




RECLAIMING POWER

**Reflections from the Joint Convening of the 6th
Biennial Social Practice of Human Rights
Conference and 6th International Conference on
the Right to Development**

*Decolonization and Development for Africa
and People of African Descent*

**3rd Session of the Permanent Forum on People of African Descent
16 – 19 April 2024**

Palais des Nations of the United Nations Office in Geneva, Switzerland



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ABOUT SPHR 2023

Since 2013, the Human Rights Center at the University of Dayton has hosted the Social Practice of Human Rights conference, which serves as a platform to:

1. Bridge the divide between scholars and practitioners, providing meaningful exchange across disciplines and building more robust networks around the conference into the future.
2. Enable critical reflection and strategic thinking on social justice and human rights research on and for advocacy.
3. Explore and cultivate potential collaborations/initiatives that can be supported by the Human Rights Center and partners resulting from the forum.

RECLAIMING POWER

In November 2023, the University of Dayton Human Rights Center, with the University of Pretoria and the University of the Free State in South Africa, co-convened with the 2023 Social Practice of Human Rights Conference and the 6th International Conference on the Right to Development, focused on the theme – “Decolonization and Development for Africa and People of African Descent.” This enabled the Africa-based human rights ecosystem to convene with U.S.-based scholars, policy

through sustainable partnerships with human rights practitioners and justice organizations in Ohio, the United States, and around the world.

As we note in our [strategic visioning](#), our Center’s approach to the social practice of human rights is a distinctive one, emphasizing lived experience, knowledge democracy, and collective action. Grounded in global norms, standards, and agendas, the social practice approach to human rights complements



designers, and practitioners, serving as an avenue to actively work towards creating an anti-racist, anti-privilege, and decolonizing practice of human rights.

The Human Rights Center (HRC) is an interdisciplinary hub that advances human rights by conducting research-driven and participatory advocacy, educating future practitioners, and fostering inclusive and reflective dialogue and learning that promotes innovation and deepens impact. Inspired by our Catholic, Marianist roots, we work

more traditional perspectives that situate human rights in formal institutions or the actions of legal experts and professional advocates. Our work focuses on discourses, dialogues, and cultures, seeking to understand how human rights are protected, extended, experienced, and given meaning through the practices of diverse communities.

This also prioritizes action-based methodologies that support, innovate, and cultivate research that is community-led and directed to support

advocacy with crucial evidence and insights. The social practice of human rights also centers on students and education, whereby we promote experiential learning that involves applied research on the practice of participatory transformational advocacy. In this educational approach, we seek to build new multidisciplinary opportunities that ensure students receive basic human rights training at the University of Dayton. In this way, we make the education-research-advocacy nexus central to all our practice. This nexus only works, however, when we root our practice in genuine, horizontal, and sustainable partnerships, both on and off campus. This allows us to mobilize power, knowledge, and skills from various fields for the human rights community.



Lastly, we have come to understand that the social practice of human rights must be guided by intersectional, feminist, anti-racist, and decolonial approaches. We embrace a critical, introspective, inclusive, and diverse understanding of human rights in the world. We actively seek to identify and transform oppressive practices and structures present in the contexts in which we work, including our own projects, systems, and initiatives.



In keeping with our role of building bridges across issues and regions, we designed our 2023 conference as a space for collective reflection around the themes of (1) the right to development; (2) building social movements; (3) just energy transitions; and (4) identity and belonging – as applied to Africa and the people of African descent.

This submission captures the discussions and shares what was learned concerning these themes during the incredible conference program, which included 2 keynotes, 4 plenary sessions, 5 Concurrent Sessions with over 30 panels and roundtables, 5 Forward-Looking Workshops, a Fireside Chat with UD Students, and a celebration of the arts at the #rightsfest.



FRAMING

As the International Decade for People of African Descent draws to a close in 2024, transnational movements for racial justice have new platforms through which to bring the social practice of human rights to bear. As Satang Nabaneh, UD Human Rights Center Director of Programs, notes in her SPHR23 setting the scene remarks:



Colonialism, slavery, and imperialism have deeply impacted Africa and its diaspora. Communities of African descent across the globe live under structural discrimination and bear the scars of poverty, underdevelopment, social exclusion, and economic disparities. These historical processes have influenced how Africa and its people are perceived and positioned within racialized, capitalistic systems and structures.

On the material question, Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Chair in Epistemologies of the Global South with Emphasis on Africa University of Bayreuth, in his keynote 'The Unfinished Black/African Struggles for Liberation,' posited that:



The people who were subjected to racism, enslavement, genocides, colonial conquest, colonial dispossession, displacement, and exploitative racial capitalism suffered deliberate and calculated destitution, underdevelopment, and impoverishment. The survivors today exist as providers of cheap labor within a globalized division of labor defined by race, class, and gender. Such a people were severed from their modes of production, and in the process, their very means of survival, which was linked to ownership of resources including land, in the first instance, was attacked and destroyed during the making of racial capitalism—a capitalism that has a white gaze at the center and which subjects and exploits those people who are racialized in very particular ways including dispossession and displacement.

The Black/African fight for liberation is a complex, ongoing movement. It crosses borders, generations, and history itself. It is driven by the desire for freedom and self-determination for those who have faced racism, enslavement, and oppressive systems. This fight uses many ideas for liberation, from abolishing these systems entirely to achieving racial justice and intellectual sovereignty. It is about reclaiming not just land but power for Black and African people (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2024).



This context makes it clear why decolonization, at its core, disrupts capitalism. It demands the dismantling of all structures that perpetuate oppression and violence. Capitalism, with its emphasis on resource extraction and profit maximization, often reinforces these very structures as well as mindsets.

We find ourselves in a distinctive era where we are not only witnessing the collapse of the existing paradigm but also having the opportunity to shape the next one. This prompts us to question whether we should prioritize addressing the underlying causes of change rather than making insignificant changes at the margins without truly challenging the status quo. Critical, intersectional,

decolonial, and black feminist approaches offer a more robust framework. Grounded in this approach, our actions become more effective tools for tackling directly the root causes of structural violence and oppression aimed at reclaiming power.



REPARATIONS, SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT & ECONOMIC JUSTICE

Decolonizing Development

As we explore the Indian economist and philosopher Amartya Sen's concept of 'development as freedom,'—which emphasizes “the removal of various types of unfreedoms that leave people with little choice and little opportunity of

underscores the essence of decolonization.

Dr. Patrice Vahard, the Representative and Director of the United Nations Joint Human Rights Office (OHCHR) in the



exercising their reasoned agency” (1999) —our first plenary on Decolonizing Development: Rethinking the Paradigm offers valuable insights into challenging traditional approaches to human rights.

We invited eminent scholars and practitioners from across the globe to give us insight into the dynamics of decolonizing development, including the exploration of redistributive models, rights-based economies, and financial institutions. At the heart of inclusive development is a commitment to centering marginalized voices and prioritizing justice and equity as critical forms of resistance to colonialism and neoliberalism. This fundamental ethos

Democratic Republic of the Congo, shared insights into using the 'right to development' as a framework for changing the development paradigm. He underscored the necessity of initiating a paradigm shift and resetting mindsets to address colonialism effectively. He emphasized the importance of formerly colonized peoples reclaiming their identities as equal contributors to shaping the world and advocated for deconstructing colonial systems that not only affect the material bases of self-support but also distort ideal notions of self and self-worth.

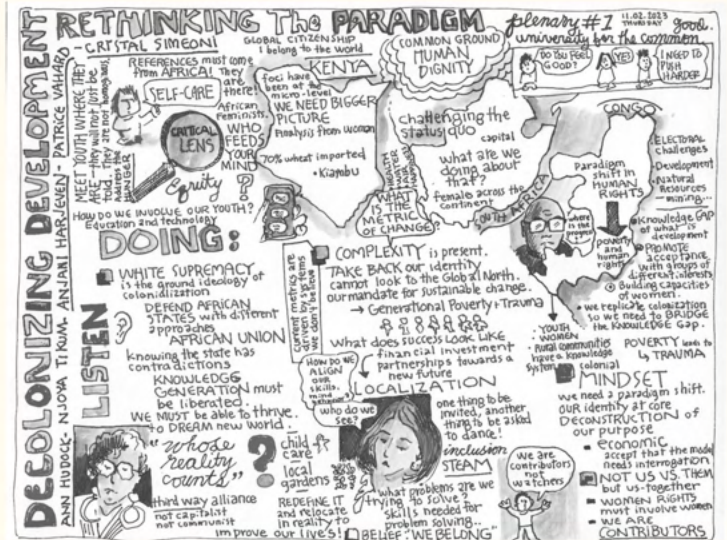
Additionally, in highlighting the economic motives behind colonialism, participants

advocated for a transition towards a development paradigm based on Ubuntu principles, emphasizing shared benefits and inclusion. Ubuntu underscores the profound interconnectedness of all individuals and highlights the shared responsibility for the well-being and dignity of one another. It embodies a spirit of mutual respect, compassion, and cooperation that resonates deeply in African philosophy and underpins the quest for human rights for Africa and its diaspora.

The value of Black/African contributions to shaping development models calls for a collective approach to address the injustices perpetuated by colonialism, as Vahard observed, stating that "The exercise should not pit us against another group or those who colonize, enslave, or exploit for their gain, but rather bring us together to recognize that colonialism, neo-colonialism, liberalism, or any other 'isms' do not benefit any of us."



The plenary also touched upon redefining success and metrics in decolonial and capitalistic contexts, urging a shift towards happiness, wellness, and equity measures. We lean on metrics that are part of the problem and don't question them, even in human rights. Success, it was argued, should be redefined based



on values that prioritize the well-being of all individuals and the environment. Recognizing that current development approaches need to be revised and new perspectives are needed, grassroots initiatives driven by youth and women's organizations can offer transformative solutions. The intersection of gender, STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Manufacturing) skills, and sustainability presents opportunities for addressing real-world problems.

The discussion brought insights into decolonizing development, stressing the imperative of dismantling enduring colonial influences. This necessitates a multifaceted strategy: nurturing indigenous knowledge generation in economic strategizing, prioritizing the universal right to development, and supporting female-led innovation in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Manufacturing). By providing opportunities for girls and women in technology and supporting female-founded businesses, Anjani Harjeven, who leads WomEng and WomHub, highlights the importance of empowering women not just economically but also to challenge current systems of oppression.



Representing the Nawi–Afrifem Macroeconomics Collective, the executive director, Crystal Simeoni, engaged in a Pan-African feminist analysis of macro-level economics and the negative impact on African women and girls. By examining topics like sovereign debt and financialization, Crystal highlighted the necessity of exploring feminist alternatives to neoliberal capitalism, neocolonial systems, and cis heteropatriarchy in the African context.

The speakers emphasized the need for systemic change, grassroots initiatives, and youth involvement to create a better future for all.

Just Transition

Climate change is one of the greatest challenges humanity has faced in recent times. The growing impact of the climate crisis and the destruction of critical ecosystems pose risks to human rights and the future of humankind. The growing grip of technological development and surveillance capitalism on our lives opens new privacy threats and creates opportunities for state monitoring and social control. In the face of these challenges, articulating sustainable and inclusive development principles is an urgent task.

Africa's position as a key player in the just energy transition provided a focal point for the plenary on Facilitating a Just and Inclusive Energy Transition. Over the past decade, learning effects, mainly in upper- and middle-income countries, have dramatically decreased solar and wind energy costs. In principle, such progress should lead to increased investment opportunities in Africa, not merely for outside firms but also for African companies creating jobs and retaining earnings for the Continent. The approach has been on energy systems, but the framework of the SDGs implies that several systems and targets should be considered holistically. Accordingly, panelists considered food and energy sovereignty, how to develop manufacturing capacity under local control, and how to transition away from a system that has been for too long dominated by structures remaining from a colonial past – illustrating how all of these issues are connected to the vision of a brighter, greener future for Africa.

“1.5 to stay alive” was the recurring refrain of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) during negotiations that led to the Paris Climate Agreement.

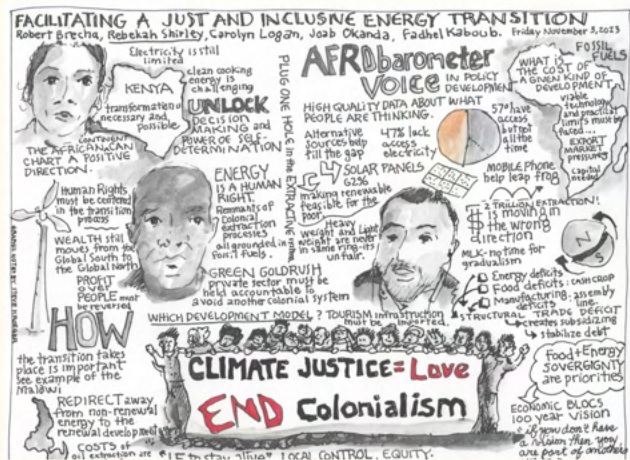


That slogan was, in fact, embodied in the key goal of the Paris Agreement, that is, to make efforts to limit global warming to “well below” 2°C above the 19th-century level and to make efforts to limit global warming to 1.5°C. Over time, it has become increasingly clear that there are significant differences in expected impacts from climate change at 2°C compared to 1.5°C. Indeed, we are already experiencing severe climate impacts at our current level of 1°C global temperature increase. One of the first points made in the opening remarks of our Plenary Session, given by Dr. Rebekah Shirley of the World Resources Institute, was that much of Africa has already seen above-average warming.

It is essential to consider the substantial efforts already made to map out the potential pathways for achieving the reductions in greenhouse gas emissions necessary to slow and halt warming and its associated impacts.



The rallying cry of “1.5 to Stay Alive” may have originated with AOSIS, but the group of Least Developed Countries (LDCs), many of which are in Africa, also has large populations that are on the front lines of climate change impacts.



One important question concerning efforts to mitigate climate change, mainly by decreasing carbon dioxide emissions from fossil fuels to near-zero by mid-century, is whether this implied change to the energy system would be in conflict with goals for sustainable development.

Access to modern energy sources (SDG 7) is not a goal in and of itself, but it is an important objective because access to electricity and clean cooking helps enable achieving other goals, such as better health, education, productive employment, clean water, and more. Dr. Carolyn Logan of Afrobarometer stressed during the session that their survey research indicates that an important component in the energy sector is that there should be actual productive use of electricity, not just access, in theory. This idea of a “Just Transition,” ensuring that vulnerable and developing countries are not left (further) behind by mitigation efforts, was the theme of our Plenary Session, with varying regional perspectives from Africa, the Americas, and the Caribbean.

The Plenary session also featured a cautionary note about the energy transition, raised by Joab Okanda from Christian Aid.



Okanda argued emphatically that renewable energy must pave the way for both at once. As he put it, “My argument is that the Global North did not industrialize through fossil fuels; though fossil fuels contributed, the Global North industrialized through slavery, it industrialized through colonialism.” The path forward for Africa that he (and other panel participants) envisions is based on a different model of building a sustainable and climate-friendly energy system from the ground up.

Another point made was that this new energy paradigm must avoid the potential for a novel version of renewable energy colonialism. There is a danger that the extraction of mineral resources necessary for the global energy transition will become the focus of a new generation of extractive models of development based on the power imbalance between wealthier countries and the poorer countries of the Global South. Unfortunately, current flows of capital are extremely imbalanced – away from South – to the tune of as much as two trillion dollars per year, as was pointed out by Dr. Kaboub. A fraction of these financial flows, now servicing previously incurred debts, would be sufficient to catalyze the necessary

investments for increased energy access, as well as mitigation and adaptation strategies. As Dr. Shirley noted, the continent only receives about 4% of global finance directed toward climate change, while it has a much higher and growing share of the world’s population. Furthermore, and linking to the intersection of climate and development issues, it is Africa, particularly Sub-Saharan Africa, where the greatest needs still exist for initial electrification and access to clean cooking technologies.

The Reparative Question

The demand for reparations and restitution acknowledges the lasting damage inflicted by systems like colonialism, racial capitalism, and neo-colonialism. These systems were deliberately designed to impoverish Africans and people of African descent. Reparations and restitution are essential to the decolonial movement, aiming to rebuild and reclaim what was lost. This is a pressing issue of justice for communities who continue to suffer the consequences of historical wrongs – enslavement, genocide, colonial conquest, dispossession, and systemic exploitation and underdevelopment. (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2024).



In a keynote conversation with Amara Enyia, President of Global Black and Director of Policy and Research for the Movement for Black Lives, and Danielle Poe, Dean of the University of Dayton's College of Arts and Sciences, on the topic "What is the Mandate of this Moment?" Enyia asserts that reparations should be seen as an intervention, emphasizing that:

It's not up to those who are the perpetrators of the harm to determine what reparations are sufficient and what form they should take.



Declaration on the human rights of People of African descent

We also utilized action research methodologies and interactive design to enable participatory knowledge production. A key component was a World Café session focused on a draft text of the Declaration on the Promotion and Full Respect of the Human Rights of People of African Descent, which Elías Murillo Martínez (Colombia), a member of the Permanent Forum on People of African Descent, graciously shared with us for this purpose.

Gaynel Curry (The Bahamas) and Justin Hansford (USA) also engaged in a conversation during SPHR23 to evaluate the draft declaration's progress and discuss the Forum's potential impact and future direction. This informed our collaborative input submitted to the UN Intergovernmental Working Group on the Effective Implementation of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action.

A rights-based approach to tackling racism and restoring dignity for all hinges on two crucial frameworks: intersectionality and decoloniality. These frameworks provide a solid foundation for grounding the declaration aimed at combating racism. While participants acknowledge the Declaration's significance, concerns regarding its implementation and evaluation remain. Specifically, how will we ensure states uphold their commitments and effectively achieve the declaration's goals? These concerns point to the need for a more inclusive globalized economy that doesn't further marginalize already disadvantaged communities.

SO WHAT IS THE WAY FORWARD, WE ASK OURSELVES?

At SPHR23, we recognize the urgency of the climate crisis and advocate for a human-rights-centered approach to driving impactful change. This entails fostering collaborative partnerships across communities, disciplines, and organizations. By harnessing a broader range of knowledge and perspectives, we can develop effective solutions that address the crisis while amplifying the voices and work of groups least responsible for its emergence.

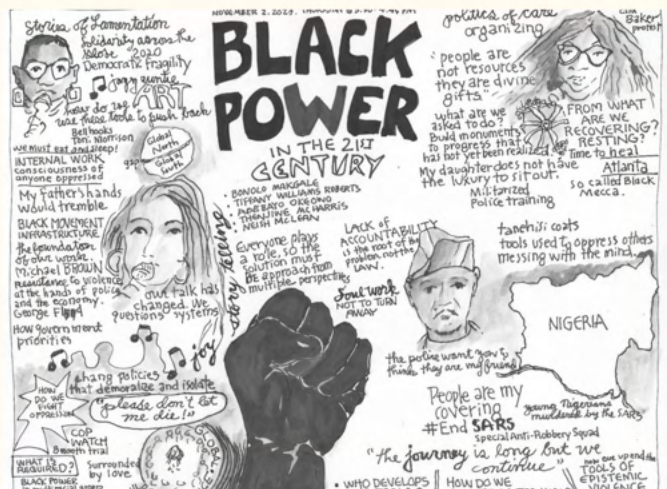
In reimagining our approach to development, it is imperative that we listen, learn, and center diverse voices and experiences. Without a global, equity-centered perspective and critical scrutiny of existing structures and systems, well-meaning efforts risk inadvertently causing harm. Collective action and systemic change can pave the way for a more equitable and just future for all. Crystal's reflection perfectly encapsulates this sentiment: "All the gains are shared, and all of the people are cared for. Here, it is clear that there is enough for the living to live."

The Permanent Forum offers a vital platform for the mutually beneficial exchange central to SPHR23 and the concept of social practice. This collaborative approach builds practices and comprehensions that overcome the rigid separation between those who build knowledge and those who act and organize. This is especially crucial for higher education. Universities hold

resources, tools, and expertise typically unavailable to advocates but immensely valuable for transformative human rights advocacy.

However, universities themselves face challenges. Human rights, an often Western framework, requires critical reflection in a world shaped by systemic racism, gender inequality, and neocolonialism. Scholar-practitioners must confront their institutions' ideologies and how they represent and reproduce those ideologies and power when working in and with communities.

Epistemological decolonization becomes a necessity for liberation. We must dismantle these entrenched dynamics through rigorous, intentional disruption of harmful power structures in order to avoid perpetuating binaries and inequities. This is particularly necessary as Black Studies and Africana Studies, born from the liberation struggles of African-descent communities, face reactionary pushback framed as 'identity politics.'



Here, at the Human Rights Center, in consolidating and expanding sustainable partnerships, we leverage our convening power with partners to foster meaningful dialogue with diverse perspectives to build shared knowledge – central to Black Power’s core message of love, creativity, and resistance, as highlighted in the Plenary on Black Power in the 21st Century. From contesting democratic deficits and police violence to campaigning for environmental and economic justice, Black political leaders and grassroots activists are driving many of today’s most visible human rights movements, exemplifying the crucial need to generate power through resistance and movement building, particularly through the lens of modern Pan-Africanism. This aligns with the Permanent Forum’s mission of fostering international and local collaboration to improve the safety and quality of life and livelihoods of people of African descent. Just as SPHR23 highlights, local leadership is vital in addressing rights issues affecting Africa and people of African descent, locally and globally. In places like Dayton, Ohio, we aim to cultivate local alliances for dialogue, non-violent resistance, and reflection alongside social movements.

Many presentations at SPHR asserted that the human rights framework is not only a useful organizing approach but also, given its holistic nature, a tool for motivating politics of solidarity and cooperation amongst diverse constituencies. As organizer Thenjiwe McHarris of BlackBird reminded us:



The heart of Black Power
is not Black suffering.
It's **Black love.**
It's **Black creativity.**
It's **Black resistance.**

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