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Troubled waters



How the 'blue economy' may be
harming the world's oceans



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Nothing can be ‘green’ or ‘eco-friendly’ until the ecological debt is paid

What an ecologically scarred world needs is redress for the historical and ongoing exploitation that is driving environmental collapse, not supposedly green solutions that only reproduce the same injustices.

IN 1950, the economist Karl William Kapp came up with the idea of a cost-shifting success in his ahead-of-its-time book *The Social Costs of Private Enterprise*.¹⁻² A cost-shifting success is when the costs of producing something are successfully shifted to other people and places, while the company that makes it keeps the profits.³ Cost shifting is when it’s easier to dump toxic waste into a river, making people – often Black and Brown – pay downstream, in another jurisdiction or country. On a planetary scale, cost shifting happens when whole regions are turned into sacrifice zones for polluting industries, when a company sells products that contain ‘forever chemicals’ that poison our bodies and groundwater, or when oil companies see massive profits even as society and Earth’s life support systems pay for climate change caused by the burning of fossil fuels.⁴⁻⁹ It’s called a cost-shifting success because so-called externalities cannot meaningfully be internalised. The poor have little power in a market-based economy because they don’t have money that they could use to, say, lobby politicians or pay for lawyers. So while polluters cash in, the poor pay with their lives, their health, their homeland.¹⁰

Cost-shifting successes can be painted green. A new million-square-foot ‘sustainable’ headquarters for France’s largest bank, BNP Paribas Fortis, in Brussels has

**Vijay Kolinjivadi and
Aaron Vansintjan**



Diana

The UK, the US and the EU have already exceeded their fair share of carbon emissions.

been adorned with a massive green roof and innumerable photovoltaic panels as well as four Olympic-sized swimming pools’ worth of stored water to warm the building in winter.¹¹ But not only has this bank been one of the world’s major investors in the deforestation of the Brazilian Amazon for €5 billion soy and palm oil deals with major agribusinesses (chiefly Cargill), but its ‘green’ makeover of its headquarters demands specialised

mineral extraction for rare earths like neodymium, tellurium and gallium as well as lithium, copper and nickel. Mysteriously, the labour conditions that directly result in the construction of this so-called green building are not considered in the advertising material. This includes the labour of (especially migrant) workers in Belgium as well as the labour of the supply chains well beyond Europe’s borders that are required to extract raw materials, process them, manufacture them, transport them and assemble them.

Branding stolen value from racialised people as ‘eco-friendly’

None of this is new, even if it has been recast with ‘green’ bells and whistles. Since Columbus set sail for the ‘New World’ in 1492, European powers started a process of slavery and Indigenous genocide on a global scale unprecedented in human history. The transatlantic slave trade involved the exportation of labour to power the economies of the countries where they were forced, on pain of death, to work.¹² Insatiable European appetites needed cheap (dark-skinned) hands and vast plantations to provide the raw materials for subsequent stages of industrialisation.¹³ Nothing, not even humiliating peanuts for wages, was paid back in return for this stolen labour value.

Today, labour and nature continue to be stolen systematically.

One study calculated that 25% of total consumption in the United States, Canada and Western Europe is provided for free from countries in Africa, Latin America and Asia. By free, the authors mean that it is not compensated in terms of equivalent trade. In the year 2015 alone, wealthy countries in Europe and North America grabbed 13.2 billion tons of raw materials, over 2 billion acres of land, 3.4 billion barrels of oil and 392 billion hours of work (or 188 million person-years of labour) from Latin America, Asia and Africa. The grabbing of resources and hours continues year after year and the scale is growing over time.¹⁴ This is so great that traditional development aid is absolutely meaningless; for every \$1 richer countries give to poorer ones, they receive \$80 in return, while for every \$1 that poor countries receive, they lose \$30 in land, labour and resources.¹⁵ Either this can be understood as downright theft or it can be understood as a conscious gift to Western Europe and North America. But when Elon Musk states – in referring to the lithium needed for ‘green’ electric vehicles from countries like Bolivia – ‘We can coup whoever we want! Deal with it,’ we know we’re not talking about gifts.¹⁶

And the labour stolen isn’t just between rich and less-rich countries. It happens even within the population of a single country. In the United States, \$47 trillion was obtained from 90% of the population of working people between 1980 and 2018 and channelled to the top 10%.¹⁵ If that \$47 trillion were distributed equally to the whole population, every American would get \$140,000 extra in their bank account. This is money obtained, or rather stolen, from all of our work hours. If this money wasn’t being used to build someone’s fifth (LEED-certified) mansion, we might be able to imagine future generations living on this planet.

Economists call the unequal



The 2010 World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth, in Cochabamba, Bolivia, asserted the need for repaying climate debt.

distribution of labour and resources ‘uneven trade’. Uneven trade is a kickback from the colonial empires of the 19th and 20th centuries – except now the United States, Canada, Australia, Japan, New Zealand, Israel and Singapore are in on it, too – as well as a handful of elites in every other country.

What is perhaps most striking is the way labour is treated. Why, for instance, should labour in Canada, the United States, Australia or Western Europe receive higher wages than the same labour carried out in Mexico, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Vietnam or Peru? Manual labour, processing, engineering, transport and logistics tend to characterise labour demands in these countries, while end-of-chain labour (e.g., design, advertising, retail, delivery) often falls to the richer countries.¹⁷ In both cases, labour productivity is generally the same, so why the wage disparity between these regions? You might point to the cost of living, but this doesn’t come out of a vacuum. How, for instance, has a happy, warm-and-fuzzy (through indoor heating, not because of climate) and eco-friendly – yet expensive – life in places like Vienna, Zurich, Melbourne, Seattle, Osaka, Vancouver or Copenhagen been the deliberate outcome of resource and labour exploitation elsewhere?

The implications of this question are crucial to understanding ecological breakdown. Unfair labour arrangements mean that workers across Asia, Africa and Latin America see highly precarious work without adequate safety or environmental standards. They also mean that workers in Europe and North America see their jobs moved overseas, their communities abandoned, and their sense of meaning and purpose lost. The only ones who gain from all of this are the transnational creative professional and managerial service sector workers in cities across the world, who may not recognise how their high wages come at the expense of manufacturing workers made redundant or cheapened labourers in the darker-skinned nations of the world.¹⁸ What this means is that rather than writing statements about diversity, equity and inclusion, it would make better sense to build an international anti-racist coalition that supports all workers.

The stolen goods and life energies also extend to carbon emissions. For example, more than half of all emissions in the year 2004 indirectly supported investments in Western Europe, the United States and Canada. Reflecting their consumption patterns, Western Europe required an import of 72% more emissions than what is emitted

within Western Europe itself, while the Middle East exported 58% of emissions for consumption in other regions (namely, Europe and North America).¹⁹ Overall, the economic investments in richer regions are underwritten by emissions in poorer places, with China's emissions being central to maintaining living standards in the West.

The greening of debt

While many ex-colonies are in endless debt to their financial creditors in North America and Europe, these same ex-colonies are also burdened with the responsibility of dealing with climate change and ecological collapse as well as being most vulnerable to its impacts. This 'ecological debt' caused by the emissions from manufacturing, raw material production and industrial agriculture, which accrues largely to consumers in the richer countries, is not being paid – it's hardly even being recognised.

Many emerging wealthy nations impose their way into poorer regions and grab resources – adopting the same forms of resource imperialism that the United States carries out in Latin America and other parts of the world, and not dissimilar to the playbook of the European colonisers' 'scramble for Africa.' For instance, the United Arab Emirates, one of the world's richest petrostates, has recently acquired nearly 20% of Zimbabwe's land surface as reserve land for carbon credits that companies can purchase to offset their climate-breakdown-inducing activities. The Dubai-based company Blue Carbon acquired forest land across five African countries totalling nearly the landmass of the United Kingdom for carbon offsets that continue to allow climate criminals to burn more fossil fuels.²⁰ This gross public relations exercise by corporations largely responsible for planetary climate collapse has meant that land values for forested regions have skyrocketed across the continent,

all while displacing and evicting the very communities who know best how to steward their forests. The displacement of communities across the continent, in turn, contributes to conditions leading to periurban informal settlements and precarious migration across the Mediterranean and the US-Mexico border. This also leads to rising xenophobia and labour exploitation in the wealthier nations, whose so-called solutions don't get us out of ecological collapse but just dig us into deeper holes.

Imagine if all that land, energy, material and labour could be redirected to meet the needs of the people who need them – instead of going towards speculative land grabs for water-poisoning, soil-eroding, climate-change-fuelling and habitat-loss-generating cheap food export baked into deeply unequal and unfair international trade agreements. The 2 billion acres of stolen land mentioned above (a total area twice the size of India), for instance, could be used to provide varied and nutritious food for up to 6 billion people that is grown with ecological sensitivity to the needs of the land.¹⁵

Towards climate reparations

For at least a decade social movements and governments in the Global South have been pushing for the West to redress historical harm caused by the pollution they are largely responsible for.²¹ For example, at the 2010 World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth, in Cochabamba, Bolivia, over 35,000 people from 140 countries, comprising Indigenous peoples, labour unions, and social movements for climate justice, agrarian reform and women's rights, gathered to draw up a declaration that asserted the need for repaying climate debt: 'Developed countries, as the main cause of climate change, in assuming their historical responsibility, must recognise and

honour their climate debt in all of its dimensions as the basis for a just, effective, and scientific solution to climate change.'²²

Reparations are direct transfers of resources that can repair historical and ongoing damage to people whose ways of knowing about the world have been erased. In this way, they are an attempt to repair relationships marred by centuries of harm. They seek to restore the 'freedom dreams' of people whose pasts have been marred by colonial pillaging and whose futures are being compromised by financial speculation dependent on cheap Black and Brown labour.^{23–24} It's key that these reparations, as philosopher Olúfẹmi Táíwò notes, 'make tangible differences in the material conditions of people's lives' – including through secure housing, accessible food and drinkable water.²⁵

Yet, it's not enough to frame reparations as being about a better distribution of resources; it is also about correcting past atrocities and the ways these continue into the present and future. This means not only transferring resources but also, and perhaps more fundamentally, ceding power and staying silent (for a change) by giving no-strings-attached decision-making power and autonomy to those who have been and continue to be robbed of their territories and their own bodies (as enslaved, indentured and exploited workers), and who are subjected to climate change's impacts (like sea level rise) which they did not cause. But very concretely, it means preventing people like Bill Gates and other land investors from elsewhere in the world (including the UAE, China and India) from interfering in decisions that affect historically disadvantaged groups, so that these groups can make decisions over their own lives on their own land, rather than listening to a (too often, white) saviour from outside telling them how best to run things. As Táíwò states: 'A refusal to take reparative steps when one

has injured another can signal that the injured party morally deserved their injury or need not be regarded as a moral equal.²⁶ Reparations are particularly important for Indigenous people, whose autonomous land-use practices have a record of being more compatible with stewardship and sustenance, but who have also been subject to some of the most extreme kinds of condescension and patronisation.

A so-called ‘loss and damage’ fund was agreed upon by world governments at the 2022 climate conference in Sharm-el-Sheikh, Egypt. A year later, in time for the next climate conference in Dubai, a special UN committee proposed the World Bank as interim trustee and host of the fund. At Dubai, countries’ pledges for the fund totalled only \$700 million, which covers less than 0.2% of what one NGO estimated was needed per year.

Hosting the fund at an institution notorious for funnelling wealth to wealthy Northern creditors and corporate interests hardly bodes well for addressing the historical legacy of exploitation that created climate crises in the first place.^{27–30} And a fund whose purse strings are held principally by North American and Western European nations does not bode well for ceding power to poorer countries and regions that urgently need to develop without depending on richer nations. Wealthy and ex-colonial nations like Belgium, France and the United Kingdom have yet to repair historical damage to the societies they exploited, causing unthinkable violence. Others, like the United States, do not even acknowledge, let alone attempt to repair, debt-driven foreign policies and deadly dictatorships they installed and propped up in places like Indonesia, Angola and many parts of Latin America to keep resources flowing in their direction.^{31–32}

In this context, a ‘loss and damage’ fund that supposedly accounts for the historical

responsibility of climate breakdown and is framed as climate reparations has a much greater risk of reproducing the same patterns, especially if those who manage the funds are the perpetrators of previous and ongoing wrongdoing. Strings-attached development aid, especially from Europe and North America, but increasingly from China and India, has entrenched poverty, keeping the conditions intact for cost-shifting exploitative labour practices and degraded environments to places where most people can’t afford to complain without risking imprisonment or worse.³³ Climate reparations mean climate justice to undo historical wrongs. They can’t mean reproducing the same cycle of debt-driven loans, the stripping of public assets, an excuse to grab cheap resources or find a cheap location to dump wastes.

A recent study has quantified what reparations would imply for countries that historically have been responsible for climate change.³³ Taking as a baseline the year 1960 (a very generous baseline, given centuries of colonial pillaging) and assuming a collective goal of keeping global warming at 1.5°C, the study’s authors found that places like the United Kingdom, the United States and the European Union have exceeded their fair share of carbon emissions 2.5 times over. The authors show that if all countries were to reduce their emissions to zero by 2050, the over-emitters in the wealthy countries of Europe and North America will still overshoot by nearly three times the amount of greenhouse gas that can be safely emitted to stay within 1.5°C of warming. This would also take up half of poorer countries’ emissions budgets and force them to mitigate their impacts faster. According to these authors, the climate reparations owed to countries who suffer the most from climate breakdown would amount to a total of \$192 trillion by the year 2050. The over-appropriation of the

carbon budget by the United States alone would require reparations of \$80 trillion.³⁴

Down to earth

Smallholder farmer movements, represented by La Via Campesina, a global coalition of farmworkers that represents 200 million farmers across the world, have been calling for land reform and an accounting of the true costs of industrial agriculture. They have been joined by the global Shack Dwellers International and the Landless Workers’ Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais sem Terra) in pushing for a recognition of and reparations for the ‘ecological debt’ carried by the world’s poor. The Kisan Andolan, or Indian Farmers’ Movement, of 2021–22 built broad-based alliances across urban and rural divides and demanded action to protect small-scale farming livelihoods, and they did this even amid a global pandemic and despite an increasingly authoritarian government. We could also mention here movements like the Yellow Vests in France, who in 2018 took to the streets and set up people’s councils across the country in protest against a carbon tax that would ultimately have a greater impact on working-class people than on climate change.^{35–41}

In short, we are eco-friendly when we build solidarity with the people organising for a better kind of world – a real somewhere, not a nowhere pipe dream of speculation that shifts costs onto future generations and faraway places. This means coming ‘down to earth,’ so to speak, to take back our future and reclaim ecological balance for everyone. We have to pull ourselves away from the vortex of speculative innovation, technological fixes and ‘green’ myths of efficiency that simply keep the status quo machinery operating faster and without delay. We need to build an internationalist network of solidarity across workers and

dismantle the class and racial divides that are driving ecological breakdown. ♦

Vijay Kolinjivadi and Aaron Vansintjan are the authors of *The Sustainability Class* (The New Press, December 2024), from which the above is an adapted excerpt. Kolinjivadi is an assistant professor at the School for Community and Public Affairs, Concordia University in Montreal, Canada. He is also a co-editor of the website *Uneven Earth*. Vansintjan, who is the Policy Manager for Food Secure Canada, is founder and co-editor of *Uneven Earth* and co-author of *The Future Is Degrowth*.

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The Sustainability Class How to Take Back Our Future from Lifestyle Environmentalists

Vijay Kolinjivadi and Aaron Vansintjan

An original argument that environmental sustainability has been co-opted by the urban elite, along with examples from around the world of ways we can save our planet

'Caring for the environment means reclaiming ecology for everyone.' – from the introduction

A sustainability apartheid is emerging. More than ever, urban residents want to be green, yet to cater to their interests, a green-tech service economy has sprung up, co-opting well-intentioned concerns over sustainability to sell a resource-heavy and exclusive 'lifestyle environmentalism'. This has made cities more unsustainable and inaccessible to the working class.

The Sustainability Class is about those wealthy 'progressive' urbanites convinced that we can save the planet through individual action, smart urbanism, green finance and technological innovation. Challenging many of the popular ideas about environmentalism, authors Vijay Kolinjivadi and Aaron Vansintjan show that it is actually the sustainability class that is unsustainable, its solutions working to safeguard an elite minority, exclude billions of people, and ultimately hasten ecological breakdown, not reverse it.

From Venice Beach, Los Angeles, to Neom in Saudi Arabia and beyond, the authors explore with biting humour how investors around the world are rushing to capitalise on going green. By contrast, real-world examples of movements for housing and food production, transport and waste management demonstrate how ordinary people around the world are building a more ecological future by working together, against all odds. In doing so, they show us how sustainability can be reclaimed for everyone. Sustainability isn't about vibes and superficial green facades. It's about building people power to reimagine the world.

For more information and details on how to purchase the book, please visit thenewpress.com/books/sustainability-class.



'Do you want to attain a sustainable way of life? It's likely you will end up just reinforcing the hypocrisy of the sustainability class. The only way to avoid this trap is to read this book.'

– Kohei Saito, associate professor at the University of Tokyo and author of *Slow Down: The Degrowth Manifesto*

'The struggle to transform society and the economy away from our addiction to fossil fuels is, as these authors argue cogently, a constant class struggle against wealth and power. They remind us that in that struggle we have the power to say no and the power to say yes; the power to fight and build. Essential reading for the world's transformers.'

– Ann Pettifor, author of *The Production of Money*

'A scathing critique ... Readers will come away more savvy and empowered.'

– *Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

'With lively prose, a keen eye for detail, and razor-sharp political sensibility, Vijay Kolinjivadi and Aaron Vansintjan have thrown an intellectual Molotov cocktail into the heart of lifestyle environmentalism. After reading this book, you'll never look at environmentalism the same.'

– Jason W. Moore, author of *Capitalism in the Web of Life*

'A powerful challenge to a way of thinking that has turned sustainability into a virtue-signaling lifestyle.'

– *Kirkus Reviews*

Drug resistance is making malaria normal again

As resistance to existing antimalarial treatments grows, so too does the threat posed to the African continent by this deadly disease.

MALARIA is such an inherent part of many African people's lives that any kind of fever or general feeling of malaise is often referred to as malaria. Any health worker who has practised on the African continent will tell you that they have observed this assumption. About 94% of malaria cases and 95% of deaths from malaria, a disease that was long eliminated in many parts of the world, occur in Africa.

Even though there has been progress in the fight against malaria – including Egypt's recent certification as being malaria-free – over 600,000 people die of malaria every year. Those who survive, especially young children and pregnant women, risk life-long morbidities.

Still, 'I think I have malaria' is not a statement African people make with dread. It is often stated with nonchalance and the resignation of a people who have accepted the disruption malaria brings to their lives.

What communities do not always fully appreciate is that malaria is not only continuing to kill but it is also evolving and becoming resistant to some of the existing treatments. In September, on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly, the Gates Foundation, the US Presidential Initiative on Malaria, Unitaid and the Global Fund got together to highlight the urgent need to address antimalarial resistance. These key malaria funders got together to draw attention to the emergence of resistance to artemisinin-based combination therapies (ACTs), the most used malaria treatment line in Africa.

Michael Adekunle Charles

These donors have variously invested in interventions such as supporting the production of affordable generic drugs, subsidising countries so that they can afford to provide people with more diverse and effective options to treat malaria, and research to develop alternative treatments and monitor the progression of resistance.

They further highlighted that while there are alternatives to artemisinin-based treatments, they are three to four times more expensive. Endemic countries throughout Africa cannot afford these treatments.

'We urgently call on bilateral and multilateral donors, philanthropic foundations, and the private sector to join us in heeding the call from malaria endemic countries to make existing alternative ACTs available and affordable,' they said in their statement.

Already, African countries that are hardest hit by malaria also lie at the lower side of the development index. A recent study showed that if Africa gets back on track to meet its malaria goals by 2030, the continent could increase its gross domestic product (GDP) by \$127 billion. Malaria lies at the core of African problems. For decades, it has strained health systems, as governments invest resources to respond to a disease that is, in some countries, responsible for over half of patient admissions.

Malaria also means that resources that could go into

responding to other illnesses have to go to malaria. This is especially true in the face of pandemics. During COVID-19, we saw malaria deaths rise as governments dedicated their public health budgets to managing the pandemic. During the 2022 Ebola outbreak in Uganda, we witnessed the ways in which the existence of malaria made it harder to diagnose Ebola, further compounding the epidemic. We are seeing similar scenarios with mpox as affected countries struggle to respond to both its sudden outbreak and malaria.

Even as the World Health Organisation reports that malaria funding has decreased by 10% and funding for malaria research is at the lowest recorded level in 15 years, it is safe to say that the malaria parasite is only getting smarter – evolving to outsmart existing interventions and bringing with it a heavy sense of *déjà vu*.

The use of artemisinin-based treatments as the malaria parasite grew resistant to chloroquine contributed to the halving of malaria deaths in the past decade. In 2004, British medical doctor and tropical medicine researcher Nicholas White had written: 'Resistance is the most likely explanation for a doubling of malaria-attributable child mortality in eastern and southern Africa. Resistance has already developed to all the antimalarial drug classes with one notable exception – the artemisinins. These drugs are already an essential component of treatments for multidrug-resistant *falciparum* malaria.'

Resistance to antimalarial drugs has been linked to several factors, including the use of poor-

quality drugs, a weak supply chain that compromises the efficiency of drugs, and poverty that forces people into practices that can drive resistance, such as self-medication, taking incomplete drug doses and sharing drugs.

Following the catastrophic deaths that came with resistance to chloroquine, Dr White further warned: 'If we lose artemisinins to resistance, we may be faced with untreatable malaria.' And that, 'The effects of resistance on morbidity and mortality are usually underestimated.'

When a patient in Africa comes into the medical centre on suspicion that they have malaria, the community health workers, most of them women, who form the bedrock of national malaria responses move fast. They know that the disease is a matter of life and death. They also know that many times, people feel ill and, for various economic, social and cultural reasons, do not seek treatment. They welcome the patients who decide to go to the medical centre.

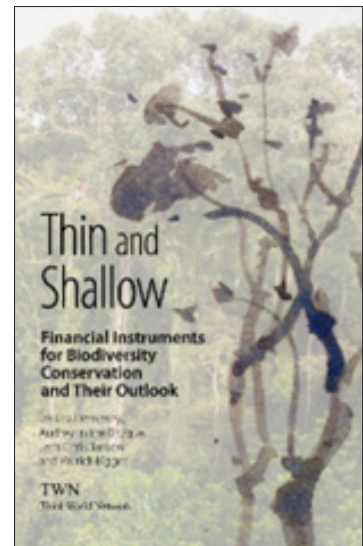
And while malaria may be part and parcel of the lives of African people, with antimalarial resistance, we are yet to see the worst of the disease. Without urgent intervention, which includes adequate funding to enable endemic countries to prevent and treat the disease, the perfect storm of antimalarial drug resistance coupled with other challenges is brewing even as African people soldier on – many unaware of the consequences awaiting them.

The first step in staving off the storm is for donor countries to honour their pledges and adequately replenish the global fund for the next grant cycle. The next is for Africa to determine once and for all to not normalise the existence of a disease that continues to shackle the continent and take steps to eliminate it once and for all. ♦

Dr Michael Adekunle Charles is the CEO of RBM Partnership to End Malaria. This article was first published in African Arguments (africanarguments.org) under a Creative Commons licence (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

Thin and Shallow: Financial Instruments for Biodiversity Conservation and Their Outlook

*Jessica Dempsey
Audrey Irvine-Broque
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Patrick Bigger*



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This paper examines the track record of private financial mechanisms aimed at funding conservation of biological diversity. It finds that, due to lack of rigorous and consistent benchmarks and monitoring, these investments may not necessarily safeguard biodiversity and could even, in some cases, have adverse impacts. Further, despite decades of attempts to draw private capital to biodiversity protection, the quantum of finance remains limited, especially in the highly biodiverse countries of the Global South where it is most needed.

Written for a research project established by a group of central banks and financial supervisors, this paper cautions these authorities from deploying resources towards promoting such biodiversity-focused private financial instruments. Instead, the supervisory bodies are urged to step up policy coordination to address drivers of biodiversity loss in the financial system.

Available at: <https://www.twn.my/title2/books/pdf/Thin%20and%20shallow.pdf>

The colonial origins of economics

The work of this year's Nobel economics laureates brings the role of colonialism back to the development discourse, but does so in a way that actually reinforces Eurocentrism in the discipline.

THE recent Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel 2024 was awarded to Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson and James Robinson (henceforth AJR). The Nobel committee noted that the laureates 'have demonstrated the importance of societal institutions for a country's prosperity. Societies with a poor rule of law and institutions that exploit the population do not generate growth or change for the better'. One of their key insights is that to understand differences in prosperity, we need to consider the 'colonial origins of comparative development' (Acemoglu et al. 2001). Some have called this a 'colonial turn' in economics (Ince 2022).

While this is an improvement on a discipline that has historically focused on markets as the main avenue for development, and has tended to neglect the role of colonialism in shaping economies, this colonial turn nonetheless falls short of understanding the roots of global (and local) inequality and the institutions that underpin the economic system. To understand how AJR managed to integrate colonialism into economics without addressing the capitalist dynamics of uneven development, we need to go back to the colonial origins of economics.

Economics has arguably been founded on Eurocentrism since its inception as a discipline (Dutt et al. 2025). Economics assumes that development (of capitalism) took place in Europe endogenously, based on a range of internal factors such as technological progress, high productivity, hard work, and cultural and social changes, which meant that the production

**Ingrid Harvold Kvangraven,
Surbhi Kesar and
Devika Dutt**

for the market aligned with what economists would consider rational (Amin 1988). Consequently, if the same conditions can be created in other countries, development can also take place there.

This Eurocentric narrative, however, is partial and biased, as it distracts from the violent processes of colonialism, exploitation, changes in social relations, imperialism and racialisation that shaped the advancement of capitalism in Europe, while creating underdevelopment in other parts of the world (Rodney 1972; Brenner 1976; Patnaik and Patnaik 2021; Inikori 2020). As such, it reduces the process of economic development to finding the right kind of institutional mix that ushers in efficiency increases, technological progress and rational decision making, in order to propel underdeveloped countries to a path of prosperity. Given this Eurocentric view's lack of understanding of the role of colonialism in shaping the global economy and creating the development-underdevelopment dichotomy as a result of a common historical process, it actually serves to reinforce a colonial view of the world that sees the Global North economies as naturally better models for development.

As the discipline's focus narrowed during the Cold War to strengthen its reliance on methodological individualism and methodological nationalism – which sees the nation state and the individual as the most relevant units

of analysis without recognising the structures that shape and constrain both the global economy and individual behaviour (Blaug 2003; Fine and Milonakis 2009) – the Eurocentric narrative has only been further cemented and has largely gone unnoticed and unquestioned.

AJR and the 'colonial turn' in economics

When the public protests in the United States following the murder of George Floyd in 2020, the caste-based student movements post-Rohith Vemula, and the movements for decolonising universities starting with #RhodesMustFall escalated, the discipline's lack of attention to racial and caste inequities and its Eurocentric approach finally came to the attention of economists. In the wake of these developments, the discipline has also had to reckon with its colonial origins and its lack of understanding of colonialism and imperialism. Many economists take issue with critiques of economics as being blind to colonialism, as, arguably, AJR and their highly cited work show us the opposite. Furthermore, the Nobel in Economics being awarded to AJR may seem like an attempt to highlight that the discipline does in fact deal with colonialism. But does it do so in a way that challenges the Eurocentric narrative we outline above, or, rather, leave that narrative intact?

To give some context, new institutional economics arose in the 1970s as a further development of neoclassical economics, placing emphasis on the role of property rights and transaction costs, seeing failures associated with free-market reforms in the Global

South as being due to imperfect institutional arrangements that do not adequately support growth (North 1991). AJR's contribution is a further development within new institutional economics, and their work on how colonialism shaped institutions paved the way for a boom in further work on colonialism and slavery within this tradition (Nunn 2008; Engerman and Sokoloff 2006; Michalopoulos and Papaioannou 2013).

The AJR argument, in a nutshell, is that the inequality in the world can be explained by whether countries have 'inclusive' or 'extractive' institutions. Considering 500 years of colonial history, they argue that sustained capitalist growth and prosperity can be attributed to inclusive institutions, which they associate with the protection of private property, contract enforcement and enabling markets that incentivise investment and innovation (market-supporting institutions). According to them, these institutions characterise Western Europe as well as Western European settler colonies (the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand). Extractive institutions, on the other hand, enable expropriation and rent seeking due to legacies of extractive colonialism, hindering development in countries of the Global South. In this inclusive-extractive dichotomy, colonialism as a system of extraction is contrasted with capitalism as a system of inclusion.

Although this appears to bring the role of colonialism back into the discussion of development, and specifically highlights the role played by European colonialism's extractive institutions in creating underdevelopment, we argue that AJR's approach actually serves to reinforce Eurocentrism in economics.

The Eurocentrism of AJR

There are three important ways in which AJR reinforce

Eurocentrism and a colonial worldview. The first is that their research neglects the global nature of capitalist development and the central role of colonialism in it (Grinberg 2018; Ince 2022). Various radical anti-colonial scholars have long argued that capitalism unfolded across the world in a manner that concomitantly produced capitalist development in the Global North and capitalist underdevelopment in the Global South. The so-called inclusive institutions in some parts of the world were sustained by extractive institutions, such as racialisation, destruction of artisan economies, and the development of extractive mining and plantation economies, in other parts. This created unevenness on a global scale, producing the developed-underdeveloped dichotomy, which was borne out of a common process of capitalism's global unfolding, supported by colonialism (Amin 1988; Patnaik and Patnaik 2021). In fact, this unevenness is not limited to only within-country dynamics; economies of the developing world have seen that the process of capitalist accumulation has been associated with the large-scale dispossession of those subsisting on the resources needed for the accumulation process (Sanyal 2007). This scholarship thus highlights the differentiating nature of capitalism's dynamics, the failure to deal with which betrays a rather simplistic understanding of development processes.

AJR consider colonialism a discrete external shock to the trajectory of endogenous domestic institutional development. Path dependency, in this account, is not due to the uneven nature of capitalist development but rather due to a self-reinforcing nature of political and economic institutions (generating 'vicious' or 'virtuous' cycles). By focusing on (market-supporting) institutions as the drivers of change, the AJR framework papers over the uneven nature of capitalism itself. As such, it demonstrates a lack of

understanding of capitalism as a global and violent system that, both historically and contemporaneously, produces unevenness, and generates development and underdevelopment. Thereby, underdevelopment in the Global South is understood to be an outcome of failed cases of capitalist transformation and the lack of 'good' institutions. Similarly, development in the Global North is simply attributed to the establishment of good institutions, without considering that such development depended on a global system of exploitation and extraction. Neglecting the structural, violent and uneven processes of capitalist development, AJR reinforce the Eurocentric idea that capitalist development is based on rational, progressive and endogenous (good) institutions.

The second way Eurocentrism is reinforced is in AJR's neglect of the violent and uneven process through which institutions of private property rights have been established in both the Global North and the South. This neglect leads them to deem them 'inclusive' institutions, despite the fact that property rights were created through large-scale dispossessions and enclosure of common or indigenous land, a far cry from 'protection from expropriation' (Khan 2012). Indeed, it is well documented that the capitalist expansion in Western European settler colonies was supported by the elimination and dispossession of indigenous peoples (Rana 2010). As such, it seems particularly bizarre to suggest that it is protection from expropriation and coercion that characterises these allegedly inclusive institutions.

Besides, even in the Global North, private property rights, for both physical and intellectual property, were routinely violated where convenient, during the process of development. For instance, in the US in the 19th century, the success of private railroad companies is often attributed to the fact that

they were given the power of eminent domain – meaning they could violate the private property of others by paying compensation – in order to expand (Klemetsrud 1999). In addition, Chang (2001) shows that intellectual property regimes were also historically very lax in Europe and the US in the 18th and 19th centuries, and producers routinely violated intellectual property rights of competitors well into the 20th century. Generally, in singling out domestic institutions as the key factor explaining economic development, the AJR view betrays a lack of complexity in understanding how institutions are embedded and evolve with economic and social systems more broadly.

Furthermore, if we look at how such institutions have been rolled out across the world, we find that they have had highly unequal impacts on different people, often marginalising the less powerful in society. For example, when property rights were instituted by the British in India, a reliance on written contracts was enforced. As such, only socially privileged castes were able to take advantage of this, forcing marginalised caste groups to lose their ownership claims (Ilaiah 1990). Others have noted that assigning property rights to tribal and indigenous populations in India, by bringing common land within the ambit of market exchange, opens it up for grabs by big capital who yield much more power in the market than the tribal population (Bhattacharya et al. 2017). Similarly, the upholding of private property rights as sacrosanct in South Africa after the end of apartheid, despite the immense violence through which the land had been grabbed by the apartheid government for the White population, has contributed to the continuation of vast inequalities in the country (Ngcukaitobi 2021). As such, AJR's critical promotion of (market-supporting) institutions sweeps under the carpet the power

imbalances that are reinforced through such institutions and the violent ways in which these institutions have been established across both the developed and developing world.

Thirdly and finally, in identifying the fundamental causes for development, the AJR framework, unfortunately, also leads us to think of development as a techno-bureaucratic process of policy fixes (Rist 1997), thus depoliticising the process of capitalist development. The ultimate lesson that is often drawn from their work is that Anglo-American political institutions are historically unique and should be universalised in order to support capitalist development globally (Morefield 2014). Indeed, the key policy prescription that came out of AJR's work was that countries in the Global South needed to adopt the right kinds of institutions to support capital accumulation, also aligning closely with what has since come to be known as the post-Washington Consensus (Fine 2006).

While AJR move away from the plumbing-type behavioural fixes that the randomistas promote as the solution to development (Banerjee and Duflo 2011), their general understanding of development as something that can be solved by importing solutions developed in the Global North remains. Perhaps unsurprisingly, importing 'good' institutions has generally not been particularly successful in promoting economic development in the Global South, given that it is a fallacy that such institutions facilitated economic development in the Global North. An extreme example is the case of Afghanistan, where the US attempted to import good institutions to facilitate development, without dealing with the broader structural problems or recognising their own role in shaping the country's political economy (Goodhand and Sedra 2013). As we know, this attempt failed miserably. Generally,

depoliticising development to move our attention away from the structural and violent forces that support capital accumulation serves to reinforce the Eurocentric view of development. This has real material consequences for people across the world who are subject to policies associated with new institutional economics.

Consequently, although AJR's work is often considered to represent a 'colonial turn' in economics, it actually fails to deal with the colonial worldview embedded in mainstream economic theory, given that colonialism is considered a shock from the past, and the continued dynamics of imperialism and uneven capitalist development are not considered. Remarkably, despite their attempt to integrate history and colonialism into their analysis, AJR's theoretical framework actually remains ahistorical and Eurocentric (Ankarloo 2002; Dutt et al. 2025).

Conclusions

The awarding of the Nobel Memorial Prize to AJR despite the easily disprovable nature of their hypotheses on institutions and development – which have indeed been heavily critiqued in other fields – once again reveals the insular nature of economics and its resistance to fundamental change and improvement, apart from very narrow changes in methodology. This award to the three professors from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Chicago lends further credence to Freeman et al.'s (2024: 1) recent finding that there has been a 'high and rising' concentration of Nobel Prize winners in just a handful of elite US universities. This insularity and concentration of power is particularly problematic, given the disproportionate influence that the economics discipline has on the policy world. Indeed, policy formulations on 'good governance' in key international organisations

are still heavily influenced by AJR's simplistic and biased view of the nature of capitalist development processes.

Why does this matter? By providing an easy and elegant 'answer' to the complex process of development, albeit a wrong one, AJR's rise to prominence has lent support to a very particular understanding of development that is now prevalent in the discipline. It also provided an easy, unfalsifiable and arguably racist narrative of underdevelopment: Why are developing countries not able to develop, even after decades of efforts to strengthen institutions as per the Eurocentric standard? Because their private property rights and other capitalist institutions are still not strong enough. This narrative suggests that there is something intrinsically good about Western capitalist institutions and intrinsically bad about non-capitalist institutions. The role of colonialism in destroying the good non-Western – both capitalist and non-capitalist – institutions that could promote improvements in living standards and social cohesion in the currently underdeveloped nations is beyond the pale. Our aim is not to suggest that the study of institutions is not important, but rather that the way institutions are studied in the mainstream of the economics discipline is seriously deficient for understanding global inequality. ♦

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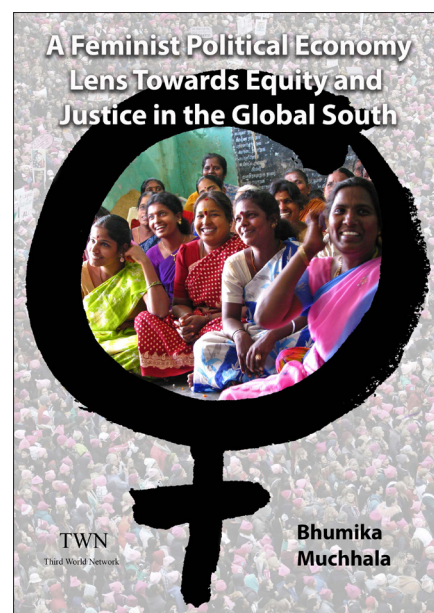
A Feminist Political Economy Lens Towards Equity and Justice in the Global South

By *Bhumika Muchhala*

THE global political dynamics of financialisation, sovereign debt distress and fiscal austerity generate structural inequalities within and between nations. A feminist political economy lens centres the social provisioning approach, where economic activity encompasses unpaid and paid work, human well-being is the yardstick of economic success, and power inequities, agency and economic outcomes are shaped by gender and intersectional inequalities. Transforming macro-policy norms and frameworks towards gender and intersectional equity involves reorienting fiscal policy from expenditure reductions to sustained, long-term and gender-responsive investment in public sectors and services to support gender equality and protect women's economic and social rights.

In this insightful collection of papers and articles, scholar-activist Bhumika Muchhala examines how financial subordination generates conditions of gendered austerity through channels such as social reproduction and unpaid care work, reduced access to quality public services, and regressive taxation. This analysis involves a perceptual shift from viewing women as mere individuals to gender as a system that structures power relations within economy and society. Writing from a critical political economy and South-centric perspective, she also maps out possible pathways – ranging from fiscal policy reformulation and sovereign debt workouts to social dialogue and movement building – towards a decolonial transformation for gender and economic equity.

Available at: <https://twm.my/title2/books/pdf/A Feminist Political Economy Lens Towards Equity and Justice in the Global South.pdf>



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The ‘blue economy’ myth

We have to stop thinking the ocean can be run like a business

Covering over two-thirds of Earth’s surface, the oceans have been viewed as a source of growth and development. But will the ‘blue economy’ entail sustainable management of the world’s marine resources, or does it herald wanton exploitation of the aquatic ecosystem for profit?

Nnimmo Bassey

IN response to the increasing global demand for resources and the economic pursuits that come with it, attention on the world’s oceans continues to grow. But how should marine resources be properly managed? The ‘blue economy’ is the umbrella term that looks at the planet’s oceans from an economic perspective and refers to the sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods and jobs while preserving the health of ocean ecosystems.

On one side of the coin are the exploitative activities and economic sectors, including fisheries, aquaculture, maritime transport, tourism, offshore renewable energy like wind and tidal power, and biotechnology. On the other side are marine conservation efforts.

Global platforms like the United Nations, the World Bank, the European Commission, the Commonwealth of Nations and the Center for the Blue Economy have called for oceanic sustainability efforts.

In March 2024, the United Nations Environmental Assembly adopted a resolution on ‘strengthening ocean efforts to tackle climate change, marine biodiversity loss and pollution’. A press release issued by the European Commission after the session stated,



The Great Barrier Reef in Australia. Coral reefs are dying at an alarming rate due to ocean acidification fuelled by the climate crisis.

‘By submitting and negotiating the resolution, the European Union and its Member States reiterated their determination to play a leading role in protecting, conserving, restoring, and sustainably utilising the world’s oceans.’

The concept of the blue economy is rooted in the recognition that the oceans are vital to human wellbeing and the global economy. Still, they are also threatened by overexploitation, pollution and climate change. Therefore, the blue economy seeks to balance economic development with the need to protect and restore the ocean environment, ensuring that future generations can enjoy marine

resources.

Fundamental principles of the blue economy include:

- **Sustainability:** Ensuring ocean-related activities do not deplete resources or harm the environment.
- **Inclusive growth:** Promoting economic activities that benefit local communities and alleviate poverty.
- **Innovation:** Encouraging the development of new technologies and practices that enhance productivity and sustainability in using ocean resources.
- **Governance:** Implementing effective policies, regulations

Wise Hok Wai Lum (CC BY-SA 4.0)

and international cooperation to manage ocean resources responsibly.

The blue economy is increasingly seen as a crucial component of global efforts to achieve sustainable development and address climate change, particularly in coastal and island nations heavily dependent on marine resources.

Challenges in defining the blue economy

There is no consensus on the definition of 'blue economy'. The term generally refers to the purportedly 'sustainable' economic activities associated with oceans, seas and coastal waters. Yet, that's where consensus on the concept breaks down. The blue economy requires a clear, widely agreed-upon definition before it can be applied appropriately.

The World Bank defines the blue economy as the 'sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods and jobs, and ocean ecosystem health'. The European Commission defines it as '[a]ll economic activities related to oceans, seas, and coasts. [It] covers a wide range of interlinked established and emerging sectors'.

According to the United Nations, the blue economy 'comprises a range of economic sectors and related policies that together determine whether the use of ocean resources is sustainable' while emphasising the need to protect life below the water. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) stated that the blue economy applies to industries with 'a direct or indirect link to the ocean, such as marine energy, ports, shipping, coastal protection, and seafood production'. The World Wildlife Fund acknowledges that there is no widely accepted definition.

Defining the blue economy is much more than semantics.



Cleaning up on the coast after an oil spill. Hundreds of millions of gallons of oil enter our oceans yearly.

Some people mistakenly believe that it has been intended to benefit capitalism. This is a widespread phenomenon and is not just limited to corporations. In some ways, it is similar to the misconceptions that arose from using the term 'green economy'.

People who live far from the ocean may not fully grasp how much humans rely on the ocean for survival, including regulating climate, providing food sources and generating oxygen, even if they don't directly access it for daily needs. This can lead to a view of the blue economy as simply supporting coastal transportation, recreational activities or ecotourism. However, the US Environmental Protection Agency states, 'Approximately half a billion people globally depend on coral reef ecosystems for food, coastal protection, and income from tourism and fisheries.' And yet, coral reefs are dying at an alarming rate due to ocean acidification fuelled by the climate crisis. They are also being destroyed by harmful coastal development – development that could be part of the blue economy.

Development or destruction?

The United Nations affirmed that the blue economy would

assist in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals – especially Goal 14, 'Life Below Water'. This triggered a rapid expansion across all facets of the blue economy, with projections suggesting this trend would persist.

Marine economic activities include fisheries, aquaculture, maritime transport, coastal renewable energy, seabed mining, bioprospecting, marine biotechnology and waterborne tourism. These activities harm marine health to some degree and contribute to many problems, including biodiversity erosion, ocean acidification, climate change, water and air pollution, and even noise pollution that threatens marine life, including whales and dolphins.

The corporate extractive sector, in particular, has been looking for new territories to extract minerals such as manganese, cobalt, copper, nickel and rare earth elements. This has become increasingly problematic due to the risks involved in resource extraction. Though the ocean may seem like an unlimited expanse that profiteers exploit purely for financial gain, it has natural limits.

'[A]lthough scientists and campaigners have been warning of the consequences of our rampant

exploitation for decades, time is now running out to protect our oceans,' Hugo Tagholm, executive director of Oceana in the UK, and Callum Roberts, a professor of marine conservation at the Centre for Ecology and Conservation at the University of Exeter, wrote in EuroNews in November 2023. 'We like to think of our ocean as infinite, but the truth is, it cannot stand this industrial-scale exploitation.'

The Earth's marine ecosystems are extremely valuable to the global economy. They deliver essential ecosystem services to life on the planet and provide sustenance for billions of people. More than 3 billion individuals depend on the ocean for their livelihoods. Most live in developing nations; humans and countless other species rely on healthy, thriving oceans.

'Bluewashing': Covering up bad behaviour

Terminologies such as 'green economy' and 'blue economy' might seem promising but are often noted as cover-ups for harmful activities. '[T]he blue economy is not a benign concept offering a win-win for the economy and the environment,' said John Childs, a senior lecturer at the Lancaster Environment Centre at Lancaster University, United Kingdom, and the co-editor of a special section in the *Journal of Political Ecology* that presented several papers on the blue economy.

Childs said the papers he reviewed suggest that the blue economy is 'another capitalist fix in which global capital is seeking to reproduce itself, to keep making money and create a surplus. This is happening as we get to the point where much of the planet's landmass [has] been appropriated'.

'If "greenwashing" is the practice of making unsubstantiated or misleading claims about the environmental benefits of an action, then perhaps we need a new term – "bluewashing" – to cover coastal

and marine development initiatives which fail to deliver on their environmental and social promises,' wrote Nicole Leotaud, the executive director of the Caribbean Natural Resources Institute, in 2017. 'Personally, I'm tired of labels that confuse and mask the development principles we are seeking,' she added.

Threats to the marine ecosystem

Some protections benefit the oceans, such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), established in 1982 to provide an international legal framework for using and protecting the marine environment. However, not all nations agree to these protections. Additionally, ocean-bordering countries have their own laws, creating a patchwork of often poorly enforced rules. Contested waters regularly result in tumultuous situations.

Many maritime crimes negatively impact oceanic health, such as illegal fishing or harvesting, ocean dumping and polluting. In addition to overfishing, where necessary species are removed from the food chain, and accelerating biodiversity loss, unsustainable industrial development along coastlines has also contributed to ocean pollution. 'All of these threats erode the capacity of the ocean to provide nutritious food, jobs, medicines, and pharmaceuticals as well as regulate the climate,' stated a 2020 article in the journal *Nature*. 'Women, poor people, Indigenous communities, and young people are most affected.' Climate change is another serious threat to our oceans, 'increasing sea levels and making the ocean warmer, more acidic and depleted in oxygen', the *Nature* article pointed out. The ocean has absorbed more than 90% of excess gas trapped by greenhouse gas emissions, but that is only a portion of the damage. 'Unsustainable development along coastlines is

destroying coral reefs, seagrass beds, saltmarshes and mangrove forests,' which provide vital biodiversity reservoirs, sequester carbon, and buffer coasts against storm surges, the article added. Because of human intervention, plastics and nutrient runoff pollute the water and kill sea life.

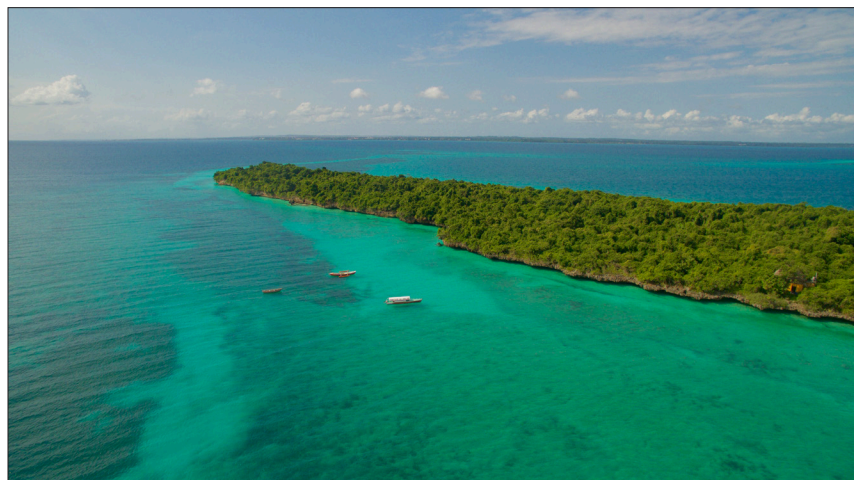
We must not ignore the hazards of shipping. Sea vessels use heavy fuel oils that release soot, sulfur and carbon dioxide, amounting to substantial emissions of some air pollutants and 3% of carbon dioxide emissions.

There are many parts of the ocean where life has died. These sections have layers of crude oil and have been contaminated to outlandishly unsafe levels. Pointing to the impact of oil extraction in Bayelsa in the Niger Delta in Nigeria, a Bayelsa State Oil and Environment Commission report reveals that the 'concentration of noxious chemicals, such as Total Petroleum Hydrocarbons, exceed safe levels by a factor of 1 million according to some of the samples taken'.

Even though significant oil spills receive much media attention, the ongoing oil flow into the sea represents the bulk of the problem. 'Hundreds of millions of gallons' of oil enter our oceans yearly, but most evade media attention. According to the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, only a fraction of that – 5% – comes from what the US Department of Commerce labels as 'significant' oil spills.

Some of the most prominent damage to ocean ecosystems appears to come from deep-sea mining on a massive level, which destroys the seabed. It harms marine and aquatic ecosystems while impoverishing coastal communities that depend on fisheries and other resources. The kind of damage that it could cause is almost impossible to calculate, especially since deep-sea mining is a relatively new endeavour.

In a press statement in August



Rob Barnes (www.grida.no/resources/8707)

The success of the Chumbe Reef Sanctuary in Tanzania is due to the involvement of local communities in the management of marine protected areas.

2024, Dr. Enric Sala, the National Geographic Explorer in Residence and Pristine Seas founder, said: ‘Giving the greenlight to deep sea mining would open a Pandora’s box of unknown impacts. Mining the seabed will inevitably affect fragile sea life that we barely know. And a [July 2024] study ... showed that deep-sea polymetallic nodules produce oxygen in total darkness, which may be key to ocean health. The more we look in the deep sea, the more we discover. Rushing to mine the seabed will surely go down in history as an environmental disaster we should have stopped before it started. It is short-sighted to destroy, in minutes, ecosystems that have taken millennia to develop. Countries worldwide have so much more to gain by protecting vital parts of the ocean than signing them away for short-term profit.’

The blue economy in African coastal waters

Just as vast tracts of global land have been acquired to extract fossil fuels – in the United States alone, Earthjustice, a non-profit public interest environmental law organisation, reports that ‘[t]he oil and gas industry has over 26 million acres of land under lease’ – the same phenomenon is being duplicated in the sea. The wellbeing of more

than 200 million Africans who depend on fisheries for food and nutritional security is at risk, CEO of WWF Kenya Mohammed Awer said in July 2023. Once corporate interests claim bodies of water as their own, they will likely become inaccessible to those who make their living from the sea and nearby coastal communities.

Industrial installations, such as crude oil platforms, establish control over the surrounding waters, ostensibly as security buffers. Fishermen who have tried to find more sea life in the high seas have reported that large parts of the continental shelf and beyond are off-limits because extractive industries have claimed and cordoned them off with controlled installations.

Unregulated industrial fishing in West African coastal waters, often carried out by foreign fleets, threatens fishermen’s livelihoods. According to ‘Fishy Networks: Uncovering the companies and individuals behind illegal fishing globally,’ a 2022 report by the Financial Transparency Coalition, more than 40% of cases involving illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing by industrial vessels from January 2010 to May 2022 occurred in West Africa. More than one-third of global fisheries were overfished in 2019, mainly due to illegal fishing.

Access to healthy water bodies is becoming increasingly difficult by the day due to industrial installations and related pollution. Massive oil spills have been the result of different security forces at work, including blowouts at wellheads at Santa Barbara River, a fire at the Ororo-1 well (which erupted in 2020 in Nigeria and was still raging nearly a year later), explosions of floating production storage and offloading (FSPO) units, the blowing up of oil-laden vessels and burning of bush refineries.

Paying to pollute

In the current blue economy paradigm, privatisation prioritises profit above ecosystem health. Water is viewed as a commodity in this construct, and the buying and selling of oceanic water and aquatic resources would be prioritised over other considerations.

The blue economy could allow polluters to pay to pollute by allowing bodies of water to be used as dumps for mine tailings and other pollutants. It could also open the space for speculators on water futures, thus raising the stakes against access to clean and safe water for the 4 billion people worldwide facing extreme water scarcity for at least one month every year.

Promise and peril for ocean economy

An OECD report indicated a significant increase in ocean-related economic activities by 2030, saying that ‘[t]he new “ocean economy” is driven by a combination of population growth, rising incomes, dwindling natural resources, responses to climate change and pioneering technologies.’ The projections show that the global value added by ocean-based industries could grow from \$1.5 trillion in 2010 to more than \$3 trillion by 2030.

While the growth of the

ocean economy does offer potential advantages for coastal communities, it's essential to monitor the adverse outcomes that ocean-based economic development can also yield. These challenges can include the growth of existing economic disparities, the displacement of local communities and their means of livelihood, pollution, harm to environmental sustainability and biodiversity, and an infringement of human rights.

With all of these stressors connected to the exploitation of the oceanic ecosystem, safeguards must be implemented.

Physical capital and technology have been given such priority in the world economy that other critical factors like human resources and natural resources are ignored or reduced in significance, and there is no longer any real balance in sustainability.

The drive for profit above the health of the planet and its people leads to the transformation and, often, the destruction of environmental resources without regard to planetary or social limits.

For coastal communities, the ocean is not just an arena for economic activities but a space for culture, spirituality and interactions with nature. Connections to the ocean are a way of life. The prevailing capitalist bent may dismiss this reality as an inefficient use of aquatic ecosystems, yet it highlights the origins of the polycrisis in our world today.

When governments and corporations decide what should be done, they often ignore the people closest to the water and the fact that they know more about what is necessary to protect it. It gets more troubling when the uninhabited deep sea is discussed. For example, in Nigeria, Shell Oil is selling off its onshore oil fields and moving operations to the deep sea, where there is limited oversight on the damage being done. Even if the harm being done in the deep sea stays out of sight, its results still

affect everyone onshore. This is a major reason for the concern anywhere in the world that is near the water.

While some countries believe that opening their maritime territories to investment will improve their economies, they invite the destruction of irreplaceable resources.

Norway explores deep mining in the seas

In January 2024, Norway's Parliament voted to allow mining companies to search a large area of the country's waters, approximately the size of Italy, for the minerals needed to build electric cars, mobile phones and solar panels. 'If you find the resources, and if you have the technology that shows that you can develop this with acceptable [environmental] impact, then you will have your green light,' said Walter Sognnes, CEO of the startup mining company Loke Marine Minerals, according to a January 2024 *Wired* article.

Other companies are also looking to exploit the Norwegian waters, with the startup Green Minerals expected to 'extract copper from what's known as seafloor massive sulfide (SMS) deposits, according to its CEO, Ståle Monstad,' added the article. Test mining is supposed to begin in 2028, but several technical challenges must be resolved. Deep-sea mining companies must transport mineral deposits 3 kilometres from the seabed to the surface. How the maritime ecosystem – corals, sponge grounds and other sea life – will respond to the mining is unknown. Yet, on a positive note, mining companies are required to study the environmental impact before they are permitted to begin exploration.

Norway has changed its position on this issue in recent years. As co-chair of the Ocean Panel, it pledged to sustainably manage the world's coastline by decarbonising

the shipping industry and regulating seafood production. The Ocean Panel, formed in 2018, comprised 14 governments responsible for 40% of the world's coastlines.

Norway's shift in allowing deep-sea mining occurred because a new government was elected in 2021. Outraged researchers have said that not enough is known about the deep-sea ecosystem to risk mining for minerals such as manganese and cobalt, used in batteries and other electronics. 'In marine biology, our knowledge about the existence, function, and distribution of many species is either too poor or non-existent,' warned a group of scientists from the Norwegian University of Science and Technology and NTNU University Museum, both located in Trondheim, Norway.

When a relatively forward-thinking country like Norway promotes deep-sea mining, it raises concerns due to the region's history of resistance to expanded offshore oil extraction. The damage to local economies, fisheries and Indigenous peoples of the region has been demonstrated before, so it is worrisome that support for deep-sea mining seems to be increasing once again.

Deep mining in US seas

According to the *Nature* article 'Five priorities for a sustainable ocean economy,' "[b]lue carbon" ecosystems of mangroves, seagrass beds and saltmarshes store carbon at up to 10 times the rate of terrestrial ecosystems.' For example, the article's authors cite the successful restoration of 3,000 hectares of seagrass beds in Virginia lagoons along the US eastern seaboard, sequestering about 3,000 tons of carbon annually.

However, there are proposals to rely on seaweed to capture carbon or iron filings, which could lead to enormous damage. Yet, most people are unaware of these initiatives or the potential disasters

they can cause. The concept appears benign, but the unsustainable aspects aren't adequately addressed in the public sphere. Moreover, the pursuit of blue carbon through mangrove protection or restoration portends the danger of sea grabbing, displacement of communities or disruption of their livelihoods.

Assessing the value of the marine ecosystem

Some argue that putting a price on the oceans' value distorts the meaning of the blue economy as the right path forward. According to a 2023 report by the World Resources Institute, the blue economy is responsible for more than \$1.5 trillion of the annual global economy.

Although a blue economy is often conceptualised as the 'sustainable' management of aquatic and marine resources and ecosystems, actions other than economic profit or power are usually seen as unreasonable or not viable.

A 2015 report published by *Nature* estimated that the assets found in the global marine ecosystem – including fisheries, shipping routes and tourism – have a total value of \$24 trillion and generate an annual output worth \$2.5 trillion. In 2022, employment in the marine economy grew by 5% in the United States, outpacing the overall economy (3.9%) in job growth.

Yet, the fundamental issue is that the concept of an 'economy' has become so pervasive that people often assume that aquatic ecosystems are intended solely for capital accumulation through exploitation.

Protecting marine ecosystems

Local coastal communities must be mobilised. Forming alliances with fishermen, activists

involved with natural rights, non-profit organisations, and legal and political influencers will have to play an essential role in protecting the oceans. We must use all legal mechanisms to prevent threats to water bodies from corporations, governments and other parties.

The world functions quickly, while political leadership in many regions tends to make strides on the path of least resistance, taking the most expedient way forward. It is a global responsibility to prevent profits from becoming the first priority for industry and political leaders, thereby maintaining the importance of natural resources and life below water.

The wars happening in the world today demonstrate that oceans and other waterways require protection. The massive destruction shows that appealing to the consciences of political leaders or the boards of global corporations is counterproductive. Grassroots activists and mass public awareness and mobilisation, including litigation, can help to hold corporations, governments and criminals accountable when official routes fail to protect the seas. The media can help expose ongoing marine destruction and unsustainable practices and motivate lawmakers to protect oceanic ecosystems. Destroying marine ecosystems can be viewed as an international crime. As harmful activities in the oceans threaten species, it may be considered a kind of genocide – ecocide, or the killing of Mother Nature.

Marine protected areas: More action needed

Marine protected areas (MPAs) include oceanic space for long-term conservation. Other areas could be estuaries, seas and lakes. Such protected areas also cover rivers, creeks, swamps and continental shelves.

As governments, corporations and illegal actors exploit the

open seas in a highly unregulated ecosystem, community-led MPAs represent a potential strategy for protecting the health of the Earth's oceans. Simply marking an area as an MPA may not be a neutral exercise.

MPAs can have many names: marine parks, conservation zones, reserves, sanctuaries and no-take zones. As of 2023, there were more than 5,000 MPAs worldwide, covering more than 8% of the ocean. MPAs have been established in various maritime sites, including the open ocean.

Most MPAs aim to protect marine habitats and the sea life they support. One of the best-known examples is the Galápagos Marine Reserve, which is about 1,000 kilometres off the west coast of South America and includes a variety of marine habitats like coral reefs and mangrove swamps, where trees grow directly in seawater. The waters around the Galápagos are home to about 3,000 plant and animal species. Some MPAs, on the other hand, focus on particular historical sites, like shipwrecks.

According to the Marine Conservation Institute, approximately 8% of the world's waters are protected by some form of marine protection, with the island nation of Palau far out in front. Only nine countries have protected 10–30% of their waters, though only 2% have protected as much as 30 percent.

The UN's World Database on Protected Areas documents MPAs submitted by nations. It reports that more than 15,000 MPAs safeguard an expanse of ocean covering more than 27 million square kilometres. In the US, marine protected areas cover 25% of the country's waters.

Most African MPAs are in Eastern and Southern Africa, with a few in West and North Africa. Experts recommend that MPAs should be people-driven rather than financially driven. If the laws regulating MPAs come solely from the government, further details must

be made clear to those involved in keeping these laws intact.

One example of these rules is the Chumbe Reef Sanctuary in Tanzania, established in 1992. This project continues to involve local communities in managing and monitoring marine resources. It has led to a significant recovery of degraded coral reefs and increased fish stock. This success is due to the involvement of local communities in the management of MPAs and the assurance of equitable stakeholding in the benefits derived from such conservation.

Another success story is the Bazaruto Archipelago National Park in Mozambique, established in 1971. It covers an area of 1,430 square kilometres and contains a diverse range of marine habitats, including coral reefs, seagrass beds and mangroves. This MPA has provided economic benefits to the local communities by supporting sustainable artisanal fishing and protecting the region's biodiversity, including endangered species such as dugongs, turtles and sharks.

Unless MPAs are instituted with the full consent and support of dependent coastal communities, they may be a means of shutting groups of people off from nature. Governments can protect forests without the consent of relevant parties in what is often called 'fortress conservation'. This concept refers to the ability of some groups to map out and prevent others from going near designated parts of the ocean. In such instances, the blue economy could be considered a cause of many conflicts. This situation could arise if communities or commercial entities contend to control resources found in particular areas. Conflicts could also occur when MPAs are cordoned off with a military shield as 'conquered' territories.

Colonising nature

The concept of colonialism goes beyond the political control

and exploitation of one nation by another; it also extends to our relationship with nature. The 'colonisation of nature' entails exploiting and transforming natural resources for economic gain without considering its socio-ecological impacts. This approach has contributed to many problems, including climate change, biodiversity loss and armed conflict over resources.

Launched in 2018 and based in Nigeria, the School of Ecology (SoE) explores environmental and climate justice, agriculture, resource democracy and overall socio-ecological transformation. The organisation operates under the aegis of the Health of Mother Earth Foundation, an ecological think-tank where I serve as the director. One SoE gathering was based on the MPA concept and the challenges of the idea of the blue economy. A people-driven MPA would place the fate of their aquatic ecosystems in people's hands. Such a level of stewardship would ensure ecosystem protection and restoration where damage may occur.

The organisation promotes the security and resilience of ecosystems as wielders of power and capital. Although many people see the promotion of the blue economy as a means of securing life underwater, as highlighted in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, this is often not the case.

Environmentalism from below

The Gulf of Guinea has seen high pollution levels and environmental crimes. A high level of sea-based pollution, including plastic waste, in the Gulf of Guinea is traceable to the Niger Delta, and it is time for regional governments such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to declare an environmental emergency.

A commitment to such a declaration will go far in ensuring that the population of West Africa can rely on a safe environment to carry out their economic, socio-cultural, recreational and spiritual activities. Environmentalism from below requires the reassessment of the false idea that environmental concerns are for those who have had their basic needs met and have the benefit of thinking about luxuries. Environmentalism from below requires those who depend on healthy ecosystems for their basic needs to stand up against attempts to appropriate their territories for exploitation by powerful and connected individuals, governments and corporations. Humanity is outpacing nature and plundering ocean resources to the degree that we are preventing those resources from recovering naturally.

Establishing community-managed MPAs is a powerful strategy for safeguarding the health of our oceans and halting further decline, particularly when incorporated into a comprehensive management framework. These MPAs offer a compelling solution that will help to guarantee that the aquatic commons remain free of corporate and industrial exploitation and monopolies.

Optimally, if local, community-based managed MPAs were established in coastal waters worldwide, they would restore degraded areas, rebuild biodiversity, revive cultural practices, restore dignity and reinvigorate local economies. While capitalism often sets rules globally, there are definite ways in which humanity can work together to liberate nature from the bottom up. The world's oceans – and all species they support, including ours – depend on it. ♦

Nnimmo Bassey is the director of the ecological think-tank Health of Mother Earth Foundation (HOMEF) and a member of the steering committee of Oilwatch International. He is a contributor to the Observatory (observatory.wiki). This article was produced by Earth | Food | Life, a project of the Independent Media Institute.

Capitalism's big blue expansion

Under the cover of the blue economy, oceanic resources are being exploited, geopolitical rivalries played out and climate-harming schemes hatched.

Adam Wolfenden, Maureen Penjueli, India Logan-Riley and Laisa Nainoka

THE need for the expansion of markets and materials under hyper-capitalism has seen a renewed interest in oceans and their exploitation. The push for ocean market expansion is also happening hand in glove with the securitisation of ocean governance. Global powers including developed countries and transnational corporations, backed up by multilateral financial institutions, are all competing to obtain and secure access to a new frontier of maritime resources.

Framing this race for exploitation as the 'sustainable blue economy'¹ and 'blue growth' offers a perfect cover to justify their interests in terms of gaining food security, expanding carbon emissions, and obtaining minerals for 'green technology' and renewable energy for the economies in the Global North and emerging powerful economies in the South, such as China.

Long seen as a vast blue void, the world's oceans are now viewed as sites of enormous economic potential. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)'s *Trade and Environment Review 2023* report claims that the world's ocean economy is worth an estimated \$3–6 trillion, with about three billion people relying on the ocean for food and income.

This article looks at how ocean exploitation and militarisation is taking place under the guise of development and the blue economy framework. It



Port infrastructure development in the Pacific is bound up with considerations of access to marine resources as well as geopolitical concerns.

explores infrastructure financing, particularly deep-water ports, to secure access to ocean resources as well as provide safe harbour for military vessels. It also highlights how deep-sea mining (DSM) is being promoted as a saviour for a transition to a climate-friendly future despite its impacts on climate regulation, biodiversity and ecosystem destruction having the opposite effect. It details how the World Trade Organization (WTO)'s Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies fails to achieve the sustainability issues it set out to address while letting those most responsible for overfishing and overcapacity off the hook. Finally, it examines the push for 'blue carbon', an expansion of the failed carbon market approach to climate action, in the context of the blue economy.

Infrastructure financing fuelling debt to resource the Global North

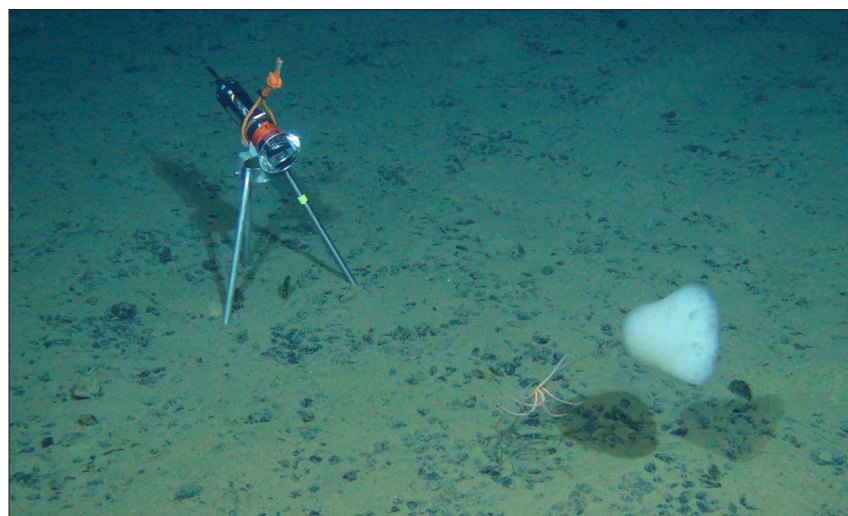
Oceans can offer high reward to those looking to exploit their natural resources. The Pacific Ocean is home to highly valuable and healthy straddling stocks of tuna and other living organisms such as sea cucumber and giant clams as well as a range of ocean mineral nodules which have enormous commercial and strategic military value.

Infrastructure funding, and the movement of goods and people that it facilitates, always holds an interest for exporters seeking to gain market entry to the recipient countries, and colonial powers seeking geopolitical alignment as well as reliable and safe harbours

for their military vessels. As the post-COVID world shifts to a greater focus on securing supply chains, control of and access to port infrastructure and sea lanes becomes crucial for accessing critical minerals and resources.

Infrastructure is critical for the movement of goods and transportation of people in and out of countries. This is especially important for Pacific small island developing states (PSIDS) as these countries comprise small land masses spread out over large ocean distances that are far from global market centres. PSIDS have sought donor partner assistance through bilateral and multilateral agreements to obtain funding and technical support for building, expanding and maintaining ports, roads and airports. Significant loans and grants have been obtained for infrastructural development, especially ports. For example, the approximate total loans from international financial institutions (IFIs) for four Pacific island countries from the year 2000 are: the Cook Islands – \$138.32 million; Papua New Guinea – \$2,719.81 million; Tonga – \$344.56 million; and Vanuatu – \$185.8 million.² Papua New Guinea, Tonga and the Cook Islands are all located in proximity of extensive deposits of seabed minerals.

The colonial powers had traditionally been the dominant, and at times only, donor funders in the Pacific islands, giving them a privileged position of geopolitical influence. This resulted in significant advantage in geopolitical affairs as their aid funds could be leveraged to pressure and influence the decisions of the Pacific island countries. The entry of new donor governments, particularly from emerging economies, has now diluted and challenged the level of influence that the former colonial powers can exercise through their aid programmes. In any case, the wielding of donor influence is



The Clarion-Clipperton Zone (CCZ) in the North Pacific has been targeted for deep-sea mining. This photo of a camera on the CCZ seafloor was taken during a 2019 expedition to assess the impact of potential manganese nodule mining.

consistent regardless of whether it is framed by Western powers as a nefarious agenda or a hand of friendship.

The growth of China's economic power, the advent of its Belt and Road Initiative and its subsequent investment in infrastructure funding across the so-called 'Maritime Silk Road' challenged the traditional domination of colonial donors. China's ease in providing financing for infrastructure projects made it a welcome donor partner in the Pacific region. Its rise as a major new player in the development world by financing projects with loans to Pacific governments has however led to concerns over debt sustainability and allegations of China pursuing 'debt trap' diplomacy.

Despite China's decisions to cancel some PSIDS debts and the shift to more grant-based financing, the US and its allies continue to raise concerns anytime there is port funding in the Pacific, especially for deep-water ports. This induced a major political reengagement from Australia, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, France and the US.

Some former World War II (WWII) naval bases in the

Pacific used by the US and its allies, especially Australia and New Zealand, have come into prominence as controversy surrounded overtures relating to port development. Both Efate and Espiritu Santo in Vanuatu received a massive influx of American military personnel, equipment and infrastructural support during WWII. Roads, wharves and landing strips were built to facilitate the war against Japanese occupation of neighbouring Pacific islands. Luganville, in Vanuatu, was a strategic military post during the 1940 'Pacific War', with 100,000 personnel located there. Given its strategic location northwest of Australia, whoever controls Vanuatu de facto controls the sea lanes between Australia and the US. The Australian government and media, as well as many security commentators, have expressed concerns on the building of a large wharf in the deep-water port in Luganville. Media reports quoted security analysts in Australia and the US who claimed that China was aiming to establish a naval base at the port, something categorically denied by both the Vanuatu and Chinese governments. However, these concerns about military

presence in the Pacific islands fail to acknowledge and expose the reality of the many US bases in the region.

Other former WWII deep-water ports have drawn similar interest and contention from the US and its allies, and the institutions they command, like the Asian Development Bank, have been looking for opportunities to be the ones financing their redevelopment. This has been the case with Lombrum port in Papua New Guinea, Pehnrn port in the Cook Islands, and Port Vila in Vanuatu, among others.

In light of all this, port infrastructure development in the region has been bound up with geopolitical concerns, besides considerations of proximity and access to raw materials and minerals. As geopolitical competition heats up, the protection of sea lanes, and by extension the supply chains, that connect Australia and New Zealand to Asia and the Americas is seen as critical by those countries to challenge Chinese access and control of strategic ports. Buried within the rhetoric of the blue economy, therefore, is the realpolitik of ensuring access to resources through the provision of infrastructure for their extraction, and the use of ports for facilitation of military presence if and when needed.

Deep-sea mining

The exploration of deep-sea mining as a frontier extractive enterprise is driven primarily by the demand for metals and minerals required for technologies, particularly those associated with renewable energy and infrastructure. Companies and industry players often tout resources such as cobalt, nickel, manganese and other rare earth metals as ‘green metals’ in global efforts to combat the climate crisis, positioning DSM as a key component of a just transition towards decarbonisation. However,

this narrative is deeply misleading.

The growing demand for these metals, fuelled by the global energy transition, perpetuates the false idea that deep-sea minerals are critical for achieving a green transition. In reality, DSM represents the continuation of exploitative resource extraction, a phenomenon deeply connected to Pacific histories and legacies but now being advanced under the guise of saving the planet despite extraction methods that may be devastating for the ocean's ability to act as a climate regulator.

In 2021 at the International Seabed Authority (ISA), Nauru, a small island developing state, triggered the ‘two-year rule’ under the 1994 Implementing Agreement,³ which gives the ISA two years to finalise regulations that will allow exploitation of the seabed or DSM; if it fails to do so, mining will still be allowed to go ahead without the regulations. With the trigger period having expired in July 2023, this untried, untested and highly risky activity could see contractors begin full-scale exploitation as early as 2025. This comes despite the international community acknowledging that there is very limited understanding of the deep ocean, the ecosystems targeted for mining, the mining process and the related technology, as well as the potentially devastating ecological and climatic impacts.

Research suggests that deep-sea mining would disrupt the seabed by extracting mineral nodules from the ocean floor some 4,000–5,500 metres deep. These nodules took millions of years to form and mining them could cause severe harm and extinction to thousands of species, many of which are endemic to these sites. Industry players have long claimed that these are empty deserts, but the deep sea, far from empty, is teeming with life and rich biodiversity from bacteria to megafauna. Despite growing research, still little is

known about deep-sea ecosystems and the impacts of mining on deep-sea habitats and the ocean as a whole. However, scientists have established that a healthy ocean is vital to human life. It provides the oxygen we breathe, sequesters approximately one-third of human-generated carbon dioxide, offers protection against severe storm events, and sustains food sources and employment for billions of people.

The Clarion-Clipperton Zone (CCZ), also known as ‘the Area’, a region spanning some 4.5 million square kilometres in the North Pacific, is considered a common heritage of humankind. However, the ecosystems within this region, which are highly vulnerable to long-term damage, have been targeted for deep-sea mining. While scientists continue to warn that the impacts and severity remain largely unknown, initial studies have indicated that the effects of DSM will likely be irreversible and that recovery will not be possible within human timescales. In addition to severely harming deep-sea biodiversity and ecosystems, mining could create disruptions in the water column that affect the pelagic food system and cause sedimentation plumes that alter the nutrient composition of the water. The ecology of the deep sea impacts the health of the entire ocean. The destruction of the deep sea by mining will likely create irreparable harm not only at the CCZ but across the entire Pacific Ocean.

With the real possibility that mining could start as early as 2025, there are growing calls by a wide range of actors including civil society organisations, Indigenous communities, scientists, academics, industry players, parliamentarians and some governments for a precautionary pause, moratorium or an outright ban on deep-sea mining. Oceanic and coastal peoples from the Pacific who have already suffered from nuclear testing and

are on the frontlines of the climate crisis consider deep-sea mining as the newest threat – one that is already proving harmful to Pacific communities, particularly in Papua New Guinea and Tonga, and their livelihoods, cultural practices and wellbeing. They have joined the growing calls for an outright ban on DSM.

Fisheries negotiations

Subsidies for fisheries have long been used to develop a domestic fleet capacity and then export that fleet elsewhere to fish foreign waters. These established fleets are however using the World Trade Organization's negotiations on prohibitions on fisheries subsidies as a way to secure their commercial position against the threat of others.

In June 2022 at the WTO Ministerial Conference, the Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies (AFS) was agreed upon.⁴ The AFS prohibits a range of subsidies to fishing and fishers related to overfished stocks, illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, as well as fishing in unregulated waters. While the outcome was lauded by some, its failure to hold accountable those historically most responsible for global overfishing, undermining the sustainability of fish stocks while placing additional burdens on developing countries, represents an empty harvest.

The negotiations on fisheries subsidies have a long history in the WTO but were intensified following adoption by the UN of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDG target 14.6 is to 'prohibit certain forms of fisheries subsidies which contribute to overcapacity and overfishing, eliminate subsidies that contribute to illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing and refrain from introducing new such subsidies, recognising that appropriate and effective

special and differential treatment for developing and least developed countries should be an integral part' of the WTO negotiations.⁵

The AFS however remains fundamentally flawed and in favour of those countries with large capacity for subsidising and reporting. Its failure to target those historically most responsible for overfishing is ensuring that the burdens of the agreement are being carried by those least responsible. The minimalist special and differential treatment for developing countries fails the SDG mandate. Furthermore, the lack of commitments on technical assistance and capacity building represents yet another failure as well as an obstacle for developing countries, particularly least developed countries, to be able to meet the burdens of this outcome. Instead, resources will have to be either diverted from other purposes or, once again, provided through an overreliance on external assistance. In conclusion, the AFS fails its intended mandate and should be rejected.

Sadly, we're seeing this trend continue with the ongoing negotiations on subsidies that contribute to overfishing and overcapacity. The current negotiations in the WTO continue to avoid adopting the principle of 'common but differentiated responsibilities' and targeting those with the historical responsibility for overfishing.

The problem is clear: the estimated 45,000 large-scale vessels (with an overall length of 24m or more and usually associated with over 100 gross tonnage) which represent only under 5% of the world's motorised fishing vessels but account for an estimated one-third of the total engine power of the global fishing fleet.⁶

The countries with the largest capacity are being let off the hook in many ways. This is firstly seen through the 'sustainability flexibility' which will effectively

only be available to those with the capacity to measure, manage and subsidise their fleets, as well as meet the notification requirements of the WTO – often the same countries historically responsible for overfishing. Secondly, the proposed prohibitions on subsidies for distant-water fishing are only of a 'best endeavour' nature, meaning that while discouraged (with a request to prove that the fishing is sustainable), ultimately the prohibition is unenforceable.

Despite the SDG mandate stipulating the need for special and differential treatment for developing countries, the way that it is being promised in the negotiations is problematic. Developing countries are being split along the lines of how much fish are caught annually, with greater flexibilities envisaged for those small enough to not be considered a market threat. For those above the line, there is a transition period and then no flexibility available to them that isn't on offer for developed countries. Caught up in all of this too are small-scale fishers who are the least responsible for the problem.

The exemptions for the big fleets and the restrictions on the emerging fleets highlight the real, unspoken aim: to ensure that the dominant players remain so, not jeopardising their position through additional competition from other countries. The end result is that the market power and food security of the major players are locked in while they are praised for their 'blue' credentials. All of this is done through an organisation like the WTO that continues to fail in supporting development and under the rhetoric of ocean conservation.

Marine biodiversity and blue carbon

After almost two decades of negotiations, the legally binding UN treaty on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine

Biological Diversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ Agreement) was adopted in June 2023 to much fanfare.⁷

The BBNJ outcome aims not just to conserve the biodiversity of oceans but also to govern how it is to be used. The conservation dimension has placed in a legally binding framework the Global Biodiversity Framework concept of ‘30x30’ – protecting 30% of ocean space through marine protected areas by 2030.⁸ This approach is linked via a climate-ocean nexus with those conservation efforts being connected to the financialised carbon markets, including emissions trading schemes, bonds, insurance, etc., which seek to use these protected areas as stored carbon sinks. Concerns have been expressed that such offsetting projects will be used by those most responsible for historical greenhouse gas emissions to appear to reduce their emissions despite not actually reducing them. This contradicts their actual responsibilities to cut emissions under the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities, ultimately undermining any conservation benefits from the marine protected areas.

Which brings us to the new frontier of capitalist expansion in the Pacific – the promotion of carbon markets in the context of ‘blue carbon’. Blue carbon is the carbon that is absorbed by coastal ecosystems, such as wetlands, salt flats and mangroves, and the benthic sediment on the ocean floor.

Carbon markets have failed to bring down emissions for a range of reasons. A considerable part of the problem is the fabrication of carbon credits from ‘avoidance’ sources. Avoidance credits, sourced from protecting an area that is threatened by damaging activities such as logging, are exceedingly hard to prove as legitimate; in many individual examples, the threat has been proved to be fraudulent. As avoidance credits make up 75%



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Pacific peoples have a spiritual, social and economic relationship with the ocean.

of credits,⁹ a significant majority of carbon credits are likely to be fraudulent and do not represent significant emissions reduction in any form.¹⁰

The second failure of carbon markets is seen in how they are currently used. In the Pacific, we are witnessing Australia securing carbon credit projects in countries like Papua New Guinea to ‘cancel out’ the impacts of its 114 new oil and gas projects.¹¹ Proponents of carbon markets consistently point to the expansion of carbon markets as a good thing for engaging polluters in reducing their emissions, but very little is being done in terms of preventing the ongoing use of (ineffective) carbon markets to avoid emissions reduction.

The oft-cited justification for carbon markets is that they redistribute funds to frontline communities in need. However, the Pacific is littered with examples where carbon project managers from outside the region have failed to fulfil promises of financial benefits for local communities who have responsibility for a site that sequesters carbon. On top of this concerning pattern, using market-based mechanisms leaves the financial circumstances of local

communities vulnerable to market dynamics. This is a privatisation of developed countries’ obligations to provide stable, consistent, meaningful and grant-based funding to countries and communities who are doing the most to protect the climate while contributing the least to the climate crisis.

Enabling this state of affairs are international conservation organisations and international financial institutions like the Asian Development Bank and World Bank. These entities are preparing the pipeline of carbon market projects by encouraging Pacific countries to map their blue carbon zones to facilitate bringing more credits to market.¹² Papua New Guinea has signed an agreement with UAE-based company Blue Carbon LLC to sell blue carbon credits.¹³ New Zealand and Australia are mapping their coastal ecosystems to calculate the amount of carbon sequestered. In November this year, Fiji commenced blue carbon assessments in mangrove areas with support from the German government.¹⁴

Countries and communities alike should exercise high levels of scepticism when considering carbon markets and their blue

carbon expansion. What we can see from previous experience with carbon markets and the motivations of international financial institutions is an embedding of a new industrial landscape distributed across existing geopolitical dynamics. The Global South farms carbon credits for the Global North to use as an exit door on emissions reduction responsibilities, and this is disguised as a benevolent quid-pro-quo arrangement between wealthier and poorer countries. This arrangement asymmetrically benefits the wealthy countries, further enabling their accumulation of wealth.

Conclusion

Pacific peoples have a spiritual, social and economic relationship with the land and the ocean. The blue economy, and with it the industrialisation of the ocean, allows former colonial rulers, often aided and abetted by some Pacific island governments and elites, transnational corporations and multilateral financial institutions to reshape the way the ocean's value is determined. Pacific peoples have a connection to the ocean that goes beyond the commercial valuation promoted through the blue economy paradigm. For them, the ocean holds histories, ancestors, song lines as well as livelihoods, relationships and sustenance.

In contrast, the blue economy aims to enable the exploitation of oceanic resources, promising development but delivering an outflow of resources and profits largely to the Global North. To do so effectively, it requires physical infrastructure that is in close proximity to the abundant natural resources, so as to secure their movement out of the Pacific island countries, as well as governance rules that can be used to enforce this free movement of resources. Infrastructure financing (and the debt incurred) along with WTO and ISA governance mechanisms and

the expansion of carbon markets will open the oceans to greater exploitation with little regard for development and conservation.

The quick-fix promises of the blue economy do not align with the custodianship obligations and already-existing economic systems of Pacific peoples. Instead, the countries of the Global North must address the part they play in the current crises that the oceans of the world face, rather than doubling down on that by expanding the marketisation, industrialisation and militarisation of the ocean. ♦

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The above article is adapted and updated from an earlier version that appeared in the journal Development, published by the Society for International Development, titled 'Blue Economy: Industrialization and Militarization of Oceans?.'

Notes

1. The 'blue economy' concept grew out of the broader 'green growth' concept and increased concern about the heavy damage caused to the ocean and coastal ecosystems by manmade activities such as overfishing, habitat destruction, land-based and marine pollution, shrimp farms, oil and gas

extraction, large-scale infrastructure, ocean acidification and climate change.

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Global fisheries are in far worse shape than we thought

New research uncovers the alarming extent of overfishing across the world today.

Graham Edgar

WHEN fish are taken from our oceans faster than they can reproduce, their population numbers decline. This overfishing upsets marine ecosystems. It's also bad for human populations that rely on fish for protein in their diets.

To manage fishing areas sustainably, we need accurate data on how many fish exist and how abundant they will be in future. Fisheries scientists use complex mathematical models to determine this.

But an investigation by my colleagues and I, published in August in the journal *Science* (<https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.adl6282>), casts serious doubt on the accuracy of these models.

We studied 230 fisheries around the world. We found populations of many overfished species are in far worse condition than has been reported, and the sustainability of fisheries was overstated. Urgent action is needed to ensure our oceans are not fished below their capacity to recover.

Alarming findings

A sustainable fishing operation would ensure the numbers of fish caught do not outstrip the capacity of a fish population to reproduce. In cases where an area has been overfished, stocks should be given time to rebuild.

To determine appropriate catch rates, computer models are used to assess fish stocks. The models are fed data such as fish biology, catch history, and rates of fish breeding, growth and death.



Urgent action is needed to ensure our oceans are not fished below their capacity to recover.

Our investigation tested how accurate estimates of fish stocks actually are. It involved examining data from 230 of the world's largest fisheries, spanning 128 fish species. They include fishing areas off Australia, New Zealand, the United States, Europe, the United Kingdom, Canada, Argentina and South Africa.

We focused on the depletion in the 'biomass', or total weight, of fish stocks. When fish catch falls to below 10% of its biomass when fishing began, the fish stock is widely said to have collapsed.

For each fish stock, we took data that provided the best estimate of stock depletion at a given year in the past. The data was produced by scientists and reported to fisheries managers and databases.

We compared this historical data with updated modelling produced years later. The updated data was the most recent assessment of that fish stock, but was also 'backdated' to the same year as the historical data. The more recent

estimates should be more accurate because they are based on data collected over a longer period, and after improvements in the modelling process.

So what did we find? The earlier stock assessments were often too optimistic about the number of fish in the ocean.

For sustainably fished stocks, the earlier estimates were generally accurate. But for stocks that were overfished, most earlier data turned out to be substantially overestimated. In many cases, fish stocks were regarded at the time to be recovering when they were in fact declining.

Among overfished stocks, we estimated the number of collapsed stocks was likely 85% larger than currently recognised.

How has this discrepancy come about? The models used to make stock assessments are complex and involve many inputs. This can lead to uncertain or inaccurate results – a problem that accumulates each time a value is

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entered into the model.

As I outline below, the consequences can be devastating.

The case of the jackass morwong

The jackass morwong (also known as deep sea perch) is found off southern Australia and New Zealand. In 2009, models estimated the total stock size for south-eastern Australia at 4,680 tonnes – 22% of the 21,200 tonnes that existed when fishing began. This estimate informed decisions by fisheries managers about how many fish could sustainably be caught in future years.

But modelling in 2014 indicated stock size in 2009 was more likely to have been 3,330 tonnes, and the initial stock size was probably about 28,800 tonnes. That

means in 2009, stocks were likely to have depleted to 12% of original levels, not 22%.

The inaccurate estimates mean the ‘total allowable fish catch’ set by the Australian Fisheries Management Authority for jackass morwong is likely to have been unsustainable. Fishing continued with little constraint and the morwong population continued to decline for a decade.

By 2022, however, the declining fish numbers were clear. That year, the authority announced five ocean areas would close to trawl fishers, in a bid to protect the jackass morwong and other fish species. The federal government also allocated about A\$24 million to buy back fishing vessel permits.

This probably could have been avoided if accurate stock models had been applied and the

full extent of depletion recognised a decade earlier.

Fundamental change is needed

Our research shows the global problem of overfishing is far worse than currently recognised. So what should be done?

Clearly, scientists should try to improve the accuracy of models used to assess fish stocks.

And management of fisheries should be far more cautious, to protect fish stocks around the world. This is vital for sustainable fisheries, healthy oceans and our own food security. ♦

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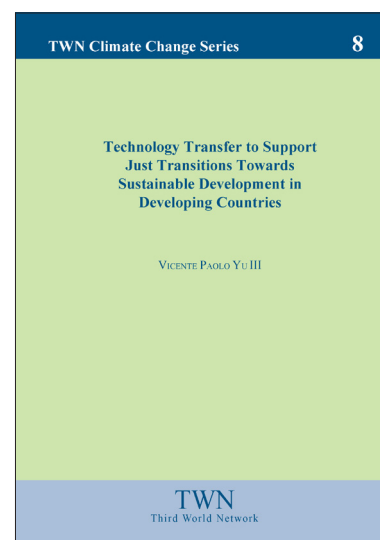
Technology Transfer to Support Just Transitions Towards Sustainable Development in Developing Countries

Vicente Paolo B. Yu III

To diversify away from fossil-fuelled economic growth and effect structural transformation, developing countries need access to technologies that support low-carbon production and adaptation to climate change. Overcoming the financial, technical and legal barriers to the transfer of these technologies from developed to developing countries requires in turn a coherent policy approach combining national action and international cooperation. Encompassing areas ranging from finance to trade and intellectual property, such an approach should aim to not only boost technology flows to developing countries but also foster endogenous innovation geared towards climate action and sustainable development.

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Securing small fishers' rights

Recognition of the tenure rights of small-scale fishers is essential not only for their livelihood security but also for the resilience of marine fisheries, as shown by the example of the fixed bag-net fishworkers in India's West Bengal state.

**Shalini Iyengar and
Amitrajit Chakraborty**

CONFLICTS over use of natural resources are common in coastal areas globally. Fluid environmental frontiers, historical marginalisation of fisher communities, and overlapping tenure systems coded in formal law or customary institutions make governance of coastal and marine resources complex. In the midst of such conflicts, fishworkers in small-scale fisheries (SSF) find themselves situated at the bottom of the ladder of development in terms of priorities, despite their useful contribution towards securing livelihoods of coastal communities and ensuring nutritional security of the global population at large.

In India, on the one hand, the absence of formally recognised tenure rights of small-scale fishworkers alienates them from the resources that form the basis of their social and cultural wellbeing. On the other hand, weak governance structures threaten the ecological sustainability of the resources which are claimed and contested by various user groups, including government institutions, civil society, private enterprises, marine fishing communities and the general public at large. In this article, we assess the implications of marine tenure systems on small-scale fishworkers practising fixed bag-net fishing (*behundi jal*) in the eastern Indian state of West Bengal.

Tenure in the international context

Concerns around the sustainability of marine fisheries



Amitrajit Chakraborty

Fishing practices in each *khoti* are pursued following a set of rules and norms that uphold the principles of equity and collective action.

have led to an increasing focus on the rights to use, access, manage and alienate marine resources. Broadly bundled together as 'tenure rights', these rights raise important questions around the social ties and institutions that govern such resources. Understanding tenure systems requires an assessment of four broad aspects: the resource itself; those who possess rights to the resources; the rules and norms; and the authorities governing and managing the resources. A tenure system thus determines who can use which resources, and the duration and conditions governing such use.

SSF communities are widely acknowledged to be critical actors for ensuring sustainable and equitable utilisation of coastal and marine resources. The environmental stewardship of SSF has found cognisance in international instruments such as the UN Food and Agriculture

Organization (FAO)'s Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries (CCRF) and the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty (the SSF Guidelines). They prescribe that 'small-scale fishing communities should have secure, equitable and socio-culturally appropriate tenure rights to fishery resources, fishing areas and adjacent land and forests' for their social and cultural wellbeing.

Within the broader rubric of tenure rights, customary tenure has been highlighted as a key component of tenure security for SSF. Defined as the norms regulating rights to resources that are enforced and managed by community institutions and non-state authorities, customary tenure is distinguished by its flexibility, dynamism and sensitivity to place and local moral economies. Critically,

given colonial legacies and state interventions in fisheries, customary tenure interacts, and overlaps, with the formal legal system, and rarely functions entirely independently of the latter. In the fisheries context, this means that customary tenure relies on, and is impacted by, the formal legal system. In the next section we examine the formal legal system impacting customary tenure in coastal and marine contexts in India.

The legal setting

Coastal and marine fisheries in India are governed by a patchwork quilt of laws, rules and policies. At the constitutional level, in addition to the general environmental provisions, responsibility for coastal and marine fisheries is shared between the state and central governments. The former has the responsibility for tenure and fisheries within territorial waters and the latter beyond territorial waters. At the national level, the Government of India has issued the Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) Notification, 2019, under Section 3 of the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986. First issued in 1991, and then in 2011 and 2019, the CRZ notification has the stated mandate of conserving and protecting coastal and marine areas in addition to ensuring the livelihood security of fishers and other coastal communities.

The CRZ notifications have been extensively critiqued for their managerial approach towards the coast and a lack of focus on ensuring the rights and security of marine fishers. However, it is significant that while the notifications do not confer rights, they do recognise traditional rights of SSF. The notification makes several references to traditional rights and customary uses of fishing communities in relation to dwelling houses, boat-building and fishing activities. Equally significantly, the CRZ notification requires



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Coastal and marine fisheries in India are governed by a patchwork quilt of laws, rules and policies.

the creation of Coastal Zone Management Plans and local-level Coastal Zone Management Maps that must recognise and demarcate the fishing villages and common properties of the fisher communities as well as their fishing zones in the water bodies.

Taken together, it is arguable that the CRZ recognises the presence of fishing communities and their traditional usage of coastal and marine resources. It is undeniable, however, that the CRZ grants no explicit protection to systems of customary tenure of SSF in India. When combined with increasing pressures on coastal land and marine space, efforts by governmental and private actors to enclose coastal areas for tourism and other activities, and poor governance overall, it is clear that tenure security for SSF faces grave threats.

In addition to the CRZ Notification, 2019, the West Bengal Marine Fishing Regulation Act (WBMFRA), 1993, is the overarching state enactment for marine fisheries. While the WBMFRA does not explicitly reference customary tenure, it does,

however, contain special protections for SSF. These include a heightened governmental responsibility for protecting SSF and creating special fishing zones for fishers using non-mechanised boats.

Customary tenure and *behundi jal*

Customary marine tenure systems can be observed among the marine fishing communities of Purba Medinipur and South 24 Parganas in West Bengal, where production of dried fish follows an elaborate array of institutional arrangements from pre-harvest to post-harvest activities. Every year from the month of September until March, the marine fishing community from native and neighbouring villages of the two coastal districts come together to constitute social organisations known as *khoti*.

Fishing practices in each *khoti* are pursued following a set of rules and norms that uphold the principles of equity and collective action. That is to say, access to fishing grounds and space on land for building living spaces and fish drying is

distributed equitably among the fishing households in the *khoti* before the start of a fishing season. *Khotis* are usually responsible for determining who is permitted to join the community institution and for resolving disputes among their members.

The *khoti* is a gendered space. Fish work in the *khoti* is undertaken by family units where division of labour is based on gender roles. The men usually go fishing in groups of two or three on wooden motorised boats within the territorial zone until the limits of the fishing grounds of the *khoti*. After the fish is landed from the boats, the work of the women fish driers and sorters commences. They spread out the fish on the beach on top of nets which are laid out in front of the encampment of the *khoti*.

Once the fish is dried under the sun, the women carefully sort the fish, based on species and quality. The finer quality of the fish goes for human consumption whereas the second-grade quality goes for the fishmeal and fish oil (FMFO) industry, both bought and transported by the merchant or *dadondar*. The women work either under the family units or, in some cases, as wage labourers in the *khoti* for a daily wage of INR 200–300, depending on the availability of work.

The fishing grounds are mapped and demarcated at the start of the season, where every fishing household is eligible for a stretch of the sea to stake their bag nets or *behundi jal* on bamboo poles. Fishing is based on lunar cycles. The fixed *behundi* nets, staked on poles, are lifted during the low tide to harvest the fish catch and automatically float back on the water during the high tide. The technology of operating *behundi* nets, with their mesh size ranging from 10 mm to 24 mm, targets fish species such as small brown shrimp (*Metapenaeus monoceros*), ribbon fish (*Trachipteridae*), barramundi (*Lates calcarifer*), Indian anchovy

(*Stolephorus indicus*), Bombay duck (*Harpadon nehereus*), golden spotted anchovies (*Coilia dussumieri*), hair-fin anchovy (*Setipina taty*), Indian white prawn (*Penaeus indicus*), kuruma prawn (*P. japonicus*) and paste shrimp (*Acetes indicus*). However, over the years, the mesh size of the bag nets has become smaller due to high demand from the FMFO industry. This reduces scrap value from fishing effort, albeit at the cost of long-term sustainability of the marine ecosystem and available fish resources.

Threats to marine tenure

The tenure needs of the fishworkers in a *khoti* span from the water to the land. However, in the absence of formal recognition of their tenure rights, the viability of their social organisation and traditional practice is subject to multiple threats.

Small-scale fishers lack formal land rights in coastal areas and, as a result, they have faced consistent threats of displacement from infrastructural projects for promotion of coastal tourism, national defence, trade and commerce and other developmental initiatives. For example, the unlawful development of hotels in violation of CRZ rules along the Mandarmani coast has displaced fishing communities.

The proposed development of a marine drive road, the Tajpur deep-sea port in Ramnagar, and a missile launching platform in Junput have been promoted on the grounds of enhanced connectivity, increased economic activity and national security, respectively. However, the cost of such developments is almost always borne by the small-scale fishers who find themselves increasingly erased from the Bengal coast.

Conclusion

Small-scale fishers rely

on both land and sea for their customary rights and livelihoods. By practising ecologically sensitive and sustainable modes of fishing, they are custodians of the fragile coastal and marine resources that are critical to both the environmental health and food security of the entire nation. In order to ensure that they are allowed to thrive in coastal spaces, it is imperative that our legal and governance systems recognise the customary tenure systems practised by small-scale fishers. These systems are unwritten but they have widespread acceptance from the community members.

Recognition of customary tenure systems would imply that the state recognises that small-scale fishers have a preferential right to access, use, manage and conserve coastal resources. It would grant them protection from state and non-state actors seeking to displace them, and would ensure that their traditional fishing practices and ways of life can be sustained and passed on to future generations.

Moreover, it is important to emphasise that customary tenure systems usually have a strong interest in preserving and stewarding the resources upon which livelihoods depend. Recognising and supporting systems of customary tenure, which already have robust rules in place for maintaining healthy ecosystems, is critical to ensuring the resilience of marine fisheries. Insecure tenure for small-scale fishworkers, who have traditionally protected the coasts and marine resources for their subsistence and livelihood, not only threatens their wellbeing but also brings forth newer challenges in an uncertain era of global environmental change. ♦

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Blue bonds: Shifting the responsibility innovatively

Touted as an innovative means of funding marine protection efforts, 'blue bonds' end up passing the financial burden for conservation to small island developing states even as private investors reel in the profits.

WHEN we think of debt, we cannot overlook the role it plays in the blue economy. There is an increasing emphasis on the importance of making financial flows consistent with improving ocean ecosystems, along with the recognition of the role oceans and seas play in climate change mitigation and adaptation. Through the efforts of financing climate action and developing blue economies, blue finance has created a legitimate space for financial actors to intervene in funding projects, standard setting and combining debt, equity and the protection of the marine environment.

What's missing in the mainstream discussions over the blue bond sector, however, is the way in which debt dynamics transform states' commitments and differentiated responsibilities under international environmental law – as introduced by Principle 7 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development¹ – by promoting and legitimising certain forms of sovereign climate finance.

Blue bonds and the flow of money

Similar to green bonds, blue bonds are debt instruments aimed at collecting and channelling private finance towards sustainable marine-related projects and activities. As a debt instrument, it is an interaction between investors and a borrower. The agreement underlying a blue bond requires two types of promises. First, the borrower becomes obliged to pay back the capital with interest in a certain period. The second promise is what gives the agreement

Arınç Onat Kılıç

its colour: positive impact on the marine environment. The latter can range from financially supporting sustainable fisheries to waste management.

I argue that the transformation blue bonds bring to marine conservation should be scrutinised. This transformation materialises through financialised forms of marine conservation and passing the responsibility of enforcing marine protection to private actors. Its implications are particularly salient in the context of financing for small island developing states (SIDS). It is because blue bonds are offered as a form of financial assistance to SIDS and these states are mostly concerned by inadequate and unfunded adaptation strategies, but also among the least responsible for the degradation of the sea ecosystems. Belize's debt restructuring is a case in point.

Enforcing environmental commitments through private contracts

In November 2021, Belize restructured its \$553 million sovereign debt via a blue loan: brokered by The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and facilitated by Credit Suisse, the issuance of a blue bond cancelled Belize's approximately \$553 million of existing debt with the reduction of \$189 million while shifting \$364 million of remaining obligations towards its new buyers.

While the transaction consists

of complex interactions of multiple actors, this is how it works: Credit Suisse issued blue bonds via a special purpose vehicle in the Cayman Islands and channelled the new \$364 million loan to a TNC subsidiary, which in turn lent the 'blue loan' to Belize to buy back the existing 'superbonds', the government's external commercial debt. The financial transaction was conditioned upon the establishment of a conservation fund (the Belize Fund for a Sustainable Future) and the use of the bond's proceeds to support activities that fit the scope of the sustainable blue economy as defined by the parties to the scheme. In the end, Belize is obliged to make two flows of payments: repaying the loan to the TNC subsidiary and financing the conservation fund that is governed by a board of non-government majority. This model was previously tested in Seychelles in the name of the Seychelles Conservation and Climate Adaptation Trust (SeyCCAT).

On the conservation side of the deal, Belize committed to start a marine spatial planning process and establish 30% of its exclusive economic zone as marine protected areas by 2026, as well as some other environmental goals. In fact, this commitment came before the post-2020 global biodiversity framework's goal of protecting 30% of marine environments. Similarly, the 30% goal is already achieved by Seychelles following the first debt-for-ocean conservation swap in 2015.

Based on the parallel between Belize's commitment and the international biodiversity



Tom Nagel

Belize's blue bond is an example of a deal which shifts to a small island state the financial burden for marine conservation that will benefit global climate change mitigation.

goals, it might appear that these types of financial deals advance marine conservation even earlier than what would have happened based on voluntary national action plans under the international environmental law regime. Indeed, some might consider it positive that the remaining amount of debt, which would otherwise have been paid to investors, at least ends up in 'sustainable' activities instead.

On the other hand, this mechanism makes SIDS pay for marine conservation that will benefit global climate change mitigation. This is despite the fact that SIDS are not major contributors to climate change but net sinks for greenhouse gas emissions. In other words, as Clive L. Spash claims, these innovative financial instruments are 'freeing up the ability to shift costs on to others'.² Liability provisions have become key for shifting the responsibility of conservation to SIDS.

Conservation commitments with financial liability

Through its 'Blue Bonds for Conservation model', the US-based NGO TNC introduced an innovative legal form of strengthening commitments of SIDS. This form implies that if the borrower country cannot meet its

commitments by the deadlines, it has to make increased payments to the statutory trust. As an example of shifting the financial burden for mitigation, it puts an economic burden on taxpayers. Research by the European Network on Debt and Development (Eurodad) proves that this restructuring still did not make Belize's debt situation sustainable.³ Indeed, a recent International Monetary Fund (IMF) working paper demonstrates that debt-for-climate swaps aren't suitable if they don't resolve unsustainable debt burdens.⁴

Similarly, the world's first blue bond in Seychelles was a concessional private placement limiting fundable activities within the SWIOFish3 project prepared by the World Bank. According to the SWIOFish3 project and the blue bond terms, if the Seychelles government decided to support different areas of the blue economy such as marine-based renewable energy, it would need to renegotiate with and persuade the investors. This has not been possible so far due to high negotiation costs. The consequence is that even though the government of Seychelles has become indebted through the blue bond, it cannot determine the direction of financial resources for adaptation according to local needs and changing realities. The limited

policy space in turn resulted in financing only one project via blue loans since 2018.

While the liability mechanisms for the flow of resources to certain areas appear to accord credibility to blue bonds in terms of marine conservation outcomes, in reality this only ensures that the investors get publicity for their ESG (environmental, social and governance) contributions. The legal construction of debt in this context creates tension with the principle of 'common but differentiated responsibilities' as established under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and Paris Agreement, by shifting the financial burden to SIDS for mitigation benefits stemming from conservation. Despite the prioritisation of SIDS for financial assistance and the emphasis on 'public and grant-based resources for adaptation' in Article 9(4) of the Paris Agreement, blue finance instruments deliver loans from which financial actors profit. Indeed, a recent Bloomberg article revealed that there is a difference between the financial amounts of Belize's loan payments to Credit Suisse and Credit Suisse's blue bond payments to the investors, with the profit going to Credit Suisse.⁵

Saviours of the oceans?

Blue bonds are the latest frontier in increasing the financial resources to be channelled to the blue economy. However, the way financial responsibility for climate change mitigation and adaptation is allocated through blue bonds raises doubts as to their alignment with the principle of equity.

Although SIDS are net sinks for greenhouse gas emissions, they are pushed to make a choice between indebtedness for adaptation or consequences of climate change. If these efforts to protect their marine environment are meant to help absorb carbon

dioxide to the benefit of the whole world, placing additional financial burdens on SIDS undermines the meaning of differentiation in terms of humankind's common responsibility.

Blue bonds should be read in this context as tools for localising the financial burden of climate change mitigation and adaptation while ESG investors receive financially safe deals and set precedents of financial assistance where responsibility for climate action is being shifted to the borrower through private contracts. ♦

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Notes

1. Principle 7 of the Rio Declaration, which was adopted by the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, reads: 'States shall cooperate in a spirit of global partnership to conserve, protect and restore the health and integrity of the Earth's ecosystem. In view of the different contributions to global environmental degradation, States have common but differentiated responsibilities. The developed countries acknowledge the responsibility that they bear in the international pursuit of sustainable development in view of the pressures their societies place on the global environment and of the technologies and financial resources they command.'
2. Spash, Clive L. (2022): 'Conservation in conflict: Corporations, capitalism and sustainable development,' *Biological Conservation*, Vol. 269, May 2022, 109528.
3. Munevar, Daniel (2021): 'Making sense of Belize's blue bond proposal,' Eurodad, 4 November, https://www.eurodad.org/making_sense_of_belizes_blue_bond_proposal.
4. d Chamon, Marcos, Erik Klok, Vimal V. Thakoor and Jeromin Zettelmeyer (2022): 'Debt-for-climate swaps: Analysis, design, and implementation,' IMF Working Paper No. 2022/162, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WP/Issues/2022/08/11/Debt-for-Climate-Swaps-Analysis-Design-and-Implementation-522184>.
5. White, Natasha (2023): 'Wall Street's new ESG money-maker promises nature conservation – with a catch,' Bloomberg, 12 January, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-01-12/bankers-bet-millions-on-sovereign-debt-deals-tied-to-green-goals>.

Health Action International Asia Pacific at 40 (1981-2021)

A Chronicle of Health Heroes, Historic Events, Challenges and Victories

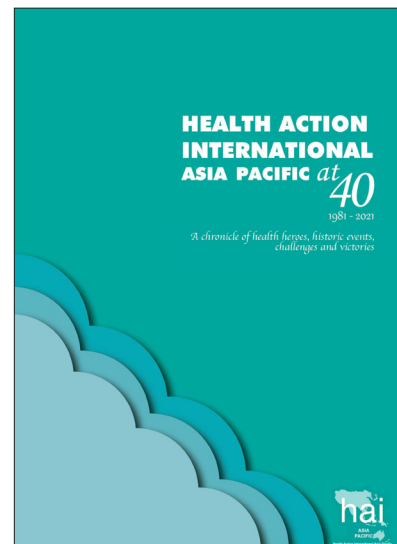
Prepared and edited by Beverley Snell

Published by Third World Network, Health Action International Asia Pacific, International Islamic University Malaysia, Gonoshasthaya Kendra, and Drug System Monitoring and Development Centre

This book commemorates the 40th anniversary of Health Action International Asia Pacific (HAIAP), an informal network of non-governmental organisations and individuals in the Asia-Pacific region committed to resistance and persistence in the struggle for Health for All Now.

HAIAP is the regional arm of Health Action International – upholding health as a fundamental human right and aspiring for a just and equitable society in which there is regular access to essential medicines for all who need them. HAIAP works with governments, academic institutions and NGOs at community, national and regional levels on issues such as promoting the essential medicines concept, equitable and affordable access to essential medicines, rational use of medicines, ethical promotion and fair prices. While promoting awareness of the impact of multilateral agreements, particularly TRIPS and GATT, on access to affordable healthcare and essential medicines, HAIAP advocates for poverty eradication and action on other priority themes relevant to countries in the Asia-Pacific region.

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Climate change in the Arctic is a wake-up call for the Global South

Melting of sea ice in the North Pole region as a result of global warming threatens adverse consequences much further south.

Felipe Arango García

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IN September 1846, the British expeditionary ships HMS *Erebus* and HMS *Terror* became stranded in the Canadian Arctic while navigating the Northwest Passage, a shipping corridor between Europe and Asia. Eventually frozen in on all sides, the crew hoped to break free of the ice the following summer, but it did not retreat one iota. Every crew member eventually perished.

One hundred and seventy years later, Crystal Cruises made history by sailing a large cruise liner through the Northwest Passage for the first time.

Arctic melting has become widespread and is intensifying every year. As stated by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 2019, the extent of Arctic sea ice is steadily declining as the years pass by, with the most significant contractions (typically reached every September) unprecedented during the past 1,000 years at least. The glaciers of Greenland, the largest ice mass in the Northern Hemisphere, have lost a third of their volume since 1978.

So, why does the accelerated thaw of an inhospitable and distant place, where the night lasts six months, and to which most people will probably never go, matter?



NASA/Kathryn Hansen (CC BY 2.0)

The melting ice in the Arctic not only poses significant environmental risks but could also reshape the global geopolitical chessboard.

The simplest answer is, what happens in the north also affects the south. Climate change in the Arctic carries planetary risks.

Sea level rise and flooding

The melting of the glaciers in polar regions is threatening the fate of many coastal areas. According to Laura Larocca, an assistant professor at Arizona State University's School of Ocean Futures, glacial melt in Greenland and Antarctica is behind approximately 21% of the sea level rise that has happened since the turn of the millennium.

By 2100, sea level rise is projected to reach somewhere between 28 and 101 centimetres. The exact numbers will depend upon greenhouse gas emission reductions in the meantime. Some of the most significant sea level rises will be seen on the flattest coastal lands that abut the shallows of large bodies of water.

This will happen not only in the Global North, in countries such as the United States, but also in the Global South. Southeast Asian nations such as Thailand, Cambodia, Indonesia and the Philippines will be especially impacted, as well as countries throughout the Caribbean Basin, and Bangladesh in South Asia.

Every signatory of the Paris Agreement acknowledged a collective target of reining in the global average temperature rise to below 2°C compared with pre-industrial levels. If we miss this target, a 2018 study estimated, rising seas will cost the global economy \$14 trillion in flood damages annually by the year 2100. This would primarily be due to the vulnerability of critical infrastructure, such as energy plants, water treatment facilities, underground communication cables, and transportation networks including ports and railways.

Ecosystem disruption

Marine species of the North Atlantic that are threatened by the warming of their habitats are risking a migration north in search of colder waters, towards the Arctic. This has two repercussions: competition for food and space with vulnerable species, and with organisms that have specially developed to exist in these areas; and the decline of fish stocks, an economic mainstay of countries including Iceland, Norway and Spain.

Destabilisation of ocean currents

The oceans absorb carbon dioxide (CO₂) emitted by fossil fuel combustion. An influx of large amounts of freshwater from melting glaciers will lower the ocean's salinity and destabilise ocean currents, which are vital for this CO₂ absorption and for global climate regulation. This will in turn disrupt the CO₂ cycle, increasing its concentration in the atmosphere and exacerbating global heating. In addition, low ocean salinity can slow down the Gulf Stream, which will disrupt Europe's mild winters and the biodiversity of the Gulf of Mexico and North Atlantic.

But the havoc does not stop there. In addition, the Gulf Stream significantly influences weather conditions across the developing world. The slowdown would mean an upsurge in extreme weather events in South America, the Caribbean, India and West Africa. Floods or droughts in these regions put the food security and lives of hundreds of millions of people at risk.

Geopolitics of energy transition

Approximately 13% (90 billion barrels) of the world's undiscovered conventional oil resources and 30% of its



A flood-hit Indonesian village. Southeast Asian nations like Indonesia will be among those especially impacted by sea level rise caused by glacial melt in polar regions.

undiscovered conventional natural gas resources are estimated to lie beneath the Arctic tundra and ice. In addition, the Arctic holds critical minerals such as nickel, zinc and copper.

Although these resources remain inaccessible due to the extreme climate, they are located partly within Exclusive Economic Zones belonging to either the US, Canada, Norway, Russia or Denmark. The rest is located in an international zone spanning 2.8 million square kilometres (the Central Arctic Ocean). Governments adopted the High Seas Treaty last year to regulate this international zone, but it will not become law until it is ratified by at least 60 countries.

In the event of a thaw that liberates these resources, new geopolitical scenarios could emerge, with multiple repercussions. On the one hand, countries with sovereign access to these resources could come under political pressure to 'refossilise' their economies, to the detriment of any decarbonisation strategies. On the other hand, non-Arctic powers such as China and India are seeking commercial alliances, especially with Greenland

and Russia. They seek to exploit rare earths (metallic elements that are essential for many high-tech devices) and hydrocarbons off the coasts and Exclusive Economic Zones of these countries. A strategic conquest of newly released fossil fuels could shore up their own energy security.

A new scenario

The melting ice in the Arctic not only poses significant environmental risks. It will reshape the global geopolitical chessboard, triggering tensions over access to energy resources and strategic sea lanes. In this context, international cooperation and effective governance will be crucial in effectively managing the challenges and opportunities of a region at the epicentre of climate change.

If the countries of the Global South do not focus more attention on the North Pole, they will pay the price for the decisions and measures taken there. ♦

Felipe Arango García is the executive director of Transforma, a Latin American think and action centre, based in Colombia, focused on just energy transition, financial system transformation and climate diplomacy.

The US' Cuba policy leaves the island in wreckage

US sanctions against Cuba are a form of economic warfare that is relentlessly depleting its coffers and harming its people.

Ed Augustin

THE sight of hungry people scavenging through dumpsters and panhandling was once more common in cities in the United States and Europe than in Havana. But a series of quiet moves, first by Trump, and now by Biden, have produced a humanitarian crisis throughout Cuba.

As he watches the world go by each day from the shade of his porch in southern Havana, Ramone Montagudo, 72, a retired history teacher, has a front-row seat for the wreckage. Until a few years ago, the garbage men regularly emptied the blue waste containers on the corner of his street where he and his neighbours dump their household trash. Now flies swarm over a sea of rubbish in the sticky heat. He watches some of his poorer neighbours – who until a few years ago had enough to eat – pick leftover food out of the rot.

‘When it comes to food and medicine, we’re living through an extraordinarily difficult situation,’ Montagudo says. ‘This country has always been sanctioned, and we used to get by. But Trump filled in the gaps.’

Cuba has been sanctioned for longer than any other country in modern history. But almost a decade ago the Obama administration softened sanctions on the island and restored diplomatic relations with Havana, admitting that over half a century of immiserating the island had failed to oust the communist government. The economic rebound was swift. But in the final weeks of



Pedro Szekely (CC BY-SA 2.0)

Hardened US sanctions have ushered in a grim new reality for Cubans.

the first Trump administration, the White House put Cuba back on the US State Department’s list of state sponsors of terrorism, alongside Iran, Syria and North Korea, for nakedly political reasons and without providing evidence.

Cuba watchers expected that Biden would restore Obama’s raft of achievements. After all, on the campaign trail in 2020 Biden promised that as president he would ‘reverse the failed Trump policies that inflicted harm on Cubans and their families’.

Instead, Biden has one-upped Trump by going further than the previous administration in attacking Cuba’s tourism industry – the main engine of the island’s economy. Two years ago, the Biden State Department barred foreigners who visit Cuba from visa-free travel to the US. That meant that people from the United Kingdom, France,

Spain and 37 other countries found out that a mere holiday in Cuba could forfeit their visa waiver, and many decided not to risk a visit to the island. Unlike in the rest of the Caribbean, tourism in Cuba has not rebounded since the pandemic. European travel to the island is only half what it was before the pandemic.

The terror designation, together with more than 200 sanctions enacted against the island since Obama left office, has pulped the Cuban economy by cutting revenue to the struggling Cuban state. Economists calculate that the loss in tourism revenue resulting from the terror designation costs the state hundreds of millions of dollars a year. The combined annual cost of the Trump-Biden sanctions, they say, amounts to billions of dollars a year.

But the human cost for

Montagudo and millions like him is incalculable. The retired teacher was diagnosed with Parkinson's three years ago. He can get his prescriptions – Cuba still has more doctors relative to population than any other country in the world – but no medicine. Like everything else, the supply has dried up. 'Before, you went to the pharmacy and the medicine was there. Now...', he bites his lip and shrugs his shoulders.

'Offload[ing] the enforcement to the private sector': How the Trump-Biden sanctions have ground down Cuba's economy

The one-two punch of the hardened sanctions and the pandemic have ushered in a grim new reality for Cubans. For many, power outages can now last more than 12 hours a day. With pharmacy shelves barren, the price of medicines on the black market has slipped beyond the reach of much of the population. Without money to repair old infrastructure, hundreds of thousands now live without running water. Worst of all, things have been bad for so many years that people have lost hope.

By driving down people's living standards and crushing the dream of a better tomorrow, the Trump-Biden sanctions have produced a mass exodus from the island of historic proportions. Over the last three years, a record-breaking number of Cubans have left the country. According to official figures, 10% of the population – more than a million people – left between 2022 and 2023.

Still, neither the Trump nor the Biden administration have banned US firms from selling Parkinson's medication to Cuba. The sanctions on Cuba even formally allow for 'exemptions and authorisations relating to exports of food [and] medicine'. And in 2022, the Biden Treasury Department introduced 'general licenses' for



Cuban agriculture has cratered in recent years for lack of seeds, fertiliser and petrol.

life-saving goods in Cuba, arguing 'the provision of humanitarian support to alleviate the suffering of vulnerable populations is central to our American values'.

But economic warfare remains a prime weapon in the US foreign policy arsenal, as a comprehensive investigation in *The Washington Post* recently laid out, and away from the announcements, press conferences and headlines, both administrations have reverted to a policy of regime change premised on reducing the hard currency flowing into the island's coffers and ratcheting up the suffering of people like Montagudo.

Joy Gordon, an expert on sanctions at Loyola University Chicago and author of *Invisible War: The United States and the Iraq Sanctions*, told Drop Site News there has been a shift towards minimising visible harm to civilian populations since the sanctions on Iraq in the 1990s, which resulted in widespread malnutrition and epidemics. 'There's a strategy of trying to offload the enforcement to the private sector,' she said. 'US policy has created conditions that make it commercially compelling for the private sector to withdraw from whole markets, resulting in severe and widespread economic harm, but in a form that is not directly attributable to US policymakers.'

The Helms-Burton Act is a good example. In 2019, Trump

implemented Title III of the law, which allows Americans to sue companies doing business with Cuba, which every previous president had waived. Cruise liners that took American tourists to Havana during the Obama years have since been sued for hundreds of millions of dollars in a Florida federal court for docking at Havana's main port. The effect has been to deter multinationals from investing in the island.

But perhaps the best example of an almost invisible but insidious sanction is designating Cuba as a 'state sponsor of terrorism'. Presented as a benign policy tool to make the world a safer place rather than an arm of economic warfare, it has contaminated the word 'Cuba' more than ever in the global economy. Almost overnight the label provoked both global banks and vital exporters to pull out of the Cuban market, according to diplomats and businesspeople on the island.

'Very few banks want to work with Cuba now,' a Havana-based European businessman, speaking on condition of anonymity, told Drop Site News. He said his bank informed him his account would be closed just days after the designation.

The island had been on the State Department's terror list before, up until 2015. But since the relisting in 2021 the effects have been fiercer.



US designation of Cuba as a state sponsor of terrorism has resulted in tourism revenue loss estimated at hundreds of millions of dollars a year.

Over the past decade, anti-terrorism and money laundering rules have been tightened. ‘Over-compliance’ has also increased as banks try to dodge multi-billion-dollar fines from an increasingly emboldened Treasury Department.

Coercing multinationals to cease trading with the island has meant the state has a smaller and skittish pool of suppliers it can import from. Coercing banks to stop processing payments to and from Cuba has meant that often, even when the state can find the money to buy and a provider willing to sell, there’s simply no way of making the payment.

‘Enforcement is now delegated to the banks which have been dragooned into self-prosecuting,’ another Western businessman based in Havana said. They ‘can’t claim they don’t know anymore’.

With more risks and less payoff, many suppliers have left the Cuban market. ‘It’s a little country that pays late. The market can’t be bothered,’ said a third European businessman who no longer sells high-tech equipment to the Cuban Ministry of Public Health. Doing business with Cuba has always been risky, he added, but the terror designation was a game changer: Now, ‘if there is a trace of a Cuban account, it will be blocked’.

When asked why many medical equipment and pharma companies have stopped trading with Cuba over the last few years, the founder of a medium-sized European pharma firm put it this way: ‘It’s a small market: Why rock the boat for small potatoes?’

The source said it is no longer ‘worthwhile’ for his company to supply the Cuban Ministry of Public Health but they do so anyway. ‘How can you look at that and not feel for them?’ he said. The businessperson spoke on condition of anonymity, worried his company’s bank account could be shuttered if the major European financial institution his company banks with found out they supply Cuba.

Broken lifelines

Defenders of the Biden administration argue that Cuba’s economic woes go beyond these punishing measures. They are right. Stop-start reforms by the ruling Communist Party over the last two decades have failed to improve the productivity of the state sector, which remains highly centralised and lethargic. State wages are miserable and getting worse. Absenteeism is rife. But to point to multiple causes of the island’s economic problems does not absolve the sanctions.

William LeoGrande, political scientist at American University, said the terror listing amounts to ‘one front in Washington’s economic war on Cuba’. A direct result of the terror listing and other Trump-Biden sanctions, he said, is that the Cuban state today loses billions of dollars of revenue a year at a time when its principal imports are food and fuel. ‘The sanctions today,’ he added, ‘have a greater impact on the Cuban people than ever before.’

Government food rations – a lifeline for the country’s poor – are fraying. Domestic agriculture, which has always been weak, has cratered in recent years for lack of seeds, fertiliser and petrol, forcing the state to import 100% of the basic subsidised goods.

But there’s not enough money to do that. Last year the government eliminated chicken from the basic food basket most adults receive. In September, the daily ration of bread available to all Cubans was cut by a quarter. Even vital staples like rice and beans now arrive late. Food insecurity on the island is rising, according to a recent report by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. Vulnerable groups – older people, pregnant women, children and people with chronic illnesses – are most affected by the knock-on effects of US policy.

‘When food rations are funded by the state, it’s no surprise that if you bankrupt the state, food insecurity would increase, particularly for those who do not have family abroad to send remittances,’ said Gordon, the Loyola professor.

In March, the US got a hint of the unrest its policy aims towards, with hundreds of people hitting the streets in the eastern city of Santiago decrying long power outages and shouting: ‘We’re hungry!’

Most Cubans fleeing this misery head to America. Over 100,000 have emigrated to the US legally since January 2023 through the Biden administration’s ‘humanitarian parole program.’

Many more have crossed the border illegally. A piece of Cold War legislation, the 1966 Cuban Adjustment Act, makes Cuba the only country from which a migrant can arrive in the US illegally and get a green card a year and a day later. Some Cubans build rickety boats, and more than 140 Cubans have died this year while trying to cross the Florida Straits, according to the International Organization for Migration. Those with relatives who can pay an airfare fly to Nicaragua before taking the perilous trek to the US-Mexico border.

By keeping the terror designation and other sanctions in place, the Biden administration has fuelled this record-breaking wave of Cuban migration. Over the last three years, more than a half-million Cubans have arrived in the US, according to figures from the US Customs and Border Patrol Agency. The whole dynamic has a whiff of madness: record Cuban migration stoked by the Biden administration played into the broader 'border crisis' that helped Trump as the recent US presidential election approached.

'Cuba is not a state sponsor of terrorism'

The list of state sponsors of terrorism has always stood on the frontier between analysis and propaganda. No matter how bad their records, US allies never make the list; adversaries do.

The Reagan administration first designated Cuba as a state sponsor of terrorism in 1982. Havana bristled at the decision given the US' history of backing and condoning terrorist attacks on the island, notably Operation Mongoose, a covert operation that hit civilian targets inside Cuba during the 1960s, and prior knowledge of plans by CIA-trained Cuban exiles to blow up a Cuban civilian airliner in 1976, which Washington decided not to share with Havana, resulting in the killing

of 73 men, women and children on board.

Still, during the 1980s, Cuba was backing national liberation struggles in Central America and Africa. Cuba's freedom fighter was Washington's terrorist, so the designation at least had some Cold War logic to it. And indeed, on occasion, some of the movements Havana backed carried out political violence against civilians – better known, depending on your political perspective, as terrorism. US intelligence agencies were thus able to cobble together information-based arguments to support the listing. But as the Soviet Union disintegrated and the Cold War drew to a close, Cuba spiralled into a deep economic crisis at home while its power projection diminished. The days of supporting liberation struggles abroad were left behind in the 20th century, yet the terror designation lived on.

According to former intelligence and State Department officials, for the last three decades the US intelligence community's assessment has been that the island has not sponsored what even the US would define as terrorism since the 1990s. When Obama took the island off the list in 2015, Ben Rhodes, the administration's point person on Cuba, tweeted: 'Simply put, POTUS is acting to remove #Cuba from the State Sponsor of Terrorism list because Cuba is not a State Sponsor of Terrorism.'

To put Cuba back on the list, the Trump State Department needed rationales. It argued that Cuba was providing sanctuary to US fugitives from justice and to leaders of the Colombian National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional, or ELN).

The aging US fugitives are mainly Black Power activists whom Cuba granted asylum back in the 1970s and 1980s. Cuban state security monitors them, and there is no evidence that they have ever used Cuban territory to carry out or support terrorist activities.

Meanwhile, the ELN commanders were granted safe haven as part of peace negotiations the Obama administration encouraged Cuba to host.

The talks were facilitated by Cuba and Norway (Norway has somehow escaped the terror designation despite its role). While the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, or FARC), the country's other major guerilla group, reached a historic peace accord in 2016 with Havana's help, peace between the Colombian state and the ELN remained elusive.

In 2019 the ELN carried out a deadly attack on a police academy in Bogota, Colombia, killing 22 people. The Colombian government made multiple requests to Cuba to extradite the ELN leaders, which Cuba sidestepped.

But in 2016 the ELN and the Colombian government signed off on a secret protocol guaranteeing the safety of ELN negotiators in Havana 'in the case of a breakdown in peace talks'. The document, signed by the Cuban delegation, makes clear that extradition would not be on the table, and that the negotiators would be able to return to parts of Colombian territory they consider safe.

Furthermore, Colombian President Gustavo Petro – himself a former guerilla – withdrew the extradition request in 2022 and described Cuba's inclusion on the list as 'an injustice'.

Peace talks between the Colombian government and the ELN, the country's last remaining guerilla group, resumed last year in Havana. The two sides have since announced a truce.

Fulton Armstrong, who previously served as the top US intelligence officer for Latin America, said that had Cuba extradited the ELN negotiators, it would have undercut its ability to help to wind down Colombia's bloody wars. 'It's not a question of

being nice to former guerillas,’ he said. ‘It’s a question of credibility.’

The policy review that never was

From its first months in office, Biden’s team has repeatedly said – both publicly and privately to members of the US Congress – that it was carrying out a broad review of policy towards Cuba, including the terror designation. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in 2022 that the administration ‘will continue as necessary to revisit those to see if Cuba continues to merit that designation’.

But last year, that claim was revealed as bogus. In a private meeting, a State Department official privately told members of Congress that no review process had even begun, according to sources present.

The meeting, hosted by Congressman Jim McGovern and others who focus on Cuba policy, was part of an effort to push the administration to back off its punitive approach to Cuba. But McGovern and his allies in Congress believed, according to sources involved in the fight, that giving the Biden administration room to manoeuvre and reducing pressure on the White House would lead them to do the right thing. That calculation proved incorrect, and now the State Department has run out the clock.

By giving journalists dull lines about bureaucratic ‘processes’ that are hard to use in a story (in contrast to the snappy, incendiary language of a ‘maximum pressure’ campaign on the island used by the Trump administration), the Biden administration has closed down a conversation about the listing’s potency.

Journalists have failed to hold the administration to account. But even with goodwill, tracing the specific effects of sanctions on a population is hard: the interplay between Cuba’s internal economic problems and the interlocking

strategies of external strangulation of the island makes it all but impossible to pinpoint any one particular shortage to any one particular policy.

Additionally, the decades-long strategy of outsourcing of sanctions policy to the private sector has also reduced journalism on the effects of the sanctions. News outlets prefer neater one-to-one stories that can be quickly explained to an audience, and finding companies that are willing to speak about how and why they have ceased trading and investing is laborious.

For Armstrong, the former intelligence officer, talk of a ‘review process’ was always a sham. All that was required at the executive level, he said, was to call together US intelligence agencies and ask them whether there was any evidence-based reason not to reverse the relisting of Cuba as a state sponsor of terror. ‘It would take half a day,’ he said.

Analysts agreed that with political will, Cuba could have been taken off the list within weeks of Biden’s inauguration in 2021. Some 80 Democrats from the House of Representatives sent Biden a letter urging him to do just that within weeks of his inauguration. Even if the administration carried out a six-month review as some argue the law requires, the designation could have been lifted by the middle of Biden’s first year in office. Had the White House done so, hundreds of thousands of Cubans might well have been living at home with their loved ones today, living with better access to food and medicine, rather than fighting their way to the border and battling the byzantine US immigration system.

The Biden administration’s position became even more tangled in May when it removed Cuba from the list of countries that are not ‘fully cooperating’ with the US on counterterrorism. According to official designations, Cuba now ‘fully cooperates’ with counterterrorism efforts while at the

same time ‘sponsoring’ terrorism. How the same country could do both things remains unexplained.

Asked why the State Department had not even begun a review, spokesperson Matt Miller told Drop Site News at a press briefing that the US policy was aimed at furthering ‘the democratic aspirations of the Cuban people’, a reference to the US goal of overthrowing the regime.

‘Should there be any rescission of the State Sponsor of Terrorism status, it would need to be consistent with a specific statutory criteria for rescinding that determination,’ he said. ‘Any review of Cuba’s status on the list, should one ever happen, would be based on the law and the criteria established by Congress, but the President and Secretary Blinken remain committed to the policies that we have advanced that will advance the democratic aspirations of the Cuban people.’

But there are unvarnished ways to describe the ways and means of sanctions. Back in April 1960, as Washington planners were working out how to deal with the new revolutionary government, a senior State Department official penned a now-infamous memo which gives insight into the rationale behind the unfolding economic warfare. ‘Every possible means should be undertaken to promptly weaken the economic life of Cuba,’ argued Lester D. Mallory, then deputy assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs. ‘While as adroit and inconspicuous as possible,’ he added, US policy should make ‘the greatest inroads in denying money and supplies to Cuba, to decrease monetary and real wages, to bring about hunger, desperation and overthrow of government’. Biden has refused to break with this logic. On Cuba, this is his legacy. ♦

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Occupation and oppression in Palestine

An emergency international delegation of legal experts, human rights defenders and legislators was in Palestine for one week in October–November to look into the worsening conditions in the Occupied Territories. Their report, reproduced partially below, documents systematic violations of international law by Israel, ranging from torture within prison walls to displacement and dispossession in the towns and villages – all as the carnage in Gaza continues.



Physicians for Human Rights – Israel (CC BY-SA 2.0)

Over 800,000 Palestinians have been subjected to military detention by Israel since 1967, affecting as many as 40% of Palestinian men in the Occupied Territories.

ON 28 October 2024, an emergency international delegation landed in Palestine to amplify evidence of the Israeli regime's systematic violations of international law since the start of its genocide in Gaza one year ago.

Delegates arrived in Palestine amid sustained efforts by Israeli authorities to prevent access to the Occupied Territories and obscure the conditions of deprivation, detention, apartheid and annexation endured by the Palestinian people.

The delegation – coordinated by the Progressive International, the National Lawyers Guild of the United States, and the International Association of Democratic Lawyers – brought together legal experts, human rights defenders and parliamentary representatives to

hear witness testimony, conduct site visits and gather evidence of these violations of international law.

The evidence is clear: the genocide in Gaza and the systematic nature of the abuse of Palestinian detainees recall the worst historical abuses committed by colonial powers against indigenous populations.

Informed by their direct observations, the delegation echoes the urgent demand for states to sever all ties with the Israeli regime – not only to end the genocide and occupation but also to defend the very integrity of international law.

Systematic violations

Over the course of a week in the field, the delegation met a wide

range of civil society organisations, political representatives and local communities to compile a wide-ranging set of findings about the conditions of the Occupied Territories and their changes since October 2023.

The delegation found clear evidence of what Palestinian citizens and organisations have been telling the world for years: Israel relies on systematic violations of international law against the Palestinian people to advance its project of settler colonialism.

For decades, Palestinian human rights organisations and international observers have documented the systematic use of land grabs, settlements, surveillance, harassment, executions, administrative detention, imprisonment and torture as tools of control in the occupied Palestinian territories.

According to Addameer Prisoner Support and Human Rights Association, over 800,000 Palestinians have been subjected to military detention since 1967, affecting as many as 40% of Palestinian men in the Occupied Territories. Many of those arrested are held without trial.

These assaults have intensified since the start of Israel's genocidal campaign against the Palestinian people in Gaza. As Inès Abdel Razek, of the Palestinian Institute for Public Diplomacy, told the delegation: 'There is no going back to 6 October. We live in a new

reality. But that reality is one layer upon other layers of colonisation, occupation and dispossession.’

Time and again, delegates heard the same message from Palestinians: ‘The world has failed us.’ They face executions, expulsions, torture and incarceration – all atop the rubble of a genocide in Gaza.

Genocide in Gaza

From the early days of Israeli forces’ 2023 assault on Gaza, experts, human rights organisations, lawyers and genocide scholars have been clear: the actions and stated intentions of the occupying force point to a deliberate campaign of genocide against the Palestinian people carried out with the full support of the United States.

As of 9 October 2024, the official death toll in Gaza was over 44,000. Some half of those killed were children. At least 126 of them have been journalists, and evidence points to the deliberate targeting of them and their families. Over 1,000 of them were health workers – doctors, nurses, pharmacists and others who were systematically targeted to disable Gaza’s health system.

But the official count of those killed is likely to be significantly constrained by Gaza’s degraded administrative capacities. In July, a letter in the medical journal *The Lancet* estimated that the death toll could now exceed 180,000, as Israeli forces systematically destroy all life-sustaining infrastructure in the Gaza Strip. Starvation, disease, a lack of access to healthcare, a lack of clean water, and myriad other factors are contributing to a cataclysmic situation for the Palestinian people.

‘There is a systematic destruction of the medical system. Hospitals destroyed, doctors killed, drones assassinating surgeons,’ Palestinian political leader Mustafa Barghouti told the delegation. ‘This is biological warfare: they make us

sick, pollute our water and allow infections to spread.’

The widespread use of hunger as a weapon of war is now threatening all the remaining residents of Gaza. ‘There is so much destruction of basic supplies that people are starving – not only in the North but also in the South,’ Barghouti told the delegation. ‘A chicken today is 600 shekels; that’s 160 dollars. There is no food, no medicine and no showers. There are people who have been displaced not once, not twice, but 10 times.’

In this context, the Israeli regime’s decision to ban the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine (UNRWA) is clear in its intent: to cut off the final lifeline for hundreds of thousands of people facing imminent starvation and in dire need of humanitarian assistance. ‘We have never seen worse conditions than today in North Gaza. It is truly apocalyptic,’ Roland Friedrich, Director of UNRWA Affairs, West Bank, told the delegation. ‘No aid, all air strikes, and no journalists left to cover what kinds of devastation are taking place there.’

Detentions, disappearances and political prisoners

The delegation heard harrowing testimony from Palestinian detainees and human rights advocates, exposing a pattern of systematic abuse and humiliation inflicted upon Palestinian prisoners by occupation authorities. While some aspects of detainees’ suffering have been documented, much remains shrouded in secrecy, with countless cases of abduction, detention and even killings going unreported.

Sahar Francis, co-director of Addameer, described a disturbing pattern of psychological and physical abuse, with Israeli regime authorities aiming to crush detainees’ spirits. ‘Almost every prisoner in Gaza has faced torture, sexual harassment or assault.

They strip them, tase them, take pictures to humiliate them. They treat us worse than they treat dogs and cats,’ she told the delegation. Francis explained that while past abuses have left detainees physically harmed, many retained a sense of dignity. Now, however, ‘humiliation’ has become a deliberate tactic of torture, intended to erode the very core of their humanity. This abuse is so extreme, she argues, that detainees are being broken ‘in soul as well as body’.

Accounts from former detainees underscore the intensity of abuse within Israeli facilities. Issa Amro, a human rights activist from Hebron, described being arrested on 7 October, saying, ‘I was arrested on 7 October, and 50 soldiers laughed and danced and tortured me for 11 hours – and they did not even take my ID.’ Amro, who has no affiliation with Hamas, believes his treatment exemplifies the arbitrary and retaliatory nature of detentions following the 7 October operation.

Since 7 October 2023, the number of Palestinian detainees in Israeli prisons has doubled to over 10,100, with more than 3,000 held under administrative detention – a policy permitting imprisonment without charge or trial. Under Military Order 1651, Israeli military commanders are empowered to impose six-month detention terms, renewable indefinitely, based on undisclosed evidence. This opaque legal process limits detainees’ access to legal representation and denies them a fair trial, effectively sanctioning prolonged detention with no oversight. By mid-2024, 4,781 detainees were held without trial, many for vague accusations like ‘sympathising’ with Gaza.

Qaddura Fares, Head of the Commission of Detainee Affairs, spoke to the delegation about the persistent abuses he believes are institutionalised in Israeli detention facilities. ‘We are witnessing torture, every day,’ he said. ‘They break the hands of the prisoners, they starve the prisoners. And

these are only the 10,000 political prisoners that we could register. From Gaza, we do not even know their names.' The true scope of detentions, especially from Gaza, remains concealed due to restricted access and communication.

Fares explained that 'On the first day of this war – just two hours after the attacks of 7 October – Israel began a revenge war against Palestinian prisoners. Every right that they succeeded to achieve was stripped from them on that day. Those rights, all of a sudden, became "privileges" – privileges to be taken away at their will.' Since then, more than 40 Palestinian prisoners have reportedly died under detention, incidents which Israeli officials have classified as 'assassinations'.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and various independent commissions have documented widespread cases of torture, including forced starvation, physical assault and the denial of medical care. Reports indicate that detainees are frequently subjected to torture within facilities such as Sde Teiman, where international inspectors, lawyers and journalists have been denied access. As one detainee reported to Addameer, conditions include confinement in metal cages with jagged stones, forced exposure to extreme cold, and relentless beatings by guards.

These abuses are not incidental but rather indicative of standard procedures under occupation. Sahar Francis and others argue that administrative detention has evolved into a weaponised policy aimed at destabilising Palestinian society by detaining individuals on tenuous or non-existent grounds, erasing due process and stifling resistance. Fares summarised the prisoners' predicament: 'The message of the prisoners is that conditions are getting worse. Each day we get news of prisoners' deaths. We worry these will accelerate month by month.'

Each year, Israeli regime

forces arrest some 500–700 children, showing clearly that the intention is not 'self-defence' or 'fighting terrorism', but intimidation and dehumanisation. Children are held for an average of 16.5 days, a period during which 75% suffer physical violence, and nearly all suffer other forms of psychological or physical torture.

Violence, displacement and apartheid

While the formal focus was on the plight of political prisoners, the delegation's meetings throughout the West Bank exposed the wider architecture of occupation – a relentless assault on Palestinian life and heritage that extends beyond the prison walls and into towns, villages and olive groves.

Sahar Francis from Addameer explained: 'Few people understand the chilling effects of this Israeli repression. Everyone is terrified to speak out; no one is organising civic actions against the war – marches or demonstrations – because they will be arrested and disappeared.' Israeli forces wield control through pervasive intimidation, rendering public resistance nearly impossible.

In Ramallah, Mayor Issa Kassis described how Israeli forces make their presence constantly known, entering the city at will. 'The Israeli army wants to make its presence felt in Ramallah. So they come, slowly; they shoot if they want. Their goal is to demean us, to threaten us, and above all to degrade the social fabric of an otherwise peaceful, civil city,' he told the delegation.

These arbitrary intrusions serve not just as demonstrations of power but as acts of psychological warfare, intended to destabilise and fragment Palestinian communities.

In Jerusalem's Silwan neighbourhood, Fakhri Abu Diab recounted the brutal demolition of his home by Israeli settlers. 'They have not only demolished the walls and windows. They have

demolished my past, my memories,' he said. The destruction is often abrupt, leaving families homeless – without recourse or compensation.

Abu Diab added, 'Before, they would come with a demolition order. Now, they just demolish.' Palestinians are even forced to pay for the demolition, should they choose not to tear down their homes themselves, covering the lunch and coffee breaks of the soldiers overseeing the process.

On 5 November – just days following the departure of the delegation – Israeli bulldozers and police again arrived to the house of Abu Diab. In total, they destroyed five homes in the neighbourhood of Silwan, without warning and without court order.

This systematic dispossession extends across the West Bank. For decades, the Palestinian olive harvest has been marred by violence. Settlers have long burnt entire olive groves to the ground, blocked Palestinians from accessing their land, cut off water access and attacked farmers. In 2023, at least 96,000 dunums of olive-cultivated lands across the West Bank were left unharvested due to this repression: economic ruin for the farmers and the Palestinian economy at large.

This year, this brutality has intensified. Less than two weeks before the delegation arrived in Palestine, UN experts demanded Israel stop violent settler attacks on Palestinian farmers that threaten their olive harvest. 'If the olive trees knew the hands that planted them,' wrote Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, 'their oil would become tears.'

'In the West Bank, it's lawlessness,' said Mustafa Barghouti during a meeting with the delegation in Ramallah. 'You have 700 checkpoints and the military can do whatever it likes to the people who pass through them. The settlers have been distributed over 100,000 weapons, and they work day and night to terrorise us: shoot, burn, kill, evict.'

In the village of Qusra, our delegation witnessed exactly this kind of systematic violation of international law as these weapons were turned on our delegation as it sought to document the crimes of apartheid.

On the morning of 29 October, our delegation arrived in Qusra to accompany the olive harvest. Immediately upon entering the fields, delegates were bombarded with tear gas and stun grenades by both settler armed forces and the Israeli army that accompanied them.

Fields were torched, farmers arrested, and delegates threatened with immediate and permanent expulsion from the country. 'Israel has turned the olive harvest into an act of war,' said lead delegate and former Barcelona mayor Ada Colau, as she faced off with the masked soldiers across the field.

In Qusra, the delegation witnessed the crimes committed against Palestinian farmers as they tended to their land. But the vast majority of Palestinians do not own any land at all; whether in 1948, 1967 or decades since, tens of thousands have been forced from their historical communities and into refugee camps that have since become the highest-density urban areas in the world.

After visiting Qusra, the delegation travelled to the Balata refugee camp. Here, decades of dispossession have left a dense, underfunded community regularly subjected to military raids. 'We are just a training ground for Israel's youngest soldiers – to harass, and to kill,' one resident told the delegation. With the recent Knesset (Israeli parliament) vote to expel UNRWA, the sole agency supporting Palestinian refugees, the outlook for Balata's residents is dire. 'Our classrooms now have 50 students at minimum. We will lose a generation to this crisis of education,' a teacher warned.

In Nablus, young activists with the NGO Seeds echoed this despair. 'How could they think

our lives are so cheap?' one young woman asked. 'It's as if this thing called the "world" does not exist.' This frustration lingers long after each encounter with checkpoints or soldiers, which form a labyrinthine network that traps residents and visitors alike. As one young person described, 'The army can kill you at the checkpoint, or the settlers can kill you on the road, and even if you make it to your destination, it will have taken you an entire lifetime to reach it.'

Winding through the West Bank – on a fresh road paved for settlers in the wake of 7 October – the delegation saw brand new gates at the entrance to Palestinian villages, closed at whim by the Israeli army. The result is a new geography of the occupation – an archipelago of 'little Gazas', as one of our hosts described them: open-air prisons with no control over the entry and exit of goods or people.

The Governor of Nablus Ghassan Daghlal described the process bluntly: 'Nablus is systematically targeted by Israeli forces – outposts, checkpoints, gates, settlements – designed to restrict our movement and repress our people. Settlers have closed the roads – and they control the roads – that connect Nablus from its surrounding regions.'

Area C is the key site of this advanced annexation. At Umm al-Khair in the South Hebron Hills, Israeli soldiers have conducted searches and demolitions every single day and night since 7 October last year. 'They say it's a "security issue" that Palestinians cannot farm their land or tend their animals. Meanwhile, the settlers take thousands of acres – slowly, surely and illegally.'

Meanwhile, in Al-Khalil – the old city of Hebron – Israeli settlers advance the construction apartheid with increasing violence against the existing Palestinian population. 'We are not Gaza. But in Hebron, too, we are fighting for our very existence,' Issa Amro told us. 'For 1,000 Palestinian families in H2' – Hebron's area seized by Israeli armed forces – 'there is no life now:

professional, social or familial. We cannot see our aunts and uncles, but we cannot even see our electrician.'

Area C is not alone. In Jerusalem, municipal authorities have also moved fast to implement their vision of a Palestinian-free Holy City. That ambition is longstanding and publicly declared. The Jerusalem 2020 master plan set out explicit demographic targets for a mega-majority Jewish population – and the expropriation of Palestinian properties to get there.

Lead delegate Ada Colau summarised the situation: 'Apartheid is the reality – and it is advancing.'

Implications

The ongoing genocide in Gaza – coupled with the systematic nature of Israel's abusive and illegal practices across the Occupied Territories – speak to a concerted effort to collectively punish, humiliate, dehumanise and break the will of the Palestinian people.

The Israeli regime's actions recall the worst historical abuses committed by colonial powers against indigenous populations seeking their liberation – from the concentration camps used by Britain against the national liberation movement in Kenya to the internment of millions of Algerians by France.

Any government providing arms, energy, economic or diplomatic support to Israel is complicit in these crimes against humanity – and threatens the basic integrity of the international order.

The Israeli regime must urgently be subject to total isolation on all fronts – economic, military, cultural, political and diplomatic – to lay the groundwork for the end of the genocide and the dismantling of the colonial occupation in Palestine. ♦

The full report of the delegation is available on the website of the Progressive International (progressive.international).

The silent heroes of Kenya's anti-colonial movement

Bethany Rebisz shines a light on the civilian women who, in their quietly resilient ways, contributed to the Kenyan struggle for independence in the 1950s.

EACH year in Kenya, familiar faces are feted at the national remembrance of the country's heroes and heroines. Dedan Kimathi is arguably the most commemorated of figures. As one of the most prominent leaders of the anti-colonial Land and Freedom Army, Mau Mau, he has become a symbol of the bloodshed for independence.

Field Marshal Muthoni Kirima also features. She avoided British capture for 11 years, hiding in the forests of central Kenya, and was the only woman to reach the status of field marshal in the Mau Mau. So it is unsurprising that the then deputy president, Rigathi Gachagua, and other top government leaders attended her funeral in September 2023. Kirima died at the age of 92. The surviving Mau Mau generation is now declining, but many of those who fought or

grew up during the 1950s rebellion live on.

While the leaders of the Mau Mau and the political elite now hold a prominent place in Kenya's national history of independence, this cannot be said of the thousands of civilians who contributed to the anti-colonial cause. These include the unarmed women who sustained the freedom fighters during this fraught period of Kenya's history.

Historians estimate that between 1952 and 1960, British colonial forces detained 80,000 Kenyans, hanged over 1,000 suspected rebels, and forcibly resettled approximately 1.2 million civilians in colonial 'villages'. As its control of the colony dwindled, Britain used brutal measures



A memorial in Nairobi built in honour of torture victims during the colonial era. Britain used brutal measures to suppress anti-colonial dissent in Kenya.

including torture, forced labour and collective punishment to suppress anti-colonial dissent. It wasn't until 2013 that Britain finally acknowledged these human rights abuses, having been exposed in the landmark High Court hearings (2011–12).

These discoveries have instigated a flurry of historical examination from historians and activists to assess British brutality in Kenya. This work has largely focused on the detention camps incarcerating freedom fighters and Britain's military campaign. But what of the civilians, mainly women and children, whose lives were disrupted and threatened by their forced resettlement into guarded villages? In 2018, I set out

to conduct research in Kenya to capture these important stories.

The oral histories of women Britain forcibly resettled in the 1950s offer important insights into life in these villages. They challenge the evidence in the colonial archive. Archival records lack rich or diverse information about the day-to-day experiences of those who lived in the villages.

Brutal history

Between 1954 and 1960, an estimated 1.2 million Kenyans were forcibly removed from their homes and forced into colonial 'villages'. This form of collective punishment was to work in tandem with the mass detention of suspected freedom fighters. Torture and forced labour were practised widely.

The High Court hearings forced Britain to release its 'migrated archive', which consisted of over 20,000 files pertaining to 37 of its former colonies. These records had been secretly removed during the process of decolonisation. The archive corroborated survivors' testimonies of torture, sexual violence and mistreatment in the camps. These new histories of colonial violence expose the limits of international human rights laws in the wars of decolonisation.

For its audience back home and across the world, Britain's Colonial Office circulated images of the colonial villages, images depicting community, safety and even joy. Photographs of children playing on a makeshift slide, women laughing in a sewing class, a village

headman smiling in the local shop. But how well did these depictions represent lived experiences?

Women's stories

Over the spring of 2019, I interviewed several women who had at some stage of the 1950s been forcibly resettled. Their ages at the time of interview ranged from 69 to 105 years old.

Most women were put in contact with me during my time spent in the central region of Kenya, building up relationships with community leaders, cultural heritage practitioners, and through friends. The interviews conducted for the project mainly took place in the participants' homes. Stories and memories were shared over a warm mug of chai (tea).

Several themes emerged from the interviews with women who experienced forced resettlement.

Firstly, surveillance. When the British colonial government declared a state of emergency in October 1952, it was concerned by the growing anti-colonial sentiment and initial attacks made by Mau Mau fighters. By 1953 it became apparent to colonial officials that women in the Gikuyu, Embu and Meru regions were playing a significant role in sustaining the forest fight. Much of the Mau Mau strategising took place deep in the forests of Mount Kenya, with women supplying food, ammunition and intelligence to the armed combatants.

Women were characterised as the eyes and ears of the movement and concentrating them in colonial 'villages' ensured the colonial state's eyes and ears were fixed upon them. As one interviewee explained to me: 'Everything had changed ... you do not play, you do not make a noise ... We see the Home Guards up there.' Women and children in the villages knew they were under constant watch from the colonial state and its guards, and they regulated their own behaviour accordingly.



British soldiers on patrol in Kenya during the time of the Mau Mau rebellion.

The villages, while depicted in propaganda as lush green spaces with happy villagers, instead followed similar patterns to the detention scheme. Most villages were surrounded by barbed-wire fences, or trenches filled with sharpened sticks. These were well-fortified spaces to keep out the Mau Mau and keep in those who might support them. Security posts were often situated at the top of hillsides facing down on the huts of inhabitants. Security officials monitored all movement.

As one interviewee expressed it: 'We looked like caged people. Like people in prison.'

The punishments inflicted if rules were broken raise a second theme in these interviews: brutality. Violence and coercion came in several forms. If a family was suspected of continuing to aid forest fighters, guards set the roof of their hut ablaze.

Village-wide curfews were put in place and people were locked inside their homes for extended periods of time. They were denied food. Public beatings were inflicted. People were executed. Many women sustained severe bodily harm when being interrogated at the security post. These punishments often extended to sexual violence.

But the British colonial state could not break the women's spirit. Women spoke of the food they shared with one another. They recalled caring for children who had been orphaned. Women set up

trading networks that sustained the community and prepared them for life post-conflict. Many persisted in their support of the Mau Mau, sneaking food out of the village, breaking the fences so forest fighters could get into the village site, and strategising under nightfall.

With military operations subduing from 1956, Britain slowly began releasing families from the colonial villages. Some women were allocated land elsewhere, others were assigned land that had once been part of that village. For many then, the memories of forced resettlement remain ever present.

During this research I often received a similar response from women: 'You want to speak to my husband, he was in the forest, he was detained, he was one of those heroes.' Collectively, women who faced forced resettlement for their participation and connection to the liberation movement have tended to marginalise their own significance.

Yet, in many ways, women across the central region of Kenya embodied the conflict. Their day-to-day lives became part of the battlefield. It raises a challenge for scholars to recognise all the experiences of colonialism in Kenya. To extend our anti-colonial histories beyond Mau Mau, also. ♦

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Freedom Corner: Inside a Buenos Aires prison cooperative

In the face of dramatic cuts to public funding, an Argentine prison cooperative fights to keep supporting free education for the incarcerated.

Josefina Salomón

AT the back of a large and colourful warehouse in Villa Crespo, a leafy neighbourhood in the heart of Buenos Aires, a group of young people at the cooperative Esquina Libertad print cotton bags with a manual heat press. The image on the bags shows the late Norma Plá, a zestful pensioner who became the face of social protests in Argentina in the 1990s.

Plá became a sort of national hero for leading a countrywide protest movement that fought for pensioners' rights after a neoliberal programme to fight hyperinflation was implemented in the late 1980s that drastically reduced public spending. In a moment that for many Argentines became emblematic of the problematic decade, Plá made the then finance minister Domingo Cavallo cry on camera when she pleaded for help.

While much has changed in the decades since Plá demanded a dignified pension for retirees, the kinds of policies she and others fought against are making a tragic comeback. She passed away in 1996, but her memory is being revived as protests against austerity measures in Argentina surge once again. Projects like Esquina Libertad, a publishing cooperative that supports people deprived of their liberty, fill critical gaps in social services. In the face of a new wave of austerity, the initiative is struggling to survive.

Since taking office last December, right-wing President Javier Milei has cut social spending



The Esquina Libertad project in Buenos Aires provides incarcerated individuals with essential social services.

by 30%, including reducing food aid for soup kitchens and decreasing subsidies for public services like education and transportation. He claims the measures were essential to halt crippling inflation, which reached nearly 300% in late 2023. By April, Argentina's national public sector recorded a surplus for the first time in years and inflation has since slowly declined. But Milei's policies have come at a high social cost. With rents and services going up at the same time that economic activity has decreased, poverty has skyrocketed. Currently, 52.9% of the population is living under the poverty line – the highest rate since 2003, according to official figures.

Some of the groups most affected by the cuts have been social organisations supporting those in greatest need, including cooperatives like Esquina Libertad, or Freedom Corner, inspired by a famous song by Los Piojos. The

cooperative runs a communications agency and editorial, printing and audiovisual production house. It is the first of its kind made up of people who are currently or have previously been incarcerated and their relatives, who assist in running workshops and promoting the cooperative.

Building tools for life after prison

The Esquina Libertad project started in 2010, when a group of women whose loved ones were being held in Devoto, the only federal prison in the city of Buenos Aires, started talking about how they could help their relatives after they were released. Many people who have spent time in prison say this period is the toughest; finding work in Argentina is hard in the best of times, but for those with a criminal record, it's nearly impossible. The Centro Universitario de Devoto,

Josefina Salomón

a public university that offers six degrees and a number of workshops within the prison, bought the women from Esquina Libertad a printing machine as a way to kickstart their own business. They now run workshops and trainings in half a dozen prisons across the country.

‘The project was born out of a lack of effective public policies to support our communities,’ says Ayelen Stoker, one of Esquina Libertad’s founders. ‘The state is not present from the start, does not provide proper education, healthcare, work. The one thing it does is to put people in prison, and when they are done, they release them without any support. That logic of punishment for punishment’s sake does not help resocialise anyone, it only isolates people further.’

Stoker knows about the impact of prisons. First her uncle was imprisoned, and then her partner of 12 years. Stoker, like other relatives, found it hard to make ends meet while her partner was incarcerated, let alone find time to visit him in prison. She had to gather enough money to buy food and medicines for him, travel to the prison, then queue for hours to enter. When her partner was finally released, he found it difficult to find employment given his criminal record.

These challenges inspired Stoker to find a creative way to help him, and others, access job opportunities. ‘Esquina Libertad was the result of reflecting on the need to have tools to generate inclusion, and it was something that came from us, not from people [who have not experienced prisons],’ she says.

Books behind bars

Argentina’s prison population has been steadily rising for decades, increasing fourfold between 1996 and 2022. A large percentage of people are held in pre-trial



Ayelen Stoker, one of Esquina Libertad’s founders, says that the cooperative emerged out of a lack of public policies to support incarcerated people.

detention for years before their case goes to court. The vast majority of those incarcerated come from marginalised backgrounds and lack access to higher education. The impacts of imprisonment are particularly damaging for women, who are often heads of household, and trans people who suffer a number of intersecting forms of discrimination.

On paper, a government agency called Patronato de Liberados is meant to provide services to formerly incarcerated individuals, including psychological support, assistance in finding work, and strategies for adapting to life after incarceration. In practice, the government provides few resources, putting pressure on organisations like Esquina Libertad to fill gaps in essential social services. The cooperative members rely on a collective model where work and earnings are shared equitably.

‘There are many cases of women who don’t have any support, and after being released they say they were better off in prison than

outside,’ says Silvana Ortíz, who was released from the San Martín prison a year ago and now works for Esquina Libertad. ‘There is a major difference in the way someone who is released from prison can readjust to life if they have some kind of support and if they don’t,’ she adds.

Ortíz loves talking and telling stories. This is why she jumped at the opportunity to take part in a theatre workshop organised by Esquina Libertad in San Martín in 2018. She quickly excelled and decided to take other courses, including one in radio production. When she was released, the cooperative offered her the opportunity to continue working with them.

‘What authorities propose is to open more prisons, more tough-on-crime policies when what we actually need are actions to prevent people from ending up in prison in the first place,’ says Ortíz.

Esquina Libertad is one of many social projects that are backed by Argentina’s public universities, which run workshops for incarcerated people and have



The Esquina Libertad cooperative's printing house offers workshops to incarcerated individuals on printing techniques and produces magazines, books and banners.

Josefina Salomón

awarded several hundred higher degrees in federal and state prisons. The printing house produces banners, books, magazines and promotional materials for businesses and runs communications campaigns for shops and organisations. They also offer workshops on alternative printing techniques and audiovisual production.

Argentina is a pioneer in Latin America when it comes to free higher education, including for people deprived of their liberty. Thirty-four of Argentina's 70 public universities offer undergraduate programmes for incarcerated people. Most of these initiatives were created in the last 15 years, according to Ramiro Gual, a researcher and law professor who has taught in Devoto since 2016 in one of the oldest in-prison university programmes.

These universities serve as a kind of oasis inside the prison system. Many students say they got involved because they wanted to spend time away from the cell blocks, and they got an education along the way. The student inmates coordinate their courses with visiting professors, organise exams and actively recruit new students. They also carry out classroom repairs, prepare meals for students, and negotiate with the prison authorities to obtain books and

supplies.

Gual says that these programmes are not just about people earning a degree, but about 'building citizens.' Stoker agrees. 'The vast majority of people who take part in the workshops are less likely to commit a crime again,' she says. 'That means education generates opportunities.' The programmes offer incarcerated individuals a way both to connect to the outside world and to imagine their lives outside of prison.

'It's hard to think about tomorrow'

Around 500 people are engaged with the Esquina Libertad cooperative in different ways, including some 50 who are currently deprived of their liberty. Argentina's economic downturn and cuts to social programmes have affected all aspects of the project. For some, the spike in the cost of public transport prevents them from getting to the cooperative. For others, rising unemployment and a decline in the sale of items produced by the cooperative is affecting the ability of cooperative members to put food on the table.

'Everything got immensely more difficult in the last year. I cannot think of a worse time than now. It's even hard to think about

tomorrow,' Stoker says.

She is worried about the impact that Milei's chainsaw approach to public funding will have on Esquina Libertad. In 2024, Milei reduced the country's public education spending by 40%. In recent weeks, protests to protect free university education have rocked the streets of Buenos Aires. The University of Buenos Aires has said it has seen an 80% cut to its budget in real terms, and some public institutions say they cannot afford to keep the lights on, let alone pay a decent wage to staff and professors. In October, Milei vetoed a law that would have guaranteed funding for free public universities.

These cuts have had a domino effect for projects like Esquina Libertad. Stoker says the cooperative offers former incarcerated individuals a pathway out of poverty, which can ultimately serve to reduce crime and prevent people from returning to prison. 'We need to think about alternatives to prison through education, work and healthcare,' Stoker explains. 'And we need the state to play an active role and work with civil society organisations like ours.'

In a corner of the Esquina Libertad warehouse, two women and a young man are busy printing Norma Plá T-shirts. One of the women wears a cooperative T-shirt that reads 'Without education there's no future.' As they work, they converse about their daily struggles to get by, an exchange that has become all too common across Argentina. They are preparing for an upcoming demonstration in support of public universities outside of the Congress in Buenos Aires. By invoking the memory of Norma Plá, and by continuing to organise alongside other cooperatives and social movements, they insist that a different world is possible. ♦

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