**Moving beyond invocations of economic growth: Human rights and economics as a way to envision the future of development**

Submission for the thematic report to the UN Human Rights Council "Eradicating poverty in a post-growth context: preparing for the next Development Goals"

by

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1. **Introduction**

Our future hinges on our capacity to find new paths to reduce poverty and inequality while protecting our planetary limits. Economic growth, understood solely as GDP or GDP per capita, has reached an empirical *cul de sac*. We must present alternatives to think of new development pathways as a response to avoid the risks of climate breakdown, inequality, poverty, and instability. Yet, despite the urgency of finding alternatives, our disciplinary blinkers block us from considering a more holistic approach to fighting poverty and inequality.

This document proposes that by moving beyond our disciplinary blinkers, we can bridge the apparent between economics and human rights to reduce poverty and inequality. Despite the apparent antagonism between these two fields, it is possible to envision forms in which we can articulate them.

By reflecting on how we can embrace the synergies between economics and human rights, we can open new gateways to understand how economics and human rights can support a new vision of development.

Our epistemes have coded this apparent contradiction between economics, human rights, the reduction of poverty and inequality as one that is apparently unsolvable. Thus, speaking of redistribution is usually cast as a challenge to the current form of the legal system and property ownership; to many it is both straightforward and imperative to uphold civil and political rights, but farfetched and challenging to conceive of and defend economic, social, and cultural rights.

By understanding how we can bridge economics and human rights, we can conceive ways of thinking about a future for all. A future that recasts democratic politics as something that can serve the interest of the majority of the world's population within a set of limited collective resources, and one that can move us away from repeating the cyclical episodes of poverty, inequality, war, and authoritarianism while helping us overcome the challenges brought by climate breakdown.

To present this argument, we start by highlighting the failure of economic growth to reduce poverty and inequality in Africa. The failure of economic growth as a solution, must lead us to reflect the fact that many policy interventions are based on assumptions that do not hold water in practice. We know that economic growth does not necessarily equal societal wellbeing.

To assess new possibilities for the future, we need to think of a field of economics that embraces the concepts of human rights, and a practice of human rights that embraces economics.

1. **Invocations of economic growth in Africa** [[3]](#footnote-3)

Economic growth continues to be touted as a precondition for a better world; it has been used as a rule of thumb for designing policy despite the complex relationships defining the interactions in societies underpinning economic growth, poverty, inequality, and sustainability. At this critical juncture for humanity, it is imperative to provide better science and policy advice.

Africa illustrates the gaps in the promise of economic growth for the future of society. If we are to achieve the goals of the SDGs and the Africa Agenda 2063 and move forward, we need to take stock of what works and what does not seem to work.

**2.1 What has been the dividend of economic growth for Africans?**

While the continent observed positive economic growth in recent years (before the pandemic), Africa continues to have the highest share of the world’s poor, and unfortunately is projected to host 85% of the world’s poor by 2030[[4]](#footnote-4). While the economy of the continent observed positive economic growth rates, these were not necessarily accompanied with the expansion of opportunities, jobs, and social protection.

Precariousness in livelihoods and in the realisation of rights is illustrated in the exodus of Africans risking their lives in the perilous journeys across the Mediterranean waters or trekking across jungles in Latin America seeking better livelihoods in other countries[[5]](#footnote-5).

While income poverty (by money metric indicators) was declining in the years before the COVID-19 pandemic in Africa, the impacts of the pandemic and following shocks reversed this trend. The pandemic pushed at least 23.6 million people into extreme poverty (measured by an income of less than 1.9 USD/day) in Africa in 2021[[6]](#footnote-6).

Africa does not fare better than other regions in terms of inequality either. For example, the growth of incomes mostly benefited the wealthy and the super wealthy on the continent, while barely improving the well-being (measured by income) of other segments of the population. The Africans in the bottom 50% of the world income distribution saw their income grow at a 0.73% per year. On the other hand, those in the top 0.001% of the income distribution grew at around a 3% annual rate (more than four times the improvement of the incomes of the bottom half)[[7]](#footnote-7). This highlights the skewness of the distribution of benefits and dividends from economic growth with the top as the 1% of earners capturing 27% of the total economic growth in the continent[[8]](#footnote-8).

**2.2 Economic growth as armchair development**

In Africa, like in other regions in the world, economic growth has bypassed a great deal of people. If this was not the case, the positive economic growth rates observed in the last decades should have significantly reduced the levels of poverty and the inequalities across the continent, or at least positioned states and citizens better against the instability in the region since 2020.

The rationale of economic growth as a development solution stemmed from the idea that more resources will allow the financial space to implement policies to reduce poverty, and for financing public services and social policies. Implicit in this approach is the idea that the only way to make policies viable is via economic growth, as opposed to institutional reforms and transformations leading to more effective and redistributive fiscal systems, wider acknowledgement and support to the care economy and non-monetised value systems, or better and more inclusive representation of different and alternative voices on what societal goals should be.

Even if it were true that GDP growth suffices to reduce poverty and inequality, such benefits would be null in contexts rendered uninhabitable by climatic breakdowns. The concept of GDP associated with economic growth is limited in its abilities to account for the complex functioning of economies, as it does not account for non-monetized values and economic activities which are central to the function of societies. Development needs to be reconceived so as to overcome the present centrality of economic growth, which is indifferent to social equity, non-monetised values and the environmental limits of our planet.

**2.3 Moving beyond narrow understandings of development - leaning on a different ethos**

The current state of affairs calls for interventions that envision development as a societal goal, rather than development equalling the aggregation of individualised financial outcomes. A societal understanding of development as a collective endeavour, highlights the environmental and collective dimensions of society. Such an approach has the potential to include the rights of habitants and citizens of the continent - often unaccounted and taken for granted -, supporting a different ethos of understanding what a society should be, which moves away from the idea of economic growth as being the primary objective of any society.

Looking at the African experiences and the understandings of where an economy fits within a society and its social contracts can help us to reconceive economics and human rights for the future.

Within several communities in Africa, as in several other locations in the world, life does not make sense without access to collective goods such as land and ancestral rights. Whereas in a “westernised” understanding, land and property ownership are seen as individual goods, Africa illustrates how some societies have a different arrangement with regards to the economy and human rights. The trialled experience of societies demonstrates that there are alternatives to the current tenets of how economies and human rights may interact.[[9]](#footnote-9).

This motivates our interest in reflecting about a wider praxis and understanding of rights, economics, and development in societies. The praxis of Africa and other regions of the planet illustrate that alternatives that can bridge the apparent gap between economics and human rights can be envisioned. Yet, to acknowledge this, we first need to overcome the imagined incompatibility between law, human rights, and economics. This is a necessary condition to provide frameworks and ideas that can help us to think beyond the current development goals and stratgies.

1. **Framing and understanding economics and human rights for the future**

The Sustainable Development Goals SDGs incorporate dimensions such as the social and environmental concerns which were absent in previous frameworks such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The progress of several indicators, such as the Human Development Index (HDI) that account now for gender and income inequalities, as well as environmental pressure, illustrates that how we think of and envision the praxis of development is not written in stone. Development is a process in which lessons are incorporated to bring progressive change.

Part of this change requires models of development that can encompass human rights and economics for the future.

Yet, there is an apparent incompatibility between narrow understandings of economics and human rights. We challenge this apparent incompatibility and argue that understanding the synergies between human rights and economics enables a more holistic and sustainable vision of development.

**3.1 The apparent incompatibility of human rights and economics**

Even though human rights encompass various human dimensions, they are encoded in legal language and thinking. Therefore, it is very straightforward for legal scholars and political scientists to engage with human rights issues, particularly those associated with the setup of formal institutions, as is frequently the case with civil and political rights. Human rights activists perceive economics as flat-out subservient to Neoliberalism and exploitation. This is a gross misconception of a field that has also been concerned with wellbeing and welfare[[10]](#footnote-10). What is undeniable is that there are plenty of neoliberal-aligned applications of economic models, including in textbooks, yet this is not the whole field.

Economists, in contrast, are frequently suspicious of the so-perceived prescriptive content of human rights[[11]](#footnote-11). In-so-far as microeconomics is concerned, it is not impossible to integrate human rights into problems of maximisation under constraints: for the utility of an individual to be maximised without infringing upon others' rights, one needs to combine budget constraints with provisions for the respect of human rights and the environment. In a more macroeconomic perspective, the exploration of redistributive measures - in line with fiscal progressivity[[12]](#footnote-12) - is often dismissed on an *ex-ante* basis.

But if a particular ethos restrains many economists from engaging with human rights issues or from incorporating human rights dimensions in their analyses, when they do attempt it, they are often met by a comparably ethos-based resistance from human rights practitioners as well[[13]](#footnote-13).

**3.2 A new ethos and logos as a way for the future**

Human rights are interdisciplinary by nature, as rendered explicitly by the 1993 Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, and it is undeniable that an economic dimension is involved in such understanding of rights. Since then, the complementarities between human rights and economics have also been theoretically explored and demonstrated on several occasions[[14]](#footnote-14).

Law enables accounting for power, its asymmetries, and the limitation of economic metrics for development outcomes. Economics can consider the idea of budgets (such as the existence of natural resources), costs and ways in which wellbeing can be maximised. Then it is not far-fetched to conceive a definition of wellbeing in which the fulfilment of human rights, the reduction of poverty and inequality can be the objective sought by a society, and how this goal can be achieved by understanding how resources are limited and can be affected by our decisions. Thus, we could envision how to maximise human rights and freedom considering our planetary capacities. However, this requires human rights practitioners and economists relinquishing their mutual peeves, and moving away from an ethos that is not aiding in the goal of finding a way for the future that is sustainable.

Envisioning new forms of work, society and redistribution becomes so much easier if we think of the commonalities that bring together multiple fields. Bringing together human rights and economics, can allow us also to account and think of social goods that are not monetized nor accounted for, such as the care economy. By acknowledging and accounting other forms in which economics and human rights can coexist, will enable our thinking about other means of protection and production beyond a crude goal such as economic growth. Mistaking a nation's economic activity for the wellbeing of the inhabitants of a country[[15]](#footnote-15) is not a misconception that we can keep repeating.

To paraphrase Amartya Sen “it’s [remains] vulgar to capture in one number [or a law] an extremely complex story”[[16]](#footnote-16). The promise and legacy to future generations cannot be a series of statistics or dictums about economic growth surrounded by a burning planet.

We believe that to craft a new vision of development we could start by crafting a new logos of economics and human rights that can inform a new, more nuanced vision of human rights and economics which can guide a way for the future.

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3. Some elements of this section are based on: Díaz Pabón, Leibbrandt, Yasser & David. “**Invocations and curses about economic growth, poverty and inequality for Africa”** (2023)**.** And on the discussions held at the [*International Summit on the SDGs in Africa*](http://www.sdgsafricasummit.uct.ac.za/) at the University of Cape Town, South Africa in 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Lakner, Christoph, et al. "How much does reducing inequality matter for global poverty?." The Journal of Economic Inequality 20.3 (2022): 559-585. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. McAuliffe, Marie, and Anna Triandafyllidou. "1 Report Overview: Technological, Geopolitical and Environmental Transformations Shaping Our Migration and Mobility Futures." World Migration Report 2022.1 (2022): e00022. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. AU/UNECA/AfDB/ UNDP (2022). [2022 Africa Sustainable Development Report](https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2023-01/Africa%20Sustainable%20Development-Report_2022-PRINT_Inside_Final-05-12-22.pdf). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See footnote 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Seymour, Dan, and Jonathan Pincus. "Human rights and economics: The conceptual basis for their complementarity." Development Policy Review 26.4 (2008): 387-405. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Different understandings of ownership illustrate how multiple social, cultural, and political dimensions of human experience will never fit simple models. Models are and will always remain abstractions of reality, not dictates of what reality should be. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Atkinson, Anthony B. "The strange disappearance of welfare economics." *Kyklos* 54.2‐3 (2001): 193-206. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Seymour, Dan, and Jonathan Pincus. "Human rights and economics: The conceptual basis for their complementarity." Development Policy Review 26.4 (2008): 387-405. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Alston, Philip, and Nikki Reisch, eds. Tax, inequality, and human rights. Oxford University Press, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. An example of this can be identified in Koldo Casla´s recent account of his experience in inquiring about the role of property in the assurance of human rights, made with human rights specialists and organisations, not all of whom were favourable to the idea. Casla, Koldo (2023) In defense of the social right to property, *Open Global Rights* (available: <https://www.openglobalrights.org/defense-social-right-property/>; access: 12 December 2023) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Seymour, Dan, and Jonathan Pincus. "Human rights and economics: The conceptual basis for their complementarity." Development Policy Review 26.4 (2008): 387-405. Reddy, Sanjay G. "Economics and Human Rights: A Non‐conversation." Journal of Human Development and Capabilities 12.1 (2011): 63-72. Solomon, Margot and Colin Arnott “Better Development Decision-making: Applying International Human Rights Law to Neoclassical Economics.” Nordic Journal of Human Rights 32:1 (2014): 44-74. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Kuznets, Simon. "Modern economic growth: findings and reflections." The American economic review 63.3 (1973): 247-258. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Gertner, Jon. "The rise and fall of the GDP." New York Times Magazine 13 (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)