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Gabon at 60

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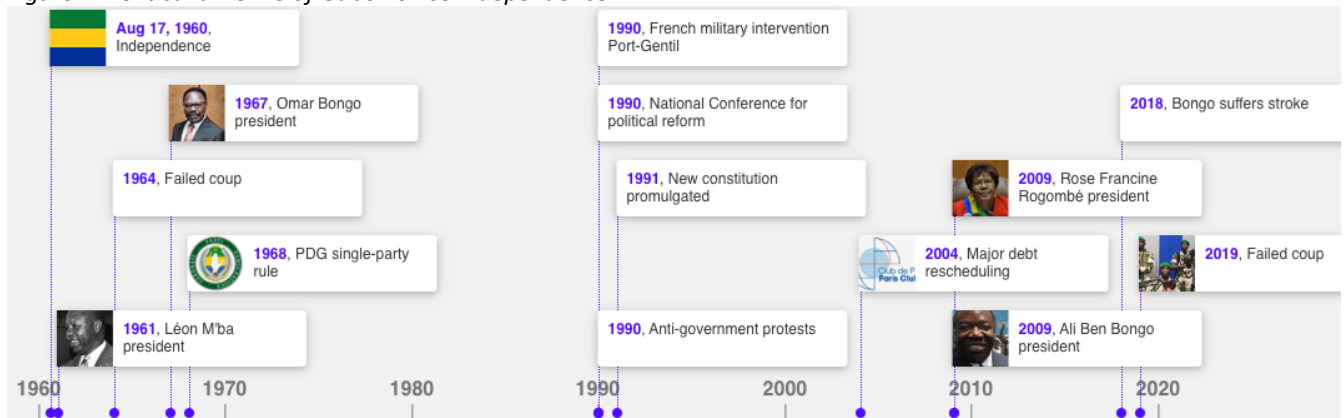
Gabon at 60

Political history

1960 was the ‘Year of Africa’: many former colonies in Africa became politically independent. Of the seventeen colonies gaining independence in that year, Gabon was the fourteenth one: on August 17. Gabon had been a French protectorate from 1862 onwards, and became part

of French Congo as a colony in 1888. In 1904 it became a separate French colony. In 1910 it became part of French Equatorial Africa. During the Second World War it was part of the area of the Free French under General De Gaulle (see Figure 1 for a post-independence political timeline).

Figure 1: Political timeline of Gabon since independence



Source: Encyclopaedia Britannica

Politically, one of the most salient facts of Gabon’s postcolonial history is the Bongo family dynasty that has ruled it. After the death of the country’s first post-independence president Léon M’ba in 1967, then Vice President Omar Bongo took power – only to relinquish it at his death 42 years later, in 2009. His political party, the *Parti Democratique Gabonais*, ruled the resource-rich country as a single-party regime from 1968 until 1990, after which constitutional reforms introduced multi-party elections. These reforms were developed in the 1990 National Conference, partly a result of preceding anti-government protests that required French military intervention. They did not, however, destabilise Omar Bongo’s rule, who held onto power by repeatedly winning (sometimes controversial) elections.

The late 1990s and early 2000s witnessed an increasing debt burden on Gabon’s national finances, which was relieved considerably by a 717-million-dollar debt rescheduling in 2004. Five years later, Bongo passed away, succeeded by the Senate President Rogombé. Elections later in 2009 produced a new president, however: Omar Bongo’s son, Ali Ben Bongo, who has been

in power continuously since then. Under Ali Ben Bongo, Gabon has received international recognition for infrastructural investments as well as environmental conservation and wildlife protection. Domestically, however, President Bongo has faced pressures and protests, including a failed coup in January 2019. Moreover, since 2018 he has been plagued by the aftereffects of a stroke and rumours about his fitness for office.

Conflict, state fragility, and travel risks

For African standards Gabon is not very high on the ‘security risk’ indices. However, before the corona crisis, in December 2019, the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs had put most of the country in the ‘orange’ zone (= high risks, ‘only travel if really necessary’ [Currently, August 2020, all ‘danger zoning’ has been disturbed by the global COVID-19 crisis].

The State Fragility Index of the Fund for Peace puts Gabon in the ‘elevated warning range’, with 70.5 points (most negative score would be 120.0 points; for Africa, ‘elevated warning’ is a relatively mild category, the

seventh out of eleven) (<https://fundforpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/9511904-fragilestatesindex.pdf>). The index consists of twelve variables, and Gabon has relatively good scores for

‘group grievances’ and for ‘refugees and internally displaced people’. Gabon has relatively problematic scores for ‘factionalised elites’, and for ‘state legitimacy’.



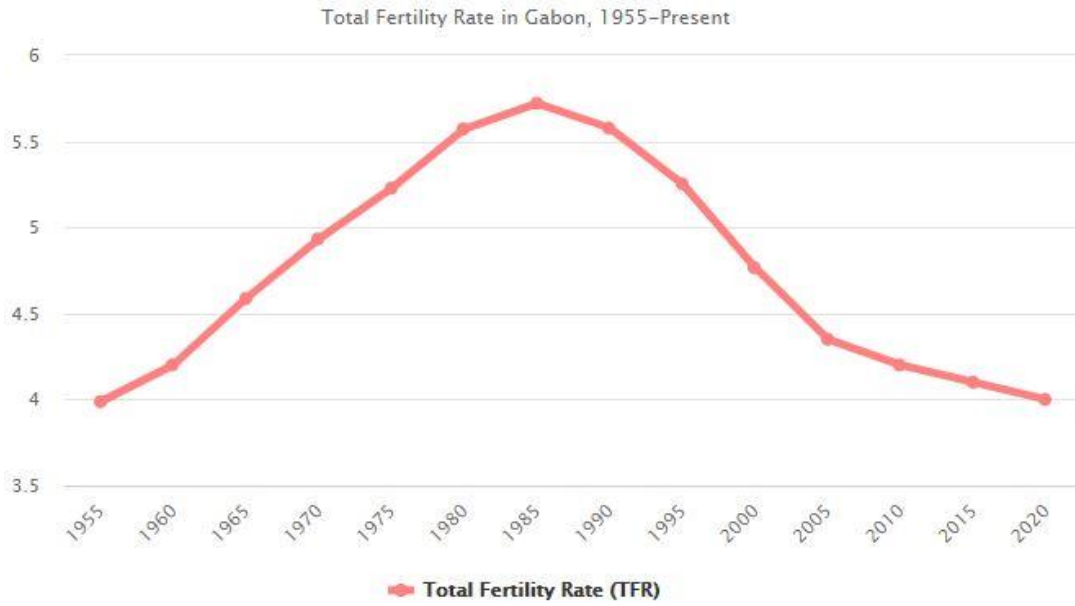
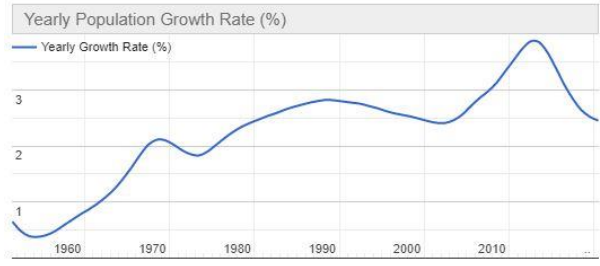
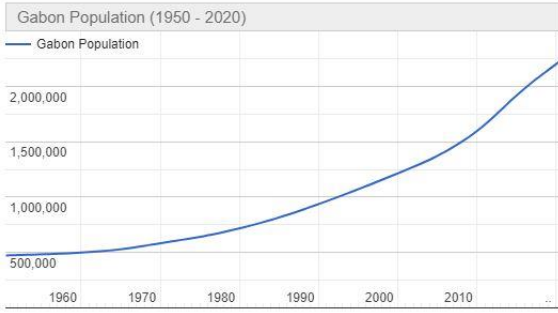
Source of the map: <https://geology.com/world/gabon-map.gif>

Demography

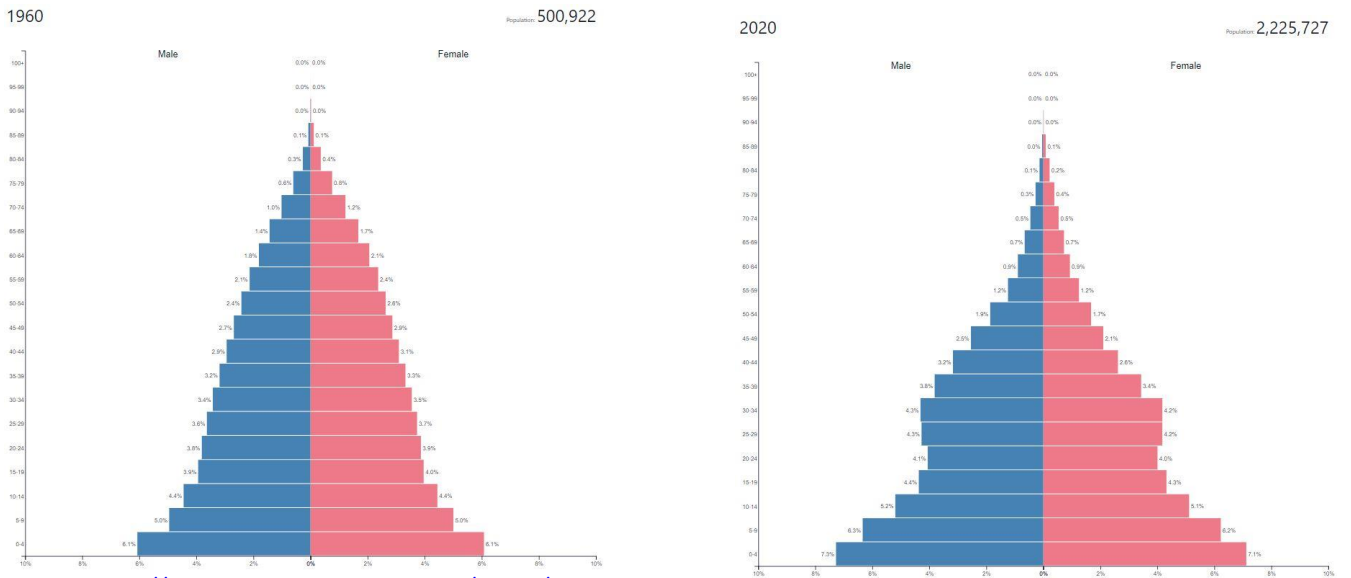
Gabon’s population increased more than fourfold between 1960 and 2020, from 0.5 million in 1960 to 2.2 million in mid 2020, mostly through high fertility rates and longer life expectancy for both males and females (also because of rapidly improving child and infant mortality figures). Population growth figures were more than 2% per year between 1967 and 1970 and from 1975 onwards, and more than 3% per year between 2008 and 2016. Currently the average growth rate is around 2.5% per year. Total fertility was around 4.2 live-born children per woman in 1960; it first increased to 5.7 around 1985, and then started to diminish, with currently 4.0 births per average

woman in Gabon during her lifetime. As a result of these demographic developments, Gabon has a skewed population pyramid, with relatively many young people. For African standards, the median age has always been higher than in most other countries: it changed from 27.3 years old in 1960, to 19.0 years old in 1995, and currently 22.5 years old. The urbanisation rate is very high: with 87% one of the highest in Africa. The urbanisation rate was only 17% in 1960! It started to increase rapidly, and around 1978 the 50% threshold was passed. Gabon is one of the very few African countries where the rural population was lower in 2020, compared to 1960.

ASCL Infosheet 46/2020



Source: Worldometers



Source: <https://www.populationpyramid.net/gabon/>

Demographic statistics, Gabon as a whole, 1960 and 2020

	1960	2020
Population	0.5 million	2.2 million
Fertility rate	4.2	4.0
Life expectancy (males)	39	65
Idem (females)	42	69
Median age	27.3	22.5
Infant mortality (< 1 yr)	149/1000	31/1000
Under-5 mortality	266/1000	42/1000
Urbanisation rate	17%	87%
Urban population	0.1 million	1.9 million
Rural population	0.4 million	0.3 million

Source: Worldometers

Human Development Index, Gabon as a whole, 1990 and 2018

Human Development Index data exist since 1990, with annual UNDP updates. In 1990, Gabon's Human Development Index started at a level of 0.619, very high for African standards. The HDI consists of a health index, an income index and an education index, while UNDP also provides data about life expectancy, and some other indicators. For Gabon the various components of the HDI mostly show gradual further improvement, except the income index, and the GDP/capita, which had a peak in 1998, then a gradual deterioration until 2008, and then

improvements again, but never coming back to the very high 1998 figures. Between 1990 and 2018 Gabon's population increased from 1.0 million people to 2.1 million people. The increase in the HDI between 1990 and 2018 (to 0,702) can be attributed to improvements in health, and particularly education, and can also be seen in the data for life expectancy. Average income levels per capita (in US\$ of 2011, PPP) went from 19,370 \$ in 1990, to 20,880 \$ in 1998, and stood at 15,790 \$ in 2018. For Africa these are very high figures.

Gabon: Human Development Index, its composition, and other indicators; data for 1990 and 2018

	1990	2018	2018/1990
Health Index	0.630	0.711	1.13
Income Index *	0.795	0.765	0.96
GNI/capita **	19,370	15,790	0.82
Education Index	0.473	0.636	1.34
Mean years of schooling	4.3	8.3	1.93
Expected years of schooling	11.8	12.9	1.09
Life Expectancy	61	66	1.09
Total HDI index	0.619	0.702	1.13

Source: <https://globaldatalab.org> 4.0; * = for 2018 called 'standard of living component'.

** GNI/capita in US \$ of 2011, PPP).

Trade statistics, Gabon: exports and imports, 2018

In 2018 Gabon exported products for a total value of 5.75 billion \$, and imported for a total value of 2.06 billion \$ (mostly from France, China, Belgium, the Netherlands and the UAE, in that order), resulting in a major positive trade

balance. Leading import products were poultry meat, packaged medicaments, delivery trucks, cars, and refined petrol, in that order. These are figures from the Observatory for Economic Complexity, a spin-off from MIT.

According to this source, the most important export products and most important export destinations in 2018 were:

Main export products (value in \$ million)		Main export destinations (value in \$ million)	
Crude petrol	3570	China	2620
Manganese ore	1220	India	511
Sawn Wood	411	South Korea	486
Refined petrol	147	Australia	318
Veneer (wood) sheets	139	USA	256

Source: <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/gab/>

If we compare Gross Domestic Product, exports and imports, and we use Macrotrends data for the average of the four-year period of 2016-2019 (for exports and

imports these differ from OEC data), we get the following picture:

3.6 b\$	7.9 b\$	7.7 b\$
Imports	Home use	Exports
Gross Domestic Product (15.6 b\$)		

GDP: <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/GAB/gabon/gdp-gross-domestic-product>;

Imports: <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/GAB/gabon/imports>;

Exports: <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/GAB/gabon/exports>

Protected areas and Forests

Gabon currently has thirteen national parks, one regional park, one presidential reserve, three faunal reserves, one wildlife management area, four hunting areas/reserves, and also nine marine parks, eleven aquatic reserves and nine marine park buffer zones. Internationally nine Ramsar sites, and one UNESCO-MAB biosphere reserve have been recognised, besides one world heritage site. According to Protectedplanet, currently 6.0 million hectares are protected areas (22% of Gabon's total area), as well as 5.6 million hectares of marine protected areas

(29% of Gabon's total marine area)¹. Gabon has 22 million hectares of forests, 85% of its total land area). Between 1990 and 2010 no major deforestation was reported². Other areas are mainly 'other wooded land', and areas for agriculture, livestock, hunting and gathering.

Agricultural Gabon

Crop Area (in 1000 hectares), and total production (in 1000 tonnes), 1961 and 2018, in the order of the crop areas in 2018:

	1961		2018		2018/1961	
	Area	Prod.	Area	Prod.	Area	Prod.
Cassava	27	135	61	320	2.3	2.4
Plantains	18	85	56	273	3.1	3.2
Yams	9	50	43	228	4.8	4.6
Maize	6	9	29	46	4.8	5.1
Vegetables	6	26	19	61	3.2	2.3
Groundnuts	3	3	18	19	6.0	6.3
Rubber	-	-	16	25	+++	+++
Taro (cocoyam)	2	10	15	93	7.5	9.3
Fruits	6	16	11	43	1.8	2.7
Oil palm	2	11	5	25	2.5	2.3
Sugarcane	0	9	5	294	12.0	32.7
Other crops (cocoa, coffee, and rice)	14	5	4	2	0.3	0.4
Total crops (area)	93		281		3.0	

2018/1961: red = 2018 is below 1961; green: 2018 is more than 4.2 times the 1961 figures (that is: more than population increase in Gabon from 0.5 million to 2.1 million between 1961 and 2018); black: in-between. Source: Faostat data.

¹ <https://www.protectedplanet.net/country/GAB>; slightly different data in <http://www.parks.it/world/GA/index.html>

² <https://rainforests.mongabay.com/deforestation/2000/Gabon.htm>

Gabon's land area is 26 million hectares, and its crop area increased from only 0.4% to 1.1% of its land area between 1961 and 2018. Gabon has never been an agricultural country. However, almost all food crop areas expanded, and expansion was relatively high for rubber, sugarcane, taro, and groundnuts. Also production volumes increased more than population numbers for these crops, and also for staple crops yams and maize, but less for the most important staple crops cassava and plantains. Unlike most other African countries the expansion of vegetables and fruits has been modest.

The numbers of all live animals together, measured in stock units, expanded more rapidly than Gabon's population: 520% compared with 420%. Per capita the numbers of live animals in the country increased from a very low 0.04 livestock units per capita in 1961 to 0.05 livestock units per capita. The best growth performance can be seen for cattle and chicken; the growth of the number of goats, and pigs lagged behind.

Livestock numbers (x1000)

	1961	2018	2018/1961
Cattle	3	38	12.7
Chicken	270	3185	11.8
Goats	50	112	2.2
Pigs	80	223	2.8
Sheep	43	219	5.1
Livestock units	22	114	5.2

Source: Faostat data; 1 livestock unit = based on 0.7 cattle; 0.1 goats/sheep/pigs; 0.01 chicken.

International migration

In 2015, 63,000 people who were born in Gabon lived outside the country (3.1% of Gabon's total population of 2.0 million people inside and outside the country during that year), of which 39,000 elsewhere in Africa (mainly in Mali), and 24,000 outside Africa (less than 1.2% of Gabon's total population: most of them in France; UN migration report 2015). In 2017 Gabon had around 268,000 immigrants, mainly from Equatorial Guinea, Mali, Benin, and Cameroon). There were also 10,000 immigrants from France. Migration more than doubled between 1990 and 2017, as a steady increase; UN Migration Report 2017).

Urban Gabon

Gabon is one of the most urbanised countries of Africa, and of the world. Gabon's urban population increased from only 0.1 million people in 1960 (only 17% of its national population at Independence) to 1.9 million in 2020 (87%). Growth has been rapid for all cities. The capital city Libreville increased its population at least 20 times between 1960 and 2020, but according to other sources almost thirty times. Almost 40% of Gabon's population currently lives in and around the capital city.



https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/06/Carte_gabon.png

Major urban areas in Gabon

Cities (and region)	Population in thousands of inhabitants			
	Macrotrends: 1960	Macrotrends: 2020	Worldometers, city, as given in 2020	Wikipedia, census 2013
Libreville	29	834	578	704
Mandji (Port Gentil)	(21)	...	109	136
Masuku (Franceville)	43	111

Source for 2020: <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/gabon-population/>;

Also: <https://www.macrotrends.net/cities/21006/libreville/population> and for Port gentil in 1960:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Port-Gentil>; For Franceville no figure could be found for 1960, but the census in

1993 counted 31,000 inhabitants: <https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Franceville>

Regional Inequality

Map	Region / Région	Population x 1000		'18/'90
		1990	2018	
	1 = Estuaire	50	230	4.6
	2 = Haut-Ogooué	100	200	2.0
	3 = Libreville/Port Gentil	480	1140	2.4
	4 = Moyen- Ogooué	40	70	1.8
	5 = Ngounié	60	130	2.2
	6 = Nyanga	40	60	1.5
	7 = Ogooué-Ivindo	50	80	1.6
	8 = Ogooué-Lolo	40	80	2.0
	9 = Ogooué- Maritime	20	30	1.5
	10 = Woleu-Ntem	80	120	1.5
Total Gabon		950	2120	2.2

Source: <https://globaldatalab.org> 4.0

Map: <https://www.netmaps.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/gabon-political-map.jpg>

Gabon has 10 Regions. Between 1990 and 2018 all regions experienced population growth, with Estuaire, the area around capital city Libreville growing most. High population growth was not so much experienced in the southwest (Nyanga), the west (Ogooué Maritime) and the north and northeast (Woleu-Ntem and Ogooué-Ivindo). If we look at the regional data for human development, which for Gabon exist since 1990, we see that across the board improvements have taken place between 1990 and 2018. Both in 1990 and in 2018 the best conditions existed in the region of Libreville/Port Gentil, the two major cities of Gabon, in two different coastal locations. But for life expectancy the best conditions existed in the southeast in 1990 (Haut-Ogooué) and those best conditions had shifted

to Moyen-Ogooué in 2018. The worst conditions shifted as well. In 1990 the subregional HDI as a whole and life expectancy were the lowest in Woleu-Ntem in the north, and in 2018 they had shifted to Ogooué-Ivindo in the northeast. Woleu-Ntem was and is the area with the lowest income per capita situation of Gabon (which for African standards still was quite high). The education situation was most problematic in Ogooué-Lolo, but, again, was relatively good for African standards. Regional inequality was relatively modest in both years for all variables, with the big exception of the situation for income per capita, although in 1990 more than in 2018.

Region	Subregional HDI			Life expectancy			Education index			K\$/capita		
	1990	2018	18/90	1990	2018	18/90	1990	2018	18/90	1990	2018	18/90
1	579	689	1.19	59	64	1.09	437	641	1.47	13	14	1.05
2	627	683	1.09	66	66	1.00	442	608	1.38	18	13	0.72
3	656	738	1.13	61	67	1.11	520	681	1.31	31	22	0.69
4	600	656	1.09	62	70	1.12	445	541	1.22	14	9	0.66
5	558	622	1.11	62	64	1.04	396	529	1.34	9	8	0.93
6	557	639	1.15	60	67	1.11	409	545	1.33	9	8	0.90
7	564	600	1.06	62	61	0.99	417	537	1.29	9	7	0.79
8	576	633	1.10	65	67	1.03	386	519	1.34	11	9	0.77
9	594	651	1.10	64	67	1.05	422	527	1.25	13	12	0.89
10	554	645	1.16	55	65	1.17	448	572	1.28	10	9	0.88
Gabon	619	702	1.13	61	66	1.09	473	636	1.34	19	16	0.82
Ineq	1.18	1.23		1.20	1.15		1.35	1.31		3.66	3.16	

HDI and education figures / 1000; life expectancy: years; k\$/capita: 1000 US \$ (2011), PPP (comparisons between the years for life expectancy and income per capita on the basis of more detailed figures).

If we compare 2018 with 1990, the education situation has improved most, and the income per capita situation has deteriorated almost everywhere, particularly in Moyen-Ogooué (but this region still has one of the highest figures in Africa). For income, the only exception has been Estuaire. The education situation, and SHDI as a whole has improved most in Estuaire as well, and for life expectancy the worst region in 1990, Woleu-Ntem, showed the best improvements. Relatively modest improvements happened in Ogooué-Ivindo, and for life expectancy this

region even experienced a slight deterioration of conditions.

Regional inequality does not say anything about income inequality between the rich and the poor (let alone wealth inequality). For Gabon, the Gini coefficient as a measure for income inequality was relatively high in 2005 (42%) and 2011 (43%) but became less extreme in 2017 (38%) <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI?locations=LR-AO-CV-TD-KM-CG-ET-GA-NA-ZM>.



Reflecting on
60 years
of independence



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Further Reading

Country Portal: <http://countryportal.ascleiden.nl/gabon>

Selected publications:

<https://www.ascleiden.nl/content/africa-2020-further-reading#Gabon>

<https://www.ascleiden.nl/africa2020>

Country Information: Ton Dietz, David Ehrhardt and Fenneken Veldkamp

Country Portal: Harro Westra

Selected publications: Germa Seuren

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