The 13th session of the Expert Mechanism on the Right to Development

Item 4 of the Provisional Agenda
Implementation of the mandate and programme of work –
Focused thematic discussions
Conference Room 6, United Nations Headquarters, New York

Advancing non-discrimination, equality and development for all: 40 years of the right to development and 25 years of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action

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Unofficial transcript of the oral statement by Prof. Radhika Balakrishnan, Rutgers University

Thank you very much for inviting me to be a part of this important conversation to reflect on the challenges in realizing and promoting these two important Declarations on the same day.

I was in Durban, and I came back to the US on September 9, 2001 with a group of students. We took students to go and participate in this incredible conference, actually Ejim and I worked together quite a bit in Durban, and we presented our findings on September 10 to the university and then September 11 happened. I think it's important to name that because it changed. It changed the world as a setup of a new global economic order. We're living in that to this day. So, I think marking Durban and what happened right after Durban really did change the way we look at all these issues.

In the few minutes I have, I want to talk really just about one issue. I could talk about many, but I'm going to limit myself to one. This is the issue of inequality.

According to the 2024 Oxfam report, the richest 1% owns more wealth than 95% of humanity. We see increased monopolistic corporate power as well as having at a time that we need to name it. It's global oligarchy. That's control, not just resources, but governments. The extreme degree of inequality in today's global economies, inescapable facet of the economic environment within which human rights can be realized.

I want to look at two issues of inequality, the impact of global inequalities on the realization of right to development that goes beyond the distribution of resources between countries, but also the inequality and power dynamics and policy space that are beyond the control of individual countries.

Our current moment is a clear example of these inequalities. The current structure of the global economy creates a situation in which countries have different policy options available to them, a differential that can reinforce existing inequalities and limits the realization of economic social rights, the policy and budgeting space allowed to countries. The current, for example, the current UN discussion on tax. It's just one example of the needs that we need in terms of countries having any kind of authority to actually make policy decisions on their own in terms of dealing with inequality.

And the two issues, and I don't go into it very much here, but we need to look at these two Declarations.

One, the Declaration on the Right to Development, looking at vertical inequality and inequality between countries, and then the Durban Declaration that's looking at horizontal inequalities. And what this anniversary really does is bring us into conversation how we have to integrate both the vertical and the horizontal to make sure that we deal with inequalities.

The second issue that I want to talk about is in human rights language, extraterritorial obligations. How do we deal with extraterritorial obligations at this current moment?

The Declaration on the Right to Development emerged from the demands of postcolonial countries for framework that supports a more just international economic governance, as the speakers spoke about the issues of slavery and where that came from.

What should that international order look like? How do we reconcile the issues of sovereignty with great interdependence and cooperation?

For example, actions by one country in the conduct of economic policy, particularly the large, influential economies, can affect the economic environment of other countries to fulfil rights. Policy choices and real outcomes in different countries are connected. Various channels offer involving inflows and outflows of financial capital, and I think this is a really important one, is the flows of financial capital, which are really beyond the governance of any one State. And so how do we talk about the right to development when money is moving around the world, and we have no control over it, and we don't really have mechanisms in place to deal with those in and outside flows?

A coordinated approach to global economics is needed. Currently, such coordination does not exist, and global institutions have done, I think, a poor job of addressing these imbalances.

We are at a critical stage in the world economic and political order. I don't think anyone here is going to disagree with me on that. We desperately need a new normative framework beyond GDP. One of the things that the Declaration on the Right to Development really emphasizes is the need to look at wellbeing and not just growth. So how do we center wellbeing instead of growth as the normative framework by which we evaluate what is development?

And I would even question the use of the word "development", because I'm not sure we actually know what that means either. Because it's really based on a growth model, and so I think we need to really think about how we change that? We need a different and stronger multilateralism. So, I'm not against multilateralism. I just think we need to have something that's really working that can truly address these inequalities. This, to me, is an insane moment in the world. And it might be the clarion call to mobilize for a new vision for an international order that actually works for us all.

Thanks.

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