

The Sustainable Development Goals and Reparatory Justice

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(Mark against Delivery)

Greetings everyone. Thank you Your Excellency Martin Kimani for giving me the floor. Greetings to my fellow panellists and my congratulations to them for being appointed or elected to the Permanent Forum on People of African Descent. Dr McEachrane, for one, knows the history of the struggle for the PFPAD as part of the struggle for the IDPAD. Ambassador Soomer knows the genealogy of the fight for reparatory justice in the Caribbean; so we have been in the trenches together.

The theme for this Panel is timely, because the murder of George Floyd on Africa Day, May 25, 2020, which led to the globalization of the BLM Campaign, shook us all to the core and made us realize how much work still needs to be done at the national, regional and international level to implement the SDGs, eliminate systemic racism and move beyond the rhetoric of “*leaving no one behind*”. We admit, of course, that George Floyd’s murder is just one in a long line of violations of Black bodies, rooted in the trans-Atlantic trafficking in enslaved Africans, African enslavement and chattelization and uncompensated emancipations, but which lived on through Jim Crow, racial apartheid and other forms of anti-black discrimination, which appear to have no end in sight.

Indeed, when I think of what happened to George Floyd and the many before and after him, my mind goes back to Marlon James’ *The book of Night Women* to reflect on how Lilith *don’t want to accept things as them be, like a good negro...*’ because “*Lilith have a quilt on her back [from her beatings], in the context of “... a bigger quilt, a patchwork of negro bones that reached from Africa to the West Indies.”* I visualised Homer’s washboard back; how after death ‘*she reborn herself as the struggle*’;¹ a struggle that descendants must carry on as a sacred trust.

Member States and other stakeholders have been called upon to integrate the elimination of systemic racism and racial/ethnic discrimination in their implementation of the SDGs. Indeed, paragraph 23 of the former High Commissioner’s 2021 Report on dismantling systemic racism calls on States to “*seize opportunities to advance the anti-racism agenda, prioritize attaining racial equity in implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and ensure that people of African descent are not left behind.*”²

It is time to implement, because in 2015, 195 nations agreed with the United Nations that they can change the world for the better. What better way to do this than by working towards SDG 1, ending poverty in all its forms everywhere and SDG #10, reducing inequality within and among countries. The fulfilment of most of the other goals depends on States being in a better

economic situation to end hunger, end or reduce inequality and meet the social and physical infrastructural needs of their populations (e.g. in health and education).

Some say that the pandemic is what is increasing the poverty levels, e.g. in the GRULAC region. Maybe so; but viruses are in themselves neutral. They slip into our societies without motives or agendas. What we are seeing playing out across the Caribbean right now, e.g., is less the effects of the coronavirus, and more the outcome of centuries of intentional exploitation and underdevelopment. Imperial powers in Europe enriched themselves off the Caribbean for centuries and then left us to grapple with the dilapidated infrastructure, asymmetrical economies, and non-existent safety-nets that they left behind. These colonial legacies in the CARICOM countries where I live, and which were colonized mainly by the British, have made the region extremely vulnerable to the kind of external macroeconomic shocks produced by the coronavirus. Erica Williams-Connell, daughter of the late Eric Williams, former prime minister of Trinidad and Tobago has often reminded us that her father once said: *“The West Indies are in the position of an orange. The British have sucked it dry and their sole concern today is that they should not slip and get damaged on the peel.”*³

Centuries of colonialist exploitation has left States, independent or non-independent, unable to end hunger and poverty among vulnerable populations. Decolonization gave ex-colonies freedom of action, but seldom the opportunity to exploit it to full advantage because firstly, economic decolonization does not necessarily accompany political decolonization. This is the reality of the Caribbean. Although the current crisis in the southern hemisphere cannot be blamed wholly on European colonial rule, and the particular attribution of cause and effect is often extremely difficult to prove, the effects of colonization, are ubiquitous.

We Africans and people of African descent are calling for reparatory justice as a means of repairing the impact and legacies of colonialism that continue to affect us. The DDPA, the programme of activities for the IDPAD and more recently the former UN High Commissioner’s Report also identify a *“long-overdue need to confront the legacies of enslavement, the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans and colonialism, and to seek reparatory justice.”*⁴ It is not as if there is no precedent for reparation. We all know, e.g., that Ayiti had to pay reparation to France in order to secure its independence from a brutal and atrocious slavery regime imposed by France; that Haiti’s underdevelopment is attributable to that reparation tax and that debt must be repaid by France. Constant Méheut and Matt Apuzzo revealed publicly in the *New York Times* that a more precise price tag for the double debt (these payments, and a loan from a French bank to cover them) was 112 million francs, or about \$560 million USD today.⁵

Since 2013, the CARICOM States have developed a 10 point plan for reparatory justice in the form of a development plan, calling on all States that participated in chattel enslavement to offer, among other actions, a full, formal apology (not statements of regret); repatriation for those who desire it and the return of stolen cultural heritage; a programme to address the public health crisis; technology transfer; debt cancellation and the return of the modern equivalent of the £20M pounds slavery compensation money paid to planters.

The basis of technology transfer is that the Caribbean was denied participation in Europe’s industrialization process, and was confined to the role of producer and exporter of raw materials.

This system was designed to extract maximum value from the region and to enable maximum wealth accumulation in Europe. The effectiveness of this policy meant that the Caribbean entered its nation building phase as a technologically and scientifically ill-equipped- backward space within the postmodern world economy. Generations of Caribbean youth, as a consequence, have been denied membership and access to the science and technology culture that is the world's youth patrimony

To develop this point further, let me point out that the Caribbean's plantation economy was an important cog in Britain's burgeoning Atlantic trading system. Such was the region's productive capacity that Richard Sheridan estimated Jamaica's total wealth in 1775 at £18 million pounds sterling.⁶ Sheridan's estimates have since been revised by Trevor Burnard who argues that the island's wealth was, at £25 million pounds sterling, some £7 million (or 39%) higher. Such wealth was a testimonial of the island's productive capacity and, more importantly, its economic viability during the eighteenth century. When compared to mainland North America, Caribbean planters' per capita earnings were significantly greater than their mainland counterparts. Burnard suggested that per capita wealth among whites in the Caribbean was £1,042.5 pounds compared to only £60.2 pounds per white person in Britain's mainland territories.⁷ The plantation economy was so strong by the early nineteenth century that Barry Higman suggested that its productive capacity could be compared to emerging industrial economies at the time.⁸

Despite the rightness of the demand, despite the constant appeals of numerous reparation advocates on both sides of the Atlantic and the work of organized reparation committees/commissions/councils/congresses/task forces, there is lack of serious negotiation with the victims by the British State. And yet, as Hilary Beckles reveals in his new book *How Britain Underdeveloped the Caribbean*, there was always awareness of the reparation debt by the state. He tells us that A. Creech Jones, MP, Colonial Office Advisory Committee on Education, writing on 5 April 1939, said:

*We carry a grave responsibility for a colonial policy based on cheap labour and cheap raw materials. The facts are out, and we can no longer plead ignorance and indifference. Of course, there has been official irresponsibility and the dominance of narrow calculating colonial interests. We can point to years of criminal neglect when official ineptitude and sloth have permitted affairs to drift and the islands to sink into unpardonable misery. Now a point has been reached when action is desperately urgent and British concern must be paid in hard cash. The hopeless squalor of today is in a real way the measure of the shortcomings of our colonial policy and of our economic neglect.*⁹

Creech-Jones' words is an admission that Britain knew all along that greater significance should have been given to making amends for the debilitating colonial inheritance.

CONCLUSION:

Post-colonialism demands that development is properly opened up to the presence and significance of voices, knowledge and agency in the South. In the end, access to fair and equitable justice is about respect, non-discrimination and dignity for the human person. It is about ending the philosophy which holds one race superior and another inferior. As Haile

Selassie 1st said on the question of racial discrimination, the Addis Ababa Conference taught, to those who will learn, this further lesson:

Until the philosophy which holds one race superior and another inferior is finally and permanently discredited and abandoned; Until there are no longer first-class and second class citizens of any nation; Until the colour of a man's skin is of no more significance than the colour of his eyes; Until the basic human rights are equally guaranteed to all without regard to race; Until that day, the dream of lasting peace and world citizenship and the rule of international morality will remain but a fleeting illusion, to be pursued but never attained;

We do not want a race war. Reparation is a route to peace and reconciliation. The search for decolonial justice in the form of reparation will continue, as we who believe in freedom will not rest until it comes.

Endnotes:

¹ Marlon James, *The Book of Night Women* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2009)

² See UN High Commissioner's Report, A/HRC/47/53 and annex; and the conference room paper of the High Commissioner on the promotion and protection of the human rights and fundamental freedoms of Africans and of people of African descent against excessive use of force and other human rights violations by law enforcement officers.

³ See also Colin A. Palmer, *Eric Williams and the Making of the Modern Caribbean* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 149.

⁴ High Commissioner's Report, 2021 A/HRC/43/53

⁵ Lazaro Gamio, Constant Meheut, Catherine Porter, Selam Gebrekidan, Allison McCann, Matt Apuzzo, "The Ransom: Haiti's Lost Billions", *The New York Times*, 20 May 2022.

⁶ Richard Sheridan, "The Wealth of Jamaica in the Eighteenth Century," *The Economic History Review*, New Series, 18, no. 2. 292-311, 1965

⁷ Trevor Burnard, "'Prodigious Riches': The Wealth of Jamaica before the American Revolution" *Economic History Review*. 54. No.3: 506-24. 2001

⁸ Barry Higman, *Plantation Jamaica, 1750-1850: Capital and Control in a Colonial Economy*, (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2005)

⁹ Hilary Beckles, *How Britain Underdeveloped the Caribbean* (Kingston: The UWI Press, 2022)