



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: ECOLOGICAL CRISIS, CLIMATE JUSTICE AND RACIAL JUSTICE

SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR E. TENDAYI ACHIUME'S REPORT TO THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY, OCTOBER 2022 (A/77/549)

WHAT IS THIS REPORT ABOUT?

This report underscores that the global ecological crisis is a racial justice crisis. Racially, ethnically, and nationally marginalized groups are concentrated in global "racial sacrifice zones" and they bear the brunt of pollution, biodiversity loss and climate change. These same groups disparately face coerced displacement and immobility in the context of ecological crisis. Yet, the Special Rapporteur describes, "the interests and concerns of non-white peoples in particular have been successfully sidelined within the United Nations frameworks for coordinating the global response to ecological crisis" (A/77/549, para. 7). She urges States and stakeholders within the UN environmental and climate governance regimes to "adopt a global approach that effectively responds to the fact that climate justice requires racial justice, and that racial justice requires climate justice" (para. 77).

DEFINING RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

International human rights law prohibits discrimination by States, including on the basis of race, and provides that all persons are equal under the law and entitled to equal protection of the law without discrimination (UDHR, Art. 2; ICCPR, Art. 2(1) and 26; ICESCR, Art. 2(2)). Racial discrimination means "any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, color, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life" (ICERD, Art. 1(1)).

RACIAL SACRIFICE ZONES

Global "sacrifice zones" are "regions rendered dangerous and even uninhabitable owing to environmental degradation" (A/77/549, para. 1). These regions are concentrated in the Global South and the Global North is largely responsible for these conditions, so the Special Rapporteur uses the term "racial sacrifice zones" instead. Racial sacrifice zones "include the ancestral lands of Indigenous Peoples, territories of the small island developing States, racially segregated neighbourhoods in the global North and occupied territories facing drought and environmental devastation" (para. 2).

RACIST COLONIAL FOUNDATIONS OF ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

Climate change is the result of centuries of greenhouse gas emissions (including carbon dioxide) that have accumulated in the atmosphere. The Global North is principally responsible for carbon dioxide emissions over time: "From 1850 to 2002, industrialized countries produced three times the carbon dioxide produced by the entire global South...[The United States] is responsible for 20 per cent of total cumulative carbon dioxide emissions. The European Union is responsible for 17 per cent, and 90 transnational corporations, predominantly headquartered in the global North, are responsible for 63 per cent of cumulative industrial emissions from 1751 to 2010" (A/77/549, paras. 4-5). The Global South, despite bearing the brunt of climate and environmental harms, has contributed minimally to emissions. For example, Haiti is among the five countries most impacted by climate change yet contributed only 0.0003% to global greenhouse gas emissions (para. 51).

The Global North's historical emissions stem from its colonial exploitation of the Global South, namely "natural resource extraction, industrialization and industrial processes and consumption of the outputs of these processes" (para.12). As outlined in the submissions to the Special Rapporteur, there is "an extensive body of research that charts the racist colonial regimes that underpinned the extraction of coal, gas and oil, forged a global capitalist system dependent on the racial hierarchies, and are thus at the heart of the global ecological crisis" (para. 12).

(See [A/HRC/41/54](#) on Global Extractivism and Racial Equality.)

CLIMATE JUSTICE

Climate justice falls under the broader movement for environmental justice. Climate justice demands that the States and corporations responsible for climate change are held accountable, and it strives to radically transform the structures that enable the global ecological crisis and its racialized impacts. (A/77/549, para. 4).

ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM

Environmental racism is a form of institutionalized discrimination, describing when "environmental policies, practices or directives that differentially affect or disadvantage (whether intentionally or unintentionally) individuals, groups or communities based on race or colour." Environmental racism can take place within countries or across borders, and it impacts racially and ethnically marginalized groups including "People of African and Asian descent, Indigenous peoples, Roma, refugees, migrants, [and] stateless persons." The [Durban Declaration and Programme of Action](#) outlines recommendations to tackle environmental racism. (See [A/77/549](#), paras. 45-46).

GLOBAL ECOLOGICAL CRISIS AND RACIALLY DISCRIMINATORY HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

Discrimination on the basis of race and related grounds is "a critical determinant of climate and environmental harms experienced by individuals and communities," and intersects with other forms of social exclusion (A/77/549, para. 50). Systemic racism leads to the denial of economic and social rights of racially and ethnically marginalized peoples, which in turn constrains their ability to control development in their communities and their exposure to climate disasters and toxic waste. They also "frequently lack true self-determination over economic development that occurs on or near their communities, making them frequent victims of racial sacrifice zones created by national authorities or transnational corporations" (para. 50; see paras. 51-53). The right to development, as outlined in the UNGA's [Declaration on the Right to Development](#), "states that the right of peoples to self-determination includes the exercise of their inalienable right to full sovereignty over all their natural wealth and resources" (para. 48).

Environmental racism also results in civil and political persecution against human rights defenders and environmental protectors who are asserting their rights against corporations or exploitative governments (para. 54; see paras. 55-56).

Climate and environmental harms particularly impact Indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples, who are on the front lines of extractive projects, and results in their systematic dispossession, denial of their lands and violations of their right to self-determination (paras. 57-59; see [A/HRC/41/54](#) on Global Extractivism and Racial Equality).



ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE INDUCED DISPLACEMENT

Highly climate vulnerable countries host over 40% of refugees, and their nationals account for 90% of refugees and most internally-displaced persons (IDPs). The risk they face is two-fold: “on the one hand, settlements are disproportionately concentrated in regions that are exposed to higher-than-average warming levels and specific climate hazards, including temperature extremes and drought; on the other hand, these populations frequently inhabit settlements and legal circumstances that are intended to be temporary but are protracted across generations, all the while facing legal and economic barriers in their ability to migrate away from climate impacts” ([A/77/549](#), para. 35).

Racial and xenophobic discrimination cause forced displacement, significantly determine who can migrate within States and across national borders, and shape who is unable to migrate. (See [A/HRC/38/52](#) on Race, Migration, and Ethno-Nationalist Ideologies.) This is also true of migration in the context of ecological crisis, with “forced displacement from racial sacrifice zones, as well as the racist and xenophobic treatment of migrants and refugees who are able and choose to leave” ([A/77/549](#), para. 36; see paras. 36-40). Many submissions to the Special Rapporteur outlined how Indigenous peoples are being forced to leave their traditional and ancestral homelands because of natural disasters and rising sea levels, as well as the environmental harms caused by extractive projects on their territories; the Special Rapporteur underscored that “permanent loss of Indigenous homelands is and will remain a massive global failure and a deep racial injustice in the absence of urgent rectificatory action” (para. 40).



RACIALLY DISCRIMINATORY MITIGATION AND OVER-RELIANCE ON MARKET-BASED SOLUTIONS

The Special Rapporteur warns that racial injustice is being reinforced by “techno-chauvinism” (“the conviction that technology can solve all societal problems”) and an overreliance on market-based solutions to climate change ([A/77/549](#), para. 8). “Green” solutions to climate challenges include carbon capture and storage technologies, as well as other experimental or speculative technologies. These and other programs, including the development of alternatives to fossil fuel, often take place within racial sacrifice zones and any harmful impacts are thus disproportionately borne by the racially and ethnically marginalized people residing there; they create what have been described as “green sacrifice zones” (para. 62). These market-based solutions are often designed without the involvement of racially and ethnically marginalized people, which means that local knowledge and leadership is excluded and leads to the replication of racial subordination that already exists within the market economy. They can entrench colonial inequities because they “seek to maintain unsustainable levels of consumption in the global North through transitions that require tremendous destructive extraction from the global South” (para. 62).



RACIAL AND COLONIAL INEQUITIES IN GLOBAL CLIMATE CHANGE GOVERNANCE

There exists a complex framework of international environmental law and, under the auspices of the [UN Environmental Programme](#) (UNEP) and [Stockholm Declaration](#) (1972), a regime for global environmental coordination. Climate change governance, including through the [UN Framework Convention on Climate Change](#), has focused on three pillars: adaptation, mitigation, and “loss and damage” ([A/77/549](#), para. 69).

States in the Global South “have consistently advocated for an international environmental framework in which structural disparities in the global economic and political system are recognized”; yet “the global climate framework offers no real path forward for climate justice, which entails racial justice” (para. 69). This is owing in part to the unequal negotiating power that States in the Global South have when it comes to negotiating these international frameworks with powerful States. Instead, the way climate change is framed “frequently elides the historical responsibility borne by some States and transnational corporations” (para. 71). International law does not include robust provisions to hold transnational corporations accountable, and wealthy countries are largely shielded from accountability for their role in creating the ecological crisis, despite some progress on remediation for loss and damage. There is also “epistemic imperialism”: international environmental discussions and the dominant frames in international law are based in Euro-centric worldviews, which are themselves at the root of the current ecological disaster (para. 74).

THE SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR’S RECOMMENDATIONS

- Global approaches to adaptation, mitigation and loss and damage must be shaped by and responsive to the racially, ethnically and nationally marginalized groups on the front lines of the global ecological crisis. They must be able to meaningfully participate in and make decisions about environmental and climate governance at different levels.
- The approach taken by States and stakeholders within the UN environmental and climate governance regimes must recognize the interconnectedness of climate and racial justice.
- States must cease racially discriminatory human rights violations related to climate and the environment and provide effective remedies to those harmed.
- States must protect the right of Indigenous peoples to self-determination, which includes control over their right to development, and take measures to preserve Indigenous homelands.
- States must mitigate the effects of climate change on small island developing States.
- States must prioritize reparations for historical environmental and climate harms and their persistent impacts. Reparations “entail equitable international economic, political and legal frameworks, [and] are a precondition for reorienting the global order away from ecological crisis.” (See [A/74/321](#) on Reparations for Colonialism & Slavery.)
- States must systematically hold transnational corporations accountable for environmental racism and climate injustice.

See a full list of recommendations: [A/77/549](#), paras. 75-82