADC region, focusing specifically on how systems such as the Pan-African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS) and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) contribute to trade efficiency and regional integration. These mechanisms, though still developing, offer pathways for aligning African economic interests with China's commercial strategies in ways that enhance sovereignty and reduce dependency on external financial systems.

Africa's political economy has historically occupied a contradictory space within the global capitalist system that is both marginalised and essential. As Büscher (2015) notes, the continent has long experienced extractive relationships characterised by "boom-and-bust" cycles of foreign interest, driven largely by the demand for its raw materials. This marginalisation is rooted in colonial-era exploitation and continued through post-independence structural adjustment policies that prioritised liberalisation and debt servicing over domestic development (Oloruntoba & Falola, 2020). These externally imposed frameworks entrenched Africa's role as a supplier of commodities and constrained its influence in global trade negotiations.

In 2025, the African political economy is seen to have somewhat moved away from the colonialist and imperialist position it had for decades. Based on the above authors' views, we deduce African nations are increasingly asserting autonomy through regional integration initiatives, economic diversification, and South-South cooperation. China has emerged as a critical partner in this transformation, underpinned by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has supported infrastructure and industrial development across the African continent (Anami, 2024).

Unlike traditional Western aid, China's financial engagement often lacks conditionalities and aligns with African governments' aspirations for sovereignty and non-interference (Brautigam, 2020). This transformation is not only driven by external actors but also by Africa's internal push for self-reliance. Initiatives such as AfCFTA and PAPSS reflect a growing determination to reduce the use of foreign currencies and foster financial inclusion through local currency transactions. The SADC Regional Real-Time Gross Settlement system (SADC-RTGS) symbolises a regional commitment to more efficient, real-time trade



settlements. Together, these financial frameworks represent more than economic reforms, they are instruments of political and economic agency.

The global order has experienced mounting geopolitical tensions, a resurgence of protectionism, and increasing competition among powers like China, the United States, and Russia. Gopinath (2024) argues that global trade and investment flows are shifting due to geopolitical tensions, supply chain diversification, and reduced reliance on the US dollar. In this context, Africa's low share of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) reflects diversification rather than a decline in traditional partners, with China's rising presence signalling a broader global realignment. Unlike the historically extractive Western approach, China's engagement aligns with emerging economies' expanding roles and Africa's strategic importance. Furthermore, US President Donald Trump's 'America First' approach weakened multilateralism and left space for emerging economies to deepen their footprint in regions like Africa. Meanwhile, global conflicts from Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to Ukraine and Palestine, have disrupted supply chains and raised the more concerning issue of social justice and the dignity of human rights. In this context, Africa has emerged not as a passive participant, but as a contested area for economic and political influence.

While the US leads in the number of FDI projects (89 across the continent), China surpasses the US in both capital investment and job creation. Over the past five years Chinese investment has generated more than 102,000 jobs, accounting for 15% of all FDI-related employment in Africa (Ernst & Young, 2024). Although the United Arab Emirates leads overall capital investment at US\$44billion, China followed closely as one of the top three investors (third behind the United Kingdom), outperforming the US in capital deployed (Ernst & Young, 2024). China's rise as Africa's largest trading partner, surpassing the US by 2009 and reaching US\$282billion in bilateral trade by 2023 compared to US total goods trade with Africa which were an estimated \$71.6billion in 2024, marks a significant reorientation in global economic alignments (NAAMSA, 2024; USTR, 2025).

Why the SADC region?

The SADC serves as an ideal case for analysing China's growing economic footprint in Africa. As one of the continent's most institutionally advanced blocs, the SADC has implemented key mechanisms like the SADC Free Trade Area and the SADC-RTGS system, which facilitate liberalised trade and real-time financial transactions (Gawe, 2021).

**Figure 1: Map of the SADC region**

Source: Konstantinus et al. (2019).

By 2012, 85% of intra-regional trade among SADC member states was tariff-free, while the RTGS system, adopted by all members, has become central to the region's financial infrastructure (SADC, 2025; SARB, 2025).

China's influence in the region has grown significantly. In 2022, bilateral trade between China and South Africa reached US\$56.7billion (SARB, 2023). This highlights a shift in Africa's political economy, where traditional Western influence is giving way to China's expanding commercial and financial engagement. However, this relationship also poses risks as concerns over rising debt, limited transparency, and continued dependence on resource exports and imported Chinese goods raise questions about the sustainability of these economic ties (Brautigam, 2020). We argue that these concerns not only lack credible evidence, they also do not differ much from the concerns of trading with the West, as highlighted by Brautigam (2020).

The SADC's diverse composition, ranging from resource-rich states like Angola and the DRC to industrial economies like South Africa,



offers a microcosm of broader continental trends. While East Africa often garners attention for major BRI projects and digital finance innovations such as M-Pesa¹ (Kalenzi & Kwon, 2017), Southern Africa's evolving financial systems remain underexamined (Sabola, 2024). Despite the growing literature on Africa-China relations, most studies focus either on trade and investment volumes or on the political implications of Chinese engagement, while cross-border payment systems are often treated as technical matters separate from geopolitical analysis. What is missing is an integrated account of how payment infrastructures mediate Africa's economic sovereignty and shape external partnerships. By situating PAPSS and SADC-RTGS within the broader story of China's trade and investment footprint, this article addresses that gap, showing how financial systems are both enablers of Chinese engagement and instruments of African agency.

We use a conceptual framework rather than a single theory, linking three themes: China's growing trade and investment in Africa (especially the SADC), Africa's shifting political economy, and the role of cross-border payment systems in shaping these engagements. Payment systems are treated not as neutral tools but as political infrastructures that influence external engagement. The article's contribution lies in connecting usually siloed debates into one coherent analysis. By situating PAPSS and SADC-RTGS in the wider Africa-China relationship, this article offers a conceptual bridge that links geopolitical analysis with financial integration studies, turning multiple themes into a strength rather than a weakness.

The article moves from a discussion of why the SADC was chosen as a case to examine, to an examination of China's trade and investment strategy and investment in the SADC region. It then examines the AfCFTA and the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), before turning to cross-border payment systems including PAPSS, SADC-RTGS, and China's approach to payments, and ends with the implications and conclusion.

China's trade and investment strategy in Africa

In recent decades China has significantly expanded its global economic reach, with a major focus on trade and investment in Africa. Over two-thirds of China's African trade involves nearly all 54 African countries and has sparked debates regarding China's intentions and impact on the continent (Zhu, 2025). Although Western powers such as the European Union and the US have traditionally dominated FDI in Africa, China's increasing role marks a shift in the global economic order and highlights the rise of non-Western actors in influencing Africa's



development path (Donou-Adonsou & Lim, 2018). China's interest and involvement in Africa is driven by the continent's natural resources, growing markets, and increasing geopolitical influence, aligning with the broader narrative of South-South cooperation. Ties were strengthened in the 1950s after China established the People's Republic in 1949 when African countries began to gain independence. This period marked China's diplomatic outreach to newly independent African states, reflecting a foreign policy centred on solidarity with developing countries and anti-colonial movements (Moinogu, 2015).

China's trade and investment strategy in Africa has evolved from traditional aid models to partnerships focused on economic development and mutual benefit. The formal recognition of China-Africa relations gained momentum in 2006 at a major summit in Beijing attended by 48 African leaders, although historical ties predate this event. Since the early 2000s, China has adopted a "trade-not-aid" philosophy (Kobylnski, 2012), embedding economic cooperation into its broader development strategy.



The Chinese-built Nairobi-Mombasa railway, southeast of Nairobi, Kenya.

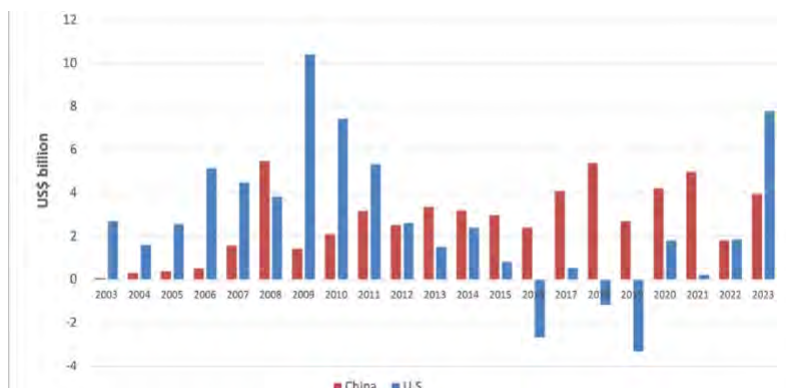
Photo by Shutterstock.

The BRI, launched in 2013, has had a notable impact on Africa, with 52 out of 54 countries signing Memoranda of Understanding to participate (Gu et al., 2022). The strategy involves the creation of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and Economic and Trade Cooperation Zones (ETCZs), replicating elements of China's own development path. Between



2020 and 2021, China further aligned the BRI with Africa's Agenda 2063 under the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), reinforcing long-term cooperation in areas such as infrastructure, regional integration, and digital connectivity (Munyati, 2024). This alignment signals a sustained commitment to supporting Africa's socio-economic transformation. Since 2013, China has surpassed the US in FDI flow in Africa, with major recipients including Niger, South Africa, Angola, Morocco, and the Republic of Congo (China Africa Research Initiative, 2024)

Figure 2: Chinese FDI vs. US FDI to Africa, flow



Source: China Africa Research Initiative, 2024.

From 2003 to 2012, US FDI flow generally exceeded Chinese FDI flow, except during the 2008 recession, as seen in figure 2. However, since 2013, China has overtaken the US as the leading source of FDI flow in Africa, except for the year 2023. This rivalry highlights Africa's growing strategic importance in global geopolitics. As Chinese investment continues to expand, African countries must negotiate favourable terms that support long-term development and economic independence. The future impact of Chinese FDI flow will depend on Africa's ability to effectively manage, assess, and balance the benefits of foreign capital while minimising dependency and resource exploitation risks.

China's trade and investment strategy in Africa has evolved from traditional aid models to partnerships focused on economic development and mutual benefit.



Figure 3: Majority African trade partners, China versus US 2003-2023



Source: Zhu, 2025

Over the past two decades, Africa's economic ties have shifted significantly toward China. As seen in Figure 3, by 2023, 52 out of 54 African countries, 97% of the continent, traded more with China than with the US, compared to just 18 countries (35%) in 2003 (Zhu, 2025). This shift has largely been driven by China's sustained investment in infrastructure, development finance, and natural resource trade. In contrast, the US trade with Africa has declined, with only Lesotho and Eswatini maintaining stronger ties with the US. The data reflects not just changes in trade volumes, but also a broader geopolitical shift, highlighting China's growing influence in the Global South and its expanding role in African markets (Zhu, 2025).

China-Africa relations: the SADC's geopolitical context

China's current economic slowdown has raised serious questions about its capacity to sustain overseas infrastructure financing, posing risks for African development, particularly within the SADC region. A potential decline in Chinese engagement may disrupt ongoing progress in countries like South Africa, Angola, Zambia, and Mozambique, which



have benefitted from significant Chinese investments in mining, energy, and transport under the BRI, even though China's FDI in Africa remains uneven. In 2020, 63% of Chinese FDI was concentrated in just ten countries, including South Africa, the DRC, and Zambia, while many others received minimal investment, often lower than accompanying loans (Gu et al., 2022). This targeted strategy prioritises resource-rich or geopolitically strategic states.

At the same time, domestic governance challenges in Africa complicate the sustainability of China's influence. To ensure long-term benefits, African governments must strengthen regulatory and institutional frameworks, while Chinese companies must adopt stronger environmental and social governance practices, particularly in sectors like forestry and land use (Jianquan & Cook, 2015). These reforms are essential for balancing development goals with sustainability and mitigating the uneven outcomes of external investment.

Trade and investment in the SADC region

China's trade and investment footprint in the SADC region demonstrates a strategic, multi-sectoral approach that has fostered economic growth. South Africa exemplifies this engagement through its "comprehensive strategic partnership" with China, formalised in 2010 following the 2000 Pretoria Declaration (Alden & Wu, 2014). Chinese-funded projects like the Hisense factory and the Freeport Saldanha SEZ have generated thousands of jobs and attracted significant capital investment, particularly in the Western Cape (Brandstories, 2023). At the 2024 China Job Fair held in Johannesburg, it was announced that frameworks like FOCAC and BRICS facilitated over \$25 billion in investment and supported approximately 400,000 jobs (Preuss, 2024; Maromo, 2024).

In Zambia, Chinese investment surged after the liberalisation of the mining sector in the 1990s, aligning with structural reforms encouraged by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (Carciotto & Chikohomero, 2022). Major infrastructure projects such as the Tazara railway and various energy plants reflect China's contribution to Zambia's development. However, the dominance of state-owned enterprises and the focus on resource extraction have sparked concerns about economic sovereignty and debt exposure (Vines & Wallace, 2023).

Angola represents another key example, where oil-backed loans following the civil war positioned China as the country's second-largest trading partner. Since Angola joined the BRI in 2014, Chinese investment



has reached close to US\$12billion, supporting sectors such as energy (Cash, 2024). Angolan officials have praised the developmental ethos of this partnership, particularly in light of recent agricultural cooperation (Yeping, 2024).

Tanzania's trade with China has deepened with a five-year export growth rate of 12.2% despite a decline in 2022, and in 2024 a summit with more than 800 Chinese firms highlighted growing interest in manufacturing and telecoms (TanzaniaInvest, 2024). China's investment in the DRC has primarily focused on the cobalt and copper mining sectors, significantly contributing to the country's infrastructure development (Peterson et al., 2025). This partnership is rooted in the 2008 Sicomines joint venture between Chinese firms and the Congolese government, valued at \$6billion in 2009, which exchanged mining rights for infrastructure development. As of 2024, Chinese commitments to infrastructure projects, including roads and hospitals, reached \$7billion, reinforcing China's role as the DRC's largest investor by 2025 (Peterson et al., 2025). These cases reflect China's evolving role in the SADC's development and the need for African governments to ensure investments align with national priorities and long-term sustainability.

The AfCFTA and AGOA as catalysts for trade and investment

The AfCFTA offers a transformative platform for promoting Pan-Africanism, strengthening intra-African value chains, and boosting trade in finished goods. These goals are essential for reducing African nations' reliance on external economic and political actors, particularly in trade relationships with dominant partners like China (Ngundu, 2025). The AfCFTA aims to unify trade negotiations, lower trade deficits, and drive economic diversification and sustainable development. Its emphasis on a more integrated continental market fosters regional industrial growth, infrastructure development, and the freer movement of goods, services, and skilled labour, which reduce transaction costs and improves competitiveness for small and medium-sized enterprises.

To enhance trade and investment ties between the SADC and China, the AfCFTA agreement, institutional capacity, and enforcement mechanisms must be consistently strengthened. This will allow the SADC region to negotiate from a position of collective strength and capture more value before exporting raw materials, particularly in light of China's dominant role in the region's extractive sectors and existing trade imbalances. The AfCFTA thus presents an opportunity for mutually beneficial economic relations, where Chinese-targeted FDI can support industrialisation, local capacity building, and technology transfer through



coordinated partnerships (Calabrese, 2024a). Moreover, the AfCFTA provides a continental framework that relies on Regional Economic Communities (RECs) like the SADC to harmonise trade rules and deepen commitments. Rather than creating integration on its own, it builds on existing progress, complementing regional industrial growth, infrastructure development, and freer movement of goods, services, and labour. Strengthening the AfCFTA's institutional capacity can further support the SADC's efforts, allowing the region to negotiate collectively and capture greater value amid China's dominant role in extractive sectors and existing trade imbalances

Simultaneously, changes to the US's AGOA illustrate a shifting geopolitical landscape. AGOA has historically supported US-Africa preferential trade and governance ties since 2000, but its future relevance depends on its ability to align with Africa's growing emphasis on regional integration and economic self-determination (Panchia, 2024). As global powers like China and the US vie for influence, Africa must strategically position the AfCFTA to reinforce sovereignty as well as advance its development priorities.

In light of the above, we argue that to fully realise the potential of agreements such as the AfCFTA agreement and the unilateral preferential trade framework offered by the US's AGOA, Africa must address a foundational challenge that is often overlooked such as the efficiency and sovereignty of its cross-border payment systems. While the AfCFTA aims to reduce tariffs and harmonise trade rules to promote intra-African trade, such goals are limited without complementary financial infrastructure that allows fast, affordable, and secure transactions.

Given that the cross-border transactions in the growing trade between China and Africa are for the most part still being settled in US dollars (Usman & Xiaoyang, 2024), there is a pressing need to shift toward regional mechanisms like PAPSS and the SADC-RTGS. These systems reduce dependency on foreign intermediaries and enhance Africa's ability to negotiate equitable terms in global trade. In this way, cross-border payments serve not merely as technical tools, but as enablers of a more autonomous, resilient political economy in the SADC region. The following sections highlight the global overview of current cross-border payment initiatives brought forward by China and Africa.



Chinese-funded large scale road construction in Kampala, Uganda.

Photo by Mohamed Robin Nieuwenkamp, Shutterstock

Overview of cross-border payment initiatives

In this article, cross-border payments refer to financial transactions in which the sender and recipient are based in different countries. These payments can involve individuals, businesses, or governments and typically include trade settlements, remittances, and capital transfers. They may be conducted in different currencies and often require intermediaries, such as correspondent banks, to facilitate the exchange and settlement. Cross-border payment systems are essential for the smooth functioning of international trade and investment, facilitating the transfer of funds across borders in a timely, cost-effective, and secure manner. In the context of Africa's shifting political economy these systems play a central role in shaping the efficiency and equity of economic relations.



The SWIFT system (established in 1973) is currently the dominant payment mechanism used by countries for international transactions (SWIFT, 2023). Although SWIFT is globally accepted, it is often expensive and slow, particularly for developing countries. This has driven the development of regional alternatives tailored to Africa's integration goals and the realities of emerging markets.

In the SADC region, where trade potential is often constrained by inefficient financial settlement systems, building interoperable and inclusive payment infrastructure is not merely a technical solution, it is a strategic necessity. Globally, emerging technologies are challenging the dominance of legacy systems like SWIFT. Blockchain-based platforms such as RippleNet offer real-time settlements, though African use remains low (Bossone & Ardic, 2021). Central Bank Digital Currencies (CBDCs), notably China's digital yuan (e-CNY), are also gaining traction in current cross-border trials through the mBridge initiative² with the Bank for International Settlements (BIS) and regional partners (BIS, 2021). These efforts reflect a broader global movement to reduce reliance on the US dollar, strengthen financial autonomy, and build resilient financial ecosystems.

The inefficiencies of the SWIFT system mentioned above serve as good reasons for slowly moving away from it. However, we argue that there is a bigger issue at hand that has further exacerbated this push towards alternative cross-border payment initiatives and the diminishing use of SWIFT. Rising concerns over US dollar dependence, especially after sanctions on Russia in April 2022, have driven Russia to accelerate de-dollarisation by trading in Chinese yuan with China and Indian rupees with India (Salikhov, 2023; Siddiqui, 2023). Observing this situation from afar, Africa needs to not only learn from current developments but also start implementing strategies to mitigate the risks and consequences in case one day the US decides to impose unilateral sanctions or limit Africa's influence in the global economy. As global payment systems evolve, developing regions in Africa and particularly the SADC bloc must consider how these changes impact their trade relationships, financial inclusion goals, and strategic partnerships, especially with countries like China that are investing heavily in digital infrastructure.

China's approach to cross-border payments in Africa

China's expanding economic footprint in Africa has prompted both regions to reconsider how cross-border payments are structured. Despite bilateral trade reaching a record \$282 billion in 2023, the majority of China-Africa trade is still settled in US dollars, exposing both sides to currency risks and limiting financial autonomy (Usman & Xiaoyang,



2024). In response, China has begun promoting the yuan (RMB³) for trade settlements through bilateral currency swap agreements, aiming to facilitate local currency use and reduce transaction costs. Notably, countries such as Nigeria, South Africa, and Egypt have signed swap deals with the People's Bank of China (Calabrese, 2024b). Nigeria's 2018 agreement, worth ₦720billion (about \$2.4billion), was designed to support direct RMB-naira transactions (Usman & Xiaoyang, 2024). However, interest has been modest due to infrastructure gaps and persistent trade imbalances, which limits the practical use of the yuan in African markets.

China's introduction of its digital currency, the e-CNY, under the Digital Currency Electronic Payment system, marks a more ambitious step. First piloted domestically and showcased during the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, the e-CNY includes features like QR codes and offline functionality aimed at enhancing digital payment efficiency (BIS, 2021). Cross-border trials were held via the mBridge project with the BIS and regional central banks. Though not yet active in Africa, China is laying the groundwork through digital infrastructure investments by firms such as Huawei and Alibaba Cloud in countries such as Kenya, Egypt, and Nigeria (Tang et al., 2024). These developments signal China's intention to embed the yuan and its digital variant more deeply into global trade, potentially reshaping financial integration with regions like the SADC.

Cross-border payment systems in Africa

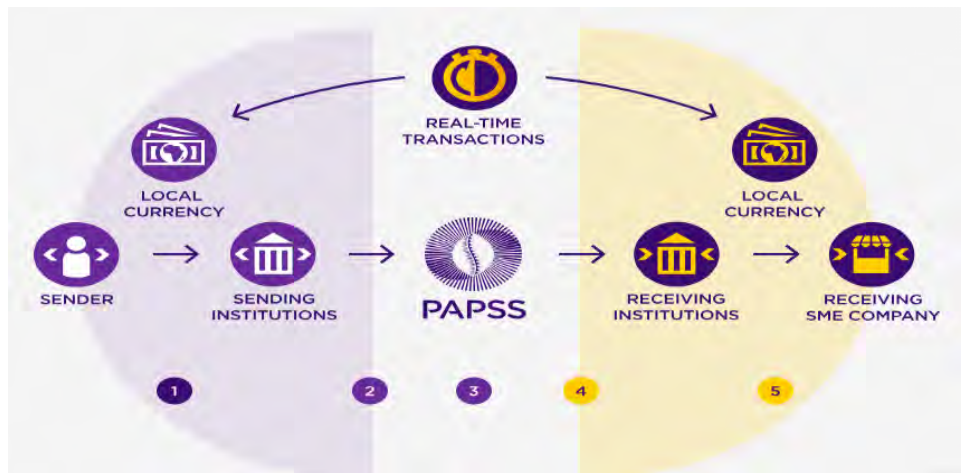
Pan-African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS)

As Africa advances economic integration under the AfCFTA, the PAPSS has emerged as a vital mechanism for financial sovereignty and trade facilitation. Developed by Afreximbank in collaboration with the AfCFTA Secretariat, it enables real-time cross-border transactions in local currencies, eliminating the need for costly and time-consuming conversions into foreign currencies like the US dollar or euro (Afreximbank, 2023). First piloted in the West African Monetary Zone, PAPSS is now expanding to other regions to address persistent challenges such as high transaction fees, exchange rate volatility, and delayed settlements. Allowing businesses and service providers to receive payments in their local currencies while centralising the clearing process, simplifies trade and promotes broader financial inclusion (Uneca, 2023). Backed by institutional support from the African Union, central banks and financial bodies, PAPSS is strategically positioned to complement regional initiatives and foster a more harmonised African financial ecosystem. Together with the AfCFTA, PAPSS represents a significant step toward reducing Africa's dependence on external financial systems



and building a resilient framework for intra-African trade and sustainable economic development.

Figure 4: How PAPSS works



Source: *Pan-African Payment and Settlement System, 2025.*

Figure 4 illustrates the operational flow of PAPSS. It begins when the originator initiates a payment in their local currency through a bank or payment service provider. This instruction is sent to PAPSS, which performs the necessary validations before forwarding it to the recipient's financial institution. The recipient's bank then clears and delivers the funds in the beneficiary's local currency. This process addresses longstanding trade barriers by reducing logistical delays, improving liquidity management, enhancing financial inclusion, and supporting greater transparency in intra-African trade (Pan-African Payment and Settlement System, 2025).

PAPSS usage in Africa began with a successful pilot in six countries – Nigeria, the Gambia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana, and Guinea – where live transactions were completed instantly (Muleya, 2024). This milestone connected six independent currencies and legal systems, though full integration within West Africa remains incomplete due to the Franc zone's backing by the European Central Bank. By May 2024, two years after its launch, 13 African central banks, more than 115 commercial banks, and 10 payment switches had joined PAPSS, with an additional 115 banks in the pipeline (Muleya, 2024). This demonstrates the recognition by commercial banks of the need for a unified, harmonised payment system to address interoperability challenges.



Figure 5: Central African banks connected to PAPSS by May 2024

Bank	Country	SADC member country
Central Bank of Nigeria	Nigeria	No
Bank of Sierra Leone	Sierra Leone	No
Central Bank of Liberia	Liberia	No
Bank of Ghana	Ghana	No
Central Bank of The Gambia	The Gambia	No
Central Bank of Guinea	Guinea	No
Bank of Botswana	Botswana	Yes
Central Bank of Zambia	Zambia	Yes
Central Bank of Tanzania	Tanzania	Yes
Reserve Bank of Malawi	Malawi	Yes
Bank of Uganda	Uganda	No
National Bank of Rwanda	Rwanda	No
Central Bank of Seychelles	Seychelles	Yes

Source: Authors own depiction with data from Pan-African Payment and Settlement System, 2025.

Figure 5 lists the 13 African central banks that had connected to PAPSS by May 2024, their host country and whether they are SADC members. However, while PAPSS aims to contribute and accelerate integration in Africa, the adoption of PAPSS faces several challenges such as fragmented payment systems, trust issues, minimal operationalisation, and cybersecurity concerns which further complicate its implementation. Furthermore, currency conversion issues, exchange rate fluctuations, and operational risks also affect the system's efficiency (Muleya, 2024). Key to note is that South Africa has yet to adopt PAPSS, despite being the country that stands to benefit the most from reduced transaction costs and increased intra-African trade, given that it supplies more than 80% of the continent's manufactured goods (Mutizwa, 2024).

SADC-regional Real-Time Gross Settlement system (RTGS)

Within the SADC, cross-border payment systems have been developed to facilitate regional trade and financial integration. The SADC-RTGS system, formerly known as the SADC Integrated Regional Electronic Settlement System (SIRESS), was launched in 2013 to enable real-time settlement of cross-border payments among participating member states using the South African rand (ZAR) as the settlement currency (SARB, 2025).



By June 2023, the SADC-RTGS system had processed more than three million transactions valued at ZAR11.77trillion (USD 692.97billion), covering 15 of 16 member states (excluding Comoros) and 90 banks (SARB, 2023). Operated by the South African Reserve Bank (SARB), it enhances payment speed and security while reducing reliance on external banks. However, its dependence on the South African rand limits inclusivity for countries whose currencies are not based on the rand and integration with systems like PAPSS. The Common Monetary Area (CMA) – which unites South Africa, Lesotho, Namibia, and Eswatini in a rand-based monetary union – is a critical factor underpinning the SADC-RTGS (Wang et al., 2007). By ensuring currency convertibility, lowering transaction costs, and building trust in the rand, the CMA provided the foundation for SADC-RTGS to initially operate with the rand as its common settlement currency. Despite these limitations, SADC-RTGS remains one of Africa's most robust regional systems, with strong potential to support multicurrency trade under the AfCFTA.

Figure 6: Transactions settled through the RTGS system



Source: Southern African Development Community, 2023.

In figure 6, we see that by February 2023, the SADC-RTGS system had settled 2,879,019 transactions worth R11.18trillion (SADC, 2023). As of June 2023, South Africa led with 17,570 transactions (R82.9billion), followed by Eswatini with 6,386. A total of 90 banks participated, settling 43,867 transactions valued at R188.7billion that month, as seen in figure 7 (SARB, 2023).

**Figure 7: Summary of transactions per country, June 2023**

Country	Number of participating banks, including Central Banks	Total number of settled transactions	Total value of settled transactions (ZAR mil)
Total for Angola	6	55	5,940.67
Total for Botswana	4	4,449	5,527.00
Total for DRC	3	1	0.00
Total for Eswatini	5	6,386	13,758.91
Total for Lesotho	5	4,823	26,299.47
Total for Madagascar	1	-	-
Total for Malawi	9	1,372	376.90
Total for Mauritius	3	139	2,405.25
Total for Mozambique	7	382	240.51
Total for Namibia	5	3,413	55,439.52
Total for Seychelles	1	43	1.68
Total for South Africa	10	17,570	82,917.68
Total for Tanzania	6	172	54.50
Total for Zambia	10	4,686	1,031.35
Total for Zimbabwe	15	377	688.69
Total for SADC RTGS	90	43,867	188,747.40

Source: South African Reserve Bank, 2023.

Implications for Africa's political economy amidst China's growing economic and financial integration

In light of the above discussion, we assert that Africa's political economy is shifting dramatically as China asserts itself as a central actor in the continent's development path. This transformation must be understood against the backdrop of a waning Western relationship with Africa, particularly under the current US administration. With Donald Trump's presidency, US foreign policy toward Africa is seen to be marked by strategic neglect and transactional diplomacy, weakening longstanding aid frameworks and leaving gaps in trade engagement. While initiatives like AGOA continue to exist at least until September 2025, they are marred by its inconsistent renewals and stringent conditionalities as it imposes strict eligibility criteria such as market reforms and high labour standards. The logic is that African countries will liberalise and reform their economies to qualify and maintain AGOA eligibility.

China has filled the strategic and financial gap left by declining Western engagement in Africa with clarity and practical tools. In 2023, China-Africa trade reached a record \$282billion – four times that of the US-Africa trade in the same year – securing China's position as the continent's top trading partner (South, 2024).

What distinguishes China's engagement is not just scale, but its facilitation of financial integration. Bilateral currency swaps, such as the \$2.4billion agreement with Nigeria, enable direct local currency



exchanges and reduce reliance on the US dollar (Usman & Xiaoyang, 2024). Additionally, China's digital yuan (e-CNY) and its inclusion in the mBridge cross-border payment initiative reflect a broader ambition to bypass dollar-based systems like SWIFT and support financial sovereignty. Our arguments above thus explicitly assert that cross-border payments serve a dual role: on the one hand, they empower Africa and the SADC particularly to negotiate with external actors like China from a stronger position by reducing reliance on Western intermediaries; on the other, they create channels through which China can deepen its commercial and financial presence by embedding the RMB and digital yuan in regional settlement.

African internal innovation is seen in PAPSS, developed with Afreximbank and the AfCFTA, which allows real-time payments in local currencies (Afreximbank, 2023), while the SADC-RTGS processed ZAR 11.77trillion (USD 692.97billion) in transactions by June 2023 (SARB, 2023). However, challenges remain as SADC-RTGS relies heavily on the South African rand and lacks full interoperability with PAPSS, creating structural asymmetries. Harmonising these systems is crucial to realising a more autonomous, multicurrency African financial architecture.

Unlike many Western models, which are often conditional on governance reforms, China's approach emphasises pragmatism, policy non-interference, and mutually negotiated outcomes (Brautigam, 2020). This shift is not merely transactional, it is strategically transformational. It enables African governments to reimagine development trajectories on their own terms, using China's expanding financial tools as leverage to enhance institutional capacity and regional economic integration. To this end, Africa is not passively navigating between great powers; rather, it is actively asserting its agency through frameworks like the AfCFTA and PAPSS. Together with China's evolving commercial presence, these initiatives can lead to a decisive step toward a more multipolar global order anchored in trade sovereignty, diversified finance, and structural resilience.

Conclusion

This article has examined the evolving political economy of Africa with a particular focus on China's trade, investment, and cross-border payments in the SADC. While China's engagement has traditionally centred around infrastructure and commodity trade, its influence now extends to the architecture of financial integration, shaping how Africa positions itself in global markets.



We argue that payment systems such as PAPSS and the SADC-RTGS system are not merely technical solutions to settlement challenges, they are possible political instruments that determine how external economic relationships unfold. Their development has a dual effect: first, they strengthen the SADC's collective bargaining capacity by reducing reliance on Western intermediaries; and second, they create entry points for China's expanding use of the RMB and the digital yuan.

Recognising this dual dynamic is crucial. Cross-border payment systems do not simply reflect Africa's attempt to insulate itself from external shocks as they also frame the modalities through which Chinese capital and trade are channelled into the region. Strengthening and harmonising these systems therefore holds strategic value; it allows the SADC to safeguard its sovereignty while also ensuring that Chinese investment contributes to long-term, mutually beneficial development. In this way, Africa's evolving financial infrastructure is central to its redefinition of global economic agency in an era of multipolarity.

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BIOGRAPHIES

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ENDNOTES

¹ M-Pesa, launched in Kenya in 2007, is a mobile money transfer and financial services platform that allows users to send, receive, and store money using their mobile phones. It has become a pioneering model for digital financial inclusion across Africa.

² mBridge is a central bank digital currency (CBDC) project led by the BIS Innovation Hub, together with the central banks of China, Hong Kong, Thailand, and the UAE. It aims to enable faster, cheaper, and more secure cross-border payments.

³ The Renminbi (RMB) is the official currency of China. The basic unit of the renminbi is the yuan (or CNY) – Ed



Academic freedom for some is academic freedom for none

A response to Nithaya Chetty

By Fred Hendricks

Nithaya Chetty, the Dean of Science at Wits University, writing in his personal capacity, contributed a discussion piece to the *South African Journal of Science* provocatively entitled “Should our universities respond to geo-political conflicts around the world?”

Referring specifically to “the Israeli–Palestinian conflict,” he called for higher education institutions to be neutral in global conflictual situations. FRED HENDRICKS’ response considers the implications ‘neutrality’ would have for the realisation of academic freedom, especially in the context of ongoing racialised inequality in the university sector in South Africa.



*Tänka fritt är stort men tänka rätt är större:
Thinking freely is great, but thinking right is greater
Thomas Thorild, 1794, University of Uppsala, Sweden.*

Introduction

In March 2025, Nithaya Chetty, the Dean of Science at Wits University, wrote a commentary piece in the *South African Journal of Science* asking “Should our universities respond to geo-political conflicts around the world?” (Chetty, 2025).¹ Referring specifically to the ongoing genocidal massacres in Palestine and in the context of widespread university outrage at the atrocities (including at the University of Witwatersrand), he called for higher education institutions not to issue statements and to be neutral in conflictual situations. Writing in his personal capacity, Chetty positions himself as the voice of reason amidst the contending viewpoints at universities and he provides a justification for university neutrality by saying, “Some individuals are so invested in the political outcome of this conflict that they cannot see the folly of their ways” (Chetty, 2025, p. 2).

This response offers a critique of Chetty’s position as part of the dominant discourse on academic freedom in South Africa which is located very firmly within a legalistic framework of constitutionalism and rights with virtually no reference at all to the abiding reality of extreme inequality in the higher education landscape and further afield. It is a decontextualised discourse and therefore singularly inappropriate in providing a compelling case for academic freedom. In a deeply divided environment, the virtues of academic freedom can only effectively be extolled if they take account of this context.

Agreement with Chetty

I agree with Chetty when he says,

Showing but a cursory interest in the conflicts in Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo now is a feeble attempt to retrofit our concerns there, when there has previously been no genuine interest at many of our universities. This comes across as being insensitive and insincere, and very much an afterthought (Chetty, 2025, p. 2).

There is a real need for us as African scholars to ensure that the ongoing violence and killing of innocent civilians across the continent, especially in Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), are placed more firmly on our research agendas so that we may readily expose the atrocities towards an engaged scholarship in cooperation with broader society and beyond the confines of the university. However, the



fact that we have failed in this respect does not prevent us from taking a stand on the question of genocide in Palestine. The two are not mutually exclusive. At the same time, it's not as if nothing has been done in these two conflict-ridden countries. As far as Sudan is concerned, I would refer any reader to the works of Kwesi Prah, who has spent many years trying to decipher the shifting nature of the genocide and educating us about the complexities in ethnic cleansing and civil war.²

As far as the DRC is concerned the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (Codesria) has been at the forefront of promoting academic freedom across the continent. A standout report of theirs was written by Mahmood Mamdani in 1997 already (Mamdani, 1997), but their involvement with scholars in the DRC, like most other African countries, is ongoing.

Disagreements with Chetty

Chetty's justifications for being against universities responding to global geopolitical conflicts revolve around: (i) the reputation of the university, (ii) "sets us up for failure as a university," (iii) exacerbating existing differences of opinion which might lead to "unnecessary tensions," (iv) "imposing a hegemonic view from the top," and (v) protecting "equally valid views" (Chetty, 2025, p. 2).

He articulates the principles of his position in the following:

The principles that I refer to speak more to what we value as our university, and invariably these principles impinge on the policies and procedures that we set for ourselves, and ultimately the decisions that we make as a collective ... And as universities are principally a place of ideas, principles largely speak to the intellectual culture of the place. (Chetty, 2025, p. 1).

The principle Chetty espouses is the free-flow of ideas, where differences of opinion can be aired without any hindrance. For Chetty the value of open discussion at a university trumps the normative position against genocide and the violation of human rights. In his world, those complicit in genocide have "equally valid views" to those of the victims of genocide as well as those who stand in solidarity with them. Putting it bluntly, universities ought to give a platform to those in support of the ongoing genocide. For him, this humanitarian crisis is "essentially a political matter" which creates "unnecessary tensions" at the university. Consequently, he argues:

...for the university to officially choose sides when there are clearly different political viewpoints across the university is problematic and sets



us up for failure as a university. We should strive to be inclusive of differing political viewpoints on this matter at our universities.

However, it would be remiss of me to impose these views on the university, through a vote, for example, when I fully know that there are differing, and probably equally valid, views on this. Making decisions on this goes way beyond the remit of the university. (Chetty, 2025, p. 2)

There are many problems with these formulations. Firstly, his arguments against voting on issues require closer scrutiny. After all, it is precisely when there are differing views that a matter is brought to a vote. The majority view then prevails. Chetty's statement undermines the very basis of democratic practice at a university and society at large. If indeed the vote is premised on fair democratic principles it cannot be considered an imposition at all. Basically, he says we should not vote because there are differing views. This is a paralysing anti-democratic position. In fact, it is an indefensible position in the face of the overwhelming evidence of genocide. These two statements demonstrate just how his insistence on neutrality leads to institutional inertia:

If we comment on one major human rights issue, then we should make every effort to comment on essentially every other major human rights catastrophe, which is hopelessly untenable to do. (Chetty, 2025, p. 2)

And,

We should be wary of taking sides in what is a known long-standing and controversial political conflict that will clearly exacerbate divisions at our universities, no matter our own personal political convictions. (Chetty, 2025, p. 2)

In Chetty's world of neutrality our institutions will not provide leadership in the great moral questions of our time. They will not assist in deciphering the complex priorities we face in the context of rapidly changing technology. Instead, they'll be disengaged from the struggles, challenges and problems of wider society. They are to be ivory towers, isolated in their privilege. As he says, "We should always think about how we can do good for our universities, for now and for the future" (Chetty, 2025, p. 2) without much concern for anything else.

We have to state quite unequivocally that what is currently unfolding in Palestine is not a war involving contending armies, it is essentially a genocidal massacre of unarmed civilians. The leading global authorities in the field of genocide have passed resolutions which provide us with sufficient evidence to declare that the Israeli authorities are guilty of the crime of genocide in Palestine. These are their findings:



*Gaza in ruins.
Photo by Shutterstock.*



Following a compelling justificatory statement, the International Association of Genocide Scholars (IAGS), a 500-member body of academics founded in 1994, passed a resolution on the 31st August 2025 declaring that Israel's policies and actions in Gaza meet the legal



definition of genocide as set out in the 1948 United Nations Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (IACS, 2025).

And on the basis of a joint investigation, the University Network for Human Rights, the International Human Rights Clinic at Boston University School of Law, the International Human Rights Clinic at Cornell Law School, the Centre for Human Rights at the University of Pretoria, and the Lowenstein Human Rights Project at Yale Law School together concluded that:

Israel's actions in and regarding Gaza since October 7, 2023, violate the Genocide Convention. Specifically, Israel has committed genocidal acts of killing, causing serious harm to, and inflicting conditions of life calculated to bring about the physical destruction of Palestinians in Gaza, a protected group that forms a substantial part of the Palestinian people. (IACS, 2025)

And, finally the United Nations' Commission of Inquiry concludes on reasonable grounds that the Israeli authorities and Israeli security forces have committed and are continuing to commit the following *actus reus* of genocide against the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, namely (i) killing members of the group; (ii) causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (iii) deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; and (iv) imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group.³

It is rare that global institutional authorities and academics are so completely in agreement. In these circumstances, an appeal to freedom of speech pitting supporters of genocide against those who stand in solidarity with its victims appears entirely inappropriate and indeed could be considered morally repugnant. It also exposes any possibility that these views might be "equally valid" as Chetty suggests, unless of course he believes that the right to hold views in favour of genocide ought to be protected in the interests of striving "to be inclusive of differing political viewpoints on this matter at our universities".

The central point of Chetty's position is captured in the following paragraph:

Universities releasing an official statement on the Israeli-Palestinian matter is not an academic freedom matter. Even though academic freedom is a right accorded to academics, a special group of individuals in society, with important rights, responsibilities and obligations, it is practised on an individual basis. We practice academic freedom as independent critical public voices. It goes against the principles of academic freedom for the university to impose a hegemonic view from the top on an essentially



political matter when we have differing views on this amongst staff and students. (Chetty, 2025, p. 2)

This individualised notion of academic freedom is so utterly detached from the reality of the genocide in Palestine that it cannot conceive of the fact that the academic freedoms of scholars in Gaza have been systematically violated by the physical destruction of their universities. When Nelson Mandela said, “But we know too well that our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians; without the resolution of conflicts in East Timor, the Sudan and other parts of the world” (Office of the President, 1997), he could equally well have been speaking about our academic freedom in relation to that of the Palestinians. Indeed, academic freedom for some is academic freedom for none.⁴

Chetty’s concern about the imposition of a hegemonic view from the top also deserves some comment. Firstly, he misconstrues the genocide in Gaza as “essentially a political matter”, when in fact, this is one of the most significant humanitarian crises of our time and the widespread outrage it provokes is entirely understandable. The question that we need to ask here is – whose academic freedom might be violated by a university adopting a resolution against genocide? Also, should a university allow space for the articulation of the views of those who are in support of genocide? Needless to say, this would place the university in an invidious position of moral incoherence. In my view, far from “setting the university up for failure” as Chetty argues, a university that adopts a resolution condemning genocide and violence necessarily occupies the moral high ground both nationally and globally. It tells the world that the university, as an institution, stands for justice and does not tolerate oppression.

Beyond the questionable moral standpoint of this piece, there are also some other problems, for example, (i) the circularity in a statement such as, “One of the enduring principles by which all good universities are governed is that they are governed in a principled way”; (ii) surely, Chetty’s assertion that he is concerned with the “best interests of our South African universities” as if there is a singular interest across such a deeply divided landscape is contested; (iii) in a deeply contradictory manner Chetty also mentions “competitor universities”.

Universities respond to genocide in Gaza

Despite Chetty’s misgivings, to date nine South African universities have issued statements on Gaza. They are listed below, in chronological order, and with short extracts from their statements:



- University of the Free State (October 2023),
“The tragedy unfolding in the Middle East reminds us again of the urgent need for a peaceful resolution of the conflict that has been raging in the region for many decades” (Loader, 2023).

- University of Johannesburg (November 2023),
“The University of Johannesburg (UJ) adheres to the principles and values that underpin our democracy. We express deep concern on the conflict between Palestine and Israel. The University supports the upholding and preservation of human rights, and the need for an immediate ceasefire and cessation of armed conflict” (University of Johannesburg, 2025).

More than a decade earlier, UJ’s senate voted to sever links with Ben-Gurion University, becoming the first university in the world to implement an academic boycott against an Israeli academic institution.

- University of Fort Hare (December 2023),
“[We therefore...] commit not to pursue any institutional links with Israeli institutions as these have played a key role in supporting settler colonial oppression and apartheid and have been complicit in grave violations of human rights ... including developing weaponry, military doctrines and legal justification for the indiscriminate mass targeting of Palestinians” (University of Fort Hare, 2023)

Sakhele Buhlungu, the University of Fort Hare Vice Chancellor, has implored universities in SA to play a more assertive role in coordinating national academic solidarity in support of Palestinian scholars and Fort Hare is also at the forefront of efforts to rebuild universities in Gaza (Roodt, 2025).

- Nelson Mandela University (December 2023),
“[Senate resolved to] support a comprehensive and consistent boycott of Israeli academic institutions and academics who may be proved to be complicit in supporting Israel in oppressing the Palestinian people, as called for by progressive Palestinian and Israeli academics” (Nelson Mandela University, 2023).



- University of the Western Cape (June 2024),
“UWC will fully disengage from Israeli academic institutions, in line with The Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) guidelines. Strengthening Academic Ties: Initiatives to enhance connections with Palestinian scholars and students and support the rebuilding of higher education in Gaza” (University of the Western Cape, 2024).
- University of Venda (June 2024),
“The University of Venda will suspend with immediate effect its scientific, technical and mobility cooperation with Israeli universities and institutions until there is calm in Palestine in Gaza and the Israeli occupation of the West Bank” (University of Venda, 2024).
- University of Cape Town (June 2024),
With regard to research collaborations with members of the Israeli Defence Force and the wider Israeli military establishment, “no UCT academic may enter into relations, or continue relations, with any research group and/or network whose author affiliations are with the Israeli Defence Force, and/or the broader Israeli military establishment” (University of Cape Town, 2024).
- University of the Witwatersrand (July 2024),
“We recognise and recommit to opposing the multiple conflicts and crises of violence that have resulted in dire humanitarian crises, particularly on the African continent, including Sudan, the Sahel, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, amongst others. Expressions of solidarity in these contexts must also be embedded in a larger commitment to advancing our common humanity on many fronts across the globe” (University of the Witwatersrand, 2024).
- Rhodes University (September 2025),
“Rhodes University condemns the ongoing atrocities of the Israeli government against the people of Gaza. The relentless bombardment, the destruction of homes, schools, universities and other tertiary institutions, hospitals, and vital infrastructure, and the deliberate deprivation of food, water, electricity and medical aid are unconscionable crimes against humanity” (Rhodes University, 2025).

It is quite clear that there is no uniformity in the statements. The main dividing line is between those universities that have condemned the



violence and called for a ceasefire and those that have gone further and imposed a prohibition on academic contact with universities in Israel.

Stellenbosch University presents an interesting case. Here, a resolution was put before the senate, but it failed to muster a majority vote. Instead, the resolution was placed on the university website with an explanation that it had not been passed by senate.

Similarly, the University of KwaZulu-Natal has not issued a statement on Gaza but it has, in practice, designed and implemented a number of projects and academic activities in relation to the genocide.⁵

Academic freedom in South Africa

Chetty's arguments follow a long line dominant in the South African discourse on academic freedom which fails to take account of the ongoing context of racialised inequality in the university sector as well as the society at large.

All rights, including the right to academic freedom, do not occur in a vacuum. There is always a particular context which determines the parameters for the realisation of rights and here I'd like to show how conditions of inequality structure the possibilities for academic freedom in South Africa. I argue that the current discourse here is a retrogression from the notion articulated in the Kampala Declaration on Intellectual Freedom and Social Responsibility passed in November 1990.⁶

In my view, the Declaration has stood the test of time. It extolls the virtues of intellectual not merely academic freedom. This is a very important distinction with huge implications for the production and dissemination of knowledge. Basically, it explicitly covers intellectuals outside of a university or academic environment and in so doing it seeks to break down the extant barriers between town and gown. In this regard it embraces a notion of engaged scholarship irrespective of the location of scholars/intellectuals.

While there may have been some earlier notions of academic freedom in South Africa, expressed in inchoate ways, it was really the context of an apartheid state's nefarious intervention in the affairs of universities that the TB Davie mantra emerged. It stated that academic freedom may be defined as, "...freedom from external interference in (a) *who* shall teach, (b) *what* we teach, (c) *how* we teach and (d) *whom* we teach".

Academic freedom is today enshrined in the Bill of Rights of the South African Constitution under the rubric of freedom of speech (Republic of SA, 1996). It is also upheld in the Higher Education Act



(No.101 of 1997), the preamble of which states, “...it is desirable for higher education institutions to enjoy freedom and autonomy in their relationship with the state within the context of public accountability and the national need for advanced skills and scientific knowledge” (Republic of SA, 1997). These are laudable declaratory statements, but how do they relate to the South African higher education environment that mirrors our broader societal inequalities where the interests of different universities are so utterly at variance with each other?

Celebrating academic freedom under these circumstances is akin to applauding the rights of the landless to buy a wine farm or the homeless to buy a mansion. So, we do need to ask whether the conditions at historically black universities are such that the right of academic freedom is itself unrealisable in the same way as the political and socio-economic rights of poor people are hollowed out by the reality of their poverty. The Constitution is supposedly inclusive, yet its pretensions to universality effectively disregard the concrete conditions of inequality in higher education.

While academic freedom is constitutionally protected, the inequalities of the university system and the mobilisation around the protection of particular interests have combined to produce a whole range of different positions on what academic freedom should mean in a democratic South Africa. If academic freedom means that universities should be left untouched by the democratic policies of the new government and that the state should not intervene in the university sector at all, it implies that the untenable status quo should remain. On the other hand, allowing state interference in the running of academic affairs is also not desirable, because it will be extremely difficult to dislodge the state once it has become ensconced at universities.

Celebrating academic freedom under these circumstances is akin to applauding the rights of the landless to buy a wine farm or the homeless to buy a mansion.

Ostensibly in response to mounting threats to institutional autonomy and academic freedom in post-apartheid South Africa, the Council on Higher Education (CHE) in 2005 commissioned an extensive investigation into the concepts of academic freedom and institutional autonomy and their relevance in the country. The ensuing CHE report,



entitled, *“Academic Freedom, Institutional Autonomy and Public Accountability in South African Higher Education,”* was published in 2008 (CHE, 2008). This is clearly the most wide-ranging examination of the concepts of academic freedom and institutional autonomy in South Africa to date and it serves as a very good barometer for the nature of the discourse.

The report is characterised by a sterile reliance on the South African Constitution as a cornerstone for understanding notions of academic freedom. It uses the language of rights, duties, and obligations in a disembodied manner devoid of any substantive examination of how these might be realised in practice. It contains vague references to transformation without any specific discussion on what this entails in relation to the differentiation of the higher education sector and how some universities are in far more favourable positions than others. In fact, it uncritically accepts this differentiation outside of a framework for understanding just how closely it is linked to a history of apartheid in education. In so doing, it accepts the racially unequal dividends of apartheid without any sense of how these might be overcome.

Consequently, it does not provide an agenda for change but instead produces a programme for the reproduction of the disparities. The report portrays a hollow universalism around the notions of academic freedom and institutional autonomy while displaying a damning amnesia of educational struggles in the country and in the light of the ongoing student and university struggles, its findings should be considered *passee*.

The CHE's report is also at pains to try to move beyond the TB Davie formulation but it does so only haltingly and without any coherence. While repeatedly asserting a necessity to go beyond TB Davie, it actually ends up merely re-iterating the Davie mantra. The incoherence of the report lies on many fronts but it is nowhere clearer than its glib reference to the various “African declarations on academic freedom” about which the report states, “The Task Team finds all of these ideas applicable for South African higher education” (CHE, 2008, p. 43). It is this kind of contrived indifference to the rest of the continent that bedevils South African scholarship. There is no thorough engagement with the many issues confronting academic freedom on the continent. Instead, this glib affirmation suggests a lazy disinterest, a gesture without any substance at all.

If there is one continental document on academic freedom that cannot be ignored, it is the Kampala Declaration adopted more than 30



years ago. Article 22 of the Declaration states, “The intellectual community has the responsibility to struggle for and participate in the struggle of the popular forces for their rights and emancipation”.⁷

This is a very different approach to the social responsibility of academics and the intellectual community more broadly, than the legalistic and individualised embeddedness of the CHE report and its reliance on the state. The Kampala Declaration unambiguously calls for an engaged intelligentsia, one that locates itself within social struggles. It does not hide behind constitutional rights. Instead, it expects actual agency by intellectuals in the struggles of the wider community.

In concert with this view, University of Fort Hare Vice-Chancellor Buhlungu had this to say at his Academic Freedom lecture at the University of Cape Town in August 2023:

We should move away from this homogenised [idea] that there’s one definition of academic freedom for everybody. No, it means different things. It’s shaped by our different histories. We [University of Fort Hare] come from a particular history that has kind of killed the soul, the fibre of our institution since 1959 and the roots of the violence and the killings and what you see on TV today, it originates from there ... So, let’s be mindful and open up this notion of academic freedom and autonomy because they’re different. (Davids, 2023)

Buhlungu goes on to claim:

Autonomy has been eroded so much that these syndicates are so confident [and] so brazen that they now kill. They don’t just send memorandums, [cause] unrests or protest, they now kill. And that’s where we are now. Where we are, we are now battling the syndicates in [a] very real sense ... in the past two years, two UFH staff members, Petrus Roets and Mboneli Vesele, have been murdered. Do these gruesome acts threaten freedom of expression and academic freedom? (Davids, 2023)⁸

Ultimately, the question Buhlungu is asking is – how does one extoll the virtues of academic freedom in a context where staff members at universities are being killed? It doesn’t mean that Buhlungu is against academic freedom, just that it needs to take account of the history of segregation in higher education and in the society as a whole.

My main contention is that academic freedom cannot root itself as a concept of currency and relevance outside of the context of extreme differentiation between universities, without reference to the preceding educational struggles, and without any awareness of continental and indeed global struggles around academic freedom.



Educational struggles were an intrinsic part of the accomplishment of democracy in South Africa. The student-led uprisings of 1976 and the subsequent ongoing resistance of the 1980s were characterised by mass participation of ordinary people, students, academics, and workers, who were directly involved in various struggles. There appeared to be no limit to their day-to-day ingenuity in engaging the state as educational struggles were animated by the promise of a better, more equitable future. This ingenuity translated into a generalised optimism, even euphoria, when apartheid gave way to democracy in 1994. However the expected changes have not happened, despite a mountain of educational policy paperwork by the post-apartheid government. The inequalities have proven to be far more durable than initially anticipated. In response, the optimism has waned and the euphoria has dissipated. A dry set of legal documents has taken the place of the vibrancy of struggle and mass participation has been substituted by state direction.

A decade ago however, the foundations of the tertiary sector in South Africa were profoundly shaken by student resistance, some violent, in placing their interests on the agenda for the future of the country. It goes without saying that these student movements have been sporadic, issue-based, and largely without coherence, but they have served to call into question the very many enduring inequalities and injustices of a democratic South Africa.

Conclusion

South Africa is today one of the most unequal countries in the world and the division between rich and poor still largely follows racialised lines despite the democratic changes in the country since 1994. These inequalities are embedded in all aspects of South African society and universities are no exception, with the historically black campuses remaining at the bottom of the pile on a whole host of indicators, despite the gestures of institutional redress since 1994.

University mergers were intended to transform the landscape of institutional inequality, but they have done nothing of the sort. In fact they have entrenched the inequalities. The privileges at historically white universities remains largely untouched by these moves. Lumping weak universities and technikons together has done little to transform the institutional landscape of the country in line with the new democratic order. Former Minister of Higher Education and Training Dr Blade Nzimande's statement in 2010 remains relevant today:



The legacy of apartheid is still clearly discernible in higher education as it is in many aspects of South African life. The relative deprivation of the formerly black, rural institutions still exists – they constantly teeter on the brink of bankruptcy, much of their infrastructure is inadequate, teaching and study facilities are poor, libraries and laboratories are badly stocked, accommodation for many of their students is over-crowded and the quality appalling, and the staff qualifications do not begin to compare with those at the better-off universities.⁹

There are, of course, many complex reasons for the enduring inequality in the university system, but it is clear that the higher education landscape has been profoundly shaped by the enduring legacies of apartheid. If it is accepted that the inequalities are the result of a history of racism in higher education then it follows that there should be definitive corrective action to address this legacy of neglect and disadvantage. If we uncritically accept the inequalities as given and outside of this historical context, it amounts to a legitimisation of a racist past.

It is inevitable that higher education institutions will be differentiated. However, when that differentiation is caused by the racism of apartheid, then the system requires direct action in the form of institutional redress. How this should happen to permit the historically black universities to recover a sense of academic credibility should be a matter of urgent national attention. This is a *sine qua non* for substantive academic freedom in South Africa.

The inscription at the start of this response comes from above the entrance to the Grand Auditorium in Uppsala University's Main Building in Sweden. It goes to the heart of the debate about academic freedom in the process of knowledge-making and the meaning of inquiry at a university. It begs the question – who decides on what is right?

In many ways this question has been answered almost irrevocably in the contemporary United States of America, with many universities meekly capitulating in the face of state intervention in their affairs and where what is right, for example in how antisemitism ought to be defined, is captured by the state and enforced by major budgetary cuts to the apparently offending universities, such as Columbia. The message is crystal clear – if you do not deal decisively with pro-Palestinian protests, we will withhold your grants.

The crass manner in which the powerful have monopolised what is right has called into question the very basis of a university. After decades of the Global North preaching to us in the South about academic



freedom, they have now all but given up that right, with very little fight, very little opposition and virtually no real belief in the true meaning of a university (Gabbatt, 2025; Bhuiyan, 2025). To be fair, Harvard University has opposed Trump's attempts at state control through litigation, but internally, at the university itself, there has been a crackdown on Palestine scholarship – some scholars have been demoted and some programmes cancelled but the clearest violation of academic freedom at Harvard in recent years is the withdrawal of an entire issue of the *Harvard Education Review* dedicated to education in Palestine. The issue was in an advanced stage of review and contracts had already been signed by the contributing authors, only for the editors to be informed that the issue would not be published (Speri, 2025).

I'd like to return to Chetty's provocation, by finally referring to Desmond Tutu's extremely insightful statement of moral compass: "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality."

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ENDNOTES

¹ Please also see the Leader article and other discussion commentaries on this issue in the *South African Journal of Science* Volume 121 Number 3/4 of 2025. <https://sajs.co.za/issue/view/1264>. SAJS is the official journal of the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSA) – Ed New Agenda.

² See especially, *Sudan in Crisis: The Dialectics of a Failing State, Ethnic Cleansing, Slow-Motion Genocide and Civil War*. Cape Town: Africa Century Editions Press (2024).

³ See legal analysis of the conduct of Israel in Gaza pursuant to the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Conference room paper of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and Israel. Human Rights Council. A/HRC/60/CRP.3. <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session60/advance-version/a-hrc-60-crp-3.pdf>

⁴ The title is inspired by Jonas Gwangwa's song "Freedom for Some is Freedom for None".

⁵ For more information see <https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=University+of+kwa+zulu+natala+gaza+qenocide&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8>

⁶ See The Kampala Declaration on Intellectual Freedom and Social Responsibility, published in *Codesria Bulletin 1, 1991*. https://academicfreedom.codesria.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Doc-3a_The-Kampala-Declaration-1990.pdf

⁷ https://academicfreedom.codesria.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Doc-3a_The-Kampala-Declaration-1990.pdf

⁸ Roets was in charge of transport at the University and Vesele was Buhlungu's body guard. Clearly a sight for nefarious accumulation, the previous incumbent of the transport portfolio, Victor Peter, was also murdered.

⁹ Keynote address by former Minister of Higher Education and Training Dr Blade Nzimande to the Stakeholder Summit on Higher Education Transformation, 22 April 2010.

BIOGRAPHY

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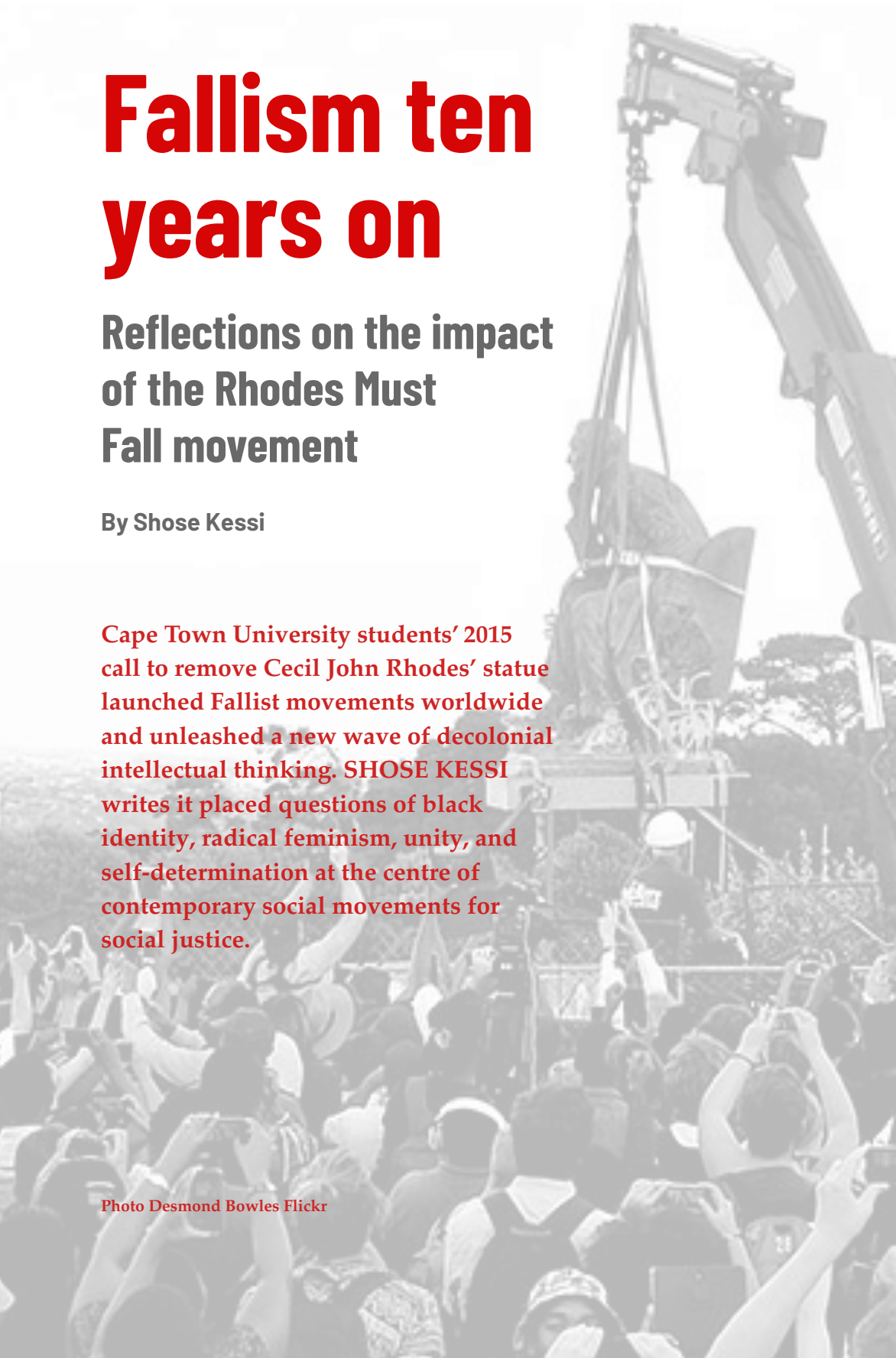
Fallism ten years on

Reflections on the impact of the Rhodes Must Fall movement

By Shose Kessi

Cape Town University students' 2015 call to remove Cecil John Rhodes' statue launched Fallist movements worldwide and unleashed a new wave of decolonial intellectual thinking. SHOSE KESSI writes it placed questions of black identity, radical feminism, unity, and self-determination at the centre of contemporary social movements for social justice.

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On 9 April 2025, I had the privilege of delivering the keynote address at the University of Cape Town's (UCT) 10th year anniversary event commemorating Rhodes Must Fall (RMF), a landmark movement in the history of the university that had an impact on higher education in South Africa and in the rest of the world. The event was hosted at UCT's Centre for African Studies, which was a generative space for RMF students 10 years ago and one that continues to produce critical scholarship in the academy. This paper is an extended version of my keynote address enriched with added theoretical grounding as well as a commentary on some of the intellectual shifts that have emerged in higher education post RMF. The focus is on contextualising black students' affective and embodied experiences of racialisation at UCT and how these were expressed during RMF in ways that have contributed to the resurgence of a decolonial intellectual movement.

The 2015 fallist movements started at UCT with calls to remove the statue of Cecil John Rhodes (CJR). Occurring two decades after South Africa's transition to democracy in 1994, this renewed energy towards the decolonisation of higher education was a contemporary expression of resistance to colonial legacies including the extant Eurocentric foundations of our institutions, which, as Ali Mazrui (2005) once described, were originally designed to expand cultural westernisation on the continent. Previous movements that emerged in African universities in the three decades following independence (1950s-1970s) had already challenged the misrepresentations of Africa as backward and uncivilised, highlighting the role of European colonialism and imperialism in the destruction of Africa's development, as well as the epistemic violence and complicity of Eurocentric knowledge in global politics (see Tella & Mosala, 2020).

Nearly three quarters of a century since the first decolonial movements in African universities, the fallist movements reminded us that many of these debates are not only still relevant today but also necessary. While some advances have been made, some of which the article will cover later, one could also argue that the slow pace of change in our institutions is indicative of the multi-layered and multi-dimensional legacies of colonialism and its pervasiveness in all aspects of our lives from the structural to the psychological and to the bodily resurfacing in our everyday behaviours and relationships.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021) provides critical insights on why the legacies of colonialism are difficult to overcome. He reflects on the



magnitude of a colonial system designed to dominate not only materially but to subjugate people, their history and psyches, and denying them the status of being fully human. Frantz Fanon describes colonial imperialist conquest as the most violent encounter in modern history in large part because of the dehumanisation of the colonial subject (Fanon, 1967a). In a similar vein, Aimé Césaire states that “colonialism is thingification,” a process which resulted in “(...) societies drained of their essence, cultures trampled underfoot” (Césaire, 2000, p.42–43), also captured in Maldonado-Torres’ (2007) treatise on the colonality of being. Given the deeply inner psychical and non-material character of such ontological questions, it is not surprising to see their contemporary resurgence in fallist rhetoric. The concept of ‘epicoloniality’ (Kessi et al., 2020) is useful in trying to grasp the magnitude of what Ndlovu-Gatsheni refers to. As societies evolve, systems of domination become more sophisticated and everyday forms of dehumanisation become less visible and more difficult to detect, yet these knowledges remain in our minds and bodies and are reenacted in everyday life.

Everyday manifestations of epicoloniality are occurrences that may not necessarily be directly related to colonialism but are nevertheless unmistakable traces of colonial relations of power. Such traces are evident in historically white universities in South Africa. When I joined UCT in 2011, the university was in the midst of a debate on affirmative action and whether to do away with ‘race’ as a proxy for disadvantage in our admissions policy given the growing numbers of black students having access to university since 1994. The popular discourses circulating in the media around this debate were highly stigmatising and described the increasing numbers of black students entering UCT as overcrowding the university and bringing down the standards of academic achievement (see Kessi, 2013; Kessi & Cornell, 2015). These racialising images were a reflection of the institutional culture of the university which, although it had opened its doors to black students, was still marked by deeply embedded patterns of institutional racism reflective of its historical whiteness. Even though black students had *access* to the institution, their presence within it was ‘pathologised’ presenting them as ‘the problem’.

This situation led me to conduct an extensive participatory action research project using photovoice methods on the experiences of black students at UCT. Over a three-year period between 2013 and 2015, I collected written stories and photographs taken by students describing their affective experiences of the institution (see Kessi & Cornell, 2015; Cornell et al., 2016; Cornell & Kessi, 2017; Kessi, 2018). What I found was that the impact of institutional racism on black students was severe and



Photo: Wikimedia Commons

led to various forms of psychological challenges affecting students' sense of self, leading to severe forms of stress and depression that hindered their academic performance, findings that have been corroborated by international literature on prejudice, stereotyping and discrimination in higher education (Tileagă et al., 2022).

Some students in my study described these affective experiences as the first time they 'felt black'. 'Feeling black' was a metaphor for the ways in which affective and psychical manifestations of colonialism and apartheid surfaced, often in subtle ways, in their everyday lives on campus. Students described the segregation in classrooms with different sections being named after Cape Town locations: the *Camps Bay* area at the front of the class was where white students would sit, Coloured and Muslim students would sit in *Mitchells Plain* and black students at the back of the class in *Khayelitsha*. Such a construction of segregated spaces at the university indicated a deep entrenchment of race, space and subjectivity. Students also spoke of many forms of micro-aggressions, such as reluctance from other students to include them in group work, additional scrutiny in assessments, subtle expressions of surprise from others when they got good marks. Wealth differences were also apparent when one student recounted her experience of sitting in class next to a young man who would arrive at UCT every day in his Porsche Boxster that could pay for her entire fees from undergraduate to PhD and some... and that she was expected to sit there every day and pretend that everything was normal!



Students referred to the problematic monuments and artifacts displayed around campus and the names of buildings which reified a colonial aesthetic; the advantage of having English as a mother-tongue; the content of their textbooks and curricula that advantaged white experiences; and the over-representation of white scholars amongst academic staff, all of which contributed to the exclusion of their own knowledge and capabilities. Many stories reflected how experiences of 'feeling black' were also complicated by intersecting identities. Students of non-conforming gender and sexual identities felt isolated and invisible and described experiences of homophobia, having no adequate access to bathrooms, having student cards that didn't reflect their identities, and the daily discomfort of having to conform to the culture of single sex residences. 'Feeling black' at university was thus coloured by other factors, such as class, sexual and gender diversity.

These daily experiences left students feeling that they didn't belong and were a constant reminder of not being on a level playing field with their white counterparts. 'Feeling black' in this case should be understood as an affective experience of marginalisation, exclusion and alienation. During the RMF movement, black students referred to 'black pain' to describe this affective experience with many illustrations of the visceral responses and rage that it evoked. The throwing of human excrement by student activist Chumani Maxwele on the statue of Cecil John Rhodes on 9 March 2015, the incident that marked the beginning of RMF, was a poignant response to 'collective disgust' and collective 'black pain' (Nyamnjoh, 2015). The 'poo' was sourced from a portable toilet on the Cape Flats designed to juxtapose the white privileged establishment with the shame of township life on its doorstep expressed through "the material indignity of (easily available) shit" (Mpendukana, 2021, p.33). Sibonile Mpendukana explains this act as follows:

"Above all (...), it is the origins of the human excrement – where it was sourced and the political and socioeconomic space of lost hope and encroaching disillusion within which portable toilets are framed that carries the force of the action. The material presence of the poo accentuated the vulnerability of Black subjects as people unable to remove their bodies and wastes from public scrutiny. Furthermore, to lay the excrement of the poor at the feet of opulence and dominant moral standards creates a mirror-image moment of the macro processes that otherwise define the country. It is a suggestive gesture that pokes the failings of democracy and brings the two worlds into contact – a literal moment of shit spilling into colonial heritage and white privilege". (Mpendukana, 2021, p. 34)



Human excrement has also been used historically as a form of violence towards enslaved people. A punishment, the “Derby’s dose”, invented by slave owner Thomas Thistlewood, was particularly brutal and sadistic involving defecation in the mouths of slaves (Burnard, 2004) and I cannot help to think of Maxwele’s act as both a symbolic and literal regurgitative recovery from embodied trauma. In my inaugural lecture commemorating the 10-year anniversary of RMF entitled: *S#*t Happens: A Decolonial Feminist reflection on Institutional Racism in Higher Education*,¹ I employed similar imagery to foreground the centrality of the body, the brutality, pain, rage and disgust in explaining the resurfacing epicolonial manifestations of historical trauma.

Mpendukana draws on Fanonian notions of black re-subjectification as a way of reclaiming the identity of the black subject through such acts of resistance. Black re-subjectification speaks to how these deep-seated affective experiences erupt as forms of protest and recovery. It is important to note, however, that resistance strategies in contexts of whiteness are never straightforward. The UCT students who participated in my study employed multiple and complex strategies. For example, students often assimilated into the dominant culture by taking on certain cultural practices, such as modifying their language and changing their accents, befriending and engaging in the activities of white students. One student told me that when he started making friends with his rugby teammates his marks started to improve because he no longer felt like an outcast in the classroom amongst his white friends.

Such strategies hint at Fanon’s treatise that blackness only exists in juxtaposition to whiteness and vice-versa (Fanon, 1967b), highlighting black re-subjectification as the simultaneous disruption of racial dichotomies. But these strategies led to difficult dynamics amongst black students, some of whom were accused of being ‘coconuts’ or other similar derogatory labels, which then created additional layers of marginalisation. In order to protect their self-worth, some students would understandably distance themselves from the transformation project and specifically the affirmative action debate as one that applied only to “other” black students. Others would claim their experiences of marginalisation in the institution as more legitimate, in other words, their blackness as more authentic (Nyamnjoh, 2017).

These complicated identity dynamics meant that black students, in addition to their academic requirements, had to find strategies for coping and relating to each other. They had to put in the extra effort to fit in, to prove themselves, to defend their right to be at UCT and to defend



their blackness. Any student studying under these circumstances was carrying significant additional labour just to get by. They carried the guilt of being made to feel that, as black students, they were taking the place of white students (through accusations of overcrowding and reverse racism emanating from the affirmative action debate). At the same time they shouldered the burden of transformation, knowing that their presence and contributions were fundamental to changing the institution and thus feeling the pressure to succeed academically. It is not surprising that under these circumstances, these racial dynamics coupled with the gender and class dynamics mentioned previously often culminated in internal conflicts and relational difficulties between black students themselves. Black re-subjectification, as an embodied and affective process, is only possible if it demystifies essentialising ideas of blackness with the potential to advance more nuanced subjectivities and inclusive knowledges.

A key critique of the racial dynamics of the RMF movement was the excessive focus on black suffering as a form of exclusionary politics (Mbembe, 2015). Be that as it may, it is important to not lose sight of the fact that black students' affective and embodied experiences were generative of critical intellectual transformations, calling for the decolonisation of the academy as a place of disruption and healing. In a panel debate on decolonisation organised by the former Dean of Humanities, Prof Sakhela Buhlungu, in 2015, one panellists, Ntebaleng Morake remarked:

"We are tired. We are angered and we cannot continue to live and learn in a space that denies us of our existence. We cannot continue to be treated as merely anonymous black faces without a history, because we have a history. And that history did not begin when white colonialist men robbed us of our dignity. It did not begin when they cornered us with their guns and stole our land. It did not begin with slavery and colonialism, nor did it begin with apartheid."

"We are enraged because this single story of history that positions whiteness as triumph that UCT so chooses to articulate is gigantically undermining to black pain. It bluntly states that here, on this campus, built with the sweat of our people, our pain and lives do not matter; for UCT treats us and the pain carelessly printed on our folded black foreheads as a negation of whiteness."

"We are enraged and we demand that our campus be decolonised, because this too is our space." (UCT Newsroom, 2015)²



*...academics across the institution
have made many strides in
transforming curricula and
pedagogical practices that
subvert Eurocentric archetypes.*

I choose to emphasise the strength of RMF in bringing black students together in solidarity and mobilising a diverse campus community to advocate for the fall of the Rhodes statue. By drawing on their own experiences and relating these to theories of Pan-Africanism, black consciousness and radical black feminism, the movement tried its best to build a common agenda by navigating through these relational identity dynamics that ultimately inspired many other fallist campaigns.

At UCT, white students got involved through the *Disrupting Whiteness* collective. On one occasion, they formed a human shield between black students and the police during one of the more intense confrontations of the protests. Different groupings started sprouting, such as the black radical feminists and the Transcollective, calling for a more inclusive and intersectional consciousness of black identities. UCT's Black Academic Caucus also found expression as a result of the RMF movement with many of its members driving curriculum and aesthetic changes and ensuring that African-centred scholarship, which we had been long advocating for, was finally recognised as central to the academic project. During the student occupation of the main administrative building, which was renamed Azania House at the height of the protests, we got a glimpse of the work of black academics from UCT and elsewhere who came to engage students through a ground-breaking conversation series. A critical achievement of the movement which is often overlooked was the insourcing of workers, enabling working class employees job security but also the promise of access to UCT for their family members that would further contribute to the changing demographics of our student body.

The national impact of RMF reverberated across the city and the country. At least 20 statues were defaced in 2015 including King George V at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, Paul Kruger in Pretoria and the Gandhi statue in Johannesburg amongst many others.³ Open Stellenbosch



produced the very moving *Luister* documentary, and protests at the university currently known as Rhodes broke out followed by significant work done to address gender-based violence in higher education. The University of Pretoria launched the Afrikaans Must Fall campaign and Steyn Must Fall was formed at the University of the Free State.

In their 2024 article, Daniel and Platzky Miller (2024) refer to Must Fall protests in Malawi, Senegal, Ghana, France, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States highlighting the global and transnational impact of the movement, specifically Gandhi Must Fall at the University of Ghana, Royall Must Fall at Harvard and Faidherbe Must Fall in Senegal. These examples demonstrate that what the RMF movement sparked was monumental – they set the scene for the Fees Must Fall protests and the national shutdown of universities in South Africa followed by global initiatives calling for change. This and future anniversaries should do justice to the gift that our students left us and the rest of the world through the enduring legacy of their critical intellectual insights and disruptions.

Fallism ten years on

At UCT, we have come a long way since the removal of the CJR statue on 9 April 2015 with considerable demographic change, curriculum change, insourced workers, renamed buildings, new artworks, gender neutral toilets, gender non-prescriptive student cards among some of the victories. Every year, UCT hosts a decolonial summer school that brings together students and local and international scholars to regularly ground ourselves in decolonial ideas and debates before the start of the academic year. These schools were inspired by the decolonial schools initiated by Nelson Maldonado-Torres and Ramón Grosfoguel and subsequently launched in South African institutions starting with Unisa in 2014.

Drawing on UCT's *Curriculum Change Framework*⁴ that was published in June 2018, academics across the institution have made many strides in transforming curricula and pedagogical practices that subvert Eurocentric archetypes. Although we do not yet have a systematic way of assessing the impact of these initiatives in the university, internal university reports have noted significant changes in the demographic profiles of staff and students, the increase of black scholars in senior academic roles and leadership positions, as well as the reduction in the racial attainment gap of students. A concrete example of curriculum change was the launch of the *Hub for Decolonial Feminist Psychologies in Africa* (Kessi & Boonzaier, 2018) in the Department of Psychology as a student-centred teaching and research space dedicated to practices of



healing, restoration and finding joy in the academy. The Hub promotes theoretical and methodological advancements in the production of psychological knowledges and, equally importantly, provides a physical space for us to come together as a community of engaged scholars.

The critical voices of RMF students continue to find expression in current debates and contestations especially in university spaces. Building on the call for statues to fall, many institutions have reflected on the ways in which affective and embodied experiences are mediated through how they choose to memorialise symbols of the past. The display of colonial monuments and statues in public spaces are shaped by power relations and influence our collective consciousness. They provide a lens into the past and the present, they construct our beliefs, our sense of belonging and our relationships to others. Global decolonial conferences and seminars since 2015 have brought into question the related issue of the theft and display of art and human remains of enslaved and colonised people in museums and universities in the global north.

The Sarr and Savoy report⁵ commissioned by French president Emmanuel Macron and published in 2018 reported that 90 to 95% of African heritage remains outside of the continent. Even more distressing are the dismembered human remains of Africans that continue to be displayed in European and American museums including university collections, putting once again into question the legitimacy of museums and universities as educational spaces. Calls for the repatriation of the remains of African people from European museums has gained traction in the past ten years. Repatriation, more than signifying a mere transfer of looted objects from the West to former colonies, holds the potential for being a humanising act, a return of the bodies mutilated and lost in university cemeteries. It also holds the possibility for continued engagement about coloniality.

In the past 10 years, there has been a more concerted effort and more diligence in some academic spaces in South Africa to speak back to the epistemic violence of scientific research through the criticism (often public) of studies that reproduce colonial representations of black identities (see for example Boswell et al., 2019). As we move forward, we must keep engaging with the pitfalls of essentialist racial identity politics and how these are put into practice in institutional contexts. Despite the many gains in the changing demographics of academic staff through a more rigorous commitment to employment equity laws and practices, we must continue to interrogate the slippages in the use of apartheid racial categories and how these practices can inadvertently reproduce relational



violences between black staff. The reification of apartheid racial categories in hiring practices has, in some cases, privileged white appointments under the guise of favouring certain under-represented racial categories. The appointment of foreign nationals (read black foreigners) is often heralded as the problem whilst foreign white bodies are exonerated. Such practices are used as a gateway for the resurgence of narrow nationalist politics, motivating xenophobia and related violences, thus contradicting the premises of decolonial, pan-Africanist, black conscious, and radical feminist thought that underlined the fallist movements.

We should also draw on official findings of institutional racism in South African universities since 2015. The 2019 *Report of the Ministerial Task Team on the Recruitment, Retention and Progression of Black South African Academics* made findings of overt and covert racism, sexism and patriarchy in universities.⁶ At UCT, we have learnt from the enquiry into the circumstances surrounding the late Professor Mayosi's tenure,⁷ that the violences of institutional racism occur in the less visible spaces of corridor talk, informal coffee breaks and social networks. Ten years on, we must critically engage with the multifaceted manifestations of institutional violence in the process of transforming and decolonising our institutions. As Dr Motimele (2024, p.212) writes:

"UCT management, some UCT staff, media, police, and members of the public considered RMF's disruptive and destructive actions and methods of protest as 'violence'. Further to this, these groups identified RMF student behaviour during the protests as rude, aggressive, disruptive, and at times illegal. In contrast, student activists recognized 'violence' as rooted within Colonial-Apartheid configurations of context."

Now that the dust has settled, we should be asking: What are the lingering violences that need to be addressed? When and in what form do they resurface? What are the policies, frameworks and spaces that acknowledge 'black pain' and its embodied manifestations and provocations? What tools are available for creating spaces for inclusive forms of dialogue and engagement? This is crucial in a context where the violence of colonialism is so easily denied and subverted. We are still confronted with claims that colonisation benefitted Africa, such as Oxford University Professor Biggar's defence of Rhodes⁸ or current ludicrous accusations of genocide against white farmers in South Africa, one of the most privileged groups in one of the most unequal societies in the world. Our duty is to stand firm against coloniality, to reflect on our epicolonial existence and to keep listening to our students and staff so that we can better confront the institutional dynamics that keep reinventing themselves in ways that exclude and marginalise.



Conclusion

Fallism as a provocation was attractive in its simplicity and practicality; in the way in which it replicated itself across different spaces generating possibilities for solidarity, debate and social action. However, fallism as an ideology of disobedience, of disruption, of contestation, of ending racism, coloniality, heteronormativity, patriarchy and all forms of oppression is much more demanding and elusive, fraught with complexities and contradictions. It is important therefore to disavow the notion that RMF and the fallist movements in general did not ultimately achieve what they set out to do. Fallism is not an ideology that offers solutions but one that asks us to engage in a decolonial process and attend to the wounds however painful and uncomfortable that such a process can evoke.

There were many demands placed on fallists to address the broader problems of poverty and inequality in South African society, the plight of workers, rape culture, raising consciousness in schools and communities in addition to a decolonised higher education. This responsibility to address all remnants of coloniality in contemporary life is not only a heavy a burden to carry but perhaps also one of the most significant challenges for fallists who not only suffered from activism fatigue but who often failed to recognise and claim their achievements, including the institutionalising of their ideas in our university spaces.

The RMF movement must firmly take its place as one of the most influential global movements in the call to decolonise universities. Despite the contradictions, confrontations and complexity of its modalities and enactments, RMF successfully centred questions of black identity, radical feminism, unity and self-determination that remain at the centre of contemporary social movements for social justice. Its ability to mobilise communities within UCT and inspire others far and wide offers much food for thought and a rich tapestry of ideas and possibilities for the continued struggle against the legacies of coloniality in our institutions. The RMF movement gave meaning to Angela Davis' famous call that: 'You have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world(...)'. Our students showed us that such a path is possible.



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ENDNOTES

- ¹ <https://www.news.uct.ac.za/article/-2025-03-25-the-candour-of-institutionalised-racism-in-higher-education>
- ² <https://www.news.uct.ac.za/article/-2015-04-24-decolonising-uct>
- ³ <https://www.theheritageportal.co.za/thread/vandalisation-statues-south-africa>
- ⁴ <https://www.news.uct.ac.za/images/userfiles/downloads/reports/ccwg/UCT-Curriculum-Change-Framework.pdf>
- ⁵ <http://restitutionreport2018.com/> See page 3, Note 4.
- ⁶ https://www.ru.ac.za/media/rhodesuniversity/content/institutionalplanning/documents/Report_MTT_RRP_of_Black_Academics_web_final1.pdf
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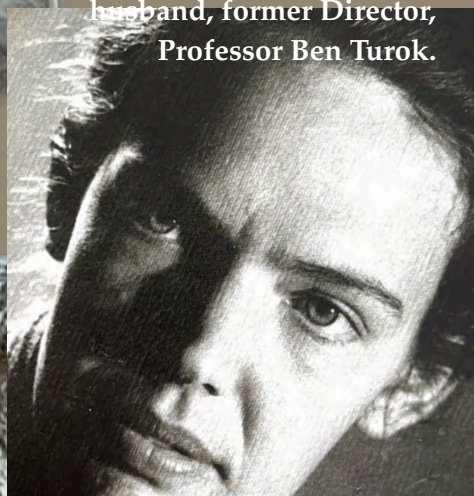
BIOGRAPHY

Prof Shose Kessi is Dean of Humanities at the University of Cape Town. She joined UCT 2011 in the Department of Psychology, was appointed chair of the Humanities Transformation Committee in 2016 and deputy dean for transformation in the faculty in 2018. She is the founder and first chairperson of the UCT Black Academic Caucus. She has a PhD in Social Psychology and an MSc from the London School of Economics and Political Science.

The life story of Mary Turok - a tribute

By Ivan Turok

Confronted by the brutality of apartheid during the 1950s and 1960s, Mary Turok became a brave and feisty political activist. After apartheid was defeated, she mellowed into a deeply compassionate woman guided by a profound humanity and selfless determination to support poor and vulnerable groups, in the spirit of Ubuntu. IVAN TUROK pays tribute to his late mother, a constant presence at the Institute for African Alternatives (IFAA), working alongside her husband, former Director, Professor Ben Turok.





Mary Butcher was born in 1932 to upper middle-class parents who were Christian Scientists. After a sheltered, apolitical upbringing in KwaZulu-Natal, she went to university in Cape Town in 1950 aged only 17. Her privileged background had a lasting effect in that she knew what it meant to be different from your peers, and religion taught her that your beliefs and values really mattered.

The National Party had just come to power and was rolling out harsh and repressive laws. Mary's exposure to growing racism and social injustice, and her involvement in student life were radicalising experiences, leading her to rebel against her establishment background. She became a surprising champion of progressive causes despite her conventional upbringing, and immersed herself in various political campaigns, community activities, and trade union battles. She learnt how important it was to help people become organised in order to protect and further their interests, and was willing to put in the effort to assist.

For example, she helped the late struggle icon, Helen Joseph, to run a feeding scheme on the Cape Flats, where she witnessed forced evictions of people living in shacks. On another occasion she joined a small group who painted a large slogan on the rock face below Signal Hill saying DOWN WITH MALAN, the then prime minister.

Modern Youth Society

Early on, Mary joined the Modern Youth Society (MYS), which was aligned with the ANC and, for some of its members, the underground Communist Party. It held meetings in the Mitra Hall, Mowbray, which was centrally located so that people of all backgrounds from across Cape Town could easily get there. She later became secretary of the MYS.

MYS members regarded themselves as socialists and called each other comrade. This was dangerous at the time because the Suppression of Communism Act of 1950 meant you could be imprisoned for years for what were very widely defined communist activities. At the time, modern meant critical, avant-garde – breaking taboos, non-conformism and challenging art, literature, and architecture. The MYS symbolised something defiant and revolutionary.



Mary was more independent than most members in many ways. She loved the spirit of rebellion and breaking the mould, alongside the very serious mission to bring down apartheid. Being actively involved in the meaningful cause of confronting discrimination and orthodox thinking with such a diverse group of passionate people was exciting and enriching, although full of hazards as well.

Defiance Campaign

The Defiance Campaign Against Unjust Laws was launched in June 1952. It involved volunteers peacefully breaking apartheid laws and led to over 8,000 arrests in the first few months. Mary was one of the first to be arrested in Cape Town, for sitting on the non-white seats in the general post office. Fortunately, her lawyer was astute and she was discharged.



Mary Turok, with Albie Sachs and Joseph Nkatlo, the Western Cape Chairperson of the ANC, give the 'thumbs up salute of the Congress Movement at the time.



MYS members lived dangerously on the verge of breaking the law all the time. When banning orders were issued, people often broke them, risking arrest. As the government clamped down on opponents and banned many leaders, Mary found herself slotted into vacant positions in youth, peace, and other committees. Her strong convictions gave her the confidence to accept leadership responsibilities, even though she felt completely ill-equipped, as she explained later. On one occasion she was asked to address a memorial meeting when Joseph Stalin died! There was no internet in those days to swot up quickly.

She was also a founding member of the South African Congress of Democrats (COD). This was a left-wing, white, anti-apartheid organisation founded in 1953 and a key part of the multi-racial Congress Alliance after the ANC invited whites to become part of the Congress Movement. The COD advocated racial equality and sought to demonstrate opposition to apartheid among whites.

Marriage to Ben Turok

Towards the end of 1953 and while still only 21, Mary formed a relationship with Ben. It started when Brian Bunting, editor of the pro-ANC *Guardian* newspaper, asked Ben to accompany Mary to the ANC national conference in Queenstown. By this time Mary was a reporter on the newspaper.

Ben came from a completely different background – he was Jewish, but secular and cosmopolitan. Unlike Mary, his immediate family had direct experience of prejudice and hardship in Eastern Europe. Both Mary and Ben's parents objected to their relationship, but in another act of defiance they got married secretly in the hope of averting further strife. Shared belief in progressive values and in emancipation bound them together in a tight partnership that endured for the rest of their lives. They were fully committed to struggle side-by-side and in a very single-minded way against oppression and exploitation, wherever these conditions existed.

There was a tension running through the Movement between independence and conformity. On the one hand, people were rebelling against the system – the law, culture, and fundamental structure of society. Yet the struggle also required concerted action, cohesion, and strict discipline, including a respect for leadership and a degree of conformity.



Mary and Ben were revolutionaries at heart, not just in their ideals but in their practical actions. They were willing to give their lives for the cause, but they were also independent and more rebellious than most comrades. They were sometimes criticised for being free spirits and going their own way. Mary didn't withhold her views and wouldn't necessarily toe the line if she believed it was the wrong thing to do. She never stopped trying to persuade others to become more active and do something of tangible value. She wasn't spiteful or nasty, but firm, direct, and quite hard in what she expected of herself and other comrades.

Conditions for people within the Movement became more difficult and life more disruptive in the late 1950s, with mounting state persecution, banning orders, and arrests. Mary really battled to juggle her political activities with caring for their three young children, so life was extremely stressful. She was in Cape Town while Ben was immersed in the Treason Trial and in organisational work for the Movement, usually in Johannesburg, and could spend little time at home. After several years she moved with the children to Johannesburg, so they could be closer to Ben.

Imprisonment

National tensions escalated with the campaign against the pass laws, the Sharpeville massacre, and the resulting state of emergency in 1960. When the banned ANC initiated the armed struggle in response to Sharpeville, Ben was instructed to undertake an act of sabotage, unbeknown to Mary. She only found out when a story about the bungled post office bomb appeared in the newspaper. Ben spent three painful years in Pretoria Central prison, where he regularly heard black male prisoners singing with anguished voices as they trundled down the corridor to the gallows.

Months after his 1962 arrest, the ANC launched a poster campaign warning of repercussions for Sharpeville. Mary was banned from attending meetings by this stage but secretly got together with three other women to paste up posters across Joburg's northern suburbs. They were discovered, arrested, and charged with furthering the objects of an illegal organisation.

Mary was convicted and sentenced to 18 months imprisonment, with 12 months suspended. She spent most of her sentence in Pietersburg, under a hostile Afrikaans manager, but made friends in prison with a sex worker and a woman who murdered her husband with a shotgun after being assaulted by him.



Life was extremely tough for Mary after her release from prison. The government's attitude towards opponents was hardening and she learnt that people were being tortured in prison. She was given another banning order, placed under suburb arrest, and experienced constant surveillance and harassment by the police – virtual imprisonment as she explained in letters to a friend. She found it difficult to handle tensions between her three boys and spent sleepless nights fearing that Ben wouldn't be allowed home after serving his sentence. She felt isolated with few friends in the area and could only write to Ben every three months and visit him every six. Indeed, she was ostracised by many of the neighbours and her children were teased at school for their father being a jailbird.



Back home ... Mary Turok reunited with her sons, Fred and Ivan, after her release from prison in 1963.

Photo supplied by the Turok family

Leaving for exile

Shortly after Ben was released, there was a rumour that Mary would be arrested for being a member of the Communist Party, which carried a minimum five-year sentence. With three young children, they had to do something urgently because her parents refused to help in the event that she was imprisoned again. Despite their enormous reluctance to go into exile and apparently abandon their comrades, they realised that



the only real option was for Ben to skip the border and leave the rest of the family behind in the hope that the police wouldn't arrest Mary if she had sole custody of the kids.

Their gamble proved correct after Ben undertook a daring escape overland to Botswana in early 1966, and then went on incognito to Kenya. Mary and the boys followed six weeks later on an exit permit, meaning that she could never come back. The government froze their assets, so they left with very few resources.



Nevertheless, the family spent three happy years in East Africa, mainly in Tanzania, which was enjoying a resurgence following independence. The atmosphere was relaxed, race relations were warm and friendly, and the sense of liberation was palpable.

However, the education system wasn't easy for the boys to navigate, so the family reluctantly left for the UK.



Mary and Ben spent the next 20 years in exile in London, excluding a three-year stint in Zambia from 1979-82 to be closer to home. Mary worked as a medical researcher and then a social worker, all the while maintaining close links with the ANC office and the Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM). Mary was most actively involved in the ANC Women's League and in the local branch of the AAM.

Mary and Ben rose above such difficulties and demonstrated remarkable versatility by adapting their interests and activities to their changing environments. They became fully absorbed in undertaking local research, teaching, community, and political activities in Tanzania, Zambia, and England and made lasting contributions in all three contexts. One of their most important legacies is the Institute for African Alternatives (IFAA), and its journal *New Agenda: South African Journal of Social and Economic Policy*. Mary played a vital role behind the scenes in both endeavours through writing, editorial, and administrative tasks.

Member of Parliament

When Nelson Mandela was released in 1990 and the ANC was unbanned, they were among the first to return home and settled in Johannesburg. Mary was nominated by her branch to be on the ANC's election list for Parliament and spent five years as a backbench MP. Although she didn't find being an MP a rewarding experience, there was a spirit of great excitement and hope about the new South Africa and she played a small part in ensuring the Constitution would be the most gender sensitive in the world.

Mary made 16 speeches during her time in Parliament and sat on three portfolio committees – Housing, Transport, and Social Development. In notes for her memoir, she states that her main experience as an MP was to learn more about the ugly and harsh ways in which the National Party imposed separate development on the country. She also came to appreciate the enormous changes required for South Africa to become a genuinely free and fair society, and began to question whether the political will existed to get to the bottom of many of the problems and tackle them seriously.



One frustration was discovering that government ministers and officials did not seem to take the ideas and recommendations of portfolio committees and MPs seriously, despite all the effort and care she and her colleagues put into their work. As a nominated MP parachuted in to represent the constituency of Mitchells Plain, she also felt something of an imposter when she encountered impressive grassroots activists and UDF members who were much better placed to represent the interests of the local community. The disconnect between many ANC MPs and local communities has of course become a mounting concern subsequently.

In her parliamentary speeches Mary consistently advocated for the poor and marginalised groups, and drew attention to a host of uncomfortable issues and problems that remain unresolved to this day. She spoke out repeatedly about road safety, in light of the country having the highest rate of road traffic accidents and fatalities in the world. She called for speed limits to be enforced and the safety of pedestrians to be improved through more and better sidewalks. She also said more effort should be devoted to tarring roads in townships and informal settlements, and spoke up for a shift towards public transport rather than private.

In housing, she advised a multipronged approach rather than a narrow focus on giving free Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) dwellings to passive beneficiaries. She believed that people's energy and skills should be harnessed to build their own homes through soft loans, advice, training, and the availability of cheap materials. She also criticised the delays in helping impoverished communities to upgrade informal settlements. And she was ahead of her time in advocating that well-located, vacant government-owned land should be released for public housing.

In social development, she offered a prescient warning about government overreach and resources being stretched too thinly to make much difference, leading to programme failures. She was particularly worried about the plight of many children living on the streets who get caught up in crime and end up in squalid and overcrowded prisons. She advocated higher standards of secure care and a developmental approach to young people through community-based services that offer greater support and pathways out of poverty. She believed that social policy shouldn't just be about widening access to grants and other welfare support, but building accountability and fairness mechanisms into the delivery of welfare services.



Extra-parliamentary activism

After leaving Parliament, Mary played a key role over many years in establishing the South African Older Persons Forum (SAOPF), and she was elected its first chairperson. The Forum emerged from a wide-ranging inquiry into the neglect and abuse suffered by older black people at the hands of their families, communities, and government officials. The investigation led in turn to an Act of Parliament, a national convention, a steering committee and ultimately the creation of the SAOPF (with provincial and district forums) in 2005. Mary understood the issues thoroughly and performed important functions in all these structures, in effect becoming a loyal ambassador for the interests of older people.

The main purpose of the SAOPF was to give older persons a platform and a unified voice, as well as to engage government on the hardships and distress affecting them. Mary believed that raising public awareness and persistent lobbying of the authorities would result in tangible progress in the lived experiences of older people. However, she reflected later that this was naïve because a stronger and better-networked organisation was required to build greater solidarity among this group and to create the powerful force needed to bring about meaningful improvements on the ground. For example, she believed that some oversight mechanism or ombud was required at the local level to protect older people who were subject to abuse, but this was rejected by the government.

Mary was also committed to working at the community level and willing to put in the hard slog to help people become better organised. For example, she set up the Muizenberg Housing Savings Scheme to assist domestic workers who were forced to travel long distances each day from the Cape Flats. She identified potential sites for self-build housing and then systematically engaged all the key local, provincial, and national authorities to secure access to at least one of these land parcels. However, after years of lobbying, these efforts were largely unsuccessful.

Throughout her life Mary remained deeply committed to the cause of social justice, and to doing whatever she could whenever she encountered adversity, unfairness, and inequality, whether this was writing letters to the press, undertaking acts of charitable giving, or helping to unlock resources through leveraging her personal contacts. She possessed great emotional intelligence and formed enduring relationships with people from all walks of life. She was a person of enormous integrity, generosity, selflessness, and humility, and was always



determined to try to improve the lives and dignity of those subjected to misery and marginalisation, especially by empowering them to control their lives and claim their rights. For this she remains an inspiration to many family members, friends, and acquaintances.

There was a vitality, sparkle and honesty to Mary right to the end. At Ben's memorial in 2020 she spoke out about the unfinished struggle for emancipation, and gently reminded people to become more active in playing their part: "We have to spend the last years of our lives fighting for what we've neglected. And looking round this room, I can see that many of us don't have much time left."

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am very grateful to many people, friends and acquaintances for sharing their memories of Mary, including Albie Sachs for his vivid recollection of events in the 1950s. A short version of this tribute was published in the Daily Maverick.

BIOGRAPHY

Professor Ivan Turok holds the SA NRF Research Chair in City-Region Economies at the University of the Free State and was Executive Director at the Human Sciences Research Council (HRSC). Before that he was a professor at the universities of Glasgow and Strathclyde. Among other leadership positions, he serves as a board member of the Institute for African Alternatives (IFAA).

Lead, don't demobilise the nation!



By Boichoko Dithlake

Now that the dust has settled after South Africa's National Dialogue Convention held in Gauteng in August, citizens are asking, what next? 'where do we go from here?' The chairperson of the Convention Organising Committee of the National Dialogue, BOICHOKO DITLHAKÉ, shares an updated roadmap for the work ahead.



South Africa stands, not for the first time, at a defining moment in its history. For ordinary South Africans, life is lived on the edge – amidst hunger, violence, economic anguish, grinding poverty, and gross inequality. The most vulnerable are victims of appalling cruelty. The wounded are progressively becoming perpetrators, and some perpetrators are deafeningly claiming for themselves the blanket of victimhood. We are witnessing an accelerated disintegration of the nation, a rupture not only in the essence but in the very fabric of the body politic.

One of the least appreciated outcomes of 1994 was the creation of a unitary South Africa. This was not a foregone conclusion at the time. Pre-1994, many within the political landscape clung to federalist and confederalist ideas, reinventing apartheid's Bantustans. Today, identity-driven and cultural-exclusionary tales are resurging: the Cape Independence Party openly campaigns for secession; tribalist movements stir discontent in some provinces; while exclusionary ethnic-nationalist pomposity gains traction.

The latent potential for this disintegration to feed nationalist and tribalist predispositions must be challenged. To disregard them is hazardous. The catastrophe of the Balkans or the long civil wars of Angola and Cameroon remind us of what happens when national dialogue is abandoned.

Why dialogue, and why now?

It is common in peacebuilding to say that those who most resist conversation are those who most need it. South Africa's transition was only possible when deep-rooted enemies agreed to dialogue. Today, dialogue is not discretionary – it is existential.

For more than a decade, South Africans have called for an "Economic Codesa,"¹ recognising that while 1994 secured political self-determination, economic transformation never followed. The Convention held on 15 August 2025, precisely 40 years after P.W. Botha's failed Rubicon speech,² was therefore more than representative. It was a Rubicon moment for a nation probing for regeneration.

The outcomes of the National Dialogue Convention

The National Dialogue Convention did not resolve every oxymoron, but it delivered something South Africa urgently needed: a roadmap out of paralysis. Key outcomes included:

- **Adoption of a national roadmap:** A phased plan for building a social compact over seven to eight months, beginning with thematic dialogues on economic justice, governance reform, safety and security, and social cohesion, among others.



- **Establishment of a national steering committee (NSC):** With a 60% civil society composition, the NSC will coordinate community ward and sectoral dialogues and report back to the nation. Communication to all sectors have been transmitted in this regard.

- **Commitment to a people's compact:** The convention resolved that the final outcome of the process will be an implementable national social compact and plan of action, to be ratified by a people's assembly during the second National Convention in 2026.

- **Transparency and accountability mechanisms:** Convention delegates insisted that all reports, budgets, and progress updates will be published regularly to ensure transparency and accountability, guaranteeing a citizen-led national dialogue process.

As one community leader from Alexandra said during a plenary discussion:

"We cannot eat promises. If this Dialogue does not put bread on the table, safety in our streets, and dignity in our homes, then it is nothing more than a talk shop. But today, at least, we have forced them to hear us."

Ordinary South Africans speak

Beyond resolutions, the Convention was powerful because ordinary South Africans spoke truth to power. A young activist from Khayelitsha reminded the plenary:

"We didn't come here to be consulted. We came here to co-create. This is our future, not their boardroom."

From a Limpopo farmer:

"Land reform has been debated for 30 years. Dialogue must not mean more delay. If we cannot feed our people, there is no nation to save."

From a Soweto grandmother who runs a community kitchen:

"We are already doing the work of rebuilding South Africa with our bare hands. The Dialogue must not silence us. It must amplify us."

These voices underscore the central truth: the National Dialogue cannot be the government's performance; it must be the people's process.

The road ahead: from convention to compact

The adopted roadmap charts a path that is ambitious but achievable if grounded in people's power:

1.2025–2026: Village, ward, provincial and sectoral dialogues (youth, women, workers, traditional leaders, faith communities, business, and rural constituencies, among others).



2. **Mid-2026:** Consolidation into a draft social compact.

3. **2026:** Ratification by the second national convention, creating South Africa's new social contract.

The roadmap is not perfect, but it is alive. It can, and must, be owned by the nation.

Answering the critics

Sceptics argue that the dialogue is “elite theatre” or “government’s PR stunt.” These concerns are not unfounded. But as Martin Luther King Jr. said: “There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love.” Disappointment is proof of our investment in the nation.

Civil society’s task is not to abandon the dialogue, but to hold it accountable. If elites attempt to derail, dilute, or delay, then communities must insist on progress. We cannot repeat Botha’s Rubicon failure.

From disappointment to determination

South Africa cannot wait for perfect conditions. Our democracy is wounded, but not beyond repair. The National Dialogue is flawed, yes, but also filled with possibilities.

As Oliver Tambo reminded us: “The way we lead must have a mobilising effect, not a demobilising one.” We must move forward – with or without those who hesitate. The National Dialogue is not an event but a process; not a performance but a project of national renewal.

This is our Rubicon. Let us cross it, together.

Updated roadmap for work ahead

Immediate (Aug 2025)

- *Constitution of steering committee (within 2 weeks): integrate new sectors, finalise coordination structure.*
- *Call to action: delegates mobilise constituencies, encourage registration for local dialogues.*

Phase 1: citizen-initiated and pilot dialogues (Aug–Dec 2025)

- *Launch – 50,000 citizen-initiated dialogues nationally.*
- *Roll out dialogues in 15 pilot districts (metro, town, rural).*
- *Dialogues to reach rural villages to ensure full coverage.*
- *Recruit/train provincial and ward facilitators using train-the-trainer model.*

Phase 2: ward & village dialogues nationwide (Jan–Mar 2026)

- *Expansion to all 4,300 wards, minimum three dialogues per ward, with multiple village dialogues in rural wards.*



- Continuous citizen-led dialogues supported by National Dialogue app, radio, WhatsApp forums, and local media.

Phase 3: Consolidation and cross-cutting dialogues (Apr 2026)

- Community action plans drafted from ward and village dialogues.
- District-level consolidation forums validate outcomes.
- Sectoral and thematic dialogues (labour, faith, youth, disability, LGBTQIA+, etc.) to synthesise cross-cutting issues.

Phase 4: National synthesis (Apr–Jun 2026)

- Interdisciplinary citizen panels compile draft people's compact.
- Public review period allows for amendments and transparency.

Second National Convention (June 2026)

- Adoption of the people's compact – binding commitments for citizens, sectors, business, labour, government, and civil society.
- Agreement on institutional mechanisms for accountability and monitoring.

ENDNOTES

¹ CODESA, the Convention for a Democratic Society, 1991-1993, was a series of multi-party negotiations to establish a new, democratic constitution for SA (ed).

² So called because former president PW Botha said in the speech "I believe that we are today crossing the Rubicon," a reference to Julius Caesar's 'no turning back' declaration when he crossed the river Rubicon (the frontier between Gaul and Italy) with his troops in 49 BCE. The speech, made on 15 August 1985, had been expected to confront the clear need for meaningful change in South Africa's apartheid system. On the contrary, Botha said there would be no change (ed).

BIOGRAPHY

Boichoko Ditlhake, Civil Society Head at Kagiso Trust, is the chairperson of the Convention Organising Committee of the National Dialogue. He writes in his personal capacity as a civil society activist.

More from the 'theatre of promise'?

Or can South Africa's National Dialogue forge a real social compact?

By Bruce Kadalie



In the aftermath of the August National Dialogue, South Africans are sceptical, asking if this will once again descend into more 'political theatre,' but at the same time hopeful that this may prove to be the 'real thing' at last? Following an IFAA Forum titled 'South Africa's Social Compact: Can it be Achieved?' **BRUCE KADALIE** reflects on the elusive search for a binding national consensus in South Africa.



The timing of a recent Institute for African Alternatives (IFAA) Forum titled “South Africa’s Social Compact: Can it be Achieved?” was not fortuitous. It took place during the runoff to President Cyril Ramaphosa’s flagship National Dialogue initiative – a grand political gambit born out of the fractured mandate of the 2024 elections that produced a Government of National Unity (GNU).

The National Dialogue, held in August 2025, was touted as the crucible for a new social compact, a foundational pact between state, capital, labour, and civil society to finally tackle the triple evils of poverty, inequality, and unemployment. Yet, as the IFAA discussion revealed, the path to this compact is littered with the wreckage of previous attempts, public cynicism, and a fundamental question of power: who truly gets to define the future of South Africa? The IFAA Forum brought together activists, scholars, and trade unionists who revealed a deep scepticism, and brought with them the ghost of past promises.

The dialogue was framed by IFAA’s Acting Director, Professor Emeritus, Ari Sitas, with a weary pragmatism that hung over the proceedings. He recalled the post-1994 hope about building consensus, but said, in reality “conflicts increased, tensions increased, divides increased”. This admission acknowledged that the machinery of social dialogue has, for more than three decades, failed to produce a consensus strong enough to alter the nation’s trajectory. Sitas framed the central dilemma around three issues: the *necessity* of a compact, the *methodology* of achieving it, and the *ultimate goal*.

He warned about the nation’s “diabolical ability to develop the most sophisticated policy papers and the diabolical ability to make them non-happenings.” This is the classic critique of South African governance: fluency in the language of policy coupled with a stunning deficit in implementation.

... the machinery of social dialogue has, for more than three decades, failed to produce a consensus strong enough to alter the nation’s trajectory.



Panellist Boichoko Ditlhake, the chairperson of the organising committee behind the National Dialogue, focused on citizen agency versus elite capture. He said the National Dialogue represents a historic fork in the road. "It will either serve as a true revival of social agency by citizens or become yet another instrument of elite-driven political theatre." He pointed to the "fatigue" and "cynicism" among South Africans who have seen countless dialogues and compacts fail. "South Africa suffers from a deficit of implementing commitments," he noted. "What guarantees this time will be different?"

Ditlhake's critique echoes the Institute for Security Studies (ISS, 2024) which argued that the National Dialogue risks "putting the cart before the horse" and prioritising conversation over concrete, measurable outcomes. Without clear goals and mechanisms for accountability, the Dialogue could easily descend into "political theatre," leaving the structural status quo untouched. Ditlhake argued the National Dialogue process must be "citizen-determined, not politically engineered," involving "13,000 ward-based community dialogues" to reach over a million ordinary people.

[The National Dialogue] 'will either serve as a true revival of social agency by citizens or become yet another instrument of elite-driven political theatre.'

What would a genuine compact entail? Veteran trade unionist and IFAA board member, Tony Ehrenreich, brought the conversation down to the brass tacks of economic power and redistribution. His intervention was grounded in the unfulfilled promises of the Freedom Charter.

Ehrenreich dismantled the neoliberal logic that has dominated economic policy since the introduction of the Growth, Employment, and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy in 1996. "Growth through redistribution is fundamental," he asserted. "Without it, wealth won't trickle down – unemployment will persist."

For Ehrenreich, a compact is meaningless if it lacks enforceable mechanisms. He called for "sector-specific compacts with legal teeth" – memorandums of understanding (MOUs) on wages, training, and investment – that carry real penalties for non-compliance. "No more



President Cyril Ramaphosa addresses the National Dialogue, held at Unisa in August 2025. Photo from Flickr.

vague promises,” he said. He directly linked the failure of past compacts to a crisis of state credibility, noting how the political elite “assimilated apartheid-era extravagance instead of undoing inequality”.

The tension between these perspectives illustrates the core challenges of the National Dialogue. Dithlake’s focus on *agency* and Ehrenreich’s focus on *redistribution* are two sides of the same coin. Both are about power; the former is about political power – who gets a seat at the table – and the latter is about economic power – how the nation’s wealth is actually shared. A compact that addresses one without the other is doomed to fail.

This is not a uniquely South African dilemma. Lessons from Ireland’s system of social compacts suggests success hinges on rigorous accountability, routine assessments, and well-integrated institutional mechanisms (Gwaindepi, 2014). The Irish model worked, for a time, because it was underpinned by a clear *quid pro quo*: wage moderation in exchange for tax reforms and social investments. It was a binding deal, not a vague statement of intent.

South Africa’s efforts have consistently lacked this binding character, existing as “a work in progress” – a phrase from President Cyril Ramaphosa’s 2022 State of the Nation address, in which he spoke of the government’s intention to forge a comprehensive social compact but bemoaned the fact it had proved difficult to get off the ground. His



reference to it as a work in progress itself admits to a perpetual state of incompleteness (Parliament of RSA, 2022).

Signs of a collapse of the political consensus the GNU was meant to embody reinforces Sitas' urgent warning about the need to "minimise establishment power in these discussions" and ensure ordinary voices are heard over those of "corporations and politicians".

The IFAA Forum framed the contours of the problem. The path forward, as synthesised from the contributions of Sitas, Dithlake, and Ehrenreich, must be built on three pillars:

Institutionalised citizen power. Dithlake's model of granular, ward-level dialogues must be the non-negotiable foundation. This cannot be a rushed, tick-box exercise. It requires resources and a commitment to hearing uncomfortable truths. As a study from the South African Institute of International Affairs suggests, leveraging "participatory futures" methodologies to co-create "transformative ecosystems" is essential (SAIIA, 2025). This means moving beyond consultation to active co-design, empowering communities to shape the agenda itself.

Enforceable redistributive mechanisms. Ehrenreich's call for binding, sectoral MOUs is critical. The compact must be translated into specific, measurable commitments on jobs, wages, skills, and investment. These agreements need clear timelines, public dashboards for monitoring performance, and consequences for signatories who renege. This transforms the compact from a document into a dynamic, accountable contract.

An end to corruption and the lack of political credibility. There can be no compact without trust. Sitas' caution about "establishment power" must be heeded and individuals implicated in corruption and state capture cannot be allowed to lead or dominate this process. Their presence would poison the well from the outset. The compact needs oversight from a credible, cross-party body, perhaps chaired by a respected non-political figure, to ensure its integrity.

The National Dialogue and the quest for a social compact are critical and, above all, timeless. The obstacles are not technical; they are profoundly political. They are about a struggle over the soul of the nation's economy and the definition of its democracy. The IFAA Forum concluded on a cautious note of hope. Dithlake's final words hung in the digital air: "This is the moment to reclaim agency. If we don't, history will judge us harshly."



The National Dialogue may indeed be theatre, but it is necessary theatre – and it cannot remain just theatre. The stage is set. The audience – a weary, cynical, yet resilient nation – is watching. This time, the performance must be real. The promises must be binding. The ending, for once, must be rewritten.

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BIOGRAPHY

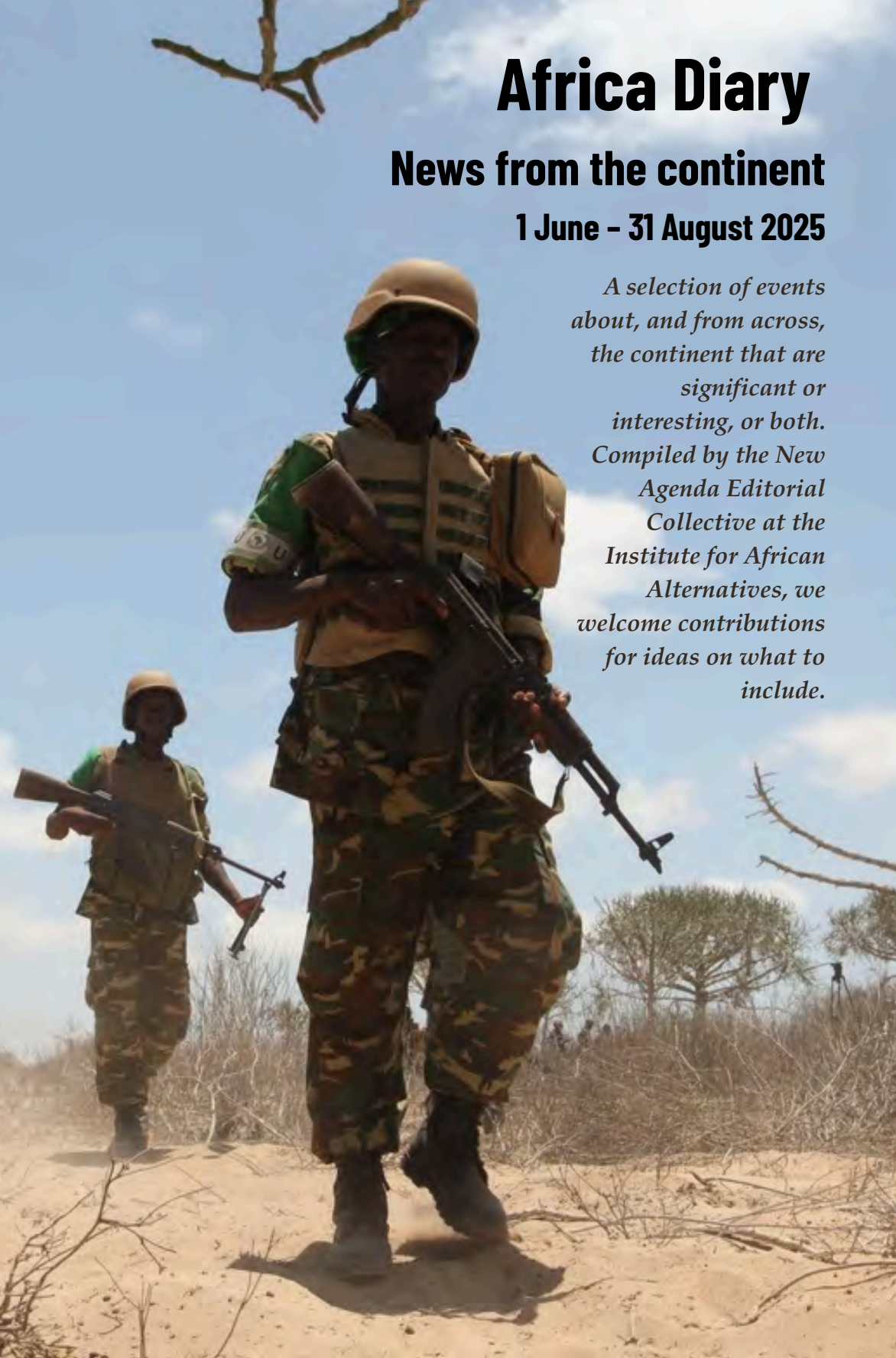
Bruce Kadalie is a research coordinator at the Institute for African Alternatives (IFAA) and runs its Forums programme of regular public debates.

Africa Diary

News from the continent

1 June - 31 August 2025

*A selection of events
about, and from across,
the continent that are
significant or
interesting, or both.
Compiled by the New
Agenda Editorial
Collective at the
Institute for African
Alternatives, we
welcome contributions
for ideas on what to
include.*





August

26 August: The Sudanese cabinet held its first meeting in the capital city, Khartoum, since the present conflict started in April 2023. The government continues to be based in the eastern city of Port Sudan. Khartoum still lies in ruins after its occupation by militias, during which many of its population fled or were killed.

15 August: Following Zambia's catastrophic copper tailings dam failure in February 2025, Mike Mposha, Zambian Minister of Green Economy and Environment, has declared "The water is fit for consumption." While studies on the long-term effects on the ecosystem of the Kufue River are still underway, the foreign-managed company responsible for the mine has apologised, distributed initial compensation to farmers directly impacted, and paid a fine of 1.5 million kwacha (about US\$65,000 or more than R1m).

12 August: Mathilde Vu from the Norwegian Refugee Council in Sudan said the number of aid workers being targeted in Sudan has increased this year. In an interview with Richard Kagoe of BBC Focus on Africa she said "... we have more than 30 aid workers, colleagues, who've been killed since the beginning of the year, nine of them very recently from Relief International in Darfur.... I'm not even counting the number of local volunteers (who would not belong to any organization, who were just feeling like you and I, who decided to step in and to support people, without any affiliation) who are being killed on a monthly basis in Sudan. It's very, very difficult to be a humanitarian worker in this day and age, at a time where international humanitarian law is not being respected, is being violated, and where there is zero accountability."

7 August: Nema Sagara, one of the highest-ranking military women in Africa, was arrested and accused of complicity in an unsuccessful coup attempt in Mali. Sagara, a Brigadier General in the Mali Air Force, has received military training in Mali, France and the United States. Since its independence from France Mali has experienced five successful military coups d'état – in 1968, 1991, 2012, 2020 and 2021 – and three coups that have failed.





July

30 July: FC Barcelona and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) have announced a strategic four-year partnership to promote football – and the culture of sport and peace – in the DRC. FC Barcelona professional teams will wear the motto “R.D. Congo – Coeur d’Afrique” on the back of their training shirts for the next four seasons and the club will hold camps and clinics for children to build young athletes in the country. For adults programmes on coaching and the organisation of sporting events will also be developed. The DRC sports ministry reportedly paid US\$11 million to the club for the first season. This is a partnership, not a sponsorship.



25 July: South Africa’s ANC hosted leaders from six southern African liberation movements at a summit near Johannesburg under the theme: “Defending the Liberation Gains, Advancing Integrated Socio-Economic Development, Strengthening Solidarity for a Better Africa.” The ANC (founded in 1912) is the oldest liberation movement still in existence. Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM), the “Party of the Revolution”, has been the ruling party in Tanzania since it was formed in 1977. The People's Movement



for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) was formed in 1956 and has been in power in Angola since independence from Portugal in 1975. The South West Africa People's Organisation (Swapo), now officially known as the Swapo Party of Namibia, was formed in 1960 and has ruled Namibia since independence in 1990. Frelimo, formed in 1962, has been the government of Mozambique since independence from Portugal in 1975. Zanu-PF has been the ruling party in Zimbabwe since it was formed in 1987.

16 July: Thabile Mdluli, Assistant Press Secretary in the Office of the Prime Minister in Eswatini, told Reuters that following “months of robust high-level engagements” with the United States government, Eswatini would facilitate the transit of five criminal deportees from the US to their countries of origin. When the Trump administration deported the five to Eswatini in July, a US government official described them as “individuals so uniquely barbaric that their home countries refused to take them back”. In a post on X he said, “[T]hese depraved monsters have been terrorizing American communities.”

3 July: Narendra Modi, India's prime minister, addressed a joint session of Ghana's parliament in the capital, Accra. He said: “The histories of India and Ghana bear the scars of colonial rule, but our spirits have always remained free and fearless.” Ghana was incorporated into the British Empire as “the Gold Coast” in 1901. This followed “the war of the golden stool” where the local Ashanti/Asante were confronted by invading troops from all over the Empire, including India. The British General (then Colonel) James Willcocks wrote: “All ranks, especially those fine soldiers, the Sikhs, behaved admirably, and if it were not for this impossible forest we would soon wipe out most of the Ashantis”. Modi was on his way to the BRICS summit in Brazil. He also visited Namibia before returning home.

1 July: BBC Focus on Africa reported that Islamist militants are using Starlink technology to co-ordinate their attacks on both government forces and civilians across the Sahel. Starlink is a satellite internet service developed by SpaceX, owned by Elon Musk. Starlink, which works everywhere, including places without cell phone connectivity, is also used for fundraising and recruitment. Starlink terminals are purchased legally in countries such as Nigeria and smuggled across borders. Not available in South Africa because of its telecom laws, Starlink is available in 24 other countries in Africa.



Massive polio vaccination campaign underway in Angola. Photo: World Health Organisation Regional Office for Africa

27 June: Angola launched an intensive polio vaccination campaign in response to 13 confirmed poliovirus cases in Benguela province. Over three days, the campaign aimed to vaccinate over 554,000 children under the age of five. Around 5,000 people, including community volunteers, were mobilised for the polio vaccination campaign, with an investment of approximately US\$3.6 million, mainly funded by the Global Polio Eradication Initiative through the World Health Organization and UNICEF. Young children are most vulnerable to polio, which can cause permanent physical damage, such as paralysis. Polio has been eradicated across most of the world through vaccination. Angola was certified polio-free in 2015, but routine immunization was not sustained.

'The vaccine is one of the greatest achievements of medicine, through which we have the possibility [of] preventing and protecting our children against diseases, particularly polio which causes childhood paralysis.'

World Health Organisation Regional Office for Africa



17 June: South Africa's National Prosecuting Authority told Parliament that the government of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) had still not explained why a 2023 request by South Africa to extradite the Gupta brothers from Dubai to face corruption and other criminal charges had been unsuccessful. Twelve formal requests for an explanation have been ignored by the UAE. The extradition request will be resubmitted with additional matters.

11 June: Fifty-three African countries will not face any tariffs at all on goods they export to China. (Eswatini, which has diplomatic ties with Taiwan, is the only country excluded.) This was announced by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi at a ministerial gathering for the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (Focac) in Changsha. This is not entirely new. A total of 33 African least-developed countries (LDCs) already had zero-tariff access to the Chinese market in January 2025 as part of a trade benefit programme introduced at the 2003 Focac meeting, and since expanded. China has been sub-Saharan Africa's largest bilateral trading partner for over two decades. The figures are huge, but the composition of trade is skewed. As with the colonial powers of old, primary commodities – such as metals, minerals, and fuel (which are not subject to tariffs anyway) – are the great bulk of Africa's exports to China (about 60%). Manufactured goods dominate Africa's imports from China.

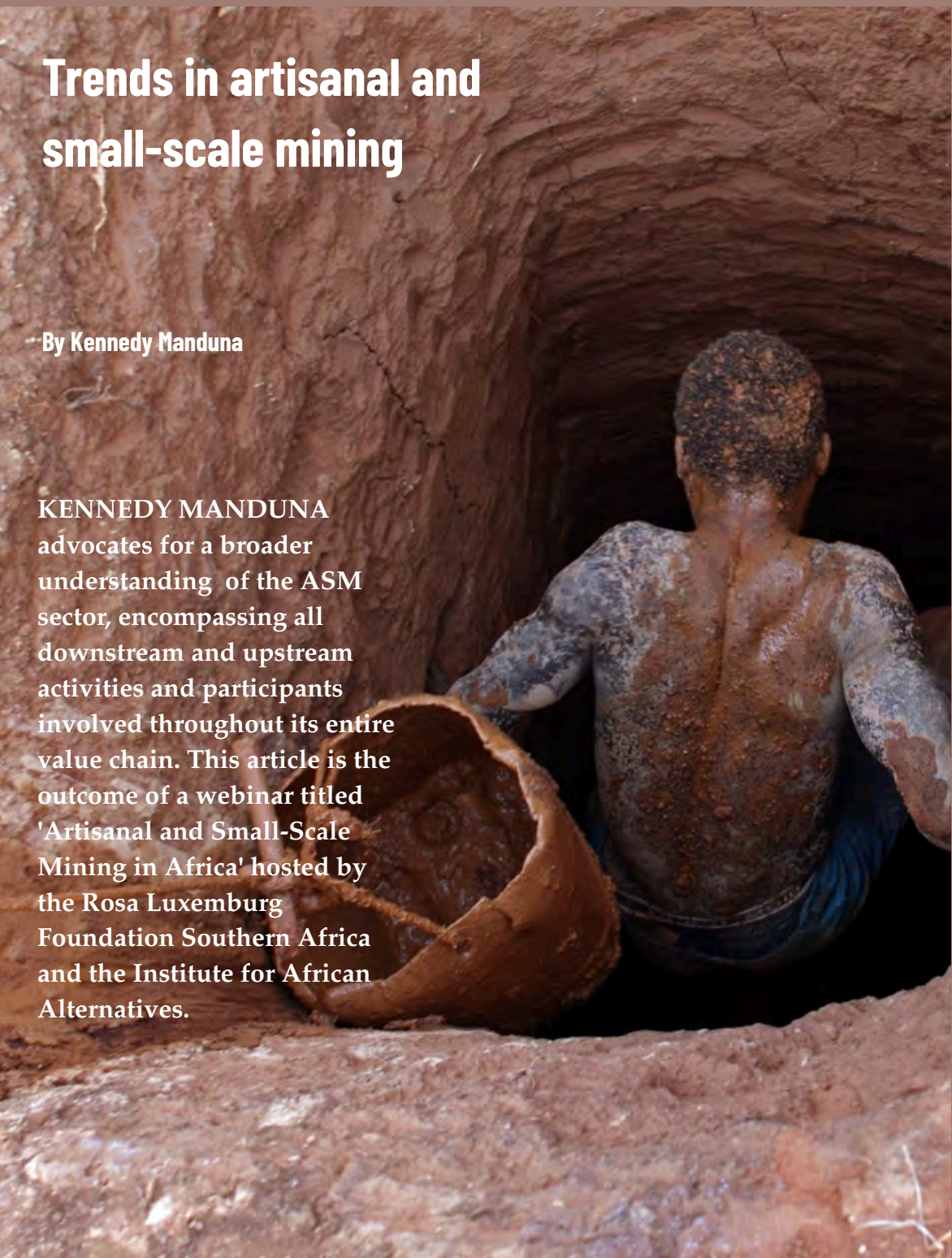
10 June: The African Airlines Association said that the air transport industry on the continent remains unprofitable. Air transport is perceived as a luxury service, so it faces particularly high taxes and charges. Governments, airports, and service providers tend to overcharge airlines even though many need help to survive. Also national rules bar airlines from operating routes with stopovers in several countries. A passenger flying out of Gabon to another African country has to pay US\$260 in departure tax. The average taxes, charges and fees paid by passengers for regional departures in Africa is US\$68, more than double the US\$32 passengers are charged in Europe.

Drivers, actors, and resistance

Trends in artisanal and small-scale mining

By Kennedy Manduna

KENNEDY MANDUNA advocates for a broader understanding of the ASM sector, encompassing all downstream and upstream activities and participants involved throughout its entire value chain. This article is the outcome of a webinar titled 'Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining in Africa' hosted by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation Southern Africa and the Institute for African Alternatives.





On 30 August 2008, I donned my illegal mining gear and made my way to the Chiadzwa Diamond Field following the diamond rush in the area that began in September 2006 – about a five-hour walk from our homesteads in the southeastern part of Buhera district, Zimbabwe. This act was a protest against the rampant inflation of 2008, which peaked at an astounding 89.7 sextillion percent (10 21 %) in November 2008, effectively erasing my entire three-month salary as a temporary high school teacher at my old school.

As a senior high school student from the nearby district, I often encountered a group of illegal miners as they walked through our fields towards the Chiadzwa area. Colloquially known as *magweja/makorokoza* in Zimbabwe, *galamseyers* in Ghana, *jerabos* in Zambia, *wachimbaji haramu* in Tanzania, or *zama zamas* in South Africa, they were identified by their hustling through illegal digging of minerals, equipped with mining gear such as shovels, picks, sacks, and other tools. Many of my peers, including close friends and relatives, left school in pursuit of fortunes in illegal diamond mining, while others, some still very young, took grave risks to search for alluvial diamonds in an area once recognised for having the largest diamond deposits in the world.

It was not until a decade later, during my drawn-out PhD journey, that I realised my active involvement was merely the surface of a deeper geological scandal, commonly known as the ‘paradox of plenty’. As in many African countries, the liberalisation of the economy due to the adoption and implementation of the structural adjustment programmes (SAPs), which led to massive retrenchments, caused the artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) sector to gain more traction in Zimbabwe.

This article examines the changing dynamics and variations in Southern Africa’s extractive industries overall and specifically within the ASM sector. For instance, this diverse, complex, and fluid sector is becoming increasingly criminalised and unregulated. The following straightforward but important questions need urgent answers to address the challenges faced by ASM: (a) Who is the real *zama zama*? (b) Who genuinely is a *zama zama*? (c) How and why did we end up in this situation? (d) Who is disadvantaged and who benefits from this situation? (e) Why does illegal, irregular, and informal mining continue unchecked in Africa? Addressing these questions is crucial because the common portrayal of ASM miners in literature, media, and policy documents – which I strongly argue is narrow, misleading, and overly simplistic – frames them as dirty, criminal-looking hustlers engaged in scavenging residual mineral deposits in Africa’s newly discovered and abandoned mines. I advocate for a broader understanding and framing of the sector, encompassing all downstream and upstream activities and participants involved throughout its entire value chain,



including the mining companies that carelessly abandoned their mines without proper closure procedures or planning for a sustainable and responsible post-mining economy and landscape.

Introduction

Artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) in Africa has a history that predates European explorers and colonisers. Southern Africans, especially the Shona people at Great Zimbabwe, traded gold with international traders from as far away as India, China, Egypt and many other Arab nations (Boafo & Arthur-Holmes, 2025; Manduna, 2025a ; Manduna, 2022; Bond, 1998). Successive colonial regimes harshly suppressed African natives who engaged in ASM. After independence, Africa did not see restructuring of the mining sector until the 1980s, when SAPs were introduced as economic reforms to address the economic crisis. It was during this period that the ASM sector gained prominence because SAPs affected sustainable rural livelihoods, led to the retrenchment of a significant portion of the formal labour force and caused unemployment and poverty rates to surge — thus pushing many into informality, with ASM and illegal mining becoming the pathways of least resistance. “The SAPs impacted rural economies and fueled the retrenchment of mine workers, resulting in the participation in non-farm activities like ASM” (Boafo & Arthur-Holmes, 2025, p. 3).

The ASM sector in Africa is currently experiencing significant shifts and disruptions in both scale and nature. For example, whereas it was once mainly composed of uneducated and unskilled rural poor, the extraordinary unemployment rates have now driven many young African university graduates into both licenced and unlicensed ASM operations, as observed in Ghana (Boafo & Arthur-Holmes, 2025, p. 3).

Zimbabwe provides another pertinent example of this problem, where about 30,000 graduates are produced annually in a country with an unemployment rate exceeding 90% — pushing many into the informal economy, with the ASM sector, particularly the artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASGM) sub-sector, as the preferred option (Hilson, 2016). Consequently, the number of ASM and illegal miners involved in the gold, diamond, chromite, and lithium sectors in Zimbabwe exceeds one million (Traoré, Hilson & Hilson, 2024), with ASGM miners accounting for over 500,000 (Manduna, 2025b; Hilson, 2016). The lithium sub-sector has recently attracted more than 5,000 illegal miners at the Sandawana lithium mines in Mberengwa district and Mutoko lithium mines in Mutoko district (Mujuru, 2023). “In some cases, illegal miners ‘invade’ concessions marked for large-scale mining companies, resulting in conflicts between illegal miners and the mining firms” (Boafo & Arthur-Holmes, 2025, p. 6). Similar incidents are common in South Africa, where *zama zamas* invade large-



scale mines either through underground shafts connecting with over 6,000 abandoned and derelict mines or by colluding with formal mine workers to gain entry through the gates (Manduna, 2025b; Manduna, 2024).

Furthermore, there is an exponential increase in the number of foreign nationals, both documented and undocumented, actively involved in Africa's ASM and illegal mining sectors (Manduna, 2025a; Manduna, 2024; Bofo & Arthur-Holmes, 2025). In South Africa, more than 75% of the illegal miners are undocumented foreign nationals from mainly Lesotho, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (Manduna, 2025b; Manduna, 2024; Manduna, 2023; Clark, 2018; Chuma, 2021). In Zimbabwe, Ghana, and the DRC, while the local populations dominate both the illegal and ASM sectors, there is a growing number of Chinese nationals (most of whom are in collusion with the local political and business elites), actively involved in these two important sectors, which are legally reserved for locals (Manduna, 2022). In Ghana, between 2008 and 2016, the country saw an influx of more than 50,000 Chinese miners engaged in illegal mining activities. In 2019, about 33 Chinese nationals were arrested for illegal gold mining in Ghana (Nadig, 2023). "On December 20, 2024, a group of 17 Chinese nationals was arrested for their direct and active involvement in illegal gold mining operations in the Walungu and Mwenga territories of the South Kivu Province [DRC], but surprisingly, after instructions from Congolese government officials in Kinshasa, they were released without any legal penalties or fines" (Tom, 2025, para. 4). Moreover, the DRC police arrested another three Chinese nationals on 4 January 2025 in the eastern part of the country for possessing 10 gold bars and US\$400,000.

Similarly, in 2023, Nigeria's Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) arrested several illegal and unlicensed Chinese nationals operating in unauthorised mining activities (Nadig, 2023). The case in point here is Dang Deng, a Chinese national and managing director of lithium mine Sinuo Xinyang Nigeria, who was convicted for illegally possessing 25 metric tonnes of assorted crude minerals (Nadig, 2023).

Another distinct feature of contemporary ASM and illegal mining in Africa is the high prevalence of foreign-owned companies, mainly Chinese owned, operating in these strategic sectors. For example, in Zimbabwe, a "court ordered a Chinese mining company to stop illegal mining operations on the lands of Mutoko residents" (Bofo & Arthur-Holmes, 2025, p. 6). In addition, in the DRC, "there are more than 450 mining companies in the South Kivu Province, mostly run by Chinese nationals, but unfortunately, they are operating illegally due to a lack of compliance with current Congolese mining codes" (Tom, 2025, para. 3).





In Nigeria's states of Niger, Zamfara, and Edo, several illegal Chinese companies are engaged in unlawful mining activities (Nadig, 2023). These revelations highlight Chinese extractive imperialism, where extensive mineral extraction and money laundering occur in mining communities, with geological wealth and scandal often intertwined. This brings to mind the idea proposed by Icarus Complex (2024), in a video on the Magaliesberg biosphere near Johannesburg, that "God stumbled here, and dropped his treasure chest of gold and diamonds and platinum and chrome. The issue we have to decide: is it a blessing or is it a curse?"

One of the notable colonial legacies is the coexistence of mining operations with two sub-sectors: the transnational and indigenous large-scale commercial miners, and the small-to-medium scale artisanal and illegal miners. The former is protected and regulated by clear government policies, legal frameworks, and institutional structures, while the latter largely operates at the margins of the State as self-governing actors (Manduna, 2025b). In many countries, this subsector is criminalised, unregulated, derided, and remains informal. Although it provides sustainable livelihoods for millions in the region, it also presents significant economic, social, ecological, political, business, and community challenges.

Conceptualisation, economic contribution, drivers, and actors

The sector is challenging to define, as it varies across different jurisdictions due to differences in the level of regulation, criminalisation, and informal practices. According to Hilson & Maconachie (2020, p. 125), the ASM sector refers to "low-tech, labour-intensive mineral extraction and processing carried out mostly by local people." Supporting this view, Hentschel, Hruschka, and Priester (2003, p. 5) observe that "broadly speaking, artisanal and small-scale mining refers to mining by individuals, groups, families or cooperatives with minimal or no mechanisation, often in the informal (illegal) sector of the market."

Understanding the sector is further complicated by the attempts to categorise it into three groups: (a) artisanal mining, (b) small-scale mining, and (c) illegal, informal, or irregular mining. In West Africa, efforts have been made to differentiate the first two subsectors, with artisanal mining referring to informal activities carried out manually without mechanisation, on a very small scale, while small-scale mining involves larger informal operations, characterised by "the presence of permanent, fixed installations that are established once an ore body is confirmed" (Hentschel, Hruschka & Priester, 2003, p. 5). In South Africa, the two are defined distinctly, as:

'**Artisanal mining**,' which refers to traditional and customary mining operations using traditional or customary ways and means. This includes the activities of individuals mainly using rudimentary mining methods, manual, and



rudimentary tools to access mineral ore, usually available on the surface or at shallow depths (Department of Mineral Resources and Energy, 2021, p. 6).

‘**Small-scale mining**,’ which refers to a prospecting or mining operation that does not employ specialised prospecting, mechanised mining technologies, chemicals including mercury and cyanide or explosives, or the proposed prospecting or mining operations that do not involve investment or expenditure which exceed such amount as may be prescribed (Department of Mineral Resources and Energy, 2021, p. 6). On the other hand, Interpol (2022, p. 7) defines illegal mining “as an umbrella term covering both illegal extraction and trade of minerals, including the illegal use of toxic chemicals (such as cyanide and mercury) in mining activities.” This article considers the expanded conception of illegal mining, which includes all actors throughout the entire value chain of this sector, from marginalised populations risking their lives to forage for mineral deposits, to their syndicate leaders, benefactors/financiers, and the buyers of these illegal minerals. Nonetheless, considering common drivers, the ASM sector can be broadly grouped into five categories, as shown in Table 1.1.

Table 1: Categories of ASM

Classification	Explanation
Influx/rush	This type of ASM is marked by a surge of miners flocking to newly found mineral sites. It frequently occurs in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Madagascar, and Brazil.
Permanent/traditional	A form of ASM that takes place year-round, often serving as the main economic activity for these communities. It is prevalent in many parts of Sub-Saharan Africa.
Permanent cohabitation	A form of ASM found in communities connected to large or medium-scale mining. ASM miners operate in abandoned or disused mines, e.g. <i>zama zamas</i> in South Africa.
Shock/push	A specific kind of ASM emerges in response to unforeseen events such as natural disasters, conflicts, commodity price changes, economic downturns, and large-scale layoffs in various sectors. This is illustrated by the SAPs in Sub-Saharan Africa, which had severe economic repercussions, driving many laid-off Africans into illegal mining operations.
Seasonal	A form of ASM that exists alongside various seasonal livelihood activities, such as subsistence farming and livestock rearing.

Source: Adapted from Manduna (2025) and UN Environment Programme (2020).



The ongoing discovery of minerals and the presence of abandoned, decommissioned, and ownerless mines in Southern Africa make an informal economy inevitable. Thousands of marginalised individuals take risks searching for alluvial minerals just beneath the surface and leftover minerals in some of the deepest mineshafts globally. The root causes driving people into illegal mining in Africa are often overlooked. Chief among these are deep-seated inequality (covering income, wealth distribution, and regional differences), rising unemployment, and poverty caused by neoliberal policies and the Covid-19 pandemic, commodity super-cycles from the mid-1990s to today, and regional political, social, and economic instability (Chuma, 2021). Supporting this, Mkhize (2017, p. 32) states that, “an increase in unemployment, poverty and the entry of large numbers of illegal immigrants into the country has contributed to an increase in illegal mining.”

Meanwhile, the ASM sector is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it makes a significant contribution to the economy and sustainable livelihoods for marginalised groups in both rural and urban areas. As of 2024, more than 45 million people are directly employed in the ASM sector worldwide, and over 225 million people globally depend on the ASM sector for their livelihoods (ZELA, 2020; United Nations Environment Programme, 2020).

Furthermore, the ASM sector is responsible for producing and supplying 20% of the global diamond output, 20% of the global gold output, and 80% of the global sapphire output. This marks a significant increase since 2003, when about 13 million people were directly employed in the sector, while approximately 80 to 100 million individuals depended on it indirectly (Zimbabwe Environmental Law Association [ZELA], 2020; United Nations Environment Programme, 2020). ASM activities offer several spillover benefits, such as natural resource management, rural development, mineral diversification, and market linkages. In particular, within the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region, the ASM sector plays a vital role in supporting the livelihoods of millions of people (ZELA, 2020).

Artisanal miners in the DRC produce approximately 20% of the nation's cobalt, a critical component for global industries such as electronics (Matambo, 2025). In Zimbabwe, this sector significantly contributes to economic growth, generating more than 60% of the country's foreign reserves, which accounts for over 13% of its gross domestic product (GDP), and attracts substantial foreign direct investment (FDI) into the country. In 2024, the sector contributed more than 65% of the total gold deliveries (Mapuranga, 2025). In Tanzania, the sector accounts for over 20% of gold export revenue. Table 1.2 presents the estimated number of people directly employed in the ASM and informal mining sectors,



along with their dependents, in selected African countries, and Figure 1.1 shows the concentration of ASM and illegal mining operations in Africa.

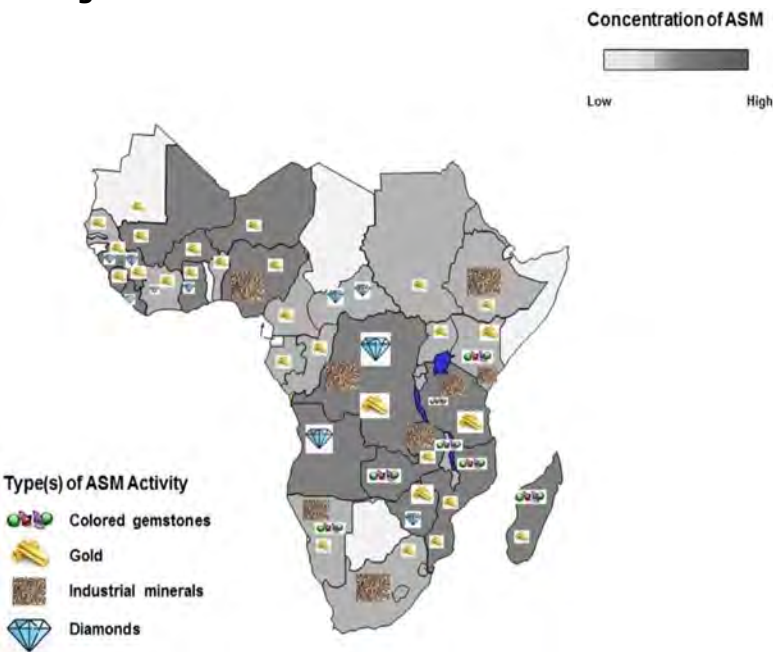
Table 2: Estimated number of people directly involved in the ASM and informal mining sectors and their dependents in selected African countries

Country	Directly working in ASM	Estimated No. of dependents
Tanzania	1.5 million	9 million
Ghana	1.1 million	4.4 million
Zimbabwe	1 million	3 million
Ethiopia	500 thousand	3 million
Nigeria	500 thousand	2.5 million
Madagascar	500 thousand	2.5 million
Niger	450 thousand	2.7 million
Central African Republic	400 thousand	2.4 million
Eritrea	400 thousand	2.4 million
Mali	400 thousand	2.4 million
Sierra Leone	300 thousand	1.8 million
Guinea	300 thousand	1.5 million
DRC	200 thousand [in cobalt alone]	1.2 million
Sudan	200 thousand	1.2 million
Burkina Faso	200 thousand	1 million
Angola	150 thousand	900 thousand
Uganda	150 thousand	900 thousand
Chad	100 thousand	600 thousand
Côte d'Ivoire	100 thousand	600 thousand
Liberia	100 thousand	600 thousand
Malawi	40 thousand	--
South Africa	30 thousand	250,000

Source: Data extracted from Manduna (2025b), UNECA (2011) and Hilson & McQuilken (2014).



Figure 1: Distribution and concentration of ASM and illegal mining activities across Africa



Source: Boafo & Arthur-Holmes (2025, Fig.1).

Drivers and outcomes

This section explores the drivers and motivations behind the rapid growth of the ASM sector worldwide, with a special focus on Southern Africa. This occurs despite the fact that, in many regional countries (e.g., Zimbabwe, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia, and DRC), the sector is heavily criminalised (Manduna, 2025b). It should be noted that the rapid growth of the sector, especially in the global south, is mainly due to the de-agrarianisation process, which involves the significant decline of agriculture as the primary enabler and source of sustainable rural livelihoods. Globally, many peasants are shifting from agrarian-based livelihoods to mining-related ones (United Nations Environment Programme, 2020; Lahiri-Dutt, 2018a; Lahiri-Dutt, 2018b).

Furthermore, the increase in commodity prices, particularly for critical minerals and rare earth elements, provides another possible explanation for the surge in ASM and illegal mining in Africa. Table 1.3 below shows the 10 most profitable minerals for the illegal and ASM sector in 2025.

**Table 3: The 10 most profitable minerals mined by the illegal and ASM sectors in Africa in 2025**

Mineral	Average Price (US\$)	Countries with ASM operations
Gold	2,300-2,450/oz	Many African countries, including South Africa, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Mali, Sudan, Tanzania, DRC, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, and Zimbabwe
Tantalite/Coltan	120-150/kg	The DRC and Rwanda
Lithium (petalite, spodumene in ore form)	400-800/ton(ore)	Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Mali, and the DRC
Gemstones (sapphires, rubies and emeralds)	Huge variations, but high-grade stones can be worth thousands of US\$ per carat	Tanzania, Mozambique, Zambia, Kenya, and Madagascar
Chrome	200-250/ton (depending on grade)	South Africa and Zimbabwe
Wolframite (tungsten ore)	20,000-25,000/ton (WO ₃ Content)	Uganda, Rwanda, and the DRC
Manganese	200-300/ton (depending on grade)	Zimbabwe, South Africa, Ghana, and Gabon.
Copper (high-grade surface ore)	8,000-9,500/ton(refined equivalent)	Zambia and the DRC
Fluorspar	300-500/ton (depending on grade)	Morocco, Namibia, Kenya, and South Africa
Quartz (for silicon and jewellery)	80-200/ton (industrial)	Ghana, South Africa, Burkina Faso, Namibia, and Mozambique

Source: Adapted from Mining Zimbabwe (2025).

Although the prices of critical minerals and rare earth elements (REEs) have recently experienced significant fluctuations, these prices have generally been rising (International Energy Agency, 2025), thereby attracting increased attention from the illegal and artisanal and small-scale mining sectors. Several factors explain this rise: growing demand for clean energy technologies, market speculation, geopolitical dynamics as China solidifies its dominance in REEs, and vulnerabilities in the supply chain. Additionally, in recent years, gold prices have risen markedly and reached record highs in April 2025, with some sources citing a staggering US\$3,500 per ounce. Many factors contribute to this increase: heightened global market uncertainty, rising geopolitical tensions, a weakening



US dollar, reduced gold supply, de-dollarisation efforts, and gold's traditional role as a safe-haven asset. Consequently, many individuals, particularly in the global south, have shifted their focus from agriculture to mining, leading to a surge in the number of people involved in the ASM sector.

Commenting on this, Manduna (forthcoming a, p. 8) argues that “[T]he causes for this great exodus are multiple, stratified, complex and slippery as they are local, national, regional and global in nature... It should be noted that the shift has had (and continues to have) far-reaching national, regional and global implications in natural resource governance and management, as well as extractivism trends, movements, debates and discourses.” Supporting this viewpoint, Bofo and Arthur-Holmes (2025, p. 1) argue that “significant contributing factors include rural poverty, unemployment, limited livelihood options, access to mineral-rich lands, declining agricultural productivity due to climate change, and the need for funds to support rebel activities.”

Additionally, in many African countries, there is a general lack of harmonisation and synchronisation between national, regional, and international laws, standards, and conventions related to mining in general and the ASM sector in particular, which offers an illuminating explanation for the sector's growth.

Existential threats posed by the ASM sector

Like in many countries around the world where ASM miners operate, the ASM sector presents various economic, social, ecological, and security challenges in Southern Africa. Economically, the sector is a hub for illicit financial flows (IFFs), mineral smuggling, tax avoidance, tax evasion, sabotage, theft of infrastructure and minerals, and disruption of large-scale mining operations, among other issues. While condemning the criminal activities of *zama zamas* in South Africa, Gwede Mantashe, the Minister of Mineral and Petroleum Resources, lamented that “[O]ur communities here say we must give licences to [the illegal miners]... If they say so, we’ll come here and hear them out and have a hearing that please give licences to steal gold to Mozambicans, Zimbabweans and Lesotho nationals. It’s a criminal activity. It’s an attack on our economy by foreign nationals in the main” (Stoddard, 2025, para. 23). The Minister further stated that “there can be no two ways about it, it is criminals attacking the economy. Precious metals illicit trade is estimated in 2024 to be about R60-billion. That R60-billion is a leakage on the value of the economy of the country. It’s a serious criminal activity and we support *Operation Vala Umgothi*”¹ (SABC News, 2025, para. 6).

A 2023 documentary by Al Jazeera, *Gold Mafia*, placed Zimbabwe at the centre and featured top politicians, bureaucrats, bankers, ecumenical leaders, and business figures from Zimbabwe, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the



United Arab Emirates. It uncovered a complex web of unscrupulous dealings involving the laundering of billions of dollars and the cleaning of illicit money in Southern Africa's gold industry, particularly in the ASM sector. In one case, the documentary revealed that Zimbabwe's ambassador-at-large and presidential envoy, Ubert Angel, was involved in laundering a staggering US\$1.2 billion intended for gold investments in Zimbabwe.

Supporting this, while attributing the issue to Zimbabwe's porous borders with its neighbours, *Maverick Citizen* (2021) and Manduna (2022) indicated that Zimbabwe loses an estimated US\$1.5 billion worth of gold through smuggling each year. To put this into perspective, Zimbabwean Finance Minister Mthuli Ncube lamented that the country loses between 30 and 34 tonnes of gold (or between US\$1.8 and US\$2 billion) to South Africa due to smuggling (Manduna, 2022; *Maverick Citizen*, 2021). Consistent with these figures, Zimbabwe's Home Affairs Minister, Kazembe Kazembe, reaffirmed that the country loses an estimated US\$100 million each month (*Maverick Citizen*, 2021).

On the ecological front, the ASM miners exacerbate the second contradiction of capitalism, or the metabolic rift, simultaneously damaging the planet through megamining of especially critical minerals while trying to save it through transitioning to clean energy powered by the energy transition minerals (Riofrancos, 2025). Commenting on this while referencing the exponential growth of the ASM sector in Africa, notably in the critical minerals subsectors, Boafo & Arthur-Holmes (2025, p. 1) argue that the sector creates "a sustainability transition paradox – advancing long-term social and technological transformation while simultaneously intensifying sustainability challenges such as environmental degradation and water pollution."

In many Southern African countries where Chinese miners are involved in illegal mining, there has been a significant escalation in environmental destruction as Chinese operators mechanise the industry using advanced technologies (bulldozers and excavators) previously unseen in the sector. This leads to extensive toxic land and water pollution, heavy metal contamination, and widespread land degradation, prompting governments in Ghana, South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe to respond with firm measures through joint police and military operations and bans on illegal mining (Bester, 2025; Manduna, 2025a).

On the security front, the illegal and ASM sectors contribute significantly to Africa's overall violence and crime statistics (Manduna, 2025a) in a continent where, since colonial times, violence has been a commodified and valorised commodity as a productive force of capitalism (Mbembe, 2019). In what has become a permanent feature of the spatio-temporal everyday realities of African illegal and ASM sectors, these two sectors engage in serious criminal



activities, including possession of illegal weapons, electricity cable theft, robbery, kidnapping, human trafficking, drug smuggling, IFFs, gold and money laundering, irregular and illegal migration, forced labour, shootouts with security forces, sexual offences, transnational organised crimes, underground gas explosions, tax evasion, gangsterism, murder, and assault.

Government responses to threats and the ASM sector resistance

Broadly, the methods employed by African governments to address the threats posed by illegal ASM miners reflect Mbembe's (2019) concept of necropolitics or Foucault's (1976) idea of biopower. That is to say, these methods echo the dark side of democracy or its nocturnal body, rendering these precarious miners not only killable but also killed – not only physically but also socially and politically (Manduna, 2025b; Manduna, 2024); neoliberal authoritarian practices that determine who is excluded and included, who dies and who lives, and who is marginalised and privileged. These methods include xenophobic and community vigilante attacks on foreign ASM miners (notably in South Africa); widespread arrests by mine security officers, police, and military personnel; extrajudicial killings; and the implementation of institutional, legislative, and regulatory frameworks aimed at annihilating ASM miners and their operations.

For instance, many severe police and military operations were carried out in various African countries to eliminate these two sectors – with widespread human rights violations being a common feature documented in all cases. South Africa conducted Operation Prosper and Operation *Vala umgodi* (i.e., close the mine), Zimbabwe carried out Operation *Chikorokoza Chapera* (illegal mining has ended), *Chikorokoza Ngachipere* (artisanal mining must end), and Operation Vanguard, while Ghana implemented Operation Vanguard and Operation Halt. In each of these cases, there were many deaths – including politically-motivated killings of miners – resulting from state-sponsored, state-supported, and state-permitted violence, as well as state-induced starvation (Manduna, 2025b; Bester, 2025). Delegated to the margins of the state, the ASM miners tend to employ Scott's (1985) weapons of the weak to counter the state-sponsored, state-allowed, and state-assisted forms of violence (Manduna, 2024):

- “The illegal miners’ strategic alliance and collusion with powerful politicians and senior police officers have been vital for the *zama zama*’s governance on the margins of the state” (Manduna, forthcoming a, p. 14).
- Bribing the formal police, mineworkers, and other security personnel to gain access to mining fields through the main entrance (Mkhize, 2017, n. 47).
- Field (2022) notes that “turf wars between rival gangs, or shootouts between illegal miners and security officers are commonplace”.



- Incorruptible and uncompromising formal mineworkers, police officers, and mine security guards (along with their family members) are targeted for kidnapping or killing.

Alternatives

To tackle the existential threats posed by the ASM sector in the SADC while promoting resource sovereignty, ecological conservation, sustainable livelihoods, and responsible mining, this article suggests aligning continental and regional mining agreements with national ASM policies, regulations, and legislation. The continental and regional mining agreements include: (a) the Yaoundé Vision for ASM of 2002, (b) the Harare Guidelines on Small and Medium Scale Mining of 1993, (c) the African Mining Vision of 2009, (d) the SADC Protocol on Mining of 2000, and (e) the SADC Mining Strategic Plan (MSP) of 2001. The first two identified the challenges currently faced by the ASM sector as ecological, social, financial, technical, commercial, and legal issues (ECA-SA, 2004, p. 39). Regarding the usefulness of adopting the first two agreements, Manduna (forthcoming[b]) suggests that:

The two guidelines further provide a framework that encourages the regional governments to regularise and formalise the ASM subsector in order to make the subsector a sustainable, developmental and inclusive space. According to these two guidelines, governments are encouraged to enact and implement unambiguous, consistent, and clear rules and regulations that govern the ASM subsector. Furthermore, the two guidelines encourage the regional governments to provide a stable and conducive business operating environment for the ASM subsector and establish strong, capable, responsive, efficient, and effective institutional frameworks that govern the conduct of the subsector.

As a result of this harmonisation, governments in the SADC region must adopt and implement the following strategic alternative policy pathways: (a) formalising and regulating the sector to reduce gang violence, IFFs, productivity and ecological challenges, as well as curb widespread gold smuggling; (b) eliminating arbitrage opportunities that create price differences between mineral finds sold by ASM miners and large-scale miners (LSM); (c) aligning gold delivery prices from the ASM sector with international market rates, and providing ASMiners with technology, financial support, training, and conducive working conditions; (d) updating outdated colonial mining laws and policies to align with current global and regional conventions on inclusivity, sustainability, and responsibility; and (e) designating the ASM sector as a strategic economic sector reserved exclusively for empowering local communities.

Furthermore, this article urges SADC governments to streamline the processes for applying, registering, and managing ASM mineral rights. This



involves ensuring these rights are transferable, making compliance easier, and providing sufficient security of tenure. It also recommends that SADC governments adopt and enforce internationally recognised health, safety, and occupational standards for ASM miners. They should simplify the ASM taxation system by establishing a standard tax regime based on each ASMiner's percentage of gross income. This system should include levies, taxes, and all other payments collected from ASM miners. Additionally, setting up financial schemes such as savings, credit, and loan programmes specifically aimed at supporting ASM growth and development is advisable. Moreover, Southern African governments must address the underlying causes that compel people to enter the ASM sector, many of which are political, economic, and social in nature.

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ENDNOTE

¹ *Operation Vala Umgodi* is a South African initiative aimed at combating illegal mining operations and related crimes. It is a multi-agency effort involving specialised units of the South African Police Service, the South African National Defence Force, and other government departments.

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BIOGRAPHY

Dr Manduna is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the International Research Group on Authoritarianism and Counter-Strategies (IRGAC), hosted by the Wits School of Governance (WSG) at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. He is also affiliated to the University of South Africa, Department of Environmental Sciences.

THE FUTURE OF REVOLUTION



**COMMUNIST PROSPECTS FROM
THE PARIS COMMUNE TO
THE GEORGE FLOYD UPRISING**

JASPER BERNES



The Future of Revolution: Communist Prospects from the Paris Commune to the George Floyd Uprising

Jasper Bernes

Review by Megan Bryer

Verso Books, 2025, 192 pgs, approx. R739.00 hardcover, R273.50 Kindle

Jasper Bernes's *The Future of Revolution* is not an easy book to pick up for a reader less familiar with the history of communist thought. It can feel dense, but it reengages communist ideas with a sense of possibility. Rather than offering a new idea, Bernes re-examines old and sometimes forgotten revolutionary texts to ask how they might illuminate the future. His contribution thus echoes Marx's remark that "revolutions dress themselves up in the costumes of the past in order to speak the poetry of the future".

The book traces the history of workers' councils and revolutionary forms from the Paris Commune to May '68. Each, Bernes argues, adds a new layer to communism's "test." The commune revealed to Marx that revolutions cannot merely "seize the state machinery and wield it for its own purposes". They must dismantle it, and workers must be armed.

The workers' councils sharpened our understanding of the criteria for the emergence of communism, demonstrating the need for mass self-organisation. Both commune and council, Bernes emphasises, show us that communism is not simply the abolition of capitalism or value, but the creation of a classless, stateless, moneyless society built on transparent, participatory processes.

Bernes draws on Marx, Rosa Luxemburg, C. L. R. James, and council-communist traditions to argue for a reimagined revolutionary practice aligned with 21st century conditions. He sets out criteria for any revolutionary movement: it must break the armed power of the state, be proletarian and mass-based, establish common provisioning without markets or law, transcend divisions of labour and geography, and operate through comprehensible, participatory structures of delegation. These



criteria form what he calls the “test of communism,” a way to measure whether a movement is truly revolutionary.

This framework is sobering in a moment when the workers’ movement and its institutions are diminished compared to the last century. Bernes observes that trade unions and parliamentary parties once sufficed to secure gains within capitalism but cannot overcome it. Today, new forms of organisation are needed, often arising outside the workplace, in spaces shaped by precarity, policing, and social fragmentation, and in most instances without any revolutionary vision.

Bernes reflects on the George Floyd uprising as a moment that, while not revolutionary in itself, contained revolutionary potential. Such movements, he argues, could become revolutionary if they broaden their reach to non-militants and non-activists, extending from the streets into schools, prisons, and workplaces, creating open points of entry for participation, and sustaining spaces of reflection and coordination. Here, Bernes shifts the focus from asking whether a movement is revolutionary to asking what it would take for it to become so.

Not all frontiers of social transformation are addressed. Artificial intelligence and its implications for class, for example, go untouched. But Bernes’s central concern of how revolutionary movements can meet the test of communism offers a framework to judge their potential and to move beyond old vehicles for struggle.

The Future of Revolution revives communist thought and makes the provocation that revolution remains an open possibility, but only if we are willing to rethink its forms. For those interested in the future of collective emancipation it is worth a read.

The background of the cover is a stylized map of the African continent in a light green color. Overlaid on the map is a network of white dotted lines that connect various points across the continent, suggesting a global or regional network. The title text is prominently displayed in the center-left area, with 'Africa's' and 'BRICS' in a dark red color, and the other words in black.

Africa's Strategic Partnerships with **BRICS** and other **Emerging Countries**

● EDITED BY
**SIPHAMANDLA ZONDI
& HELLEN ADOGO**



Africa's Strategic Partnerships with BRICS and other Emerging Countries

Siphamandla Zondi & Hellen Adogo (Eds.)

Review by Rasigan Maharajh

Jacana Media, 2025, 464 pgs, R380, Open Access at
<https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/105589>

Our contemporary conjuncture is characterised by increasing inter- and intra-national inequities, escalating polycrises, and geopolitical turmoil. The primary contradictions of the global capitalist mode of production bedevil prospects for progressive economic integration as national policy sovereignty is surrendered and ecological precarity expands exponentially.

Notwithstanding spectacular improvements in the development of productive capacities and capabilities amongst some countries on the periphery and semi-periphery of world systems, the advanced and more developed capitalist economies remain hegemonic and continue to seek to maintain and reproduce their hitherto dominance. It is into this contested temporal and contextual space that Siphamandla Zondi and Hellen Adogo have produced an interesting and challenging book entitled *Africa's Strategic Partnerships with BRICS and other Emerging Countries*, which has been published by Jacana Media.

According to Professor Zondi, the book is about the strategic partnerships developed between various countries and Africa in the post-cold war period.

The book is extensive, comprises a total of 23 chapters and is divided into two parts. The first part includes a conceptual introduction and 11 chapters that present critical analyses of the continent of Africa's relationships with Brazil, Russia, India, China, Nigeria, Egypt, and other African countries. The second part is made up of nine country-level studies of some Caribbean states, Iran, Turkey, South Korea, Japan, Indonesia, and Türkiye, followed by a generalised concluding chapter. The 415 pages of substantive text collates a combined authorship of approximately 29 individual scholars with the majority being affiliated with the University of Johannesburg.

With such a wide variety of authors, the even wider diversity of the countries constituting the continent of Africa, and the contested



terrain of development, the book offers extremely interesting and critical perspectives regarding contemporary geopolitical dynamics and multilateral strategic partnerships for and from Africa.

Professor Zondi defines strategic partnerships as “... country relations characterised by significant shared interests, strong mutual benefits, and close cooperation in areas considered to be strategic” (Zondi & Adogo, 2025. p. 9). The escalation in polycrises and the dire impacts of the unilateral executive orders issued by the 47th president of the largest economy in contemporary world systems, the United States of America, however, challenges the very notions of shared mutualities and cooperation in our contemporary conjuncture. Whilst the turmoil in global trade, uncertainties in international relations, climate change denialism, and escalating military violence are indelible hallmarks of the current Trump regime, the root causes of these elements of the polycrises had their root causes predetermined in the persistence of unequal exchanges following colonial, post-colonial, neo-colonial, and other imperialist phases of capitalist expansion, expropriation, and exploitation.

The transformation from a forum of Brazil, Russia, India and China at the United Nations General Assembly in 2006 into a voluntary assemblage of countries and an inaugural Heads of State Summit in Ekaterinburg in west-central Russia in 2009 heralded a significant change in international geopolitical relations. The inclusion of the continent and peoples of Africa was achieved through South Africa joining BRIC to form the better-known acronym of BRICS at the end of 2010.

Fifteen years later, Brazil hosted 11 member- and nine partner-countries to the 17th BRICS Summit under the theme: “Strengthening Global South Cooperation for More Inclusive and Sustainable Governance” (BRICS, 2025).

The book presents analyses and perspectives collated from scholarly work drawn from the BRICS member countries and the countries constituting the continent of Africa. Collectively, the book provides significant details regarding their respective political economies and the dynamics evident in our contemporary conjuncture. The individual chapters of the first part of the book are, however, not premised upon a common or ‘shared’ critique and methodology, therefore resulting in uneven coverage of the terrains of struggle and the balance of forces. This unevenness does not, however, detract from the usefulness of the collated information and the sense-making of the data.

The second part of the book, whilst sub-titled ‘other emerging countries perspectives,’ includes Japan and South Korea which are



designated by the World Bank as high-income economies. The ten chapters in this part provide rich narrative histories as well as contemporary dynamics to add to the vast literatures on socio-economic and political development. The international perspectives presented are contextualised within national circumstances and historically periodised. This approach encourages comparative learning and presents valuable lessons about local and regional dynamics that impact upon wider multilateral positions.

Revelations about the autonomy of North Korea's positionality during the Cold War help illuminate the real dynamics of multipolarities emerging well before our contemporary conjuncture and the current balance of forces.

Zondi concludes the book by returning to the consequences or impacts of the strategic partnerships between Africa and the countries studied and that emerged, evolved, and were engineered across time. Zondi summarises the future of these strategic partnerships along five presumptive vectors: economic cooperation and South-South trade; technological collaboration and innovation; geopolitical alignment and regional security; diplomatic solidarity and multilateralism; and culture and people-to-people ties.

Whilst acknowledging the need for further and continued research, it is also necessary to critique the five vectors so as to better appreciate the primary contradictions driving the current dynamics in the capitalist mode of production, and especially its present manifestations. It is also important to pay attention to the root causes of conflicts, the objective outcomes of neoliberal reformations, and the dawning material realities of our shared ecological precarities.

The book is therefore a welcome addition to our global knowledge commons and those concerned with international relations have much to gain from engaging critically with the texts collated in the volume.

REFERENCE

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