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# NIB boss speaks on investment opportunities, safer environment

By Alusine Sesay & Alhaji Haruna Sani

## SLPA welcomes Mercy Ship delegation



SLPA officials welcoming Mercy Ships delegation

Sierra is in dire need of healthy investment that would open up opportunities for citizens and create more jobs for the growing number of youth. As a way of enhancing a conducive atmosphere for investment to thrive, the Government of Sierra Leone, through an Act of Parliament, established the National Investment Board (NIB) in 2022, an institution that is charged with the responsibility of facilitating investment and creating the enabling environment for investor confidence. The institution would serve as a one-stop-shop to reduce the burden on investors to set up their businesses in the country.

The National Investment Board is headed by an apt academic, Professor Marda Mustapha, who serves as the Executive Director.

Professor Mustapha is an expert in International Political Economy (PHD) and has been teaching in the United States for



The Executive Director, National Investment Board (NIB), Professor Marda Mustapha

over sixteen Years. He was lecturing global investment, globalization until when President Bio asked him to come and help him achieve his aspirations in developing the country, which he saw as a blessing and a very good opportunity.

When he returned from the United States, Professor Mustapha set up the NIB from scratch. With a two page cabinet conclusion and one paragraph, he was able to put into reality what is today the National Investment Board.

Cont. Page 2

## Sierra Leone's debt stands at \$2.75 billion Ebola hero talks on financial inclusion: Salton Massally's journey to Mikashboks

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## LOCAL NEWS

From Cover

# NIB boss speaks on investment opportunities, safer environment

**CT: Can you tell us more about NIB?**

**Executive Director:** The National Investment Board (NIB) is a Government Institution established to coordinate, facilitate and promote investment in Sierra Leone and I am the one that set up NIB from scratch. When I came from the United States, I was given a two-page cabinet conclusion and one paragraph, telling me that the cabinet has approved the setting up of an investment board. First, as an Advisory Body and then to be turned into a statutory institution through an Act of Parliament. How to do it and what steps to take? I actually had to sit down and think about it and then put it in reality.

**CT: What are some of the investment opportunities Sierra Leone has as a country?**

**Executive Director:** There are numerals of opportunities because Sierra Leone is a virgin territory full of investment opportunities, including our sea fronts, our vast arable lands and untapped agricultural opportunities. But, we have to copy what China did. Before China became industrialised, they sold cheap labour and Sierra Leone also has one of the cheapest labour, if not the cheapest. When multi-million dollar investors want to save money they cut down on labour because labour is very expensive. In Sierra Leone, our labour is cheap and that should serve as a huge attraction for investors to come.

And the market is not only limited to the eight million population in the country, you also consider the 40 million population in the Mano River Union because we have a treaty for cross-border trade. At the West African level, there are over 500 million population. Another advantage for investors again is that the rate of investment competition is very low in the country compared to other countries in the sub-region, coupled with our low tax rate, which is a huge advantage.

**CT: How would you guarantee the Legal environment for investors?**

**Executive Director:** Any investor that comes to Sierra Leone through the NIB would be fully protected. I am not talking about investors that use the backdoors to come to the country, but those who pass through our channel will never be duped because for any attempt we will set an example that will make people think twice and will not dare to mess up with investors that come through NIB. Our message to investors is that they should come through NIB. Again, let's look at it on both sides, some of these investors are fly-by-night investors. They also come to dupe the country because they don't want to go through institutions, they prefer going to individuals who can promise them heaven on earth which they cannot do. Therefore, I will encourage all investors to use the right channel so that their monies can be well protected. We have so many laws that protect investors and we have the fast track court in

which cases can be heard in the fastest speed.

**CT: Initially we have SLIEPA and now NIB: why was it necessary for the setting up of NIB?**

**Executive Director:** Let us be clear, the Sierra Leone Investment and Export Promotion Agency (SLIEPA) was specifically for investment and export promotion, while NIB is more encompassing and has a broader mandate. SLIEPA was limited to promoting investment and promoting our export so the powers that NIB has SLIEPA didn't. NIB does facilitation-meaning when an investor comes, NIB has the powers to actually take their documents, go from office to office to get all the things they need to set up their businesses, but SLIEPA didn't have those powers. SLIEPA didn't have the statutory powers to make agreement with Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs), to work with them when investors come but NIB has that mandate. SLIEPA didn't have the statutory powers to clear up bottle necks; they may only go through goodwill to talk to ministries, ministers clear things up with investors. But the NIB Act gives the NIB secretariat the powers to clear up bottle necks thus; the two institutions are completely different.

There are so many things you need in the investment space which SLIEPA didn't have, so SLIEPA is now part of NIB as a directorate-the Investment and Export Promotion Directorate. And it is not only SLIEPA that has been subsumed, the Cooperate Affairs Commission is no longer a commission, it is now the Cooperate Affairs Directorate but they still do the jobs that they have been doing. Now the Business Registry at Roxy Building and the Office of Administrator and Registrar General are also coming under the NIB because we want to have a one-stop-shop so that when an investor walks into the NIB, he or she will have investment promotion, public private partnership, cooperate affairs and business registry their so, they can do everything in one building instead of going all over the place.

**CT: Many people will say NIB is a new kid on the bloc?**

**Executive Director:** NIB is indeed a new kid on the bloc; it is part of the institution building that President Bio promised in 2018. Remember some of the things people talk about President Kabbah was the institutions he built, like the National Social Security Insurance Trust (NASSIT), National Revenue Authority (NRA), the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) and more. President Bio saw the good in that. So, NIB is one of the institutions that the president wants to build and if allowed to work the way it supposed to work, it can

change the economic trajectory and the economic destiny of this country for good.

**CT: How can investors contact NIB if they want to come and invest in Sierra Leone?**

**Executive Director:** Well, for the purpose of just contacting us, we have a website, but the website is not fully developed because we are merging with SLIEPA. SLIEPA already has a website so it is but needless to operate two websites on the same institution. So, our IT teams from all the agencies are meeting and chatting the way of merging all the agencies under one website so that the website will serve as a means of contacting us and adding to that, we are about to award a contract for the online business registration wherein investors don't have to leave their offices to register their business and get all their documents.

**CT: Your office is like a conduit for investment in Sierra Leone, so if you are contacted by an investor, which area will you recommend him to invest as way of helping government achieve its Big Five Agenda?**

**Executive Director:** Of course it is agriculture, because we have to feed the nation and the President's agenda of feeding the nation is not that he is going to be giving everybody a bag of rice. What the government is working on now is to bring in investors to invest in those areas so that we flood the market with food items making it accessible and affordable, that is what feed Salone means. You know, I don't want people to think that the president is going to give everyone a bag of rice every month. The president is going to make sure that we have investors coming here to invest in our staple food and in other agricultural produces that we need to feed on.

What NIB will do is to promote that sector and we have had conversation with consultants coming in trying to work in that area and I have given them the nitty gritty of how it's going to be done. Agriculture is actually comparative advantage because it is something we can do with ease but need investment in that sector so that we can up our production. I have also told consultants that we are more interested in investors who can add value because we don't just want to feed Sierra Leone, we also want to reduce our trade deficit. We import over 200 million dollars of rice which adds on our trade deficit and as a result if we grow what we eat and eat what we grow we will be able to reduce our balance of trade so much so that even our currency will be appreciating in value. People talk about the depreciation of the Leones but the Leones will continue to depreciate until we start producing what other people can buy. Currency valuation is based on demand and supply, because if



nobody wants your money to buy your goods then your money will have no value. If the demand is high for currency because of your goods, then the value of your currency will shoot up. In a nutshell, this shows how NIB can help increase the value of the currency.

**CT: As an institution, how can you help President Bio achieve his agenda of creating 500 thousand jobs for the youth?**

**Executive Director:** Well, I want people to know that the government alone cannot create 500 thousand new jobs. Now, even when the government hires more teachers and nurses people complain that they are increasing the wage bill. So, the private sector has to come onboard and that is where NIB comes in because we are a conduit between government and the private sector. That is why we strive to make the business environment so conducive that the private sector will make more profit and expand in order to hire more people.

There is something they call the snowboard effect on the economy. For instance, if an agro-business industry comes and hires 300 workers in a small town like Blama, the entire region will benefit and the demand for goods and services of traders in Blama and its environs will shoot up and traders will make more money and expand in order to cater for the higher demand. And, if you have a bigger shop you will need to hire more people. The government through NIB will make it happen, but NIB will have to make sure we bring the investors and help the private sector expands. That is how we can provide the 500 thousand jobs.

**CT: So, do you have any other thing to say?**

**Executive Director:** Ooo.. Yes, I just want to manage the expectations of Sierra Leoneans. I know the private sector has been yearning for something like NIB, and now that they have heard about it, they are in impatience. I am appealing to them to be patient because we are in the middle of a transition and the Act has just been passed about just a year. So, my fellow Sierra Leoneans please be patient, we are working diligently, assiduously and deliberately to create the environment. When once we are done you will realize that it worth the wait, so patient, patient, we are working hard to get this thing delivered..



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## LOCAL NEWS

By Vickie Remoe

In June 2010, Salton Massally left New York City and returned to Freetown heartbroken. Three years earlier, he had left Sierra Leone with an envelope full of cash to learn how to build planes at the Department of Aeronautical Engineering at The University at Buffalo. That never happened.

Instead, he left America with no degree, money, or job. Little did he know that in five years, he would rise to the helm of Sierra Leone's nascent fintech industry and become one of the nation's brightest entrepreneurs.

Between 2010-2017 Massally created technology that averted a payroll crisis during the ebola outbreak, sold his first startup, and created Mikashboks, a group saving and lending app.

This is the story of Massally's rise from dropout to award-winning entrepreneur and a globally acclaimed financial inclusion expert. By the time Massally graduated high school, he had already demonstrated a high IQ.

He aced his national exams and had the second-highest scores country-wide for O Levels and the National Primary School Exams. While he thrived academically, Massally preferred his own company over socializing.

"My favorite thing to do was to dismantle my Dad's electronics. He had to hide them because if I got my hands on a radio or camera, I was taking it apart to understand how it worked."

That penchant for self-learning grew with him. At 17, already out of school, Massally got his first laptop when he left Sierra Leone to attend Buffalo University in New York. Like most teens of the day, social networks like Hi5 and Facebook took up most of his time, that is, until he had a crush on a girl.

"It seemed like a brilliant idea to create a web page to tell her how I felt, but I just had a laptop then. I had no idea how to create a web page, but if others could, so could I."

He built a web page with hearts and pictures. Except there was only one problem. He needed to learn how to host the page. "The girl never had the opportunity to see it, but in the midst of that, I discovered my passion for programming."

He thrived at Buffalo, but getting there had taken years of financial planning by his mom. When she handed him an envelope with thousands of dollars to cover his first year's tuition and expenses, it was all her savings. She had spent years saving in an Osusu. Every month, she made contributions, and when it was her turn, she took her share to put away for Massally.

He made the Dean's list with a 3.8 GPA, but most importantly, he became a better learner. He was doing the classroom work while at the same time exploring tech on his own. However, one year after he started, he had to drop out.

"My dad, who was a doctor, could no longer work. He developed Parkinson's Disease. My mom became his full-time caregiver, and we became a one-income household."

The Osusu she had relied on was still there, but it would take a long time for her to be able to save as she had before. Even though she was a financial director at a national agency, she couldn't get credit to pay for Massally to stay in college.

"No bank would lend to her, and she could not use the equity and goodwill she had created by being part of osusu groups for years." When his

## Ebola hero talks on financial inclusion: Salton Massally's journey to Mikashboks

mom couldn't get a loan, Massally dropped out of UB and returned to Freetown. With no job and still struggling to accept that he'd never be able to realize his dreams of building planes, he went online searching for education.

"I would say I increased the rate at which I was learning because I didn't have to bother myself with other topics or taking tests. The tests for me switched from being able to prove knowledge by answering a set of questions to solving problems."

Once he recovered from the disappointment of not completing his degree, he set his sights on building software to make it easier for job seekers and prospective employers to find each other.

"When I came back, I had a cousin who had finished university but had difficulty finding jobs. Every morning, he went through the same routine—buying a bunch of newspapers and scanning the pages to see if he could find a job. When he saw the ones that fit his qualifications, he put together an application for those jobs, which involved getting his CV printed, finding an envelope to package those documents, and paying the transport to drop off these huge brown envelopes. It was expensive and time-consuming."

Thousands of job seekers were repeating the same process, as were the employers paying for the job adverts. "It seemed like the conditions were right; the marketplace was ready, but no solution solved the problem for both sides. So, the first thing I did was to build a job hub. It still exists, Careers.sl." Over the past decade, Careers.sl has had 600,000 job seekers and 2,000 employers using the platform for search and recruitment. Careers.sl left no one behind, unlike most platforms when it was founded. It had an SMS interface that allowed job seekers who didn't have internet access to get SMS job alerts.

There were no initial plans to monetize Careers.sl. Massally wanted to make the job hunt more manageable, cheaper, and efficient. It was a success! Companies saw that the platform had more reach than newspapers and was much more affordable. Two years after returning to Sierra Leone as a college dropout, Massally's jobs hub became the launch pad for a new tech startup—IDT Labs, founded in his parent's living room. At the same time, most startups struggled to raise seed capital, the success of Careers.sl opened doors—fast.

"That was huge, someone giving a 21-year-old \$50,000, saying, hey, build something you would otherwise be doing for free. We moved IDT Labs out of my mother's living room into a location we could call ours. We were able to bring on a founding team, and then we built cool things."

After the success of Careers.sl, Massally and his team ventured out. They tried to

solve operations problems for local businesses. If a mining company needed payroll, they developed it; if a telco needed help with digitizing its tax obligations, they built that, too. At one point, they handled payroll for a mining company with 5,000 workers. In 2014, Sierra Leone had an Ebola epidemic.

The national government's medical workforce grew exponentially. It wasn't just doctors and nurses at hospitals and clinics. Call center operators, trace and burial teams, security, and other contract workers spread nationwide.

The government needed to disburse payments to frontline workers across the country while trying to limit the movement of people to curb the spread. Overwhelmed by its new payroll, the government couldn't pay medical workers on time, so the Ebola frontline workers went on strike.

"It was pretty grim. Dead bodies were left on the streets because frontline workers were risking their lives and being promised they would be paid, but it wasn't happening. This put the Ebola response to a standstill." The government asked Massally and his team at IDT Labs to build a payment system to manage 50,000 workers, get the payments to workers on time, and ensure that the government paid the right amount.

"We had just two weeks to scale our payroll system that handled a maximum of 5,000 employees to 50,000. We had to build fast. Before we worked on this project, they would load vans with bags of cash and go to the different treatment centers to pay the workers. We moved the payment system from cash to mobile money. We also set up a redressal system and district help desks to track complaints." At the height of the epidemic, IDT Labs paid 50,000 Ebola response workers every two weeks and processed up to eight million dollars monthly. Digitizing the payroll made a significant impact on the government's ebola response. It saved lives and money.

For Massally's service during the epidemic, he was awarded the Queen's Young Leader Award in 2017 by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II at Buckingham Palace. As Sierra Leone moved into the post-ebola recovery period, one thing became clear: the epidemic had shown that banks had barriers to access for many people. Mobile money and payment systems developed by IDT Labs have proven new and more inclusive financial delivery models.

To respond to these challenges, the government formed the National Financial Inclusion Strategy (NFIS) 2017-2020 with support from the UN Capital Development Fund (UNCDF).

"There was this fear initially that fintechs would kill traditional banking, not complement it. We found new ways to reach the market and delivered services more efficiently and consumer-centric."

With the launch of the NFIS, the Bank of Sierra Leone (BSL) invited fintechs to a regulatory pilot sandbox. BSL challenged them to develop solutions to promote financial inclusion while ensuring consumer protection. During that period, Massally founded MiKashBoks, an SMS-based savings scheme and marketplace for unbanked smallholder



farmers.

"We were one of the first fintechs in that sandbox. Over two years, we proved that we had a viable and secure solution, and miKashBoks was allowed to exit the sandbox by the Bank of Sierra Leone." Just as MiKashBoks was finding its footing, Massally went to work for Kiva as Director of Global Implementation.

He sold his stake in IDT Labs but kept MiKashBoks. In 2018, Massally left Sierra Leone to join Silicon Valley, this time as a fintech expert and award-winning software engineer. "I joined Kiva because we had the same mission."

"How can we provide better, more efficient ways for money to flow to people who need financial services like loans, savings, and insurance that are better suited for their income level and patterns?"

At Kiva, Massally led the deployment of Kiva Protocol, a platform that allows government identification systems to use blockchain to authenticate IDs and payments.

He deployed the first national system in Africa in Sierra Leone. Even though he found great success with Kiva, Massally was restless. He felt people like his mom who use informal group savings like Osusu demonstrated financial discipline that should give them access to credit.

He shared the first version of Mikashboks with colleagues at Kiva, Rachel Chang and Bruce Martinez. Together, they formed Mikashboks 2.0, a group saving and lending platform powered by social bonds. "We take what people are already doing offline in Osusu groups - saving and borrowing together - and bring it online."

That makes it easier and safer but also will give underserved groups access to financial services. "It's not just a start-up venture for us; we have a personal understanding of the unfairness of exclusion and have decided we want to do something about it." Massally incorporated Mikashboks in the US in January 2021 in the United States. Then Mikashboks joined Harvard University iLabs' incubator and later expanded to Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and Ethiopia.

It has raised close to 1 million USD in pre-seed from investors globally. Mikashboks is already garnering accolades. In 2022, at a pitch competition at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Sloan Fintech Conference's "Global Start-up Pitch Competition, it took second place and won the audience choice vote.

They were also finalists of the Harvard Presidential Awards, even receiving a congratulatory note from the President of the United States, Joe Biden. This month, Massally returned to Sierra Leone to launch Mikashboks.

"Everything that has happened in my life - dropping out of school, the work I did during Ebola, and launching the Kiva Protocol, everything has led me to this point—to end invisibility and improve the financial lives of the last billion. First, we launch at home, then Africa, and then the world."



## LOCAL NEWS

# HRCS enhances stakeholders' capacity on women, children's rights

With support from UNDP and Irish Aid, the Directorate of Gender and Children's Affairs of the Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone (HRCSL) has concluded a nationwide engagement and awareness raising with community stakeholders on laws and policies, especially the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) Act of 2022 and the Sexual Offences Act of 2012 as amended in 2019, protecting women and children's rights.

The engagements took place from the 14th to the 22nd of August in the five regions of the country. The thrust was to equip community stakeholders with the necessary knowledge of these laws to support community sensitization and identify progress, challenges, and proffer recommendations.

A total of 250 participants attended the engagement which was spearheaded by the Directorate of Gender and Children's Affairs with support from the regional offices in the five regions.

Despite the enactment of several laws and policies protecting the rights of women and children, the lack of awareness and understanding of these laws at the community level remains a significant challenge.

During the engagements, facilitators took participants through the GEWE Act, the Sexual Offences Act of 2012 as amended in 2019, the Child Rights Act, the three gender justice laws, and the mandate and functions of HRCSL to ensure better understanding.

While the GEWE Act of 2022 speaks to the 30% quota system, prohibition on discrimination against women in employment, prohibition of sexual harassment, requirement for paid maternity leave, requirement for financial institutions to improve women's access to finance and women empowerment, the Sexual Offences Act of 2012 as amended in 2019 addresses rape and sexual penetration, compromise, indecent exposure, incest, aggravated sexual assault and non-consent from a child, and

prescribe penalties with life imprisonment as the highest.

Also, the Customary Marriage and Divorce Act of 2009 deals mainly with types of marriage, registration of customary marriages and cohabitation, among others. Key areas in the Child Rights Act include parental duty and responsibility, minimum age of recruitment, treatment of disabled children, protection from exploitative labour, and protection from tortured and degrading treatment.

The participants, who were carefully selected from CSOs, District Human Rights Committees, government institutions, and ordinary people

in the communities, appreciated the training because according to them, they had little knowledge of these laws. In Bo, a member of the Traders Union specifically commended the Commission on the awareness raising on the SOAA and noted that their members who are victims of SGBV often call on them to act. She said with the knowledge gained she can appropriately advise these members.

Head of Women Advocacy and Agriculture Development Organization in Waterloo, Madam Doris Fatima Webber said "Majority of those living in these rural areas are not aware

of laws protecting women and children. This session will serve as an eye-opener in letting our people better understand these laws," she said.

She urged the Commission to host the session on a regular basis to remind community people about provisions in the gender laws and policies.

Across the various regions, Commissioners of HRCSL spoke about the establishment of the Commission which has a mandate to protect and promote the rights of all in Sierra Leone. They refer to public education as one of the ways the Commission uses to ensure the protection and promotion of the rights of all and urge participants to put into practice what they have learned.





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## LOCAL NEWS SLPA welcomes Mercy Ship delegation

General Manager of the Sierra Leone Ports Authority (SLPA), Yakuba Askia Bio popularly known as Jada and his dynamic Deputy General Manager, Madam Judith Boie Kosseh on Wednesday 22nd August 2023 welcomed Mercy Ship at the Sierra Leone Ports Authority.

In his address, the SLPA GM appreciated the Mercy Ship team and for what he described as their timely arrival.

He stated that, through their new administration, they have been able to welcome Mercy Ship which is one of the biggest medical ships in the world.

He further stated that the SLPA is going to create an open space to do their work and that the President, Julius Maada Bio is also focusing in the area of addressing health challenges.

"I was also working at Bollore when the Ship had earlier arrived and they were able to heal many people, but this time around the ship came under our administration to help solve our health issues in the country," he stated.

In her statement, the Deputy General Manager of SLPA, Madam Judith Kosseh also welcomed Mercy Ship in Sierra

Leone and applauded the team's gesture.

She stated that their administration is pleased with the arrival of the Mercy Ship, noting that the ship arrived at the right time.

The coming of Mercy Ship is a testament of President Bio's vision and commitment to improving the health sector in Sierra Leone. It is also an indication of the International Community's urge to work with the government and people of Sierra Leone. It is reassuring that goodies of this nature continue to happen under our watch.



## Sierra Leone's debt stands at \$2.75 billion

By Yusufu S. Bangura

The Director of Public Debts and Management Division, Ministry of Finance, Mathew Sandi, has disclosed that the Government of Sierra Leone debt currently amount to 2.75 billion United States Dollars.

He made the above disclosure while being hosted at the popular Radio Democracy 'Gud Morning Salone' program, where he was dilating on the current status of the country's debt.

According to Sandi, the debt represents both domestic and external, which was accumulated in response to different economic shocks in the country.

He said the medium term debt strategy is a tool that World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) developed to help countries assess risk of existing

debts and cost on how they should manage those risk.

"The current status of the country debt for both domestic and external sums up to 2.75 billion United State Dollars. The external debt which is mostly contracted by non-residents of the country, like the World Bank, IMF and other bilateral institutions is 1.9 billion dollars and the domestic debt may amount to 0.8 billion dollars which was contracted from various institutions across the country," he said.

Sandi stressed that they have engaged key stakeholders on how the ministry can strategise and update the public on the debt management policies.

He continued that the difference between the medium term debt

strategy and the debt sustainability analysis is that the medium term strategy is a long term plan on how they should reduce cost in the risk of the existing portfolio in terms of external and domestic debts.

He added that the debt sustainability analysis can help them with the current analysis to know if the government will be able to take any loan in order to maintain a sustainable debt part. He further said that the government acquired debt through engagement with partners following certain procedures.

He said if government wants to acquire external debt, they will go through different engagements with partners.

Sandi added that the worst state

is when the country is in debt distress, but the country has not reach there so that's why they engaged stakeholders.

He said the debt to the Gross domestic product (GDP) is 92.7% which is not the highest level, noting that the GDP goes to 92.7% because there was persistence shocks in the world economy.

Going further, Sandi pointed out that one role of the Ministry of Finance is to make sure that they have a strategy on how to manage the debt.

"This debt profile is a total public debt, but for the medium-term debt strategy that we are working on, we do always exclude the senior debt which is the IMF," he said, adding that the IMF debts are governed by their safeguard assessment.



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## NEWS AROUND AFRICA COMPILED BY GABRIEL BENJAMIN

## BRICS admits six new members as bloc seeks bigger say in global affairs

The Brics (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), meeting at their summit in Johannesburg, announced on Thursday a "historic" expansion of the emerging countries' bloc, with the integration of six new members, including Iran, from January.

Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are also joining the group, which aims to increase its influence in the world, announced South African President Cyril Ramaphosa.

Chinese President Xi Jinping hailed this "historic enlargement" and predicted a "radiant future for the Brics". As the bloc's economic heavyweight, Beijing was in favor of this expansion, which was the focus of the 15th summit, which opened on Tuesday and ends this evening.

No information was released on the content of the discussions, the support given or the criteria used in the strategic choice of the new entrants. Negotiations were conducted behind closed doors during a plenary session on Wednesday and at several bilateral meetings.

Some forty countries from all over the world had applied for membership or expressed an interest in joining. A sign of the growing influence of emerging countries on the world stage, according to the "club of five", which produces a quarter of the world's wealth and brings together 42% of the world's population.

Immediately after the announcement, Teheran hailed on X (formerly Twitter) "a strategic success



Indian PM Narendra Modi, President Cyril Ramaphosa, Deputy President of South Africa Paul Mashatile and President of China Xi Jinping attend a meeting in Johannesburg - Copyright © africanews MARCO LONGARI/AFP or licensors

for the country's foreign policy".

Ethiopia's Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, spoke of "an important moment" for his country. "Ethiopia is ready to cooperate with all for an inclusive and prosperous world order", he posted on social networks.

The United Arab Emirates also welcomed the agreement, with President Mohammed ben Zayed saying he "respects the vision of the Brics leaders".

The same was true of Egypt, which said it looked forward to "making the voice of the countries of the South heard".

A heterogeneous alliance, the Brics have in common their demand for a more inclusive global balance, particularly with regard to the influence of the United States and the European Union.

Noting that "we are moving towards a multipolar world", UN chief Antonio Guterres called for an overhaul of "outdated" multilateral institutions, which must reflect "today's economic realities".

## BRICS bank can help African countries tackle urgent challenges

The New Development Bank, a collaborative initiative of BRICS nations established in 2015, stands poised to play a pivotal role in funding crucial African endeavors, according to its President, Dilma Rousseff.

Former Brazilian President Rousseff, speaking in Johannesburg, emphasized the strong partnership between the BRICS countries and Africa. She highlighted that the bank's focus will encompass both physical and digital infrastructure projects, as well as educational initiatives across the African continent.

Rousseff asserted that the New Development Bank holds the potential to spearhead projects aimed at addressing Africa's pressing challenges. Despite Africa's foreign direct investment (FDI) share expanding from 4.9% in 2010 to 8.8% of global FDI in 2021, she underscored the need for further growth. "Significant room remains for increased progress," Rousseff noted.

She also highlighted the necessity of bolstering payment mechanisms, particularly through the introduction of local currencies and innovative financial tools. These measures are envisioned



This handout picture released by the Argentine Economy Ministry shows ... - Copyright © africanews MAXIMILIANO VERNAZZA/AFP

to contribute to the establishment of a more inclusive and multilateral financial ecosystem.

Furthermore, President Rousseff stressed the importance of collaborative infrastructure ventures among multiple nations. She pointed out Africa's abundant untapped hydroelectric potential, underlining the opportunities for joint projects in this domain.

In conclusion, the New Development Bank emerges as a potential leader in addressing Africa's urgent challenges, guided by the commitment and vision shared by BRICS countries.

## Gabon: 5 things to know before the presidential election



Gabonese President-elect Ali Bongo Ondimba at the flag during the swearing-in ceremony - Copyright © africanews STEEVE JORDAN/AFP or licensors

Five things to know about Gabon, an oil-rich Central African country, where President Ali Bongo Ondimba is seeking a third presidential term on August 26.

The Bongos in power for more than 55 years

The country has had only three presidents since its independence from France in 1960. It was ruled for more than 41 years by Omar Bongo Ondimba until his son Ali was elected after his death in 2009.

Omar Bongo, respected for his mediation in several African crises, was also a pillar of "Françafrique", a system of political cooptation, networks and commercial preserves between Paris and its former colonies on the continent. His son Ali ostensibly distanced himself from the barely elected former colonial power.

Nine other of his children are indicted in the investigation carried out since 2010 by French justice on "ill-gotten gains", real estate constituted in France with public money embezzled from Gabon.

A daughter of Omar Bongo, Pascaline, had an affair with reggae legend Bob Marley, whom she invited to come and play in Gabon for her father's birthday. These were the Jamaican singer's first concerts in Africa, in January 1980.

Oil, wood and manganese

Gabon is one of the richest countries in Africa in terms of GDP per capita (\$8,820 in 2022), thanks to its oil, timber and manganese in particular, and a small population (2.3 million inhabitants).

It is among the very first producers of black gold in sub-Saharan Africa. In 2020 this resource represented 38.5% of its GDP and 70.5% of its exports, according to the World Bank.

But the economy, which the authorities are unable to diversify sufficiently, still depends too heavily on hydrocarbons, and one in three inhabitants lived below the poverty line at the end of 2022, according to the World Bank.

88% forest

The 26,8000 square kilometer country, of which 88% of the territory is occupied by forest, is

described by the World Bank as "a net carbon absorber and a leader in net zero emissions initiatives", thanks in particular to the efforts made to reduce emissions and preserve its vast rainforest.

It has a rich ecosystem. Its national parks are home to endemic species and emblematic mammals such as the forest elephant, the gorilla, the chimpanzee, the leopard or even several species of pangolins.

The country has one of the highest urbanization rates on the continent, with more than four out of five Gabonese living in cities. Libreville and Port-Gentil, the economic capital, alone account for nearly 60% of the population.

Psychotropic plant

A plant with psychotropic effects, the iboga, an endemic shrub of the equatorial forest of Central Africa, is used in Gabon in the form of bark powder taken from its root, in the "bwiti" ceremonies, a traditional initiation rite.

The plant left its purely traditional use for about fifty years because of the medicinal virtues of ibogaine, one of its active principles, which would have in particular anti-addictive properties.

However, ibogaine is considered a narcotic in the United States or several European countries such as France.

Most of the ibogaine used in clinics that have flourished around the world (Costa Rica, Mexico, New Zealand, the Netherlands ...), to wean drug addicts or help victims of post-traumatic stress, comes from illegal export.

Fearing that its resources will be depleted by illegal harvesting, Gabon has adopted a new framework for trading in it.

Famous footballer

International Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang is Gabon's most famous footballer.

The 34-year-old striker, who has just signed with Olympique de Marseille for three years, has worked for Lille, Monaco, Saint-Étienne, German club Borussia Dortmund and English Arsenal, among others, after training at AC Milan.

Credit: Rédaction africanews with AP

## ECOWAS slams 'unacceptable' Niger transition plan

The West African bloc ECOWAS rejected the proposal by Niger's mutinous soldiers for a three-year transition to democratic rule.

Speaking to Al Jazeera earlier this week, the bloc's commissioner for peace and security said it was "unacceptable."

The door to diplomacy with Niger's junta remained open but the bloc is not going to engage in drawn-out talks that lead nowhere, Abdel-Fatau Musah, the ECOWAS commissioner for peace and security, told The Associated Press in an interview Wednesday.

"It is the belief among the ECOWAS heads of state and also the commission that the coup in Niger is one coup too many for the region and if we allow it then we are going to have a domino effect in the region and we are determined to stop it," Musah said. While direct talks and backchannel negotiations are ongoing, he said the door to diplomacy wasn't open indefinitely.

"We are not going to engage in long, drawn out haggling with these military officers ... We went down that route in Mali, in Burkina Faso and elsewhere, and we are getting nowhere," Musah said.

His comments came days after an ECOWAS delegation met the head of Niger's military regime, Gen. Abdourahmane Tchiani, for the first time since the mutinous soldiers ousted President Mohamed Bazoum in July.

After last week's meeting, Musah said the ball is now in the junta's court.

Coups and sanctions

The junta has been keeping Bazoum and his wife and son under house arrest, and ECOWAS has demanded Bazoum be freed and constitutional order restored.

ECOWAS has used Niger as a red line against further coups after several in the region, including two each in Mali and Burkina Faso since 2020.

The bloc has imposed severe economic and travel sanctions and threatened the use of military force if Bazoum is not reinstated, but the junta has dug in. It has appointed a new

government and said it will return the country to democratic rule within several years.

Niger was seen as one of the last democratic countries in the Sahel region below the Sahara Desert that Western nations could partner with to beat back a growing jihadi insurgency linked to al-Qaida and the Islamic State group. France, other European countries and the United States have poured hundreds of millions of dollars into providing equipment and training for Niger's military and in the case of France have conducted joint operations.

The 2023 Global Terrorism Index estimated that Sahel accounted for 43% of global terrorism deaths in 2022. With 8,564 victims, Burkina Faso ranked 2nd just behind Afghanistan.

Somalia, Mali and Syria occupied the 3rd, 4th and 5th place respectively. Next came Pakistan, Iraq, Nigeria, Burma and Niger according to the document.

Since the coup those military operations have been suspended while both sides decide what to do. France and the U.S. have some 2,500 military personnel in the country and the U.S. operates two key drone and counter-terror bases.

Musah said ECOWAS was not discussing military plans with any external partners and everything it was planning is based on the resources of member states. Earlier this month, ECOWAS said 11 of its 15 member states had agreed to intervene militarily if talks didn't work.

ECOWAS is banking on a combination of external pressure through sanctions and internal unrest within Niger's security forces and the fact that Tchiani, the junta's leader, met with ECOWAS face to face after multiple attempts, is a sign that the coup leaders are feeling the pressure, said Nate Allen, an associate professor at the Africa Center for Strategic Studies.

"Nonetheless, it is clear that the two sides remain very far apart and the risk of conflict is high," he said.

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**Tender documents:** tender documents will be sent to those who expressed an interest, following the close of the EOI period.

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## IN MEMORIAM

25<sup>th</sup> August 2023 Marks the 1st Anniversary of the Passing of Our beloved Mother, Grandmother, Great-Grandmother, In-law, Aunt and Friend

## JANE KASHOPE TEJAN

(NEE THOMPSON)

27<sup>th</sup> July 1939 - 25<sup>th</sup> August 2022  
(Aged 83)

*A year has passed since you left us but your presence is still felt in every breath*

*You were the light of our lives, the warmth of our hearts*

*The one who taught us how to love, how to grow, how to start*

*You were always there for us, no matter what*

*You gave us your support, your guidance, your trust*

*You showed us the beauty of the world, the joy of living*

*You shared with us your Wisdom, your Grace, your Giving*

*You are still with us, in our thoughts and our dreams*

*You are still with us, in our hopes and our schemes*

*You are still with us, in our laughter and our tears*

*You are still with us, in our joys and our fears*

*You are still our Mum, our angel, our friend*

*You are still our Mum, until the very end*

*We miss you so much, but we know you are at Peace*

*We miss you so much, but we know you are free*

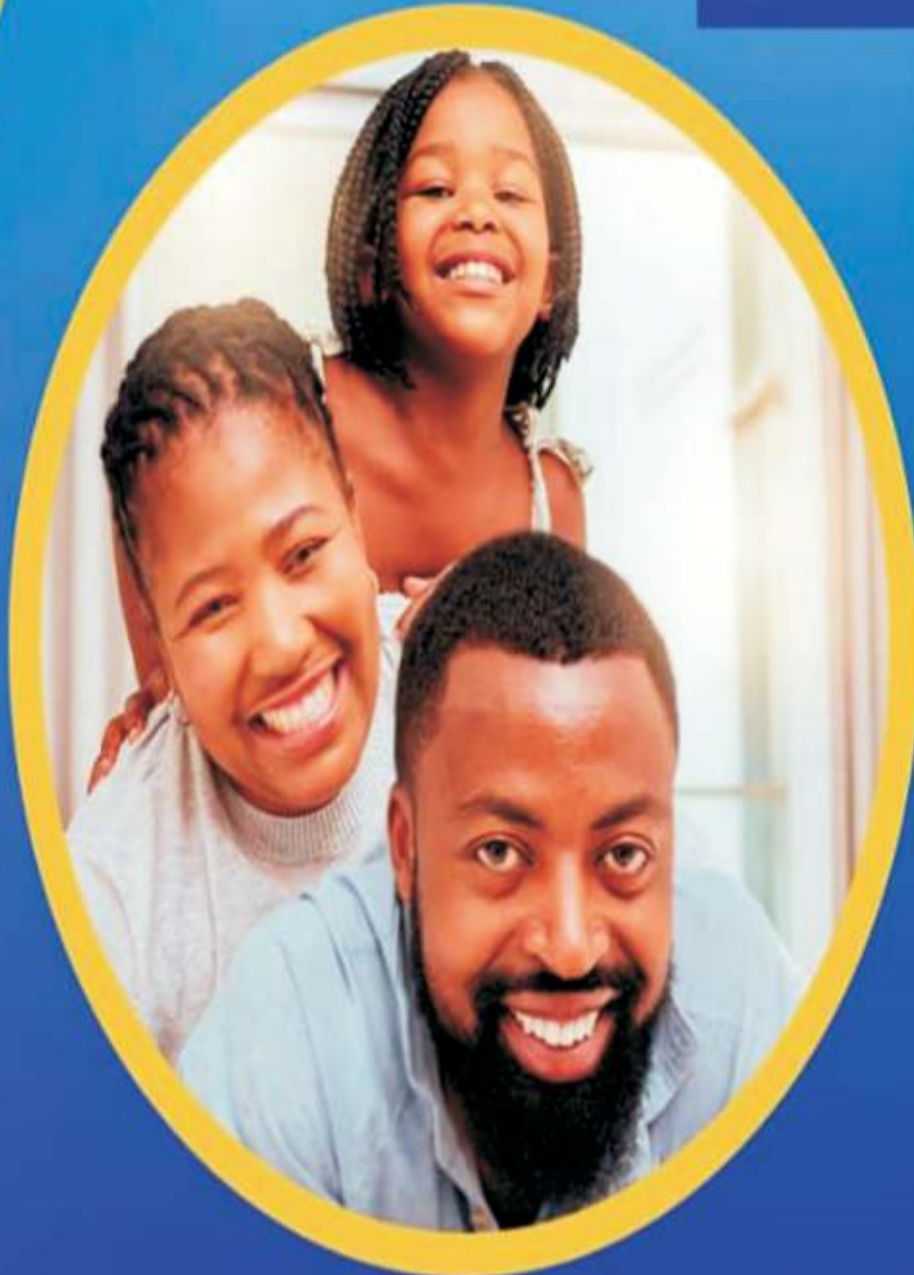
*We love you forever, Mum, we love you forever.*

*Fondly remembered and sadly missed by:*

The Children, Grand-Children, Great-Grand-Children, Nephews and Niece,  
In-Laws and Friends at Home and Abroad

*May Your Gentle Soul continue to Rest in Perfect Peace*





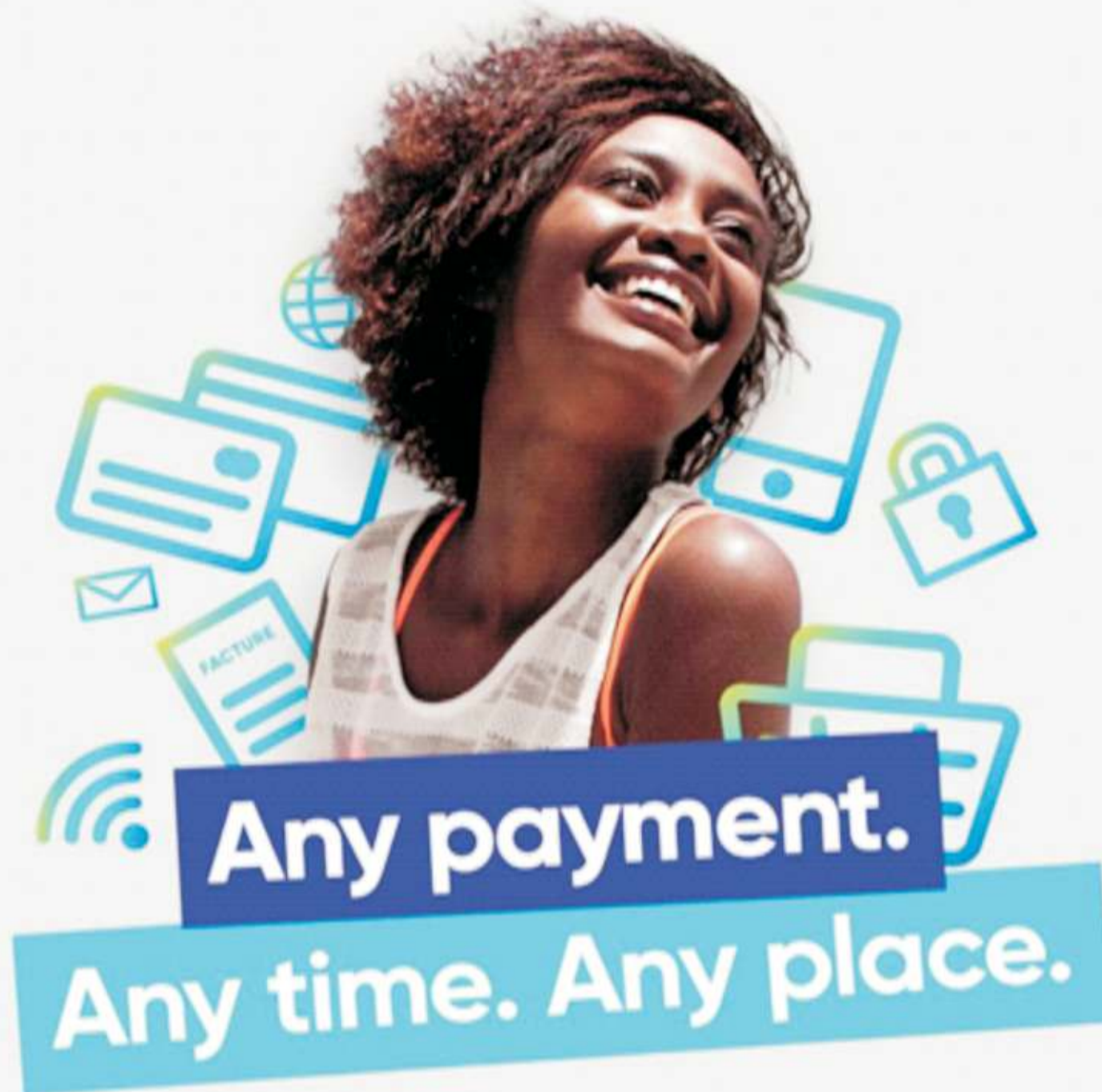
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You Padi the Kitchen



## INT'L SPORT

# Women's World Cup: Lauren Hemp says England 'wanted more' as Lionesses return home

England forward Lauren Hemp said the Lionesses "created history" but "wanted more" as the team arrived home from the Women's World Cup final in Australia.

The players landed at Heathrow airport on Tuesday morning following their 1-0 defeat by Spain on Sunday.

Fans waited in the terminal to greet the team but they left without going through the arrivals area.

BBC Sport understands this is the normal process for the men's and women's team to exit an airport.

Manchester City's Hemp, 23, wrote on X (formerly known as Twitter): "This tournament has brought some unbelievable highs but ultimately we fell just short.

"We created history but we wanted more. So much more.

"Thank you so much for the support back home and in Australia we felt you. It'll hurt for a while but we'll come back even stronger. Proud."

England reached their first Women's World Cup final by beating co-hosts

Australia in the semi-finals but suffered heartbreak in Sydney after Spain deservedly triumphed thanks to Olga Carmona's goal.

The world champions held their victory parade and trophy celebrations in Madrid on Monday.

Jess Carter said she had "nothing but absolute pride" as the Lionesses became the first England football team since 1966 to reach a senior final on the world stage.

"Couldn't have asked for a better group of staff and players to experience my first World Cup with," wrote the 25-year-old Chelsea defender on X.

"Thanks to everyone for the incredible support we have been given, we felt the love since game one."

England are next in action against Scotland in the group stages of the inaugural Women's Nations League on 22 September at 19:45 BST.

<https://www.bbc.com/sport/football>



## Theo Walcott: Former Arsenal, Everton and Southampton winger retires from professional football



## Newcastle transfer news: Lewis Hall completes move from Chelsea in deal worth up to £35m



Newcastle have completed the transfer of Lewis Hall from Chelsea on loan with an obligation to buy in deal worth up to £35m.

The club will pay £28m to Chelsea on completion of the season-long loan, with potential £7m in add-ons.

Hall, a boyhood Newcastle fan, said: "I'm very proud. Me and my family are Newcastle fans, and for me and my brother growing up, it was drilled into us that we were Newcastle. It's a big club and I can't wait to get started.

"I got a lot of experience last year in some big fixtures and I was really proud of the way I progressed as a player and a person. To now be here at Newcastle, the club that I've supported since I was a kid, I'm honoured and very proud to wear this shirt.

"It's very exciting. When you look back on last season and the way the team performed - not just the results, but the performances the team were putting in - it was amazing.

"There's so many talented players and we've got the Champions League now as well so there's many different competitions that I know the team will be

wanting to do well in, and hopefully get a trophy or two as well."

The deferred payment allows Newcastle to comply with FFP restrictions this summer. Howe said last week that they would have to be creative to sign another player.

The 18-year-old recently agreed in principle a new long-term contract with the Blues. Hall, who has featured for England U21s, made his Premier League debut for Chelsea last season and went on to make nine appearances in the top flight.

Head coach Eddie Howe said: "I'm delighted to welcome Lewis to Newcastle United. He is a player we have tracked closely, as have a number of clubs, so it's very pleasing to secure him and to add a player of his quality, versatility and high potential to our squad.

"I'd like to thank everyone involved for their tireless work to bring in the players we have.

"A lot of time, effort and resource goes into a transfer window, but we have a real togetherness at all levels here and I appreciate that teamwork and support."

<https://www.skysports.com/football/news>

Theo Walcott has announced his retirement from professional football at the age of 34.

The ex-Arsenal, Everton and Southampton winger told Gary Neville on The Overlap podcast the decision is "scary" but he "wants to try new things".

Walcott hangs up his boots following a 23-year career in which he made 397 Premier League appearances.

"I'm officially going to be hanging up my boots. It's very scary, I can't lie," said Walcott.

"It's scary because football's all I've known from the age of 16 or even younger. I want to try new things I never experienced as a kid - I missed out on a lot.

"I just feel like I want to experience life - things [usually] revolve around football for me."

In his 13-year spell with the Gunners, Walcott won three FA Cups as well as two Community Shields.

He shot to fame in 2006 as a 17-year-old when he was surprisingly selected in Sven Goran Eriksson's England World Cup squad.

Walcott appeared 47 times for England, scoring eight times in a decade-long international career.

Walcott, who was a free agent but made 20 Premier League

appearances and scored three goals for Southampton last season as the club suffered relegation, says he received offers from various clubs to keep playing but his "heart isn't committed" to it.

"I've had offers abroad and from some very good Championship teams. There's been some Saudi offers but it's not where I see myself playing, to be honest," said Walcott.

"Nothing against the money or the league but if my heart isn't into playing football it's not fair on the clubs, not fair on me."

Walcott played for Newbury and Swindon Town as a youngster before being signed by Southampton in 2000.

He made his debut for the Saints in 2005 as a 16-year-old and soon became the club's youngest ever goal scorer when he found the net against Leeds United.

Walcott made 21 appearances and scored four goals for Saints before joining Arsene Wenger's Arsenal in 2006.

He played 397 games for the Gunners, scoring 108 goals, before departing for Everton in a £20m deal in 2019.

Walcott played 85 games for the Toffees, scoring 11 times, before re-joining Southampton two years later.

<https://www.bbc.com/sport/football>

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