

Reparations, Global Economic Justice, and the Future of Sustainable Development

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There is an intimate link between sustainable development, global economic justice, racial justice and reparatory justice that is underappreciated at the UN level.

Sustainable development was first defined by the 1987 report, *Our Common Future* also known as the “Brundtland Report” by the UN World Commission on Environment and Development, headed by the former Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundlandt. The report defined sustainable development as “Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. There is a lot to be said about this definition, including that it seems to reduce the value of the environment to human needs. There is an argument to be made that this instrumentalization of the environment is part of the problem, and that it therefore may be more apt to speak of a development that is restorative or regenerative and honors the integrity of the natural world and our symbiotic relationship to it.

Still, there are two key premises of Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development that are integral to any present or future sustainable, restorative or regenerative development. First, that our consumption of natural resources, including or greenhouse emissions, cannot exceed the bounds of nature if they are to be “sustainable”. In other words, the international community needs to diligently work together to put caps on, and monitor, unsustainable uses of natural resources—which at the present is far from the case as on some models six out of nine critical planetary environmental boundaries have been transgressed and we are living in a sixth mass extinction.

Second, Agenda 2030 recognises that human beings have equal dignity or moral worth as human beings and that a development that is sustainable also needs to be global, inclusive and equitable. In this sense, Agenda 2030 recognises—as expressed in its vision and Sustainable Development Goals 10, 16 and 17—that social, economic and environmental sustainable development needs to reduce inequalities within and among countries. Although the stated targets are quite modest, vague and general—for example, calling for a progressive reduction rather than elimination of inequities, for the empowerment of the poor, equal opportunity for all, improving regulations of the global economy, and so on—still, as the progress reports from the UN Secretary General have shown, this aspect of sustainable development is also neglected and there is really no progress on reducing inequalities within and especially among so called developed and developing countries. Neither is there but passing reference to race and no mention of racial inequities or people of African descent. However, it should be no secret that all developed countries except for Japan and maybe Israel are either European or former European settler colonial states with majority white societies that are all racially stratified and in which people of African descent have unequal enjoyment

of rights across areas of society. Neither should it be any secret that at the international level most so called least developed countries are in Africa.

What is not sufficiently, if at all, recognised by the Sustainable Development Agenda is that the global economy is structurally unequal and largely premised on the appropriation of natural resources and cheap labor in the so called developing world or Global South mostly by financial and material interests and consumption in the so called developed world or Global North. This structural global economic inequality between the Global South and North is not the result of a comparative advantage in a fair and equal global market system—but an international economic order that is structurally unequal by design and rooted in histories and legacies of colonialism, imperialism, enslavement, and de jure institutional and systemic racial segregation, discrimination and white supremacy. There is indeed a very strong argument to be made that to achieve sustainable development, the still essentially racially unequal and colonial international economic order rooted in histories of colonialism and imperialism needs to be recognised, addressed and corrected and that the way to do this is through global reparatory justice.

For this purpose, the *Durban Declaration and Programme of Action* can serve as a model and programme of action. Albeit it has little to say about the global economy per se, it fully and comprehensively recognises racial discrimination and inequity both within and among countries. In fact, among the truly innovative aspects of the *DDPA*—which are yet to become enshrined into international law—is that racial discrimination, racial inequity and indeed structures of racial domination and subordination are not merely or even mostly domestic matters, but also international matters that include relations among peoples and countries of the world. It is an old insight of the Pan-African and other decolonial movements of the world that the histories and legacies of colonialism, enslavement and its institutionalised racial segregation and discrimination (i.e. apartheid as defined by the UN) have both domestic and international dimensions, and that neither of these dimensions can be effectively addressed without also addressing the other.

This is also a key insight of the Permanent Forum on People of African descent, this panel, and this week's session. Regarding the international dimension of racial discrimination against people of African descent, Africans *and* people of African descent are essentially in the same boat and cannot in any meaningful manner be separated (and I mean this literally as well as figuratively). This Permanent Forum on People of African Descent, and indeed this discussion that we now are having, offers a unique opportunity to discuss and offer concrete recommendations to the UN and its Member States on the entrenched racial discrimination against people of African descent, Africans and the Global Majority (keeping in mind that the developing world or Global South comprises 80% of the global population) in the current structure of the global economy established by half a millennia of colonialism, imperialism and enslavement.

The historical roots of the current structure of the global economy may be found in the transatlantic trade and enslavement of Africans and the colonisation of the Americas, including the Caribbean. First with early ventures by the Portuguese in West Africa and São Tomé and Príncipe during the 15th century. Later during the 16th century by several European

countries with the colonisation of the Americas, the decimation of approximately 90% of its indigenous populations, the extraction of silver and gold bullion by enslaved indigenous and later people of African descent for European markets, the establishment of colonial plantations toiled by enslaved people of African descent, and an Atlantic economy that contributed to the rise of several European empires and later the United States of America, and which fuelled much of the Industrial Revolution. This international economy later expanded into Asia, Oceania and the Pacific, across Africa and the Middle East as the result of wars, conquest and colonisation. By the beginning of the 20th century the great majority of the world was or had been colonised and integrated into a structurally unequal and racially skewed global economy.

One would think that the end of formal colonisation would spell the end of this essentially colonial global economy or at least see it subside in strength and magnitude. However, in many respects the colonial structure of the global economy has continued unabated and, in some ways, even increased in magnitude. Recent empirical data from ecologically unequal exchange studies confirm that high-income countries the great majority of them in the Global North rely on a large (*net*) appropriation of labor and resources from the rest of the world. This includes resources and labor embodied in both primary resources such as agricultural products, minerals and oil as well as high-end industrial products such as iPhones, computer chips, cars and designer clothes which in recent decades are overwhelmingly produced in the Global South. This net appropriation occurs because prices of resources, goods and not least labor are systematically or structurally lower in the Global South. What is more, this unequal exchange has dramatically increased since the formal end of colonisation in much of the world. Although this unequal exchange declined a little during the 1970s, this was followed by a steep increase—especially between 1983 and 2005 when countries in the Global South were subjected to loan conditions of structural adjustment, opening up their economies to foreign investments and trade, and the market value of their exports fell. This structurally unequal economic exchange between countries in the Global South and North is to the financial, ecological, and human detriment of the Global South—not least African and African descendent countries—whereas it facilitates the high levels of consumption, income, and economic growth of the Global North.

It is a moral, political, and legal wonder that this structurally unequal and racially skewed global economy has yet to be effectively addressed by the UN, the sustainable development agenda and the international community. It is high time that we have a sustainable development agenda and human rights regime that not only recognises and addresses racial inequities within countries, but effectively recognises and addresses racial inequities among and between countries rooted in histories of colonialism, enslavement, genocide and apartheid; and that sees reparatory justice as well as environmental and climate justice as integral to achieving global sustainable development, racial equity and justice and a just transition.

In this spirit, I would like to offer the following preliminary recommendations for discussion during this session:

1. Let the Permanent Forum on People of African Descent call on the Summit of the Future and its Pact for the Future to unequivocally include reparatory justice as well as environmental and climate justice as integral to achieving global sustainable development, racial equity and justice.
2. Let the Permanent Forum on People of African Descent call on the UN Secretary General to set up an Advisory Body on Global Economic Justice and Sustainable Development that includes reparatory justice, environmental and climate justice, and global racial equity and justice. This advisory body can develop recommendations in this area, including the implementation of Agenda 2030 and guidelines for the post-2030 Agenda.
3. Let the Permanent Forum on People of African Descent call on the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and Barbados to include in the Global Supply Chain Forum next month recognition and address of the structurally unequal and racially skewed international economic order, including though global reparatory justice and correcting all aspects of the structurally unequal value and supply chains from the Global South to the Global North such as unequal control over and use of natural resources, globally unequal and unfair labor conditions and wages, and globally inequitable patterns of production, consumption, pricing and profit making.
4. Let the Permanent Forum call on UNCTAD to include more comprehensive monitoring of structurally unequal and racially skewed global value and supply chains, including by employing methods developed by ecologically unequal exchange studies; and to unequivocally and comprehensively recognize the colonial and imperial roots of these global economic inequities—which after all was the impetus for the founding of UNCTAD and G77.
5. Let the Permanent Forum call on G77 and all other Member States that are for global economic justice and sustainable development and recognizes the integral role of reparatory justice to these, to develop a comprehensive and coordinated agenda for reparatory justice and sustainable development.