

“Environmental Racism, the Climate Crisis and Reparatory Justice”

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Vice Chair, Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination
Panel on *Environmental Justice, the Climate Crisis and People of African Descent*
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Historical injustices have undeniably contributed to the poverty, underdevelopment, marginalization, social exclusion, economic disparities, instability and insecurity that affect many people in different parts of the world, in particular in developing countries (DDPA)

Thank you Chair. I greet all attendees and members of the OHCHR and WGEPAD. It is rather nice to be in your midst once again.

The global development agenda, in the contemporary setting, has chosen to focus on climate change as one of the key areas of concern in the implementation of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs are seen as essential tools in the bid to ensure that no citizen is left behind and have been treated as a blueprint for the way forward for nations across the world. As the deadline year of 2030 approaches, climate change represents a crucial area for this development narrative. In fact, SDG 13 is specifically geared towards taking *'action to combat climate change and its impact'* with the United Nations' reporting that *'a warming climatic system is expected to impact the availability of basic necessities like freshwater, food security, and energy.'*¹

For developing nations, the effects of climate change are comparatively worse. Indeed, the UN also states that *'Poor and developing countries, particularly least developed countries, will be among those most adversely affected and least able to cope with the anticipated shocks to their social, economic and natural systems.'*²

For us in the Caribbean, our status as Small Island Developing States (SIDS), further compounds this problematic. Indeed, SIDS - like the Caribbean - are extremely susceptible to the alarming effects of climate change as we face our vulnerabilities **geographically** (as a Region that based on location is prone to natural disasters such as hurricanes and earthquakes), **economically** (as a Region that is more likely to experience exogenous shocks to our economy as we primarily rely on external markets and consumers) and **socially** (as a Region that lacks the resources to build and sustain suitable social infrastructure).

This is elucidated in 'The Future We Want' adopted at the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil where, in reference to SIDS, it was posited that *'their small size, remoteness, narrow resource and export base, and exposure to global environmental challenges and external economic shocks, including to a large range of impacts from climate change and potentially more frequent and intense natural disasters'* displays our own peculiarities and vulnerabilities of SIDS.³

Sadly, before any encounter of the term 'climate change' or any ability to define what exactly it is, our Caribbean citizens have already lived and felt it. We felt (and continue to feel) it in the gradual disappearance of our shorelines from our favourite beaches and the rising

temperatures during each summer period; as well as in the absolute havoc and destruction wreaked as we endure hurricane after hurricane, each year intensifying in their strength and destruction.

Lest we forget, it was just in 2019 that the Caribbean archipelago of The Bahamas was devastated by Hurricane Dorian – leading to the displacement of people, the loss of loved ones, possessions and homes. Sadly, this occurrence is no stranger to the Region, as we have always experienced the devastation inflicted upon us by other natural disasters – for instance, Hurricanes Maria and Irma, the effects of which were devastating to our Caribbean counterparts Dominica and Puerto Rico. The Region is, therefore, well aware that as global temperatures rise, our peoples, lands and livelihoods have been placed in great danger. We have lived it. We have felt it. Professor Michael Taylor, in reference to Maria and Irma argues that: *“At no point in the historical records dating back to the late 1800s have two category five storms made landfall in the small Caribbean island chain of the eastern Antilles in a single year.”*⁴

Yet, one cannot help but examine whose major responsibility is the position in which we find ourselves. Indeed, those who examine the subject of our history are well equipped to argue about the role European colonialism has played in our precarious position. It is Professor Mimi Sheller who best states it: *“Colonialism...is a founding moment of the contemporary climate crisis and was generated by the system of plantation slavery.”*⁵ In fact, it is impossible to examine the present ecological crisis in vulnerable Small Island Developing States (SIDS) in the Caribbean without recalling and understanding the manner in which we have been subjected to this precarious position. Our obvious geographical location has made us, as a Region, susceptible to the effects of natural disasters. Yet, if we recall, our ancestors were not willing passengers on ships to this very Region. They were forcefully transported to the Caribbean to labour and aid in the enrichment of European colonial powers.

Furthermore, centuries of agricultural practices utilised to cultivate sugar on plantations, which included mass deforestation, have led to the erosion and loss of fertility of our soils and the loss of valuable, protective forestry. Veront Satchell has noted that it was the ideology of Westernization that informed the colonial landscape and poignantly argued that:

*There is no doubt that the landscape that emerged and developed with this European incursion and settlement, and the institutions and infrastructures that were developed, served to transform the region’s landscape not only to mirror Europe but also to exploit its resources, not for the benefit of the “natives” but for that of the colonisers and, more importantly, the metropole...”*⁶

But Historians like B.W. Higman and Veront Satchell⁷ also indicate that deforestation and plantation construction led to frequent droughts. Satchell noted that during the period 1760-1830, droughts were frequent with three of the worst being in 1769, 1770 and 1815. He also noted that hurricanes were notably disastrous in 1780, 1781, 1784, 1785, 1786, 1812, 1813, 1815 and 1818. Food insecurity among the Black population was also an impact as droughts affected the output of their provision grounds.

The dominant sugar economy, by 1750 in most Caribbean countries, as the earlier diversified economy was transformed, affected the environment. The United Nations Environmental Programme has noted the following:

“The production of sugar cane has significant implications for national biodiversity. Indeed, sugar cane has probably caused a greater loss of biodiversity than any other single crop in the world due to the destruction of wetlands for plantations, intensive water uses...Land clearance for cane production not only results in the direct loss of species and habitats, but underlies a range of wider impacts on ecosystem functions, including changes to hydrology and increased soil erosion.”⁸

We have, thus, found ourselves even more vulnerable to the effects of natural disasters, including flooding, landslides and pollution. Added to this science is the global dynamic that has been institutionalized since plantation slavery, i.e. the dynamic between developed and developing nations. We have long struggled for access to resources as underdeveloped nations, dare I say at the expense of the development of developed countries – a reality which stems from slavery and colonialism but continues even today. It is this dynamic that allows for developed nations to always triumph in the fight for access to resources, conversely to the lack of access continuously faced by developing nations. Possibly most relevantly elucidated in the ongoing struggle for access to COVID-19 equipment, tests and vaccines as Vaccine Imperialism rears its ugly head. How myopic; no one is safe until all are safe.

But we still appear to be functionally divided into ‘The Global North’ and ‘The Global South’, where approximately 200 million people of African Descent, globally, represent one of the most marginalised and impoverished people in the world.⁹ It is perhaps Prof Sheller again who best summarizes this dynamic and its roots in plantation slavery:

The violent, coercive, transatlantic system of plantation slavery...created the present conditions of global uneven development, anti-blackness, and border regimes that pattern human vulnerability. These colonial ideologies continue to influence who has access to resources, to safety, and to preferable ecologies – in short who can survive the climate emergency.¹⁰

Ironically, despite the fact that we are not entirely to be blamed for the position in which we find ourselves, (I say entirely because citizens and politicians must take some responsibility for environmentally irresponsible acts that threaten the environment and the welfare of citizens), we have been expected to pick up the pieces and fix a problem for which we are not fully responsible. It was Priya Lukka, economist and international development fellow at Goldsmiths University who poignantly stated that “...those with the least exposure seem to be comfortable in telling their former colonies how they should do more without an understanding or acceptance of their own role in creating the climate burdens now experienced by others.”¹¹ Yes, we have been made to fix a problem, by the problem makers themselves without adequate help. In truth, the Caribbean Region has found itself in a post-colonial nightmare – a state of underdevelopment with insufficient resources to ameliorate the deficiencies we have inherited. We have been disadvantaged and ill equipped, the legacies of which we continue to see manifest themselves in our vulnerabilities to the effects of climate change.

Therefore, when we talk about climate change, we have to talk about reparatory justice. As Lukka argues, reparations mean questioning why people are living in poverty and rejecting political decisions that underscore their acceptance of its causes. This is not just a call for monetary compensation as I will demonstrate when I discuss CARICOM’s Ten Point Action Plan; it’s also a demand for radical and justice-driven change. Reparations activism is organised around challenging the acceptance of today’s vast inequalities and looking at the

enormous culpability of colonialism.¹² The 10 Point Developmental Approach demands the following:

1. Full Formal Apology
2. Indigenous Peoples Development Programme
3. Repatriation for those who choose it
4. The building of cultural institutions
5. Attention to the public health crisis
6. Illiteracy eradication
7. An African knowledge programme
8. Psychological rehabilitation
9. Technology transfer
10. Debt cancellation

Prof. Sheller highlights a suitable climate reparations approach:

If we were to extend the case for slavery reparations to encompass a) the damage to island environments by plantations and the destitution of populations descended from enslavement, which have left them especially vulnerable to climate change, and b) the role of slavery systems in the financial foundations of global economies, banks, and insurance firms that have directly financed the rise of multinational fossil fuel (and mining) extractive economies; then we could show that these beneficiaries have exposed the Caribbean to ecological damage, social vulnerability, and high risk from climate extremes.¹³

The Caribbean consists of people and communities most vulnerable to the ecological crisis we are currently encountering globally. Though we are least responsible, given our history, and least equipped given the global dynamic instituted since slavery, we must advocate for a reparatory approach to addressing this issue.

As it stands, it would appear as if the same colonialist logic around debt packages, land redistribution and debt rescheduling is at work around climate change, where those with the least exposure seem to be comfortable in telling their former colonies how they should do more without an understanding or acceptance of their own role in creating the climate burdens now experienced by others. As Lukka rightfully suggests, “*in a reparations approach, climate adaptation for countries which are most exposed and least responsible for climate change would be funded on this basis.*”¹⁴

I close by reminding us of the DDPA’s assertion that: *Historical injustices have undeniably contributed to the poverty, underdevelopment, marginalization, social exclusion, economic disparities, instability and insecurity that affect many people in different parts of the world, in particular in developing countries;*” – and I add, where the vast majority of people of African descent reside and suffer from colonial legacies. States must use the Decade as an opportunity to engage with people of African descent on appropriate and effective measures to halt and reverse the lasting consequences of slavery and colonialism, and eliminate continuing harm, including environmental harm that threaten their well-being. As the programme of activities direct, it is essential to alleviate and remedy disparities in the enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms affecting people of African descent, protecting them from discrimination and overcoming persistent or structural disparities and de facto inequalities resulting from historical circumstances.

ENDNOTES/REFERENCES

¹<https://sdgs.un.org/topics/climate-change>

² ibid

³ <https://sdgs.un.org/topics/small-island-developing-states>

⁴ Michael Taylor, "Climate change in the Caribbean – learning lessons from Irma and Maria," *The Guardian*, 6 October 2017.

⁵ Mimi Sheller, *The Case for Combining Slavery Reparations and Climate Reparations in the Caribbean*, Keynote delivered at the Rutgers/UWI Symposium on "Climate, History, & Responsibility: Climate Justice in the Caribbean", Kingston, Jamaica, 30th January 2020. See also Verene Shepherd, "Plantation Construction and Environmental Degradation" at the same Symposium.

⁶ Veront Satchell, *Hope Transformed: A Historical Sketch of the Hope Landscape, St. Andrew, Jamaica, 1660 1960* (Kingston, 2012), p 6

⁷ B. W. Higman, *Jamaica Surveyed* (Kingston, 1988), p. 7, and Satchell, *Sugar, Slavery and Technological Change: Jamaica 1760-1830*. VDM Publishing, 2010, p. 23. See also Verene Shepherd, *Livestock, Sugar and Slavery: Contested Terrain in Colonial Jamaica* (Kingston, 2007)

⁸ <https://unep.ch/etb/initiatives/Executive%20Summaries%20and%20briefs/Jamaica%20Ten%20Pager.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.un.org/en/observances/decade-people-african-descent/background>

¹⁰ Mimi Sheller, "The Case for Combining Slavery Reparations and Climate Reparations in the Caribbean."

¹¹ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/transformation/can-reparations-help-us-re-envision-international-development/>

¹² See J. Timmons Roberts and Bradley C. Parks, *A Climate of Injustice: Global Inequality, North- South Politics, and Climate Policy* (Cambridge, 2007) for a useful discuss on climate justice.

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/transformation/can-reparations-help-us-re-envision-international-development/>