

Reducing Inequalities within and among Nations for True Sustainable Development

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Kariuki Muigua

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Reducing Inequalities within and among Nations for True Sustainable Development

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Abstract

The ideal of Sustainable Development seeks to integrate economic growth, social well-being and environmental protection. The United Nation's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development sets out the global vision for Sustainable Development. It envisages the attainment of the ideal of Sustainable Development through 17 Sustainable Development Goals which provide an effective and practical pathway to tackle the causes of violent conflict, human rights abuses, climate change and environmental degradation and aim to ensure that no one will be left behind in the quest towards the ideal of Sustainable Development. However, the ideal of Sustainable Development is hindered by several factors including inequality within and among nations. Inequality threatens long-term social and economic development, harms poverty reduction and destroys people's sense of fulfillment and self-worth. Reducing inequalities within and among nations is therefore vital for true Sustainable Development. This paper critically explores the need to reduce inequalities within and among nations. It argues that inequalities within and among nations affect the achievement of the Sustainable Development agenda. The paper examines the causes and effects of inequalities within and among nations. It also identifies interventions towards reducing inequalities within and among nations for true Sustainable Development.

1.0 Introduction

Sustainable Development has been defined as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs¹. It has also been referred to as development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs by

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¹ World Commission on Environment and Development., 'Our Common Future.' Oxford, (Oxford University Press, 1987)

maintaining the carrying capacity of the supporting ecosystems². Sustainable Development ideally seeks to foster intra-generational equity, that is equity among present generations, and inter-generational equity, that is equity between generations³. The ideal of Sustainable Development encompasses environmental conservation, economic development and social progress⁴. According to the United Nations, Sustainable Development everywhere must integrate economic growth, social well-being and environmental protection⁵.

Sustainable Development has become an urgent global concern in light of mounting problems including environmental challenges such as climate change, pollution, and loss of biodiversity together with issues of poverty, increasing disparity between societies and the tensions brought by social inequalities⁶. This ideal is set out under the United Nations *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*⁷ which captures the global goals towards securing environmental, economic, social and political development and sustainability for the sake of current and future generations⁸. The Agenda envisions attainment of the ideal of Sustainable Development through 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which seek to strike a balance between social, economic and environmental facets of sustainability⁹. The 17 SDGs, the cornerstone of the Agenda, offer the most practical and effective

² Environmental Management and Coordination Act., No. 8 of 1999, Laws of Kenya, S 2

³ Weiss, E.B., "In Fairness to Future Generations and Sustainable Development," American University International Law Review, Vol.8, 1992

⁴ Fitzmaurice. M., 'The Principle of Sustainable Development in International Development Law.' International Sustainable Development Law., Vol 1

⁵ United Nations., 'The Sustainable Development Agenda' Available at <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/development-agenda/#:~:text=Frequently%20Asked%20Questions-What%20is%20sustainable%20development%3F,to%20meet%20their%20own%20needs> (Accessed on 19/06/2024)

⁶ Giovannoni. E., & Fabietti. G., 'What Is Sustainability? A Review of the Concept and Its Applications.' In: Busco, C., Frigo, M., Riccaboni, A., Quattrone, P. (eds) Integrated Reporting. Springer, Cham. Available at https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-02168-3_2 (Accessed on 19/06/2024)

⁷ United Nations General Assembly., 'Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.' 21 October 2015, A/RES/70/1., Available at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf> (Accessed on 19/06/2024)

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

pathway to tackle the causes of violent conflict, human rights abuses, climate change and environmental degradation and aim to ensure that no one will be left behind in the quest towards the ideal of Sustainable Development¹⁰.

One of the key factors hindering the attainment of the Sustainable Development agenda is inequality within and among nations¹¹. According to the United Nations, inequality threatens long-term social and economic development, harms poverty reduction and destroys people's sense of fulfillment and self-worth¹². Reducing inequalities within and among nations is therefore vital for true Sustainable Development.

This paper critically explores the need to reduce inequalities within and among nations. It argues that inequalities within and among nations affect the achievement of the Sustainable Development agenda. The paper examines the causes and effects of inequalities within and among nations. It also identifies interventions towards reducing inequalities within and among nations for true Sustainable Development.

2.0 Inequalities within and among Nations: Causes and Effects

Inequalities within and among nations is a major hindrance to the Sustainable Development agenda¹³. It has been noted that growing disparities in income and wealth continue to persist within and among nations¹⁴. These disparities are strongly linked to other dimensions of development reflected in unequal access to basic services and opportunities including education, health care, finance, clean energy and water and sanitation¹⁵. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), income

¹⁰ United Nations., 'The Sustainable Development Agenda' Op Cit

¹¹ United Nations., 'Goal 10: Reduce Inequality Within and Among Countries' Available at <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/inequality/> (Accessed on 19/06/2024)

¹² Ibid

¹³ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific., 'Reduce Inequality within and among Countries' Available at https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/event-documents/SDG10Profile_0.pdf (Accessed on 19/06/2024)

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid

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inequality is on the rise¹⁶. It notes that the richest 10 percent have up to 40 percent of global income whereas the poorest 10 percent earn only between 2 to 7 percent¹⁷. These inequalities are largely driven by the unequal ownership of capital¹⁸. Widening income inequality has been identified as one of the most defining challenge of our time with the gap between rich and poor at its highest level for decades in all countries¹⁹.

It has been observed that inequalities and large disparities within and among nations continue to be manifested in income and wealth, and also in access to food, healthcare, education, land, clean water and other assets and resources essential for living a full and dignified life²⁰. These inequalities also amount to failures to achieve internationally agreed human rights²¹. They include inequalities in opportunities and outcomes related to education, health, food security, employment, housing and health services, as well as in accessing economic resources²². These inequalities affect some people and populations disproportionately, often because of their sex, age, ethnicity, disability, migrant, health or economic status²³. For example, it has been noted that women and children with lack of access to healthcare die each day from preventable diseases such as measles and tuberculosis or in childbirth²⁴. Further, older persons, migrants and refugees face lack of opportunities and discrimination – an issue that affects every country in the world²⁵. It has also been noted that migrant and stateless children may be excluded from school due

¹⁶ United Nations Development Programme., 'Goal 10: Reduced Inequalities' Available at <https://www.undp.org/sustainable-development-goals/reduced-inequalities> (Accessed on 19/06/2024)

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination., 'Leaving No One Behind: Equality and Non-Discrimination at the Heart of Sustainable Development' Available at https://unsceb.org/sites/default/files/imported_files/CEB%20equality%20framework-A4-web-rev3.pdf (Accessed on 20/06/2024)

²⁰ World Bank Group., 'Sustainable Development Goal 10 – Reduced Inequalities: Progress and Prospects' Available at <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/925671552682607792-0090022019/original/SDG10EGM2019conceptnote.pdf> (Accessed on 20/06/2024)

²¹ United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination., 'Leaving No One Behind: Equality and Non-Discrimination at the Heart of Sustainable Development' Op Cit

²² Ibid

²³ Ibid

²⁴ United Nations., 'Goal 10: Reduce Inequality Within and Among Countries' Op Cit

²⁵ Ibid

to their uncertain legal status²⁶; girls may be withdrawn from school to care for the family²⁷; and pregnant girls and children including those with disabilities are frequently excluded from school and face institutionalized discrimination, stigmatization and neglect²⁸. Women, young people, people with disabilities, indigenous peoples, refugees, and migrants are among the groups of people that continue to bear the burden of inequalities within and among nations²⁹. Further, people and communities in least developed countries, the landlocked developing countries and the Small Island Developing States face the danger of being left behind in the quest towards Sustainable Development³⁰.

Inequalities within and among nations are also caused by environmental challenges such as climate change³¹. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) notes that by disproportionately affecting the poorest and most vulnerable groups, climate change and natural disasters worsen existing inequalities within and across countries³². For example, developing countries continue to shoulder the brunt of the burdens of climate change despite their relative innocence in causing it³³. Climate change therefore has uneven and unequal burdens across the globe with nations and communities that contribute the least to climate change suffering the most from its consequences³⁴. It has been noted that in

²⁶ United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination., 'Leaving No One Behind: Equality and Non-Discrimination at the Heart of Sustainable Development' Op Cit

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ World Bank Group., 'Sustainable Development Goal 10 - Reduced Inequalities: Progress and Prospects' Op Cit

³⁰ Equality and Reducing Inequalities., Available at <https://www.earth-changers.com/purpose/equality> (Accessed on 20/06/2024)

³¹ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Goal 10: Reduced Inequalities' Available at <https://www.unep.org/explore-topics/sustainable-development-goals/why-do-sustainable-development-goals-matter/goal-10> (Accessed on 20/06/2024)

³² Ibid

³³ Giles. M., 'The Principles of Climate Justice at CoP27.' Available at <https://earth.org/principles-ofclimatejustice/#:~:text=That%20response%20should%20be%20based,the%20consequences%20of%20climate%20change> (Accessed on 20/06/2024)

³⁴ Sultana. F., 'Critical Climate Justice' Available at <https://www.farhanasultana.com/wpcontent/uploads/Sultana-Critical-climate-justice.pdf> (Accessed on 20/06/2024)

recent decades, global economic growth has lifted millions out of extreme poverty and reduced inequalities between countries³⁵. However, climate change threatens to set back that progress by damaging poverty eradication efforts worldwide, and disproportionately affecting the poorest regions and people³⁶.

Climate change is therefore deeply connected with global patterns of inequality³⁷. The poorest and most vulnerable people bear the heaviest burden as result of the adverse impacts of climate change yet contribute the least to the crisis³⁸. It has been noted that as the effects of climate change worsen, millions of vulnerable people face disproportionate challenges in terms of extreme events, health effects, food, water, and livelihood security, migration and forced displacement, loss of cultural identity, and other related risks³⁹. Climate change is therefore more than an environmental crisis, it is also a social crisis that fuels inequality on many levels: between wealthy and poor countries; between rich and poor within countries; between men and women, and between generations⁴⁰. Confronting climate change is therefore an urgent priority in reducing inequalities within and among nations⁴¹.

Further, inequalities often stem from divisions along group lines that are socially constructed and sustained since they establish a basis for unequal access to valued outcomes and scarce resources⁴². Discriminatory laws and practices perpetuate these inequalities and limit the potential for minorities and other excluded groups to realize

³⁵ International Monetary Fund., 'Linking Climate and Inequality' Available at <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/fandd/issues/2021/09/climate-change-and-inequality-guivarch-mejean-taconet#:~:text=In%20recent%20decades%2C%20global%20economic,the%20poorest%20regions%20and%20people>. (Accessed on 20/06/2024)

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ World Bank Group., 'Social Dimensions of Climate Change' Available at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/social-dimensions-of-climate-change> (Accessed on 20/06/2024)

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² World Bank Group., 'Sustainable Development Goal 10 – Reduced Inequalities: Progress and Prospects' Op Cit

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their full potential⁴³. It has been noted that inequalities within and among nations are deeply entrenched by structural drivers and barriers across all economic, social, political, cultural urban and environmental domains⁴⁴. Further, these drivers intersect and reinforce each other, and can have cumulative, mutually reinforcing effects that lead to systematic disadvantage and the perpetuation of discrimination, inequality and exclusion from generation to generation⁴⁵. Inequalities within and among nations continue to be driven by factors such as climate change, poverty, political, economic, and social instabilities, conflicts and disasters⁴⁶.

Inequalities within and among nations are a major threat to Sustainable Development⁴⁷. They threaten long term socio-economic development and hinder progress towards reducing poverty⁴⁸. It has been correctly pointed out that we cannot achieve Sustainable Development and make the planet better for all if people are excluded from the chance for a better life⁴⁹. Reducing inequalities in income as well as those based on factors such as age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion, or economic or other status within and among countries is therefore key in achieving true Sustainable Development⁵⁰.

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination., 'Leaving No One Behind: Equality and Non-Discrimination at the Heart of Sustainable Development' Op Cit

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ United Nations., 'Goal 10: Reduce Inequality Within and Among Countries' Op Cit

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ World Bank Group., 'Sustainable Development Goal 10 – Reduced Inequalities: Progress and Prospects' Op Cit

3.0 Reducing Inequalities within and among Nations

The *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*⁵¹ recognizes the need to combat inequalities within and among countries in order to achieve true Sustainable Development. The Agenda acknowledges that there are rising inequalities within and among countries as evidenced by enormous disparities of opportunity, wealth, and power, gender inequality, and unemployment particularly youth unemployment⁵². SDG 10 seeks to reduce inequality within and among countries for Sustainable Development⁵³. It sets out several targets towards realizing this goal including progressively achieving and sustaining income growth of the bottom 40 per cent of the population at a rate higher than the national average⁵⁴; empowering and promoting the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status⁵⁵; ensuring equal opportunity and reducing inequalities of outcome, including by eliminating discriminatory laws, policies and practices and promoting appropriate legislation, policies and action in this regard⁵⁶; adopting policies, especially fiscal, wage and social protection policies, and progressively achieving greater equality⁵⁷; ensuring enhanced representation and voice for developing countries in decision-making in global international economic and financial institutions⁵⁸; facilitating orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people⁵⁹; and encouraging official development assistance and financial flows, including foreign direct investment, to states where the need is greatest⁶⁰. Achieving these targets is key in reducing inequalities within and among nations for true Sustainable Development.

⁵¹ United Nations General Assembly., 'Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.' 21 October 2015, A/RES/70/1., Op Cit

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ Ibid

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ Ibid

⁵⁶ Ibid

⁵⁷ Ibid

⁵⁸ Ibid

⁵⁹ Ibid

⁶⁰ Ibid

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In order to reduce inequalities within and among nations, it is necessary to reduce inequalities of income and wealth⁶¹. It has been argued that increasing wealth and income at the bottom as well as increasing access to non-income opportunities and achieving greater equality of outcomes is one way of reducing inequalities of income and wealth⁶². This requires identifying who the poor and deprived are, where they live, and the nature of the barriers they face in accessing opportunities and making the most of them⁶³.

Reducing inequalities of income and wealth within and among countries is only possible if wealth is shared and income inequality is addressed⁶⁴. It also requires all countries to eradicate extreme poverty and ensure that all men and women, in particular the poor and vulnerable, have equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to basic services, ownership and control over land and other forms of property, inheritance, natural resources⁶⁵. In addition, it requires states to adopt policies, especially fiscal, wage and social protection policies, to progressively achieve greater equality, including by promoting full and productive employment and decent work for all⁶⁶. According to the United Nations, states can ensure equal opportunity and reduce inequalities of income if they eliminate discriminatory laws, policies and practices⁶⁷. It further notes that greater efforts are needed to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, and invest more in health, education, social protection and decent jobs especially for young people, migrants and refugees and other vulnerable communities⁶⁸.

⁶¹ United Nations., 'Goal 10: Reduce Inequality Within and Among Countries' Op Cit

⁶² World Bank Group., 'Sustainable Development Goal 10 – Reduced Inequalities: Progress and Prospects' Op Cit

⁶³ Ibid

⁶⁴ United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination., 'Leaving No One Behind: Equality and Non-Discrimination at the Heart of Sustainable Development' Op Cit

⁶⁵ Ibid

⁶⁶ Ibid

⁶⁷ United Nations., 'Goal 10: Reduce Inequality Within and Among Countries' Op Cit

⁶⁸ Ibid

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It is also vital to foster equality and non-discrimination⁶⁹. It has been pointed out that rising inequalities within and among countries are undercutting development progress, frustrating poverty eradication, and producing social, political and economic instability⁷⁰. It is therefore necessary to ensure the inclusion of all groups including women, youth, marginalized, disempowered and excluded groups in the economic, social, and political spheres⁷¹. In order to achieve equality and non-discrimination, political, economic and social policies need to be universal and pay particular attention to the needs of disadvantaged and marginalized communities⁷². There is also need to eliminate discriminatory laws, policies and practices in economic, social, and political spheres⁷³.

In addition, it is necessary to address inequalities between developed and developing countries⁷⁴. This calls for enhanced representation and voice for developing countries in global economic and financial institutions⁷⁵. Harnessing the potential of natural resources also provides an opportunity for developing countries especially African countries to reduce inequalities and improve their fiscal and debt sustainability⁷⁶. African countries are rich in natural resources including oil, gas, and minerals which offer a huge opportunity for economic and social growth⁷⁷. According to UNEP, the environment and natural resources can contribute to the reduction of inequity, including through sound management of natural resources and critical ecosystems, as well as supporting

⁶⁹ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights., 'Addressing Inequalities and Discrimination in the SDGs' Available at <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Development/SR/AddisAbaba/EqualityAndNonDiscrimination.pdf> (Accessed on 20/06/2024)

⁷⁰ Ibid

⁷¹ Ibid

⁷² United Nations., 'Goal 10: Reduce Inequality Within and Among Countries' Op Cit

⁷³ Ibid

⁷⁴ United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination., 'Leaving No One Behind: Equality and Non-Discrimination at the Heart of Sustainable Development' Op Cit

⁷⁵ Ibid

⁷⁶ The World Bank Group., 'The World Bank in Africa' Available at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/afr/overview> (Accessed on 20/06/2024)

⁷⁷ Ibid

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institutional arrangements regarding the use and access to natural resources⁷⁸. African countries can therefore leverage on their abundant natural resources to reduce inequalities⁷⁹.

Finally, there is an urgent need to confront climate change⁸⁰. Climate change fuels inequality on many levels: between wealthy and poor countries; between rich and poor within countries; between men and women, and between generations⁸¹. Climate change disproportionately affects the poorest regions and people despite their little contribution to the problem⁸². It severely affects the poorest countries and people, who are more exposed and more vulnerable to its impacts⁸³. Combating climate change is therefore vital in reducing inequalities within and among nations⁸⁴. Efforts to combat climate change should also foster climate justice as a result of the inequalities caused by this phenomenon. Climate justice is vital in achieving equal access to natural resources, fair and effective solutions in response to climate change and the assigning of responsibility for those who contribute most to the global threat of climate change⁸⁵. Distributive and procedural justice should therefore be at the forefront of climate action in order to achieve climate justice and reduce inequalities within and among nations⁸⁶.

The foregoing among other measures are vital in reducing inequalities within and among nations for true Sustainable Development.

⁷⁸ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Goal 10: Reduced Inequalities' Op Cit

⁷⁹ The World Bank Group., 'The World Bank in Africa' Op Cit

⁸⁰ World Bank Group., 'Social Dimensions of Climate Change' Op Cit

⁸¹ Ibid

⁸² International Monetary Fund., 'Linking Climate and Inequality' Op Cit

⁸³ Ibid

⁸⁴ Ibid

⁸⁵ New Internationalist., 'Four Principles for Climate Justice.' Available at <https://newint.org/features/2009/01/01/principles-climate-justice> (Accessed on 20/06/2024)

⁸⁶ International Monetary Fund., 'Linking Climate and Inequality' Op Cit

4.0 Conclusion

Inequality within and among countries is a key challenge hindering the attainment of Sustainable Development⁸⁷. Inequalities are driven by factors such as climate change, poverty, political, economic, and social instabilities, conflicts and disasters⁸⁸. These inequalities are evidenced by large disparities within and among nations in income and wealth, and also in access to food, healthcare, education, land, clean water and other assets and resources essential for living a full and dignified life⁸⁹. Women, young people, people with disabilities, indigenous peoples, refugees, and migrants are among the groups of people that continue to bear the burden of inequalities within and among nations⁹⁰. Inequalities within and among countries threaten long term socio-economic development and hinder progress towards reducing poverty⁹¹. It is therefore necessary to address inequalities within and among countries in order to achieve true Sustainable Development. Some of the key approaches towards reducing inequalities within and among countries include remedying gross income inequalities⁹²; enhancing equality and non-discrimination by promoting the social, economic and political inclusion of all⁹³; eliminating discriminatory laws, policies and practices⁹⁴; and adopting policies such as fiscal, wage and social protection policies, to progressively achieve greater equality⁹⁵. It is also necessary to confront climate change and achieve climate justice⁹⁶. Reducing inequalities within and among nations should be a top agenda at the global, regional, and national levels in order to achieve true Sustainable Development.

⁸⁷ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific., 'Reduce Inequality within and among Countries' Op Cit

⁸⁸ United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination., 'Leaving No One Behind: Equality and Non-Discrimination at the Heart of Sustainable Development' Op Cit

⁸⁹ World Bank Group., 'Sustainable Development Goal 10 – Reduced Inequalities: Progress and Prospects' Op Cit

⁹⁰ Ibid

⁹¹ Ibid

⁹² United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination., 'Leaving No One Behind: Equality and Non-Discrimination at the Heart of Sustainable Development' Op Cit

⁹³ Ibid

⁹⁴ Ibid

⁹⁵ Ibid

⁹⁶ World Bank Group., 'Social Dimensions of Climate Change' Op Cit

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