

Centering Human Rights and the Environment: A Transformative Approach to International Development

This inquiry would examine the FCDO's wider approach to international development. The current approach is failing to effectively meet the grave and intersecting crises of our day. [Progress](#) on achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, a global plan adopted by United Nations member countries in 2015 to improve well-being and environmental protection, is not only falling far short; over one-third of measures are stalled or getting worse.

Recent events – such as the increase in the frequency and intensity of climate-related hazards, the Covid-19 pandemic, global inflation, and the increased cost of servicing debt – have exacerbated the challenges many countries in the Global South are facing. But the root causes of these challenges, including the vast inequality in governments' ability to confront them, reflect an international economic system that continues to be rooted in colonial dynamics of extraction and exploitation.

A piecemeal approach to development that treats symptoms without addressing root causes has failed to achieve meaningful progress. This failure has led many governments in the Global South, particularly those with IMF-supported loan programs, to implement austerity policies that undermine development. The strain these policies have put on people has [sparked a global wave of protests](#), reflecting the social and political cost when economies fail to deliver.

This inquiry will explore alternative approaches to development that adopt a holistic, system-based view that incorporates human rights, including the rights to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment and to development. It will also explore the potential for a paradigm shift in how we measure development and economic progress to embed within economic systems the objectives they are expected to achieve.

For example, there is momentum to develop economic indicators that go beyond GDP growth as a measure of development progress. Such indicators could incorporate the equitable distribution of resources, realization of human rights, and protection of the environment. In an important milestone, in September 2024, UN member states adopted the [Pact for the Future](#) that requests the UN Secretary General to appoint an expert committee to deliver recommendations for such indicators by the UN General Assembly in 2025.

A human rights approach should also encompass impediments to development at the international level, including related to debt, tax, and international financial institutions. It should recognize the linkages between development, inequality, and environmental sustainability, fostering positive feedback loops and breaking the vicious cycle so many governments are trapped in of high debt and the erosion of public spending leading to an

increase in poorly regulated private investment that undermines access to goods and services essential to rights.

Shifting to broader, more holistic development approach is an important step in the UK repairing the harms of colonialism. Many of the development challenges governments face are not only the legacy of colonialism, but the result of existing institutions and laws former colonial powers put in place to maintain their economic advantages.

But the benefits of shifting to such an approach go beyond the impact on Global South countries. An economic model that centers human rights and climate, and eschews austerity and ecological devastation, will also have enormous benefits for people in the United Kingdom.