

The Continent

A grim revolution



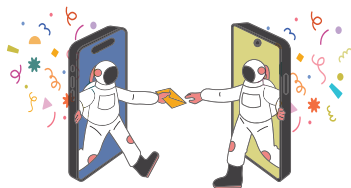
ILLUSTRATION: WYNONA MUTISI



COVER African farmers are often criticised for growing crops the way their ancestors did. Critics say they must embrace modernity by focusing on cash crops, buying hybrid seeds, and using commercial fertiliser. For 20 years, the Nairobi-based Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa has championed this model. Launched by the Gates and Rockefeller foundations, later rebranded as Agra, it pledged to double yields and incomes for 20-million smallholdings and halve food insecurity by 2020. But in Kenya (p16) and Malawi (p18), *The Continent* found farmers stuck in a debt trap, often without better yields. Next week, the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa, representing millions of small-scale farmers, will release a report on Agra's impact. It makes for grim reading (p13). Agra failed its own evaluation, then dropped its original goals – with a PR firm going as far as trying to scrub them from Wikipedia. But the African Union is still enshrining its philosophy in its next 10-year agricultural plan.

Inside

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This is Issue #250!

To celebrate, we considered staging a cage fight on the office lawn. But we're a) a remote newsroom and b) not completely deranged. In lieu, we've compiled some of the (very slightly unhinged) things our team members have said in meetings (p3). We owe so much to you, our readers, for helping to build a revolution of people reading and sharing African journalism. Help us celebrate by saying something nice to someone this week (and then doing your part to tear down the world order).

EDITORIAL

The Continent ... out of context

MANY things are said when we get together to put this newspaper together. Oh, the stories we could tell. Here are some we've cherry-picked from this year. These are real things that the people who make this newspaper have said. It's funnier for you without context. It's better for us ... legally speaking.

"There are a lot of commas going on here."

"You can be mean to people and still ask them for money. Strippers do it all the time."

"Can I just say, I was trying to figure out my taxes."

"I literally looked up T-Pain's entire discography to get the perfect song to include in the headline."

"I might need cable transport to get home" – of commuting in Addis

"You know, I'm going to regret this in the US immigration queue when they google *The Continent*."

"It isn't good at mimicking humanity stuff." – on AI

"So he's, like, riding around in a racecar thinking about Mandela."

"Shit happens when you get there."

"Guys we forgot the 'r' which stands for rationalists."

Question: "We actually have a Friday evening to speak of! What do people do on Fridays?"
Answer: "People do stuff, apparently."

"I love being in these trenches with you amazing people. These are happy trenches."

"I hope I'm communicating." (a Kenyanism!)

"I agree with the sentiment, but the wording sounds kind of kumbaya-ish."

"Can Nigel Farage lend us a yacht?"

"Gado inspires the youth of yesterday."

"I forgot to feed myself today. So, I am going off to do that. But I won't return. Because y'all don't need me."

"Guys, I hate technology."

"It's not all because of me, I promise."

"Haile Selassie, he was big stuff, hey. He was the real deal."

"Please can I binder so I can go cry in my pillow."

"There is no shame in my game." – of attractive African presidents

"If we did a *Lord of the Rings* thing, Tolkien's sense of the pastoral being destroyed by industry comes from his growing up in Birmingham."

"Those bastards."



THE WEEK IN BRIEF

SOUTH AFRICA

Ubuntu undone

As President Cyril Ramaphosa was calling for unity during his closing speech at the Southern African Development Community summit in Durban this week, anti-immigration protesters besieged the venue. About 300 people chanted demands for neighbouring countries to “fetch their people”, *AFP* reports. The demo, led by March and March, follows protests that have forced thousands of foreign nationals to flee. Ramaphosa said South Africa was “deeply concerned and ashamed” by the protests. At least 176,000 foreign nationals have reportedly left the country amid the unrest.

THE HAGUE

Injustice for all

The United States has sanctioned the president of the International Criminal Court, Tomoko Akane, and senior trial lawyer Abdoulaye Seye, as the Trump administration ramps up efforts to undermine the court. US Secretary of State Marco Rubio called the ICC a threat to US sovereignty and has frozen its US assets, *Al Jazeera* reports. The US has already sanctioned more than a dozen ICC officials for investigating alleged US and Israeli war crimes.



PHOTO: MICHELE CATTANI/AFP

Behind bars: Malian activist Ras Bath has been convicted of discrediting the junta state.

MALI

Seven years in jail for ‘dangerous’ journo

A court has sentenced prominent broadcaster Mohamed Youssouf Bathily (known as “Ras Bath”) and influencer Rokia Doumbia to seven years in jail, *France 24* reports. They were arrested in March 2023 after airing a programme highlighting economic hardship in the country. Prosecutors charged them with criminal conspiracy and discrediting the state, calling Ras Bath a “danger” to the junta. The sentences are the latest against critics of Mali’s military rulers. The junta’s promise to return power to civilians has yet to materialise.

ZAMBIA

Hichilema is still head honcho

Despite opposition leader Brian Mundubile claiming victory prematurely and alleging irregularities, incumbent Hakainde Hichilema has won a second term with 60% of the vote. Zambia's electoral commission briefly suspended counting owing to reports of violence and the arrest of opposition figures over alleged insurrection plans. Election observers noted restrictions may have created an "uneven contest", the *BBC* reports. The opposition has



PHOTO: GIANLUIGI GUERCIA/AFP

Point of order: President Hakainde Hichilema greets supporters at a rally in Lusaka.

vowed to challenge the result in court, citing alleged voter intimidation.

SOMALIA

The White Star to fly again

Somali Airlines will resume operations in September, more than three decades after it was grounded in 1991. 'White Star' was suspended after the collapse of then president Siad Barre's government and the ensuing civil war. The aviation authority said preparations were in the final stage, *TRT* reports. Somalia has invested about \$25-million in air-navigation infrastructure and upgraded its airspace. The revived carrier is expected to have five aircraft. The government sees the airline as key to restoring connectivity and boosting air-navigation services revenue, currently worth about \$20-million a year.

CAMEROON

WFH warrior returns

After spending two and a half months in Geneva on what was initially described as a "short private stay", President Paul Biya has finally come home. At age 93, Biya is the world's oldest serving head of state. Speculation about his health and who was actually running the country in his absence prompted an opposition legislator to ask the Constitutional Council to declare the presidency vacant, *AFP* reports. Biya kept signing decrees from afar, however, showing that presidents don't need to be working from the office to at least *appear* to be running the show.

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

Scores killed in mine collapse

An artisanal gold mine collapsed in Zamboye, near the border with Cameroon, killing more than 100 people *Reuters* reports. A prosecutor confirmed the incident, but said the final death toll was still being established. Rescue operations are continuing and an investigation will examine the cause of the collapse and who operated the site. Cameroon has offered to treat injured miners who cross the border. Artisanal mining provides livelihoods across the continent, but is often plagued by weak regulation and poor safety standards.



PHOTO: NDLEA

Well it sure ain't Pepsi: KC Luxury, with the cocaine seized in the Lagos drug bust.

NIGERIA

Influencer nabbed in coke bust

Social media influencer Afolabi Kazeem Michael, known online as KC Luxury, has been arrested in connection with the seizure of almost 185kg of cocaine, worth about \$29-million, *Reuters* reports. Narcotics police said Michael was arrested at Lagos airport while allegedly trying to flee to France. Authorities suspect he was the “arrowhead” of a cartel using Nigeria as a transit hub for shipments from South America to Europe and Asia. Several others, including a courier-company employee, were also arrested. Officials say courier firms are increasingly involved in drug trafficking.

MOROCCO

Let the children stay

Spain will allow about 500 unaccompanied migrant children in Ceuta to relocate to the Spanish mainland, *The Guardian* reports. This is despite the European Commission saying EU law requires irregular migrants, including unaccompanied minors, to be returned to Morocco. Previously, Spain had said everyone who entered illegally would be sent back. The move follows the mass crossing of about 70,000 people into the Spanish territory on 30 July, most of whom have since returned. Hundreds of children remain in Ceuta, some living on the streets.

CHAD

Rival leader granted presidential pardon

President Mahamat Déby has pardoned opposition leader Succès Masra, who was serving a 20-year prison sentence, *Channel Africa* reports. Masra, together with eight other opposition leaders from the Consultation Group of Political Actors, was sentenced to eight years in prison in May for alleged insurrection. The pardon is part of a move to foster national unity. However, the presidency stressed it is not an amnesty – all nine men could still face prosecution.

LIBERIA

For humanity, not for the hustle

Liberia will accept 1,200 deportees from the United States over the next year, in one of Washington's largest "third-country" deals. Liberia joins Ghana, Equatorial Guinea, Eswatini, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Sierra Leone in receiving people the US cannot legally send back to their home countries. According to the *BBC*, Liberia says the deportees are "guests", can leave freely or apply for asylum, and that it's a humanitarian arrangement for which it won't be paid.

SENEGAL

Invincible Vieira to temper Teranga vincibility

Patrick Vieira has been appointed Senegal's new head coach. The Dakar-born footballing legend is tasked with rebuilding the team after a disappointing 2026 World Cup campaign. Vieira replaces Pape Thiaw, whose side lost 3-2 to Belgium in their round of 32 match, *Africanews* reports. Vieira won the World Cup with France in 1998. He also won three Premier League titles with Arsenal and captained the club's unbeaten 2003-04 "Invincibles". The appointment is his first in international management.



PHOTO: CLEMENT MAHOUEAU/AFP

Rallying Dakar: Patrick Vieira won acclaim as Arsenal's captain during the Gunners' epic run in the 2003-2004 Premier League.

His immediate challenge will be Senegal's 2027 Africa Cup of Nations qualifiers, which begin in September.

SPORT

Lionesses, we see ya (tho we kinda woulda wanted a Biya)

DORCAS EKUPE IN YAOUNDE

ON MONDAY, the Indomitable Lionesses of Cameroon lifted the Wafcon trophy after beating Malawi in the final. It was a silver lining for a country where the president's absence has dominated national discourse.

Cameroonians took to the streets to celebrate, a temporary relief from

myriad problems: the high cost of living, insecurity in the north, and the Anglophone crisis in the northwest and southwest regions.

Odette Ngalle, a Yaoundé resident, was one of the people out celebrating.

"It's really sad the head of state is still not back in the country to welcome these heroines who have won their first-ever Women's Africa Cup of Nations," she told *The Continent*.

President Paul Biya returned to Cameroon on Thursday after being away for over two months – his longest absence in close to 44 years in power.

During this time he also refused to appoint a vice-president, who could have received the team in his place. ■



Paulless coup:
Cameroon's national women's football team takes a victory lap through Yaoundé on Monday.

PHOTO: DANIEL BELOUMOU OLOMO/AFP

SOUTH SUDAN

Aid cuts doom the displaced

Refugees from Sudan are at risk of starvation unless funding for feeding schemes can be secured in record time.

BUTROS NICOLA IN JUBA

NOW in its fourth year, the war in Sudan has forced hundreds of thousands of refugees and asylum seekers to flee to neighbouring South Sudan. Now they are at risk of starvation because of food shortages.

Refugees rely on international organisations for food, but a funding shortage is putting these feeding schemes at risk. In a report last Friday the World Food Programme and the United Nations Refugee Agency said food aid for the most vulnerable of the 650,000 refugees across the country will run out by October should more funding not be raised.

Refugees are now left with two choices: stay in refugee camps or return to war-torn Sudan.

Khalil Ali, who has been leading Sudan's refugee community in Gorom Camp, near Juba, said unless something changes, he doesn't expect anyone to

remain in the camp by December. "Some are even choosing to go back to the war zone rather than this slow dying," he told *The Continent*.

The WFP currently has a \$37-million funding gap. Over the past year, the United States has cut its UN funding from \$14.1-billion to \$3.38-billion, affecting WFP operations. Germany, France, and the United Kingdom have also cut aid spending.

Nelly Ondity, who runs gender-based violence sessions for refugee women and girls at Gorom, said the cuts' consequences won't stop at hunger.

"Some are choosing to go back, rather than this slow dying."

"When families have no food, they make desperate choices. Girls will be married off. Women will enter exploitative relationships. Children will be sent to work in dangerous conditions. Families will separate," she told *The Continent*.

Ondity said funding secured after September would arrive too late as "procurement and transport take months ... families will have moved or become even more vulnerable".

Ali's appeal is more direct: "From September onwards, our situation will be very difficult." ■

Reading is resistance



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SUDAN/CEUTA

Enter the enclave or die trying

Tens of thousands of people crossed into Ceuta last month. Most were immediately returned to Morocco. Of those who got to remain, seeking asylum, more than 20% are Sudanese nationals. But the latest arrivals to the Spanish enclave are facing a slow, uncertain process to adjudicate their future.

MOUTTASEM ALBARODI

SUDANESE migrants who crossed into the Spanish enclave of Ceuta are facing delayed screenings and uncertainty over asylum access. Migrant-support organisations say they are concerned about those still stuck in Ceuta.

Nearly five million people have left Sudan since war broke out in April 2023, mainly for Egypt, Chad, and South Sudan. Others have taken a much longer and more dangerous route, travelling across Libya, Algeria, and Morocco. They hope to reach Europe through Ceuta.

Mojahed* was in a café in Rabat in late July when he saw videos of thousands of migrants crossing the border into Ceuta.

“My friends called and told me they were taking a car to the border and had one spot left,” he told *The Continent*. “I joined them and crossed successfully on the first attempt.”

There were thousands like him.

Others have tried to cross, and failed. Fares* made 14 attempts before he succeeded. “Every time, the Moroccan guards caught us. They would jail us for a few days, then release us somewhere in the desert,” he told *The Continent*.

For those who crossed into Ceuta most recently, the first days were the harshest. The whole city was on lockdown after 70,000 people crossed the border over two days at the end of July. Some migrants went up to five days without food.

The Sudanese diaspora in Spain provided one source of help, including Casa del Sudán, an organisation which supports the Sudanese community in Spain. They rushed to assist new arrivals after the crossings. Its president, Mohamed Ahmed, says nearly 40% of the Sudanese community in Spain arrived through Ceuta or Melilla in previous years, with about 20 new migrants a week.

Ahmed said the latest arrivals are facing a slower and more uncertain process. “We usually saw a high percentage of approvals, but this time even the screening was badly delayed,” he said.

Verónica Laorden, from the Spanish Commission for Refugees, said there had been “only sporadic” screening appointments for asylum seekers.

According to the commission’s data, Sudanese nationals were the third-largest population granted temporary stay in Ceuta, after Moroccans and Algerians – even before the latest surge.

Laorden’s organisation is calling on the Spanish government to transfer some migrants to the mainland so they can undergo due process. But a shortage of interpreters is making it harder for asylum seekers to navigate the system.

Forced to work

For many Sudanese migrants, Ceuta is not their first choice. Fares said going to Egypt or Uganda might have been safer, but job opportunities were limited and neither offered a path to Europe.

Ayoub Adam, 26, from Darfur, said he was kidnapped in Ghadames in northwestern Libya in 2024. He and other migrants worked for months without pay, clearing sand from roads, before being taken to the Tunisian border. Their captors told them not to return.

The three migrants who spoke to *The Continent* say they chose to travel through Algeria because they feared Tunisian border guards, who are known



Respite: Migrants from Sudan take shelter beneath a tree in Ceuta after crossing the Moroccan border.

to be “very harsh.” But Algeria brought its own risks – forcing migrants to avoid main roads as security forces expel migrants they catch to border towns near those of Mali.

Mojahed said he emailed the United Nations Refugee Agency in Algeria in January 2025 hoping to apply for asylum in Morocco, but was given an appointment nine months later. He then crossed the heavily guarded Algerian-Moroccan border to reach Oujda in Morocco.

Although Mojahed’s Moroccan asylum claim was granted, “it’s nearly impossible for Sudanese to get residency,” he said. “This means you can only find low-wage jobs that barely sustain you.”

Adam said many Sudanese migrants feel trapped between staying in Morocco without a future or attempting the dangerous crossing into Ceuta.

“It’s either Ceuta or drown in Belyounech,” he said, referencing the town that borders the Spanish enclave. ■

**Names shortened to provide anonymity*

REPORT

How Agra keeps failing upwards

It once promised to halve hunger and double crop productivity in Africa through a green revolution. Two decades and \$1.5-billion in funding later, hunger has increased in most of the 13 countries Agra worked in. Its promises have been scrapped – and almost scraped from the internet. But African countries are doubling down on its model for another decade.



Gated community: Team Agra accepts the World Food Prize Medallion in Nairobi in June.

CHRISTINE MUNGAI IN NAIROBI

IN JUNE Nairobi-based nonprofit Agra was awarded the Norman E Borlaug World Food Prize Medallion. The prize committee praised Agra for supporting

millions of farming families through “African leadership, African innovation, and African solutions”.

The Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa was founded in 2006 by the Gates and Rockefeller foundations

and rebranded as Agra in 2023. The organisation aimed to import the original Green Revolution model to this continent.

That model, created by the same Borlaug for whom the medallion is named, initially boosted yields, in Asia in particular. It did that by relying on intensive farming and expensive inputs that often depleted the soil. It also left farmers needing to buy seeds they previously used to share with each other, as well as synthetic fertiliser.

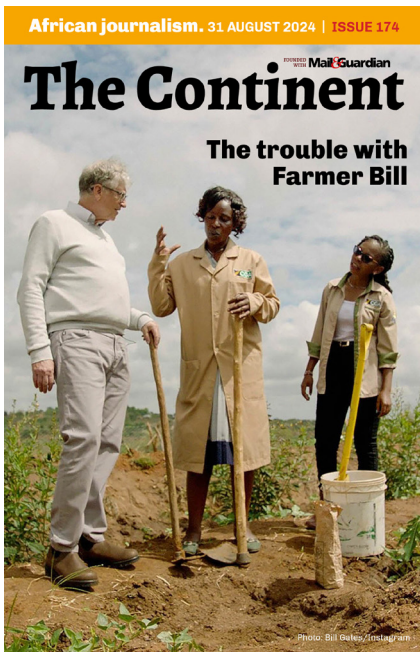
Despite the model being heavily criticised, Agra has worked to replicate it in 13 African countries, with significant backing from continental legislators.

With two decades of work to analyse, this month the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa is releasing a new report into the effect of Agra's policies on African agriculture. The alliance is a coalition of African civil-society organisations collectively representing tens of millions of small-scale food producers.

The Continent got an exclusive preview.

The report paints a sobering picture. Across Agra's 13 focus countries, the number of undernourished people rose 58%, with five of 13 countries recording even steeper hunger trends.

Staple-crop yields grew only modestly, barely above pre-Agra levels. Much of the "success" of a crop like maize came from expanding planted area (up 71%), rather than increasing yields. Malawi recorded the strongest staple yield growth in the group, but the number of hungry



E.I.E.I.O.U: *Agra is backed by billions but helps drive farmers into high prices and debt.*

people in the country still rose 61%.

Meanwhile, production and yields of millet and other indigenous, hardy staples fell as Agra's programmes emphasised maize and a handful of commercial crops.

Details of Agra's effects from the institution itself are hard to come by. An evaluation in 2022 – commissioned by Agra's own donors – was damning. It found that, despite receiving \$1.5-billion, the organisation had failed to meet its headline goals of increasing income and food security for 20-million smallholder farmers.

In its current five-year strategy, the

organisation commits to strengthening its monitoring and evaluation to “include comprehensive impacts and performance measurement”. This is usually a basic requirement for nonprofit organisations from the get-go.

Despite its documented failure, Agra had nearly \$127-million in revenue in 2024, according to its United States tax filing. And 15 employees earned more than \$200,000 a year, including its director of strategy, monitoring and evaluation.

An evaluation – commissioned by Agra’s own donors – found that despite receiving \$1.5-billion, the organisation had failed to meet its headline goals of increasing income and food security.

Shortly after the 2022 evaluation, Agra dropped “Green Revolution” from its name and removed its original targets from its website. The Bureau for Investigative Journalism subsequently detailed the attempts by a PR firm to scrub the targets from Wikipedia.

It was then, too, that Agra reframed its objectives into something fuzzier: policy facilitation, convening, and private-investment mobilisation.

But the policies it introduced remain broadly unchanged and continue to define agriculture on the continent.

Agra was central to the drafting of the African Union’s latest 10-year agricultural plan, which doubled down

on commercial seeds, mechanisation, and agro-industrialisation. That plan guides the billions in investment by African governments and institutions like the World Bank.

Civil society warns these policies leave farmers vulnerable to climate and market shocks. As *The Continent* reports from Malawi and Kenya, soaring seed and fertiliser prices are trapping producers in a debt spiral. Next week, we examine the insidious effects of these policies in Zambia. We will also highlight Senegal’s success. This country took a very different path – and hunger decreased by 50%.

This is not an academic debate. It is existential, in the most literal sense of the word: the choices made now about who sets agricultural priorities will fundamentally shape the continent’s food systems – and whether we can feed ourselves at all – for the next 10 years.

And that is the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa’s most damning criticism: what Agra is good at is shaping policy – and, in the process, eroding state capacity. In other words: this is a story about power, policy sovereignty, and whether we can learn from our mistakes – or even acknowledge them.

The Continent reached out to Agra with detailed questions. They told us they were in the process of preparing a comprehensive report that will provide a “fuller assessment” of their work, key lessons of the past 20 years, and future direction, and that they did not want to provide “partial answers” before that report is published. ■

REPORT

KENYA

Indebted farmers, decreasing food security

In Agra's home country, farmers are being pushed into a system in which they need to keep buying seeds and fertiliser, ditching local solutions.

PIERRA NYARUAI IN NAKURU

LEONARD TERER is a farmer in Mauche, Nakuru, on the slopes of Kenya's Rift Valley. Over the past 14 years, his productivity has stalled, rising only from 20 to 24 bags of maize per acre.

After an agricultural officer recommended hybrid maize seeds and fertiliser, Terer began relying on companies that sell seeds through loans.

For one farm-input package, Terer paid 3,200 Kenyan shillings (\$24) on credit. That's nearly \$8 more than the upfront cost. Loans in Kenya average an 18% interest rate.

Andrew Rotich, a maize farmer in Kitale, the country's breadbasket, farms 150 acres. Yet about two-thirds of his farm has become acidified after repeated applications of synthetic nitrogen fertiliser, as per the commercial-agriculture model.

The change has affected his yields. "In the past, we might have harvested 30

bags per acre. These days it's down to about 23," he said.

To fix the acidity, Rotich was advised to apply a calcium supplement. This is the treadmill dynamic agroecology researchers have flagged. Each fix for a chemically-induced soil problem becomes another purchase, rather than a return to practices like using green manure and cover cropping, which once sustained fertility for little cost.

These two farmers embody a shift in how Kenya approaches agriculture – and its workers. Agra is helping to drive this change.

Double the hunger

Kenya hosts Agra's headquarters. In the 20 years since it was founded, the country's staple-yield index has shrunk 8%, according to a working paper by agriculture analyst Timothy Wise of Tufts University.

Meanwhile, the number of undernourished people in Kenya has doubled, although Agra's original target was to halve hunger.

**Big Corn bites:**

Leonard Terer with his maize on his farm in Mauche, Nakuru, on the western slopes of Kenya's Rift Valley.

PHOTO: PIERRA NYARUAI

Farmers have to spend money on items that were previously shared within the community. Hybrid seeds don't reproduce, meaning farmers need to pay a seed corporation to plant their next crop.

The result is a system that may produce more calories from fewer crops, but without necessarily delivering greater nutrition, resilience, or income.

Civil-society networks such as the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa argue that soil health, dietary diversity, and farmer autonomy – not input dependency – are the foundations of food security. They also question whether Agra has crowded out Kenya's public agriculture extension system. It now has 33,000 private advisers, who promote commercial seed and fertiliser to farmers. Terer was likely advised by one such agricultural officer.

Nutritionist Ruth Oniang'o argues the Green Revolution was a short-term

fix, wrongly transplanted to Africa. It created immediate grain surpluses in countries like India, but resulted in long-term ecological degradation; depleted water tables; and sidelined traditional, nutrient-dense crops.

Instead, Oniang'o calls for a "rainbow revolution" that centres the continent's diverse indigenous foods – such as millet and sorghum – as well as farmer autonomy.

But such alternatives face a difficult political economy.

Arnold*, a food-systems consultant, said governments like Kenya's are in too much debt to say no. "African governments desperately seek any kind of investment," he told *The Continent*. "It's an open house for all kinds of investors." ■

*Full name withheld to protect identity.

REPORT

MALAWI

Policies provide food for thought – but not for stomachs

Agra has operated in Malawi for two decades, increasing yields and production. So why has nutrition in the country decreased?

GOLDEN MATONGA IN LILONGWE

EARLY THIS month government officials, led by Agriculture Minister Roza Mbilizi, celebrated Agra's 20th anniversary in Malawi. Mbilizi lauded its work, but also said: "In 2025, Malawi was a very hungry nation. We had to buy maize from Zambia."

The statement captures what Agra represents in Malawi. Despite growth

in agriculture, the country struggles to achieve food security. Agriculture remains its economic bedrock, representing about 33% of GDP and 80% of employment. Much of that relies on one cash crop: tobacco comprises 60% of Malawi's exports.

Agra has embedded itself in the country's agricultural sector by providing technical experts directly to government teams. It co-designs national frameworks



Eroding return:

*Feluzi Makono
inspects the soil at his
grandmother's farm
in Mulanje, southern
Malawi.*

PHOTO: THOKO CHIKONDI/
AP PHOTO

with the ministry, advising on seed systems and crop-diversification strategies.

Despite dictating how the country's agricultural sector should be run, Agra spends barely any money to support it. Instead, it boasts helping to bridge the gap between regional smallholder enterprises and global private investors. Such capital injection has been criticised for not translating into opportunities for small farmers.

Despite dictating how the country's agricultural sector should be run, Agra spends barely any money to support it.

But Agra insists its operations have benefited farmers in Malawi. Over the past two decades, Malawi recorded a 78% growth in staple foods. Maize yields grew 80%, contributing to an 88% increase in production, despite only a 6% rise in land use. There was also a rise in sorghum, cassava, and yam production.

But these numbers don't tell the whole story. The number of undernourished Malawians rose 61% during the same period. Four in every five people are estimated to have experienced moderate or severe food insecurity over the past 18 years, owing to a reliance on carbohydrates. Balanced, nutritious diets remain unaffordable.

Malawi suffers from two major agricultural adversities. The first is unhealthy soil, which is prone to erosion.

Intensive farming exacerbates this and means farmers need more fertiliser. The second is El Niño, a weather phenomenon that drives intense droughts, with the next expected later this year.

To improve food production, Malawi devised an input-subsidy programme meant to provide fertilisers and feed to farmers. In 2022, those subsidies comprised 60% of Malawi's entire agricultural budget – or more than \$150-million.

To reduce fraud, the government introduced an electronic-voucher system. When farmers buy seeds and fertiliser, they present their ID cards. After verification, they receive the subsidised goods. But smallholders in rural areas struggle because of poor network connectivity.

Ian Bakali, 74, in Mchinji, central Malawi, is one such farmer. His three-acre plot yielded 35 bags of maize last season. This harvest was possible because he received his farm subsidy. In each of the previous three years he had barely been able to scrape together 10 bags of maize.

"The biggest problem is the subsidy cards," Bakali says. "Most of the time the network is down."

Still, Malawi is moving forward with Agra 3.0, which ties it to the organisation for another 10 years. At the 20th anniversary event, Agra Malawi country director Dr Eluphy Nyirenda touted a note of caution: "Agra cannot – and should not – finance or implement everything." ■

Coffee with The Continent



INTERVIEW

Welcome to Coffee with *The Continent*, where we chat to smart people with smart ideas. This week, our guest is **PROFESSOR FELWINE SARR** – academic, novelist, and musician – whose report triggered a global movement for the return of African artefacts.

VENUE* The Djoloff is a beautiful, quiet, hotel in Dakar. “You can see the sea and the very old traditional fish market, Le Marché Soumbédioune. Local fishermen come back in the evening from fishing and women buy from them. You can smell the fish from across the road.”

DRINK Sarr’s “a big drinker of coffee from everywhere: Latin America, Rwanda, Ethiopia.” But when in Senegal, he drinks bissap (hibiscus juice). “I miss it when I’m not here.”

READING A Senegalese newspaper, *SenePlus*, which he can access online; *Jeune Afrique* for African news; *Le Monde* for European; and, in the United States, the *New York Times*.

MUSIC “I listen to reggae and West African music – kora from Mandé in

Mali, Youssou N’Dour, et cetera. Jazz.” Also folk music, like Bob Dylan, and bluegrass. He prefers more classical-style music: instrumentation, voice, compositions. Lately, Abdullah Ibrahim’s *African Magic* “to pay him tribute”. Bob Marley is always playing in the car.

MONUMENT** Sarr dislikes the concept: “It’s a way of inscribing a single moment or idea in the public or social space.” He believes in collective human progress. “Nkrumah is interesting, but he didn’t reach independence alone. So how do we represent all the people that organised around him to achieve it?”

He’d like to replace such monuments with something that speaks to the collective, like Diego Rivera’s mural at the Palacio Nacional in Mexico City, which depicts Mexico’s ties to Blackness and slavery.

*We interviewed Sarr online. His dream venue was brought to life by illustrator Wynona Mutisi.

**Last year, The Continent ran a series on iconic monuments across Africa. We’re asking each guest to nominate a monument iconic to them.

The man who materialises imaginaries

FELWINE SARR was born on a tiny island in the Saloum Delta in western Senegal, near the Gambia River.

“One must take a boat to the city for education – high school and university. There’s so little space around you, you naturally develop an imaginary for travelling.”

When his father attended military school in France, the family lived there for three or four years. But even back in Senegal, they moved around. “It’s why when I went to university in France, in Orléans, I stayed for the full duration,” Sarr says. “I was tired of travelling.”

When he moved back to Senegal, to teach economics at Gaston Berger University, Sarr thought he was home for good. But “I was interested in the humanities... I thought thinking in Africa needed a transdisciplinary approach. Duke University offered me a place in a department where I could work outside of the classical disciplines, travel to conferences, teach, and give talks,” Sarr says. “It’s important for thinkers, artists, and researchers to encounter other people and ideas – dynamics of thought and sensibility.”

The question at the time in African economics was how to develop by imitating Europe. “We didn’t ask ourselves sufficiently where we wanted to be, what way of life we wanted,” Sarr says. “Freedom, justice, equality,



PHOTO: FELWINE SARR

ecology, spirituality, inner peace –all those dimensions seem important to me.” That’s why he wrote *Afrotopia*, Sarr says, a philosophical meditation on what an African utopia might be.

Sarr then began to think about how to “materialise that imaginary in the present day”. These musings led to the book he’s been working on, *La Fabrique du Présent* or *The Making of the Present*, which is a continuation of *Afrotopia*’s thinking.

Sarr and Cameroonian intellectual Achille Mbembe founded Les Ateliers De La Pensée in 2016. “Achille and I thought it was time to create an intellectual space to gather artists and thinkers from Africa and the diaspora to think around our own issues,” Sarr says. “We can’t transform African societies if we don’t understand them deeply.”

Through this initiative, the duo

published non-fiction collections such as *To Write the Africa World* and *The Politics of Time: Imagining African Becomings*.

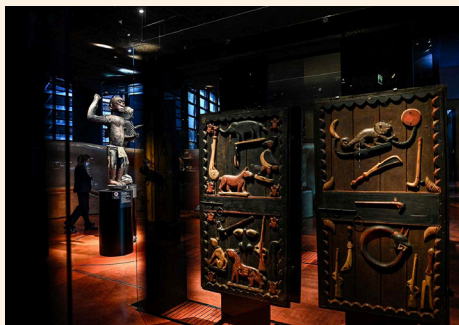
“Les Ateliers met a need for food for thought,” Sarr says. “Roads, hospitals, and schools are important, but there’s a deficit of thinking deeply about our reality as Africans.”

In 2018, Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy were commissioned by French President Emmanuel Macron to produce a report on African heritage in French museums. *The Restitution of African Heritage: Towards a New Relational Ethics* exploded into a movement that led to the return of numerous looted artefacts and a global discussion on decolonising Western museums.

“I was sceptical when we began, as I didn’t think the president would act on our report. I thought it was a PR thing,” Sarr says. “I was eventually convinced by Bénédicte that this was a serious movement – that we had to engage with it and play our part. What we didn’t expect was that it would lead to a revolution in Western museums. In the first year after the report, France accepted the return of the Abomey Treasures and from there the restitution debate grew.”

“It was a surprise,” he says. “We learned a lot about how ideas at the right time can shape reality.”

Sarr also writes novels, plays, and poetry. “Fiction articulates my dreams and sensibility. It seems to me much more true. It’s a conversation with the human condition,” he says. “If you want to leave something that will talk to people across generations, I think fiction



Je t'adoor: Statues and ornate palace doors from the Abomey kingdom, at the Musée du quai Branly in Paris in 2021. PHOTO: CHRISTOPHE ARCHAMBAULT/AFP

does that better than an essay.”

Sarr is currently working on a novel set in 19th century precolonial West Africa, “A big saga,” he says. “It will ask: Who were those people? How did they get derailed from their fate and destiny? It will explore the psyche of our elders one or two centuries ago – that’s much more important than *Afrotopia*.”

By next year, he will have five books published in English, fiction and non-fiction. In French, he’s published six novels.

Sarr is also a musician: a vocalist who also plays guitar and piano. Music runs through his family: he’s the eldest of 12 children and jokes that he “infected” his siblings with the music virus. Six are musicians, three of them famous.

For 12 years, Sarr led Dolé, a reggae band that released two albums. He also started a music label in Senegal. Now, he says, he wants to return more fully to music and fiction: “to become again more a musician than the public intellectual I’ve been.” ■

We love to hear from you

UNLESS you're a 2026 subscriber (hi!), you'll remember our most recent Big Annual Survey™, in which 1,481 of you took part. In it, we asked you to tell us about your Happy Place™. We'll be sharing a few of those responses with you this season. Look out for our mascot Astro, who's hiding somewhere in each illustration.

“On a patio with my two dogs by my feet, listening to the wind blowing through the tree leaves.”



ILLUSTRATION: RICO SCHACHERL

PHOTO ESSAY

Take me to your river

The Osun-Osogbo Festival culminates in a sacred procession that is a year in the making.

WORDS AND PHOTOS: TEMILOLUWA JOHNSON

I ARRIVED in Osogbo, southwest Nigeria, three days before the grand finale of the Osun-Osogbo Festival to capture what happens before the spectacle. By the end of it all, I realised three days was not enough.

The Osun-Osogbo Festival is an annual celebration of the relationship between the people of Osogbo, their

ruler, and Osun. The latter is the Yoruba deity associated with water, fertility, healing, beauty, and prosperity.

The Osun Sacred Grove, where the festival culminates, was recognised as a Unesco World Heritage Site in 2005 and is one of the last surviving sacred forests of the Yoruba people.

The Osun River runs through the



A man walks the path leading into the sacred grove towards the Osun-Osogbo Festival.



The entrance of the sacred grove a few days before the grand finale of the Osun-Osogbo Festival.

grove. People arrive to pray, bringing their worries with them. Some carry calabashes on their heads containing fruit, kolanuts, and other offerings. They ask for what they need and leave their sorrows with the water. They also take containers of water home with them.

The festival is a pilgrimage, celebrating ancestry, community, and an annual return to a place of belonging.

The Arugba, the young woman who carries the *igba*, or sacred calabash, from the palace to the grove, is the festival's heart. Traditionally, she is a virgin of royal lineage, selected through divination. The ritual is sacred and its

successful completion is connected to the wellbeing and continued prosperity of the people of Osogbo.

Before the main procession, the Arugba undergoes Ifa divination to determine what is expected of her: what she should wear, what she should eat, and how she should conduct herself.

This final day, always a Friday, is the climax of preparations that have lasted a year. The Arugba now carries the calabash from the palace towards the river. For people who participate in the festival, she is carrying their hopes for fertility, healing, protection, prosperity, and the continuation of life. ■



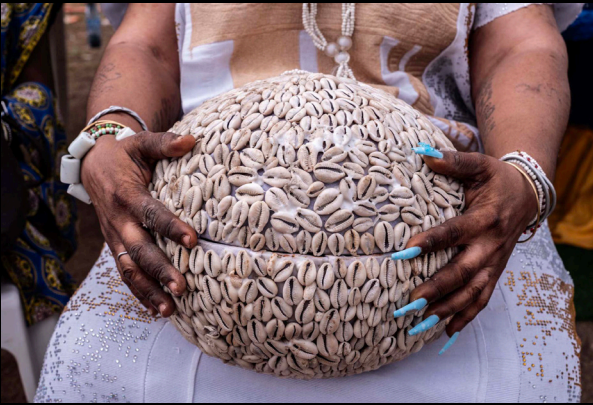
A boy sits on the banks of the Osun River while, nearby, chairs and tables wait to be unstacked for the vendors at the festival who sell snacks and traditional tchotchkes to visitors and devotees.



The festival is an annual focal point for the broader community, which has celebrated as a living expression of Yoruba spiritual heritage for centuries. It culminates in a procession to the sacred grove, where the Arugba carries the sacred calabash in for the final ritual.



Sango performers enthrall festivalgoers with theatrical evocations of fire and thunder.



All manner of vessels from shell-studded containers to large plastic kegs are brought from home or bought near the sacred grove to collect water from the Osun River, for some a token of a special time, for others as a blessing from the river deity.



DATA

Startup upstarts

WORLD Entrepreneurs’ Day (21 August) is an occasion to celebrate intrepid innovators and self-made stars. On a continent that’s constantly on the hustle, just how many people are eager entrepreneurs?

When asked for their preferred job sector, more than half (54%) of African adults we surveyed in 2024/2025 say they want to start their own business, compared to smaller shares who would rather work in the public sector (22%), the private sector (11%), the nonprofit sector (6%), or do something else – including nothing at all (6%).

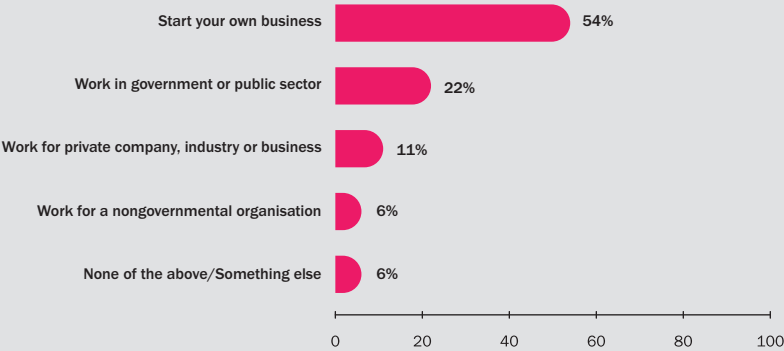
The desire to work for oneself is higher

among those with less education (61%-62% of those with primary schooling or less) than those with secondary (51%) or post-secondary (43%) education. A slim majority (52%) of young Africans want their own business.

#GirlBoss is more than just a hashtag, with women being slightly more likely than men to want to work for themselves (55% vs 52%).

The desire for entrepreneurship tops the list in 35 of the 38 countries in our data set. But a government job is preferred in Angola (46%, vs 28% who want to be self-employed), Namibia (43% vs 22%), and South Africa (37% vs 33%). ■

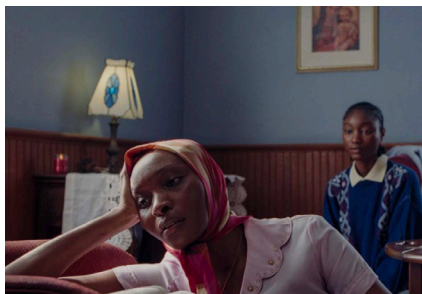
Preferred job sector | 38 African countries | 2024/2025





FILM REVIEW

BY WILFRED OKICHE



FILM STILL: BIRDIE

Displacement and freedom in cultural exile

Escaping home also means grappling with the fact that there's no going back.

PRAISE Odigie Paige was 10 years old in 2003 when her family migrated to the United States from Nigeria. Her journey from undocumented status to finding a sense of safety and home in this new country has influenced her storytelling.

Elements of this feeling of displacement make their way into *Birdie*, Odigie Paige's critically acclaimed short film, which she wrote, directed, and produced, alongside Yetty Akinola.

Birdie is a coming-of-age drama about an Igbo family airlifted to rural Virginia

in the aftermath of Nigeria's Biafra War. It premiered to strong reviews at the Sundance Film Festival in January.

The family's devoutly Catholic matriarch (Sheila Chukwulozie) tries to create a sense of order for her teenage daughters, the titular Birdie (Precious Maduanusi) and her younger sister English (Eniola Abioro) through a stern combination of domestic tasks and religion.

While they await word about their patriarch, a soldier fighting on the Biafran side, Birdie adopts the comfort of morality, whereas English leans into rebellion, embracing her sexual awakening.

Odigie Paige traces parallels with her own life, despite insisting that *Birdie* is more fictional than autobiographical.

"The part that feels most about me is my relationship with my sister – how it felt like we were different sides of a coin and the conflicts we had growing into our bodies while also growing up in this new country."

Shot on 35mm film, *Birdie* evokes a haunting landscape of the Appalachian hills, open spaces that nevertheless come to feel like a trap for the new residents, despite their promise of freedom.

Odigie Paige didn't quite have the words for the feeling of cultural exile she carried and the grief that came in waves, even into her adult years, until she read *Nigerian Town: Boston, Massachusetts* by

Emeka Anwuna.

"The perspective of this 16-year-old girl who is realising for the first time that this isn't temporary, there is no going back home, and nothing about life is going to be the same then became the driving heart of the film," she says.

Odigie Paige inherited an appreciation of history from her father and remains intrigued by the causes and effects of the civil war.

Even though her film is set a world away from the theatre of the Biafra War, she is interested in unpacking the psychological devastation it wrought on survivors.

While watching a documentary, Odigie Paige was struck by a scene depicting a Catholic procession in Igbo taking place right in the thick of the war.

"The way that the people moved, the discipline of the faith: Was it repression

or restraint?" she asks. "I wasn't sure, but I was curious. I had never seen anything like that."

In a way, this discipline is tied to the formal rigidity with which Odigie Paige approaches filmmaking. The short film, which runs for 21 minutes, nevertheless takes its time. Visual compositions are meticulous, and the scenes are allowed to breathe.

Incidentally, principal photography for *Birdie* began the week of the 2024 general elections in the United States. On the third day of filming, Donald Trump returned to the White House, riding a wave of anti-immigrant sentiment.

Odigie Paige says although she fears for some people around her, the timing made it all the more urgent to tell this story. "Now more than ever, we need to extend empathy for people losing home and building it elsewhere." ■



The Quiz

- 1 What is Somalia's currency called?
- 2 Which country won Wafcon last week?
- 3 Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta was president of which country from 2013 to 2022?
- 4 Which African country won the most medals at the recent Commonwealth Games?
- 5 Which African country gained independence in 2011?
- 6 What does SADC stand for?
- 7 In which country is the Guelta d'Archei Lake (pictured)?
- 8 Oshakati, Rundu and Walvis Bay are towns in which country?
- 9 What was Egypt's capital before it was Cairo?
- 10 What is the demonym for people from the Central African Republic?



HOW DID I DO?

WhatsApp 'ANSWERS' to **+27 73 805 6068** and we'll send the answers to you!

0-3

"I think I need to start reading more newspapers."

4-7

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

8-10

"Not all camels in the world got to see the Guelta d'Archei Lake, but lots of them herd about it."

PHOTO: VALERIAN GUILLOT

Big Pic

A spire to greatness: An Egyptian boy flies a kite from the roof of his home opposite Sultan Qaytbay's mosque, following the restoration of its mausoleum dome. Built in 1474, the mosque is one of Cairo's most iconic landmarks.

PHOTO: PHOTO: KHALED DESOUKI/AFP



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