



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: RACIAL JUSTICE, DEVELOPMENT AND THE 2030 AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR E. TENDAYI ACHIUME'S REPORT TO THE HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL, JUNE 2022 ([A/HRC/50/60](#))

## WHAT IS THIS REPORT ABOUT?

This report provides a racial justice and equality analysis of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development ("2030 Agenda") and the Sustainable Development Goals ("SDGs"). The objectives of sustainable development include "eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, combating inequality within and among countries, preserving the planet, creating sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth and fostering social inclusion" ([A/HRC/50/60](#), para. 2). The 2030 Agenda and the SDGs "form part of a much broader international development framework and a global economic and financial system that have shaped the 2030 Agenda and constrain its outcomes" (para. 16).

The report underscores that structural racism is a barrier to achieving sustainable development. Racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance lead to differential treatment of and outcomes for (i) racially marginalized individuals and groups, and (ii) formerly colonized countries that were sites of racialized exploitation. To address both levels of discrimination, it is necessary to bring a human rights analysis to the broader field of development and radically transform the overall international development paradigm.

## DEFINING "UNDERDEVELOPMENT"

The report uses the term "underdeveloped" "to highlight the historical and contemporary structures of exploitation, extraction and destruction that entrap formerly colonized regions in conditions of impoverishment. As explained by Walter Rodney in his seminal book *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, 'underdevelopment' is not the absence of development. The development of 'developed' nations is built directly on the underdevelopment of nations widely referred to as 'developing' nations" ([A/HRC/50/60](#), para. 7).

## 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)).

## DEFINING THE 2030 AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The [2030 Agenda](#) envisages "a world of universal respect for human rights and human dignity, the rule of law, justice, equality and non-discrimination; of respect for race, ethnicity and cultural diversity; and of equal opportunity" and pledges that "no one must be left behind." SDGs constitute the core of the 2030 Agenda and seek to guide all global, regional and national development endeavors until the year 2030. SDGs are high level commitments with targets that establish specific outcomes to determine whether individual goals are attained. Each target has one or more indicators that are used to track its progress; indicators "play a crucial role in resource allocation and project prioritization" ([A/HRC/50/60](#), para. 54).

## THE INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK HAS PROGRESSED IN SOME WAYS FROM ITS COLONIAL ANTECEDENTS BUT REMAINS ILL-EQUIPPED TO DISRUPT RACIAL INEQUALITY WITHIN AND AMONG STATES

The global economic and financial systems (including the Bretton Woods institutions) remain engines of racially discriminatory underdevelopment, and the mainstream international development framework fails to disrupt this status quo. However, there have been some shifts: First, States are increasingly moving on from the initial view of development as "large-scale political, economic, and financial intervention in 'underdeveloped' nations with limited consideration of social and human costs"; instead, States are adopting "'human-centered' approaches to development, such as 'human-rights based development' and 'sustainable development'" ([A/HRC/50/60](#), para. 31). Second, "emerging economies" like China have become "prominent actors in the international development framework," including by promoting South-South development as part of achieving the 2030 Agenda (para. 32). Despite these shifts, the Special Rapporteur notes that to disrupt racially discriminatory underdevelopment, these emerging economies would need to adopt approaches that "actively promote human rights and economic and racial justice" (para. 35). As she outlines, "the 2030 Agenda fails to fundamentally disrupt the overall dynamic of racially discriminatory underdevelopment that is embedded within the global economic system and the international development framework" (para. 79).

## THE INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK

The modern international development framework was ushered in with the creation of the Bretton Wood institutions (the International Monetary Fund and World Bank) after World War II. These institutions, which promote free-market capitalism and global trade, offered development aid to "underdeveloped" countries but made it conditional on their participation in these systems. Despite the prevalent international rhetoric after decolonization, which promised "a new, universalized equality between all States and peoples, the postcolonial international economic order preserved colonial and racial inequality" between the Global North and South ([A/HRC/50/60](#), para. 24). Starting in the 1960s, "underdeveloped" states across Asia, Africa and Latin America sought to challenge this postcolonial economic order and make claims for economic justice through the United Nations, including the UNGA's adoption of the Declaration on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order in 1974 (paras. 24-28). Despite these efforts, our global economic system is still characterized by "developed" countries which are successors of colonial States and are at the top of the economic hierarchy; they intervene in the economic, political, and social systems of "underdeveloped" countries and Indigenous peoples (para. 28).

## MARGINALIZATION OF RACIAL JUSTICE, EQUALITY, AND NON-DISCRIMINATION IN THE 2030 AGENDA

The 2030 Agenda contains racial equality commitments and there is some evidence that progress is being made to promote racial justice within the SDGs framework. Yet, implementation of the SDGs “remains weak, suggesting a merely performative commitment to addressing entrenched racial and ethnic inequalities” ([A/HRC/50/60](#), para. 53). For example, despite general instructions that SDG indicators should be disaggregated, States have largely failed to collect disaggregated data on race, ethnicity, indigeneity and migrant status. Indicators are the main measure of progress on SDGs, and therefore linked to resource allocation, so “it is no surprise that adequate resources have not been directed to combatting racism, racial discrimination, and xenophobia and related intolerance” (para. 59). Further, the Special Rapporteur notes that States tend to “focus on age, gender and sometimes migration status in their reporting, while racial and ethnic inequality is rarely mentioned” (para. 59). The 2030 Agenda also excludes caste and descent-based discrimination, despite their prohibition under the [ICERD](#); this “represents a major barrier to the eradication of poverty and also has significant gender equality implications” (para. 60).

### DECOLONIZING THE INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC ORDER

The Special Rapporteur argues that “[r]acial justice, equality and non-discrimination require far greater transformation than is possible within the 2030 Agenda and within the current international economic order,” and she identifies “alternative approaches and development pathways that may lead to systemic disruption of the inevitable status quo” ([A/HRC/50/60](#), para. 83).

First, an “essential starting point” must be to recognize and engage with alternative visions of full and equal self-determination in order to radically transform the global economic system and its harmful impacts on the environment (para. 84). For example, the indigenous South American concept of *Buen Vivir* offers “an alternative to mainstream development derived not from an anthropocentric conception but from a relationship of complementarity and reciprocity between humans and nonhumans” (para. 85). The Special Rapporteur says that while *Buen Vivir* need not replace the 2030 Agenda, States and the international development apparatus must become more open to this and other alternative epistemologies.

Second, the Special Rapporteur suggests another path to decolonizing the international order is by “seriously revisiting the anti-imperial, redistributive and reparative project embodied in the New International Economic Order,” adopted by the UNGA in 1974, as well as engaging with decolonial initiatives being advanced by social movements today (para. 86). Finally, the Special Rapporteur underscores that the right to development “advances a claim for redistributive justice that reflects the vision and needs of ‘underdeveloped’ nations” and it “has the potential to enable claims for the transfer of resources and self-determination as urgent precursors of all human rights obligations” (para. 88).

### INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS LAW CREATES STATE OBLIGATIONS TO COMBAT DIRECT AND INDIRECT RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

International human rights instruments enshrine the right to self-determination and the principles of non-discrimination and equality in exercising civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights ([ICCPR](#), [ICESCR](#), [ICERD](#)). States “must combat intentional or direct racial discrimination as well as de facto or indirect racial discrimination” ([A/HRC/50/60](#), para. 71). Therefore, discrimination and inequality in any of the SDGs indicators may constitute racial discrimination in violation of international human rights law.

The right to development “is a reconceptualization of development in terms of human rights obligations, guaranteeing both a right to social and economic progress and the realization of all other human rights through self-determination and equal sovereignty” (para. 73). The [Declaration on the Right to Development](#) outlines the content of this right, including Art. 5 which requires states to eliminate the human rights violations of people affected by racism and racial discrimination, and Art. 8 which provides for the fair distribution of income and equality of opportunity for all. The [Durban Programme of Action](#) also “lays out several international commitments towards the eradication of poverty and underdevelopment linked to racism, including to the development of racially marginalized groups” (para. 77).

### THE SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR’S RECOMMENDATIONS WITH RESPECT TO UNLOCKING THE POTENTIAL OF THE 2030 AGENDA TO ACHIEVE RACIAL EQUALITY

- Multilateral development institutions should continue institutional and programmatic reforms to advance racial equality, including tackling structural and systemic racial discrimination.
- The UN and multilateral development institutions should recognize and materially support their employees who are internally advocating for racial equality, including in leadership positions.
- The SDGs Indicator Framework should be refined to ensure racially disaggregated indicators are used and race and ethnicity data are incorporated, and States should collect, compile, analyze and publish reliable statistical data disaggregated by race or ethnicity for each SDG, target and indicator.
- All actors should recognize caste and descent-based discrimination as a form of racial discrimination and include such discrimination as part of the “leave no one behind” principle.
- States should identify racism and racial discrimination as key barriers to development, and respect the right to self-determination of all racially marginalized peoples affected by major development projects.
- All development actors should prioritize a decolonial approach to transforming the existing framework of racially discriminatory underdevelopment and prioritize the meaningful participation, representation and leadership of racially marginalized people in creating alternative approaches to development and human well-being.

See a full list of recommendations: [A/HRC/50/60](#), paras 91-93; *List of Additional Recommendations*