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TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES

The Transnational Child Raising Arrangements (TCRA) projects studied how living apart impacts the well-being of African migrants in Europe and their children and caregivers in Africa.

Migration is a reality of our global society and a topic of ongoing debate. Of the nine billion people expected to live on this planet by 2050, 3% will be migrants. If they were all to live in one country, it would be the fourth most-populated country in the world, after China, India and the United States. Many of the people on the move in search of a better future are parents. Due to stringent immigration policies, or by choice, they leave their children in their country of origin. These children are cared for by relatives, friends or sometimes paid caregivers, while the parents remain closely involved in raising their children from abroad. Little is known about what happens to families when migration causes them to live apart for long periods. It is important to understand this phenomenon, not only because of its sheer magnitude, but also because the ability of these transnational families to function successfully has significant long-term implications for both the country of origin and the destination country.

The Transnational Child Raising Arrangements (TCRA) projects studied the effects of transnational parenting on migrant parents in the Netherlands, Ireland and Portugal and their children and caregivers in Ghana, Nigeria and Angola. It is the first research of its kind to focus on the same groups of African migrants in different European countries. The TCRA projects compare the well-being of transnational parents with that of migrant parents who live with all their children, and the well-being of children left in the country of origin with that of children in the same country who live with both their parents. The projects are unique in combining large-scale quantitative methods with in-depth qualitative research.

CHILDREN WHO STAY BEHIND

Findings from the TCRA projects suggest that the popular western notion that growing up separated from one's parents will always be harmful for children's well-being is unjustified.

STAYING BEHIND: THE IMPACT ON CHILDREN'S EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

The TCRA projects conducted a large-scale survey on the emotional well-being of children in Ghana, Nigeria and Angola, using the TDS score of the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire. This is a self-reporting scale that measures 25 psychological symptoms. The three most notable outcomes of the survey are:

1. Children who have one or two parents who migrated overseas are not necessarily worse off emotionally than children who live with both parents in the country of origin. This finding contradicts qualitative case studies from Asia and Latin America, which emphasize that children in transnational families suffer from anger, anxiety, shame and feelings of abandonment.
2. However, the absence of negative impacts on these children depends on three factors: good basic living conditions; a stable care arrangement where children do not change caregivers more than once; and an active relationship with the parents who are overseas through regular communication and face-to-face contact.
3. Across the board, well-being outcomes are worse for Angolan children than for children from Ghana and Nigeria. This is in line with research on post-conflict settings, which stresses the vulnerability of children in such settings to sudden changes in their living circumstances.

STABLE CAREGIVING ARRANGEMENTS

The TCRA projects established that a stable care arrangement is important for the emotional well-being of children whose parents have migrated. Interestingly, however, the findings also show that who takes care of the children does not affect their well-being. In both Ghana and Nigeria, there is no difference in emotional well-being between children living with relatives or friends and children living with both parents. Moreover, our research findings challenge studies in other parts of the world which claim that a mother's migration has the largest impact on children due to her exclusive emotional bond with the child. The survey data show that there is a decline in children's well-being when mothers migrate and children stay behind with the father compared to children living with both parents.

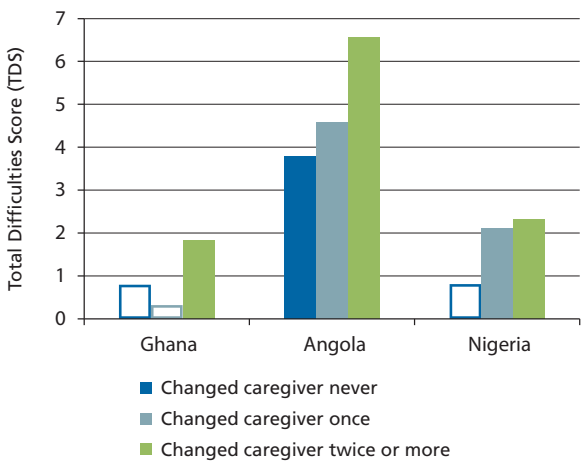


Figure 1. Effects of the stability of caregiving arrangements on the emotional well-being of schoolchildren in Nigeria, Angola and Ghana

Source: TCRAf–Eu Child Survey, Ghana, Angola, Nigeria, 2010–2011.
Note: Full bars indicate significant differences between children in transnational families and those living with both parents. Empty bars indicate non-significant results. Higher scores indicate poorer well-being. Figure 1 shows that children with migrant parents who changed their caregiver two or more times in their lives have poorer emotional well-being than children who live with both parents and never changed their caregiver.

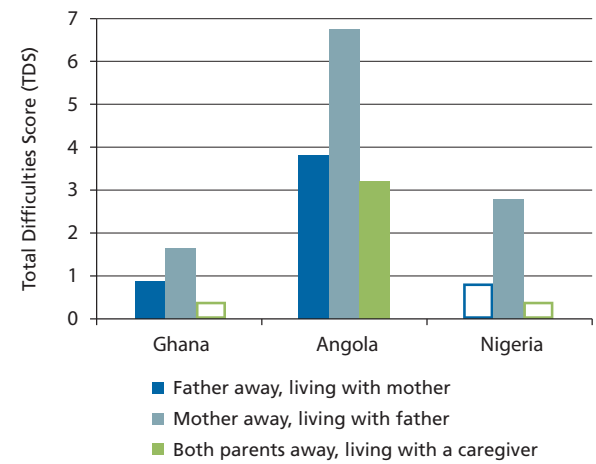


Figure 2. Effects of which parent migrates on the emotional well-being of schoolchildren in Nigeria, Angola and Ghana

Source: TCRAf–Eu Child Survey, Ghana, Angola, Nigeria, 2010–2011.
Note: Full bars indicate significant differences between children in transnational families and those living with both parents. Empty bars indicate non-significant results. Higher scores indicate poorer well-being. Figure 2 shows that children whose mothers migrate and are cared for by their fathers show significantly worse emotional well-being outcomes compared to those living with both parents.

Table 1. % of children with migrant parents and their caregivers in high out-migration areas			
	Ghana	Angola	Nigeria
Children with at least one parent abroad	15.8%	2.6%	3.5%
Mother abroad, living with father	11.5%	7.5%	8.9%
Father abroad, living with mother	51.5%	67.5%	69.7%
Both parents abroad	37.0%	25.0%	21.4%
When both parents are abroad, the caregiver is	Ghana	Angola	Nigeria
Uncle and/or aunt	30.2%	12.5%	45.4%
Grandparent(s)	32.1%	25.0%	27.3%
Others	37.7%	62.5%	27.3%
Source: TCRAf–Eu data, 2010–2011.			

However, when both parents migrate, which also involves maternal absence, there is no difference in children's well-being compared to children in non-migrant families. The effects of maternal absence are therefore mediated by factors such as caregiver stability, family unity and living arrangements.

SOCIAL PARENTING

Our qualitative research points to a likely explanation for the findings about caregivers and migrating parents. Parenthood is a flexible and inclusive notion in many African countries: caring for a child is not only the responsibility of the biological parents but also that of the extended family. Children of migrant parents from Ghana, Angola and Nigeria do not seem to feel the stigma and shame associated with not living with their biological parents that is found among children of migrants in Asia and Latin America. Nigerian children whose parents were caught up in the Irish asylum system for many years or who remained undocumented were an exception. Our research suggests that the inclusive childcare norms in Africa help children to cope with and even value their lives in a transnational family context. This finding challenges theories of child psychology and the western notion that intimacy between parents and their children and a healthy childhood development can only be created through physical proximity.

CHILDREN IN POST-CONFLICT COUNTRIES

Regardless of the characteristics that were taken into account, the well-being of Angolan children in transnational families appears to be lower than the well-being of those living with their parents. This finding suggests that other factors, such as the political context in the country of origin, could play a part in determining how well transnational care arrangements function. Civil war raged in Angola from 1975 to 2002, creating a loss of confidence and solidarity that affected family and community relations. The challenges of social and economic reconstruction make it hard for families and other caregivers to care for the children of migrants. Moreover, the children are psychologically vulnerable. These factors may explain why Angolan children respond more negatively to their parents' migration than children in the more stable socio-political contexts of Ghana and Nigeria.

SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

The TCRA projects surveyed the impact of migration on the educational outcomes of children who stay in the country of origin by recording the grades children received in English (Ghana and Nigeria), Portuguese (Angola), science and mathematics. The findings show no significant difference in school performance between children living in transnational families and those living with both their parents in the country of origin. This suggests that even when children in transnational families experience lower levels of emotional well-being, they do not, on average, perform worse in school.

SCHOOLS IN GHANA

Some observations from teachers in Ghana's junior and senior high schools about children whose parent(s) live abroad:

- Some migrant parents send their children – who adopt inappropriate behaviour while in Europe – back to Ghana to get 're-educated'.
- These children experience difficulties adapting to the disciplinary standards in Ghanaian schools.
- Teachers did not note any clear trend of worse behaviour or educational performance among children who never lived abroad with their parents.
- When transnational children underperform, it is due to emotional issues or the lack of supervision over schoolwork by their caregivers.
- Some children are in need of special counselling services, which are currently only available to a limited extent.
- Some parents, despite the geographical distance, keep in close contact with teachers about their children's performance and progress.

CAREGIVERS

A well-functioning care arrangement is vitally important for the well-being of both migrant parents and their children who stay in the country of origin. Caregivers play a pivotal role in providing a stable environment for the children.

Most research about transnational families has paid scant attention to the role of caregivers in the lives of migrant parents' children. We found that norms of social parenthood in Ghana, Nigeria and Angola facilitate migrants' decisions to leave their children with a caregiver, and that caregivers take on the responsibility without question. Our research found that most caregivers invest precious time and resources and do their utmost to protect the relationship with the parents even if their caretaking role puts them under serious pressure. Many caregivers are caught between the time-honoured ideals of social parenthood and the reality created by international migration.

Secondary school students in Ghana fill in a survey for the TCRA project.

A TRICKY THREESOME

The Simultaneous Matched Sample methodology was particularly useful in illuminating the dynamics of trust and mistrust in the relationship between parents, children and caregivers.

- Undocumented parents and those with a low income regularly fail to send money home, even when it is sorely needed (e.g. for school fees).
- As a result, the caregiver needs to borrow money from friends or family to provide for the child, which creates stress. To maintain a good relationship, however, s/he does not inform the migrant parent about the financial difficulties.
- Meanwhile the migrant parent has high expectations for the child and wants the child to focus on schoolwork rather than spending time helping the caregiver with household chores.
- The caregiver's situation is complicated by adolescent children's access to mobile phones, as this allows them to complain about the caregiver to their parents.
- The caregiver often feels restricted in the performance of his/her duties because the use of mobile phones and internet allows parents to stay closely involved in the day-to-day decisions concerning the child's upbringing.
- The caregiver's situation is further complicated by neighbours and family members who wrongfully assume that s/he is benefitting from the remittances sent by the parent.

'Whenever I complain to my sister that the money she sends is not enough, she tells me that it is all she has and so I should manage with it. After all, the children are mine too.'

- Thess, caregiver in Ghana -

- Migrant parents who are unaware of the caregiver's financial difficulties may start to mistrust the caregiver with the use of the remittances.
- Undocumented migrant parents who worry about the well-being of their child often rely on friends to check on the situation. The caregiver who discovers s/he is being checked on perceives this as a major lack of trust.
- The availability of material resources and effective communication play an important role in building and maintaining trust between parents and caregivers.

PARENTS WHO MIGRATE

Millions of parents from Africa migrate to Europe to provide a better future for their families. The TCRA projects found that migrant parents' immigration status and income level largely determine how separation from their children affects their well-being.

SEPARATION: THE IMPACT ON MIGRANT PARENTS' EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

The TCRA projects investigated how the separation of migrant parents from their children impacts the health and well-being of these parents. A large-scale survey was conducted among Ghanaian parents living in the Netherlands, Angolan parents living in Portugal and the Netherlands, and Nigerian parents living in Ireland and the Netherlands. Their emotional well-being was assessed through 12 questions on anxiety and psychological distress based on the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12). Two notable outcomes of the survey are:

1. Parents involved in transnational care arrangements have lower well-being than migrant parents who live with all their children. This was found irrespective of the migrants' country of origin and destination, and also when controlling for age, sex, education and length of stay.
2. The difference in well-being between parents living with and without their children, however, is not the result of the separation itself but more the result of the lower income and undocumented status of the majority of transnational parents. When controlling for income and documented status, the statistical analysis shows no difference in well-being for Ghanaian and Nigerian parents living with or without their children.
3. Angolan transnational parents show lower well-being outcomes across the board. The explanation is found in their migration history: Angolans left their country because of war, while Nigerians and Ghanaians migrated mainly for economic reasons. The trauma of war, which forced many to migrate, appears to increase the negative effect that separation has on the well-being of Angolan migrant parents.

MONEY AND MOBILITY

Findings from our qualitative research help to explain the strong relationship between immigration status, income and well-being. First, undocumented migrants have a hard time finding a stable job with a decent salary. Their low and irregular income make it difficult for them to provide for their children's upkeep and school fees. This not only causes parents to worry about their children's well-being, but it can also have a negative impact on their relationship with the caregiver. Second, the poverty and undocumented status of these parents means they cannot travel home to visit their children or deal with crises in the care arrangement, such as the death of a caregiver or children underperforming at school. These circumstances also make it impossible for parents to invite their children for a short-term visit to Europe. Third, in most countries poor and undocumented migrants are not eligible for family reunification should they wish to bring their children over. Even when they are eligible, they have great difficulty obtaining the necessary funds and paperwork. In brief, the stress of being unable to meet the emotional, material and educational needs of their children back home is what leads to lower well-being

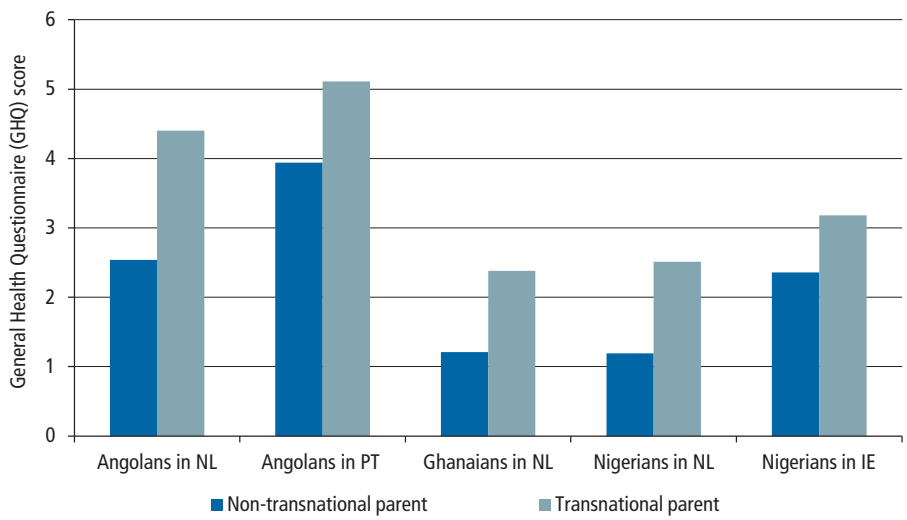
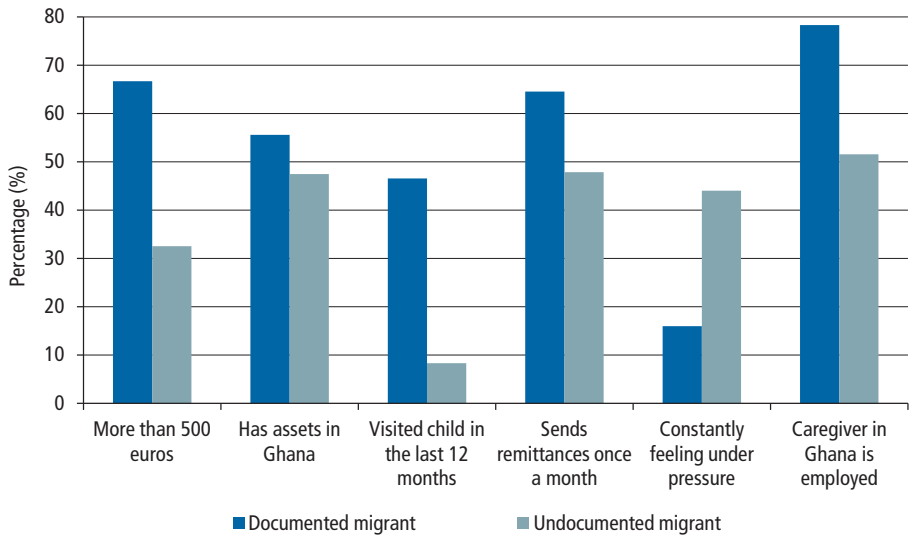


Figure 3. Emotional well-being by documented status

Source: TCRAf-Eu Parent Survey, the Netherlands, Portugal and Ireland, 2010–2011.
Note: Full bars indicate significant results and empty bars indicate non-significant results. Higher scores indicate poorer emotional well-being. Figure 3 shows that across all countries, on average undocumented parents have lower well-being than documented ones.

Figure 4. Income, home visits, etc. by documented status of Ghanaian migrants living in the Netherlands

Source: TCRAf-Eu Ghana Parent Survey, the Netherlands 2010–2011.
Note: Full bars indicate significant results and empty bars indicate non-significant results.
On average documented parents face better conditions for parenting from afar (higher income and assets, etc.).



among undocumented migrants who are forced to accept low-paid and insecure jobs.

THE GOOD FATHER IDEAL

Our statistical data show no difference in the impact that transnational parenting has on the well-being of fathers and mothers. This contradicts qualitative findings from Latin America and Asia suggesting that especially mothers suffer from being physically absent while their children are growing up. For fathers, migration can be an avenue to fulfil the 'good father' ideal: providing for their children's material needs. We found that fathers who struggled to live up to this ideal due to poverty or undocumented status suffered from emotional stress; some fathers who failed to provide for their children (temporarily) withdrew from contact with their family back home. In contrast, documented fathers with sufficient income reported that they had an intimate relationship with their children based not only on their breadwinner's role, but also on frequent communication through phone, Skype and Facebook and regular visits home. These fathers, just like the few Ghanaian mothers who had the resources to maintain intimate, long-distance relationships with their children, reported hardly any emotional stress as a result of separation.

> 'I thought about bringing my son, and I still think about it, but I do not feel comfortable with the Dutch educational system. And also, I don't want to be dependent on a man, to have him support my children and myself. The best option for my son at this moment is to stay with my mother. I want the best for him.
>
> - Wendy, Ghanaian migrant in the Netherlands -

MOTHERS AND THE LAW

Even though our quantitative data show no difference in emotional well-being between transnational fathers and mothers, we found that certain mechanisms in particular affect mothers' experiences. During interviews with Ghanaians in the Netherlands, mothers expressed the wish to reunite with their children more often than fathers. The obstacles they face are severe. First, most Ghanaian women work in informal, low-paid jobs without (long-term) contracts and do not fulfil the income criteria for family reunification. Second, mothers feel that prejudice on the part of immigration officials, who cannot reconcile long-term separations with 'real' motherhood, and intricate paperwork make it difficult to prove there

is a family bond. Third, often the only option for an undocumented mother who wishes to reunite with her children is to marry a Dutch national or someone with a residence permit. Based on her status as 'family migrant', but only with her husband's permission, she can then apply for reunion with her children. We found that this dependent position could make Ghanaian mothers vulnerable to psychological or physical abuse or financial exploitation. Immigration laws substantially shape the gendered experiences of migrant mothers' daily lives.

PREFERENCE FOR A HOME COUNTRY UPBRINGING

Not all migrant parents wish to reunite with their children. Migrant parents in the Netherlands who have good jobs, are documented, and have a good support network back home sometimes prefer their children to be raised and educated in the home culture. Attending a good secondary school with strict disciplinary standards in the country of origin is thought to open more doors for these children in the future than bringing them to the Netherlands. Parents are also worried that their children will adopt the 'bad' behaviour displayed by schoolchildren in their Dutch neighbourhoods. Finally, parents realize it is difficult to combine work and child care given the long work hours and high costs of day care. Leaving their children in the country of origin allows them to focus on their work and earnings, which was the reason they migrated in the first place. Ghanaian parents who feel that, given the circumstances, the best choice is to leave their children at home and feel satisfied with this arrangement, show better levels of emotional well-being than those who choose to live with their children in the Netherlands. Migrant parents who feel forced to leave their children behind suffer emotionally.

A Nigerian mother working as a nanny in Europe.

SAMPLES

A survey assessing well-being was conducted among:

- 2,760 pupils from 22 schools in Ghana
- 2,243 pupils from 27 schools in Angola
- 2,168 pupils from 25 schools in Nigeria
- 300 Ghanaian parents in the Netherlands
- 300 Angolan parents in Portugal and 306 Angolan parents in the Netherlands
- 306 Nigerian parents in Ireland and 297 Nigerian parents in the Netherlands

Triads of parents in the destination country and their children and caregivers in the country of origin were studied using the Simultaneous Matched Sample (SMS) methodology:

- 15 triads Ghana – Netherlands
- 7 triads Angola – Portugal
- 18 triads Nigeria – Ireland

Additional in-depth interviews were conducted with:

- 54 children in Ghana with migrant parents
- 37 children in Angola with migrant parents
- 39 Ghanaian migrant parents living in the Netherlands
- 15 Angolan migrant parents in Portugal
- 19 Ghanaian caregivers in Ghana
- 40 schoolteachers in Angola
- 22 schoolteachers in Ghana
- 22 schoolteachers in Nigeria
- 24 NGO staff and other informants

RECOMMENDATIONS

Why are our findings important for policymakers in Europe and Africa?

- From an economic perspective: Migrant parents who are doing well emotionally perform better at their jobs and thus contribute more to the economies of the European countries where they live. It is also important for the African countries of origin that the children of migrants grow up well, as in the future they too will be tasked with the development of their countries.
- From a social perspective: Migrants provide much-needed labour in the countries where they work. European countries should therefore do their utmost to improve the conditions that allow migrants to fulfil their role as parents and raise healthy families. Also, the well-being of children and youth in any country is a global issue that concerns us all.

How can governments, policymakers and institutions in Europe and Africa contribute to well-functioning transnational families?

- European governments should be aware that their policies aimed at managing migration have an impact on the functioning of families across international borders. The most affected group are undocumented migrants and those earning a low income.
- European visa policies should be adjusted to allow families to function across borders, e.g. by issuing temporary work visas that enable parents to travel home and visit their children, and by issuing specific visas for minors that allow children in the country of origin to visit their parents during school holidays.
- Family reunification requirements should not disadvantage women by creating conditions of dependency on a partner. In order to reduce suspicion and unnecessary delays in the family reunification procedure, immigration officials should acknowledge the social parenthood practices prevalent in many migrant origin countries that involve people other than nuclear family members in raising children.
- European governments can improve migrants' integration into their labour markets, e.g. by devising flexible schemes for recognizing the qualifications of educated migrants and devising on-the-job training programmes specifically targeted at migrant workers. This would allow them to earn higher incomes, a necessary condition for well-functioning transnational families.
- Authorities in both African and European countries that deal with transnational families from (post-) conflict countries should be aware of the large impact that separation has on parents and children from these countries and support them in reducing these impacts.
- Governments in African countries should make an effort to improve children's living conditions and school environment because this will help to reduce the possible negative effects of parental migration on children's emotional well-being.
- Schools in high out-migration areas in African countries should pay particular attention to children from transnational families, for instance by instructing teachers and training counsellors on the needs of children whose parents have migrated.

RESEARCH AND PUBLICATIONS

The TCRA projects include the TCRA-Ghana project funded by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO/WOTRO) and the TCRAf-Eu project funded by NORFACE. Researchers include: *Maastricht University, the Netherlands:* Prof. Valentina Mazzucato (PI), Dr. Bilisuma Bushie Dito, Dr. Victor Cebotari, Dr. Djamila Schans, Karlijn Haagsman and Miranda Poeze. *University of Ghana, Ghana:* Prof. Takyiwaa Manuh, Prof. Mariama Awumbila, Dr. Ernest Nimfah Appiah, Ernestina Korleki Dankyi. *University College Cork, Ireland:* Dr. Angela Veale, Dr. Allen White, Dr. Caitriona Ni Laoire and Camilla Andres. *University of Lisbon, Portugal:* Dr. Marzia Grassi, Dr. Jeanne Vivet and Luena Marinho. *Fafo, Norway:* Dr. Cecilie Øien

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COLOPHON

Text: WiW – Global Research & Reporting, Haarlem
Production: Speer Publications, The Hague
Printing: Drukkerij Holland, Alphen a/d Rijn