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In response to the call for input “Call for inputs for the 2024 report of the United Nations Secretary-General on the implementation of the programme of activities of the International Decade for People of African Descent”

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission. I am a museum consultant working to empower museums, similar institutions, and their partners to contribute more effectively to sustainable development challenges, using rights-based approaches and linked to environmental and social goals. This submission will focus on how cultural institutions, notably museums, and their sponsors, agencies and governments have implemented the International Decade, and will also make remarks on the environment within which activity takes place. It will also make remarks on the implementation of the Decade in the UK, where I am based.

1. Recognition

The international community, including museums and their organisations, as well as many other organisations who express an interest in addressing historic and contemporary racism and inequality, have been largely unaware of the International Decade, or what they could do concretely towards its achievement. This impedes recognition of the challenges people of African descent face, both in African countries and in African diaspora, and impedes sustainable development.

Recognition of countries’ contributions to constructing oppressive systems, through empire, colonialism, slavery and resource exploitation, remains very patchy. The UK has yet to acknowledge the terrible impact of its past actions, and has not been prepared to make an official apology or plan for reparations, while jingoistic approaches to history and Empire impede progress in this area. Similarly, the ongoing oppression resulting from trade systems, state debt, neocolonial exploitation and

capitalism (for example for minerals for the shift to non-fossil-fuel technologies), as well as more overt support for fossil fuel extraction in African countries supported by Global North financial input, are all barriers to sustainable development for African countries.

Recognising the historic and contemporary injustices, as well as recognizing countries' existing commitments and responsibilities, would help to progress sustainable development for African countries and peoples. The standard formula for human rights of 'respect, protect, fulfil' is far from being achieved, and in some countries is going backwards, as countries make political capital of diminishing the human rights of others.

In terms of museums, many museums are making efforts to be more reflective of their local communities. For example, Museums Galleries Scotland ran a consultation on how empire, slavery and colonialism should be reflected in Scotland's museums.¹ This consultation used a Human Rights-based Approach, to ensure that assumptions were not made or perpetuated, and that outcomes were determined in response to society's aspirations, rather than museums' aspirations. The recommendations produced as a result were as follows (shared here in case they are useful or adaptable for others):

1. Scotland should create a dedicated space to address its role in empire, colonialism, and historic slavery. A new organisation should be created to lead this work.
2. Museums should ensure anti-racism is embedded in their workplaces and public spaces.
3. Museums should involve the people of Scotland in shaping their work through co-production, to promote cultural democracy and participation for all.
4. Museums should commit to research, interpret, and share the histories of Scotland's links to empire, colonialism, and historic slavery.
5. Museums should support efforts to promote and embed race equality and anti-racism in the curricula in a meaningful, effective, and sustainable way.
6. Scottish Government should demonstrate their support for restitution and repatriation of looted or unethically acquired items in Scottish collections.

¹ <https://www.museumsgalleriescotland.org.uk/project/empire-slavery-scotlands-museums/#:~:text=Museums%20Galleries%20Scotland%20were%20commissioned.with%20anti-racist%20education%20worldwide.>

These recommendations are currently being progressed through a project called Delivering Change, which aims to progress some of the findings of the consultation, to support the transformation of the Scottish museum sector. The project aims to support Scotland's museums to be more reflective of what people – notably people with experience of racism and/or other forms of discrimination – want from museums, in terms of memorializing and addressing empire, slavery, colonialism and their historic and contemporary legacies. The project goes beyond the subject matter of museums (exhibitions and educational programmes) to cover employment, training, progression.²

Justice: a shift to regenerative economies

Some aspects of justice have been included in the response above. In addition, a significantly enhanced commitment to human rights – their respect, protection and fulfilment – would form a basis for a stronger response to address historic and contemporary injustices, to ensure a fairer future. A human rights economy has been set out by OHCHR:

“...A human rights economy seeks to redress root causes and structural barriers to equality, justice, and sustainability, by prioritizing investment in economic, social and cultural rights with a focus on those most marginalized. It addresses power imbalances between persons, among people, business and public institutions, as well as between countries, including the role of international financial institutions there.”³

A human rights economy should be sure to place people and nature at the centre of concerns, and not be a ‘tweak’ of the current, destructive economic system. Moving away from ‘growth’ as a measure in any sense, should be a priority. Peace, justice, dignity, environmental protection and restoration, could be the basis for metrics of ‘progress’.

Sustainable development

Action for sustainable development is impeded for many reasons. Among these, the current fixation – including within the 2030 Agenda – for sustained economic growth as a basis for action impedes a fair system for all people and all countries.

Global North countries are going into overdrive for African natural resources, and in ways that will not necessarily support the flow of economic benefits to African

² <https://www.museumsgalleriesscotland.org.uk/project/delivering-change/>

³ https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/ohchr_observer_paper_fina.pdf

countries or people, nor prevent environmental and social harm as a result of activity. This is neocolonialism in its classic sense. The race for oil and gas is retrograde, and the opposite of what is called for from the principle of Common But Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities. For some examples, Germany's deal with Senegal for gas, or Shell's oil activity in Nigeria that is the subject of a court case for human rights abuses⁴.

Within countries, including many Global North countries, cultural institutions are being pushed to be more commercial, as part of government plans to reduce public funding. This impedes sustainable development, by forcing museums and other institutions to provide entertainment or mass-culture experiences, that do not necessarily address more challenging local or global issues, nor secure sustainable development. Fear of saying 'the wrong thing' results in institutions that sit on the fence or say nothing about the gross injustices happening around the world, including in many African countries, or visited on people of African descent, or of the contributions of their governments – and their taxes – towards these contemporary challenges.

Around the world, people and communities face disaster risk to different extents. Greater awareness of challenges and opportunities to contribute to addressing them, is a principle of sustainable development, by building strong partnerships that learn, share concern, and work for a spirit of shared humanity, rather than an ideological rhetoric of difference.

Recommendations for a new Decade

1. A new Decade is not only desirable, it is essential.
2. A new Decade should start out with some ready made resources that a wide range of actors can use as they are, for example a 'print-on-demand' exhibition of panels that can be produced locally, and doesn't require complex permissions to use.
3. This should be accompanied by simple lesson plans.
4. These resources should be available in multiple languages, at least the main UN languages.
5. These resources should be accompanied by a simple, open-access, capacity-building programme, open to everyone to take part in, that is run online and has some translation. Capacity building activities are essential to promote the

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2023/nov/23/shell-to-face-human-rights-claims-uk-over-chronic-oil-spills-niger-delta>

uptake of resources, rather than expecting people to understand them automatically.

6. Build a community of practice, open to all, without limitation.
7. Provide a platform for activities that people run, for example one that is similar to the UNDRR Voluntary Commitments site.
8. Provide tools for people to evaluate their existing activity, and make suggestions on how activities can be strengthened, beyond more abstract concepts such as recognition: be very clear what this looks like.
9. Provide people – organisations – with tools to share their activity, for example logos to include on websites or on reports. Make the use of these very easy to use and access, rather than requiring complex permissions that impede uptake.
10. Provide governments and others with opportunities to hold themselves to account, in their reporting for e.g. the SDGs (VNRs, VSRs, VLRs, or to UN treaty bodies).

For information on how museums and cultural institutions relate to human rights, and can support a rights-based approach, see [Museums and Human Rights \(2020\)](#).

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission. I remain at your disposal should you have any questions or want clarification on any of the points raised.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a series of loops and a long horizontal stroke, followed by the name "Henry McGhie" written in a cursive script below it.

Henry McGhie, museum consultant, Curating Tomorrow