Greetings Your Excellencies and Distinguished Delegates. My name is Grieve Chelwa. I am an economist and the director of research at the Institute on Race, Power and Political Economy at the New School in New York City. I have previously held academic positions at the University of Cape Town, University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg and Harvard University. I am delivering this statement from Lusaka, Zambia where I spend a great deal of my time.

It is a great honor and privilege for me to be delivering this statement on the occasion of the Fifth Intersessional Meeting of the Human Rights Council focusing on human rights and the 2030 Agenda. I congratulate the members of the Human Rights Council and the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR) for their stellar work in advocating for the guaranteeing of Human Rights.

Before I make some remarks on the topic of today’s meeting, I’d like to say some words about my Institute and its work.

The Institute on Race, Power and Political Economy at the New School examines the intersections of race, social stratification, power, and political economy. The founding director, Darrick Hamilton—a noted scholar, economist, and public intellectual -- leads the Institute in advancing innovative models and practical solutions that promote economic inclusion, social equity, civic engagement and racial and economic justice. Through these efforts, the Institute engages in strategic partnerships and produces actionable research intended to move policy and practice in fundamentally new directions that promote more broadly shared prosperity across race, gender, nativity, ethnicity, sexual orientation and their intersections.

The topic of today’s gathering is Overcoming multiple crises: realising the SDGs through a human rights enhancing economy.

This is a fitting topic given that the events of the last couple of years have demonstrated the limitations and contradictions inherent in our current mode of production and distribution across the world. The covid pandemic and the carnage that it has wrought laid bare to us all that our economic and health systems have been for the last couple decades designed to serve the few at the expense of the many. And this is largely true wherever in the world one is situated.

Billions of people across the world did not have access to publicly provided and guaranteed social safety nets to deal with the economic fallout from the pandemic, and therefore were largely left to fend for themselves as economies ground to a halt. We are yet to fully reckon with the implications of this mass neglect of our brothers and sisters.

At the sametime that billions were undergoing suffering, the global elite, for whom current systems of production and distribution favor, carried on with their lives with the minor inconvenience that they could relocate to their second and third homes away from pandemic hotspots.

The pandemic also laid bare the fact that our most essential workers in our economy, the ones where their absence from work would completely ground all that is vital to our wellbeing, were the least remunerated and the most exposed to covid.

Additionally, and quite poignantly, the pandemic revealed the immoralities contained in the Global Intellectual Property Architecture whereby the language of profits was predominant over people even in the midst of a historic pandemic where we would have expected a different kind of discourse acknowledging the sanctity of human life. In my own continent of Africa, many of our leaders were left to make desperate pleas begging for access to covid vaccines or at the very least the recipes on which the vaccines were based.

Your Excellencies and Distinguished delegates, I share these observations to make the case that we need to reconfigure how our economies are structured. That is to say, we need to reconfigure our current systems of production and distribution in such a way that we build economies that function for many as opposed to the few.

That is to say, we need to build economies that uphold the dignities of each one of our 8 billion neighbors without any prejudice to race, gender, nationality, immigrant status and other social identities which have historically been used as criteria for exclusion or inclusion.

This is why I find the concept of Human Rights Enhancing Economy particularly instructive in our current juncture of multiple crises – what some more perceptive scholars are referring to as polycrisis.

A north star for us in the present moment is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) which was adopted in December 1948 making it 75 years old this year. That landmark document, which was the product of input from diverse economic and political systems, proposed a framework through which to realise and uphold human dignity. According to the UDHR, human dignity was to be buttressed by five sets of inseparable rights: political, civil, cultural, social and economic rights.

Sadly, in the immediate aftermath of the adoption of the UDHR there arose a systematic intellectual campaign and social movement to lift up some rights and to delegitimize others. And here I am talking about the Mont Pelerin Society founded in the late 1940s that is the precursor to the Neoliberal Revolution that came to sweep the world and largely responsible for the multiple crises that the world is facing today.

In particular, the Mont Pelerin Society wanted to delegitimize economic rights by dubiously arguing that the free-market was a site for peaceful and voluntary exchange and therefore there was no need for a system of economic rights. On the other hand, the Society argued that the political realm was the site for much violence a scenario requiring government guarantee of civil and political rights and those rights pertaining to the protection of private property.

This dispensation of what one may call the neoliberalization of human rights (i.e. focussing only on political, civil and property rights), a dispensation that has dominated policy discourse over the last couple of decades, has not led to the upholding of human dignity as envisaged in the UDHR. If anything, and as the events of the last three years so poignantly demonstrate, the neoliberalization of human rights has led to mass indignities.

In conclusion, a human rights enhancing economy, to my mind, requires that we recapture the bold ambition of the UDHR by paying particular attention to the role that economic rights can play in fostering human dignity. After all, the economy plays such an inordinate role in determining material conditions for many across the world, a situation necessitating that economic rights take on a prominent role in enhancing human rights.

Lastly, we need to articulate different sets of norms and values that center people and not profits. Had we engendered such a set of norms and values in the lead-up to the pandemic, we would have had in place adequate social safety nets instead of the trillions in dollars given to private firms in the form of corporate welfare. Had we had such norms and values in place, the recipes for lifesaving vaccines would have been viewed as truly public goods for the public benefit as opposed to mechanisms for the accumulation of endless profits by the pharmaceutical sector (who by the way are massive beneficiaries of corporate welfare). Had we had such values and norms in place, we would all come together in unison in confronting the climate crisis that is underway.

Your Excellencies and Distinguished delegates, there is much work to be done to make the world anew but as Commissioner Turk so eloquently stated a few minutes ago, we are fortunate in that our forebearers bequeathed us the UDHR as a blueprint.

Thank you.

Grieve Chelwa, PhD

Director of Research

Institute on Race, Power and Political Economy at the New School

19th January, 2023