

Education,  
sustainability, and  
decolonisation:  
moving beyond  
the 'greenwash'



# Introductions and housekeeping...

- *Please introduce yourself by adding your name and organization in the chat*
- *Please mute yourself unless speaking*
- *Add questions and comments in the chat*
- *We are recording!*





# Introducing Critical Sustainability Conversations

Rehema White,  
University of St Andrews and  
Learning for Sustainability Scotland



Regional Centre of  
Expertise on Education for  
Sustainable Development



# Introduction to the Critical Sustainability Conversations

- Critical sustainability conversations around contemporary issues.
- Sustainable development is full of contested concepts, unpredictable outcomes and complex issues.
- These conversations are meant to be challenging and open up new possibilities.
- In this series we explore:
  1. *Scotland's SDG Network: mapping the terrain*
  2. *Education, sustainability, and decolonialism: moving beyond the 'greenwash'*
  3. *Peace education: fighting for the future*
  4. *And more!*





# Agenda

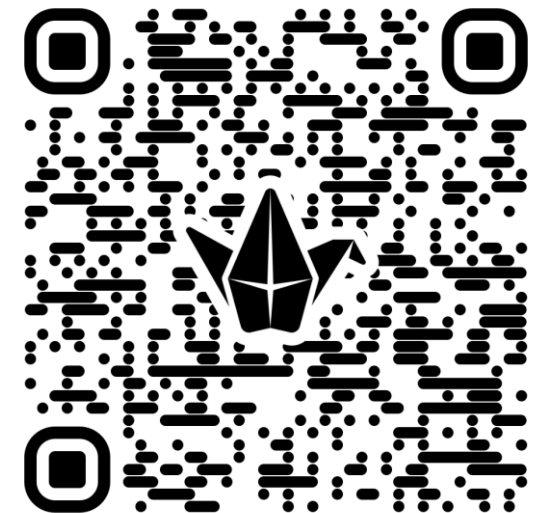
Time	Item
16:00	Welcome and introductions <i>Dr Rehema White, University of St Andrews</i>
16:05	Introducing this Critical Sustainability Conversation
16:15	‘Decolonial ecology: (dis)organising the concept of sustainability’ <i>Dr Mostafa Gamal, Queen Margaret University</i>
16:30	‘The Frameworks Underpinning Education for Sustainability: From Dead Ends to New Possibilities’ <i>Dr Zulfi Ali, Canterbury Christ Church University</i>
16:45	Summary and key issues, mutual responses, provocations
16:55	Participant questions and Padlets
17:10	Conclusions: and an overview of our next Critical Sustainability Conversation
17:15	Close



# Questions

1. What are we trying to sustain and for whom?
2. What would we like to see in the next stage of the SDGs after 2030?
3. How can we bring a critical engagement with sustainable development into our practice?
4. What further resources and conversations do we need to continue this critical discussion?

[Share your thoughts on our Padlet.](#)





# Learning for Sustainability Scotland

Rehema White,  
University of St Andrews and  
Learning for Sustainability Scotland



Regional Centre of  
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Sustainable Development



# Who are we?

**Learning for Sustainability (LfS) Scotland is a UN University- recognised Regional Centre of Expertise (RCE) in Education for Sustainable Development**

We are an open network in which members and partners come together to undertake collaborative projects, research and advocacy that advance and embed Learning for Sustainability practice and policy in Scotland.





# What we do

1. We **weave connections across sectors** within Scotland and with our international partners
2. We **co-produce, pioneer and practise new knowledge** and approaches and **curate materials and resources** with and for educators, organisations and communities
3. We **advocate and provide strategic advice** for effective learning for sustainability policy
4. We **lead, monitor and evaluate projects** and programmes locally and internationally, often in partnership





# Paradoxes in the SDGs

Rehema White,  
University of St Andrews and  
Learning for Sustainability Scotland



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# SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



# Possibilities

1. Wide scope
2. They were developed by consensus
3. Universal and across all sectors
4. Current policy context, facilitating collaboration
5. Mapping across institutions and standards
6. Enables critical analysis of nexus, systems, cluster, pathways and relationships across SDGs hence SD





# Challenges

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- So many SDGs...
- SDG interrelationships
- Resources
- Monitoring and evaluation
- Reconciling local, national, global scales
- Traversing paradoxical perspectives on sustainable development





# Paradoxes

- Tren Maya, Mexico
- Power to the people or power to the president?
- Is this in line with the SDGs?





# ‘Decolonial ecology: (dis)organising the concept of sustainability’

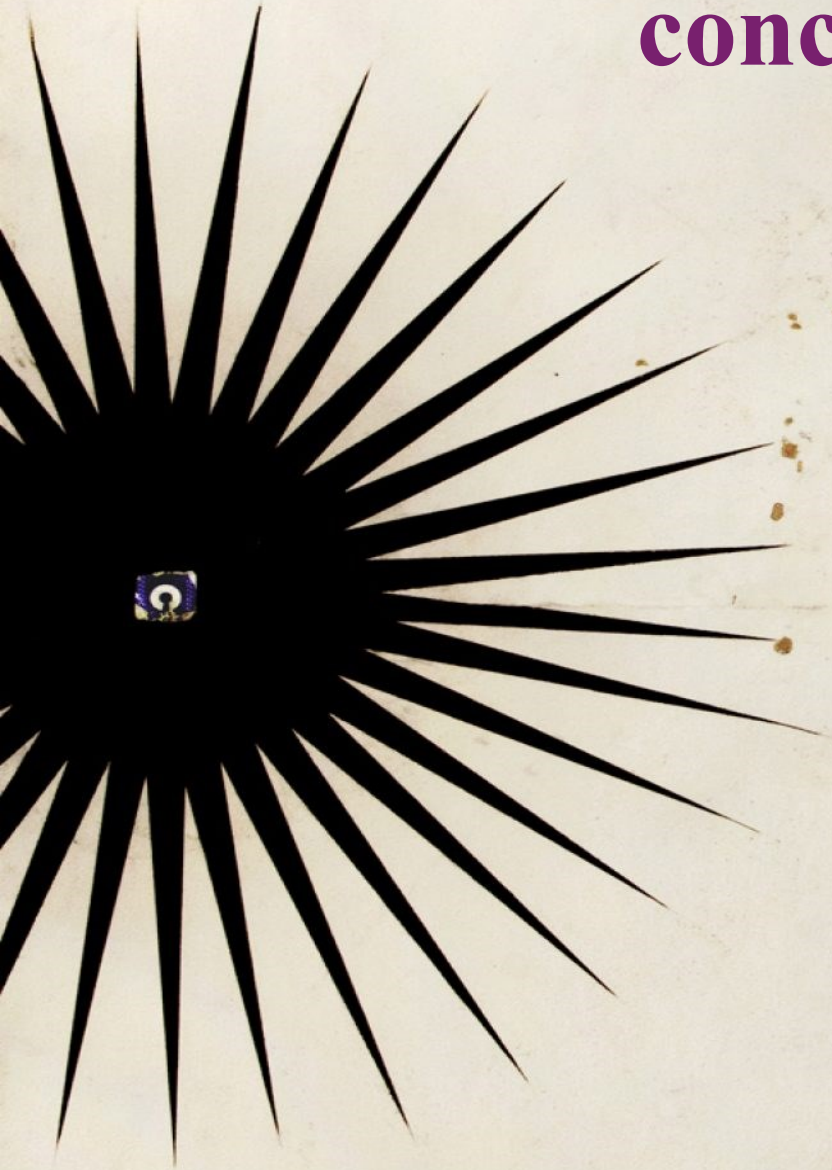
**Mostafa Gamal**  
Queen Margaret University



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# Decolonial ecology: (dis)organising the concept of sustainability



Dr Mostafa Gamal  
Queen Margaret University




# Starting points

- Sustainability , social sciences and philosophy
- Colonialism and its aftermath as a starting point
- Extend, constrain, rethink sustainability?




We aim to be carbon neutral across our own operations by 2035. We're working with suppliers and partners to achieve net zero across our supply chain by 2050.



ABOUT US + INVESTORS + DOING GOOD + CONTACT NEWS FAQs

# Making our planet safer

We pledge to become a carbon neutral, zero waste business.



PLAYING OUR FULL PART

GOING CARBON NEUTRAL

BUILDING THE SHOPS OF THE FUTURE

USING LESS PACKAGING



## ENVIRONMENT

We're hungry to become a fully circular zero waste business by 2035, as well as becoming a net zero carbon business by 2040 or sooner – and we've partnered with industry experts to help us get there.





**United  
Nations**



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## ▶▶▶ Pact for the Future Zero Draft



- 1. We, the Heads of State and Government, representing the peoples of the world, have gathered at United Nations Headquarters to take action to safeguard the future for present and coming generations.
- 2. We are at a moment of acute global peril. Across our world, people are suffering from the effects of poverty, hunger, inequality, armed conflicts, violence, displacement, terrorism, climate change, disease, and the adverse impacts of technology. Humanity faces a range of potentially catastrophic and existential risks. We are also at a moment of opportunity, where advances in knowledge and technology, properly managed, could deliver a better future for all.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Reviewing industry plans in light of experience so far and the assumptions outlined above suggests that the UK shale industry will still be firmly in the exploration and appraisal stage by 2020. A total of ~5-20 horizontal wells could be fracked by mid-2020 – however, the total will likely be significantly closer to 5 than 20 wells

- [REDACTED]
  - Note that these estimates are significantly less optimistic than industry's estimates, who suggest 30+ fracked wells are possible
- [REDACTED]



# The practice of redaction (Sharpe, 2016)

- Official government documents
- To counter the register of abandonment
- What can practices of decolonial redaction offer?



# Redaction

- 1. We

future

- 2. We

Humanity

We

future

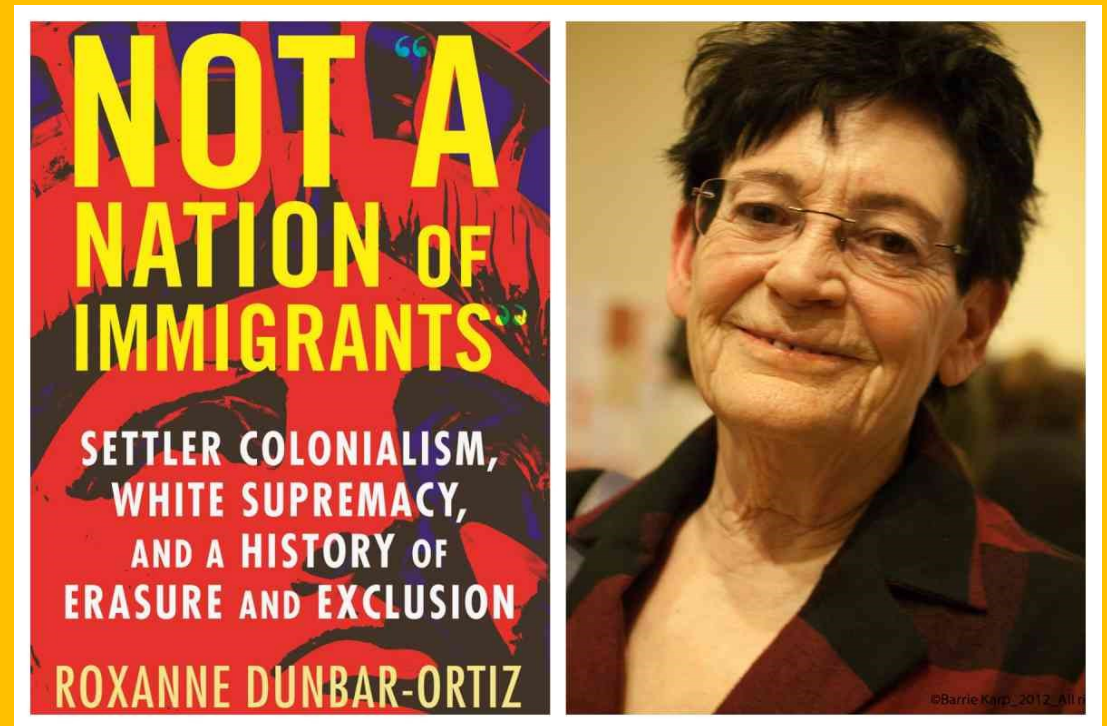


# Unforgetting

- What is the opposite of truth? We think immediately “the lie”. But in Greek, the opposite ...is forgetting...What is the action you take to tell the truth? It is un-forgetting. That is really meaningful to me. It is not the origin myth is a lie, it’s the process of forgetting that is the real problem...” (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2008, p.57)

# Decolonial unforgetting

- Practice of colonialism are written into practices of memory
- Who is mentioned, remembered and who benefits from this?
- Decolonisation is an ethical response to forgetting.
- How to unforget?





- Who is the forgotten ?

- Forgetting as a verb

# We

- Who is this “We”?
- Who has attained the status of humanity?  
(Wynter, 2003; Gamal, et al, 2024)



# The future

- Who is included in the future?
- Whose earth [future] is this, anyway? (Cone, 2001, p. 32)

- What is to be sustained and for whom?  
(Misiaszek, 2020)
- What ought to be sustained, and who it ought to be sustained for ... Who decides, who acts, who benefits and who gets lost along the way in the pursuit of sustainability? (Lockie, 2016, p. 2)



# Different trajectories

- Different populations across the globe are prepared for different trajectories/ lifestyles
- ESD: (re) produces, and further consolidates, distinctions between different forms of life.
- Sustains the gulf between the Global North and the Global South

**RESTLESS DEVELOPMENT** **GPE** Transforming Education **firelight™** African Union International Center for Girls & Women's Education in Africa

## SAVE THE DATE

**Youth insights on how to build a greener, resilient, inclusive and sustainable Africa**

**The Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development Pre-Forum Youth Led Side Event**

Exploring important intersections between climate justice, gender, education, livelihoods and opportunities for young people to drive forward progress on the Global Goals and Agenda 2063 in Africa, and globally

<b>01</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Virtual Event</b>
March	9 am - 10:30 am (GMT+2)	Registration Link: <a href="https://bit.ly/3t3r6sz">https://bit.ly/3t3r6sz</a>

For more information: [candie@restlessdevelopment.org](mailto:candie@restlessdevelopment.org)

#GreenGenAfrica #ARFSD2022




<https://www.oxfam.org.uk/education/classroom-resources/sustainable-fashion-a-guide-for-teachers/>



# Unforgetting:

- A consideration of how

“environmental policies today are rooted in a legacy of colonialism characterized by forced displacements, land dispossession, extraction of wealth, cultural genocide, social, economic and political marginalization and the greater exposure and vulnerability of these communities to polluting industries and other environmental hazards”. (Waldron, 2018, p. 36)

# Redaction/annotation

- 1. **We/They/The Plural others**

**future/present**

- 2. **We**

**Humanity/who is human/who is marked for harm?**

**We**

**future/Futurelessness/Whose future?**



- “I believe that the only way to enhance our understanding of the overreaching structures in modern society that cause the unspeakable suffering to many is to understand the latticework of that suffering-across and between genders, communities, races, classes landscapes, countries and , and continents. Only once we understand it, its width, breadth, span, scope, and texture, can we hope to know what it even means to move towards justice” (Arundhati Roy, 2020, p.234)



# ‘The Frameworks Underpinning Education for Sustainability: From Dead Ends to New Possibilities’

Zulfi Ali

Canterbury Christ Church University



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# Education, Sustainability & Decolonialism: Moving Beyond the Greenwash

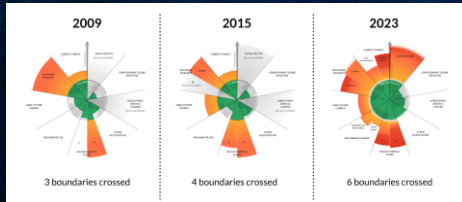
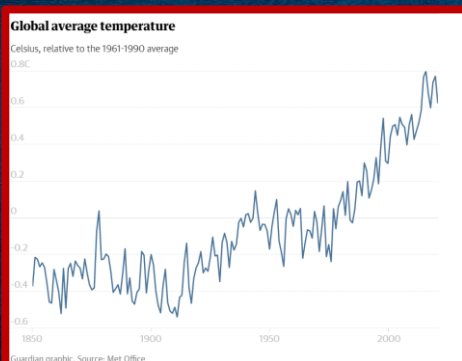
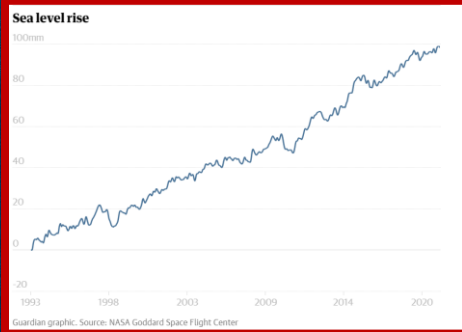
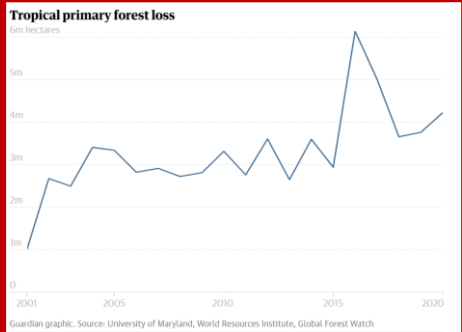
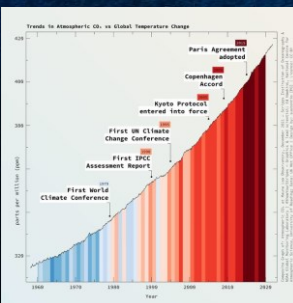
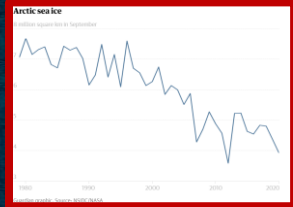
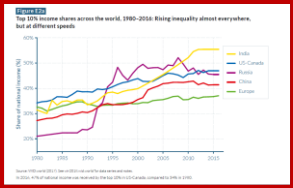
Learning for  
Sustainability  
Scotland

Zulfi Ali  
2025

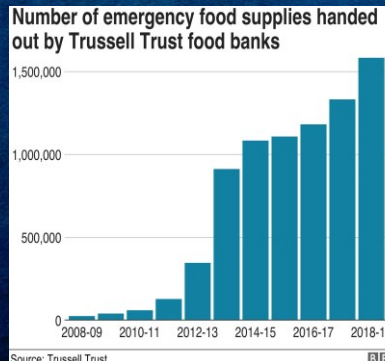
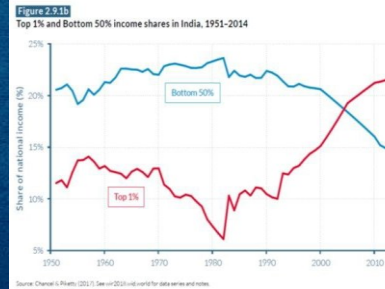
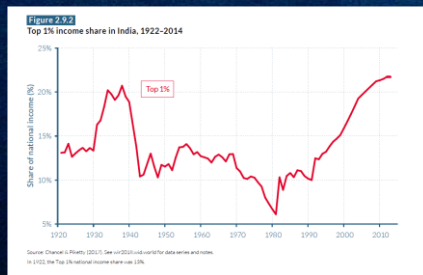
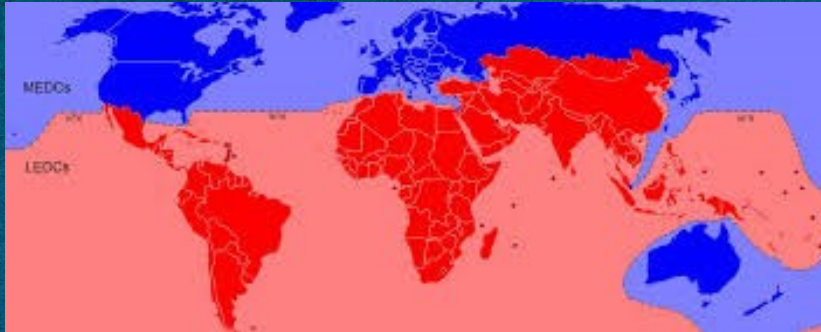
*The Frameworks Underpinning  
Education for Sustainability: From  
Dead Ends to New Possibilities*



# The Environmental Crisis



# The Social Justice Crisis



# The Crises of Democracy, Politics & International Law





## The Global Context & the SDGs as a Framework

- Thinking about education as a response to these crises
- The SDGs have become the dominant framework for work in education for sustainability
- Should the SDGs be accepted at face value? What is it about the SDGs that gives us the confidence, despite the shallow and largely unsuccessful histories of international development, to base our faith in the SDGs to:
  - deliver radical and urgent action?
  - lead us to structural & systemic change?



## The Argument

- Based on my experiences, I have recently argued that:

- Education for Sustainable development (ESD) (or Learning for Sustainability) has been unable to keep up with contemporary environmental and social justice crises and therefore is not effective in the form that it exists in today.
- *Anchored in the SDGs, ESD has become too de-politicised, too de-radicalised, and too disconnected from the social, political, economic, and other drivers that shape the world, to be able to have an impact.*

[See Ali. Z (2024) 'Swallowing a world': Reflections on Education for Sustainable Development in higher education. In Kemp, N & Bainbridge. A (2024) Good Education in a Fragile World. Routledge]



## Four gaps or failures in ESD

- A failure to critique the conventional narratives of international development that inform our understanding of sustainable development, and consequently our approaches to ESD.
- A failure to think beyond the narratives of neoliberal capitalism when analysing the current political economy of the architecture of global decision-making.
- A failure to look at the world through lenses other than the Western, and to give due respect and consideration to other systems of thought.
- A failure to 'tell the truth', about environmental and social justice crises.

[Ali. Z (2024) 'Swallowing a world': Reflections on Education for Sustainable Development in higher education. In Kemp, N & Bainbridge. A (2023) Good Education in a Fragile World. Routledge]



## The Curious Case of the Elephant in the Room: SDGs

- Existing critiques of the SDGs come from within the framework of the SDGs, pointing to problems with individual goals.
  - But frameworks are neither neutral nor benign
  - They hide some things, highlight others
  - They distract our attention away from some ideas, focus attention on others
- Is it possible to make LfS transformative and impactful if it is anchored in the SDGs, which structurally perpetuate the very problems we aim to fight?



## Challenging the Dominant Narratives: The Road to Progress?

- In 2022 more than a 100 scholars wrote to the UN and said: “As we approach the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Rio Earth Summit, we publicly call on the UN to drop the redundant and unhelpful ideology of Sustainable Development.”
- UN Secretary-General António Guterres admitted that humanity is “moving backwards in relation to the majority of the SDGs.”
- The SDGs use growth as a strategy to end poverty. Estimates suggest that it will take over 200 years to end poverty with this strategy, not 15. In fact, while global GDP has grown by 271% since 1990, the number of people living on less than \$5/day has increased by more than 370 million.

In 2015, states agreed to end hunger by 2030, poverty in all its forms, achieve food security...

Number of food insecure people worldwide:

2014:	1543.9 million
2016:	1693.4 million
2018:	1905.4 million
2019:	1955.9 million
2020:	2297.8 million
2021:	2308.5 million



## Challenging the Dominant Narratives: White Man's Burden?

- SDGs are a powerful set of narratives about international development that frame our imaginations, thinking and action on environmental and social justice matters.
- The SDGs are based on the colonial narrative of the advanced world and the poor helpless developing world that needs help...
- The narrative constructs a distorted lens through which we see the world.
- Think about how the colonial narratives were created.



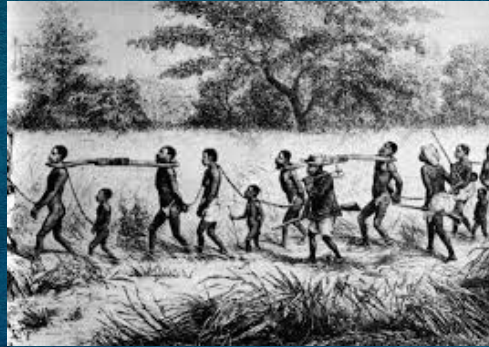
## How to create a narrative: An Indian Example

### Indian Timeline (Some Highlights)

- 3300 BC Indus Valley Civilisation. Ends in 1300 BC
  - 2500-1900 Development of Indian cartography
  - 1200 BC Rig Vedas (sacred canonical texts of Hinduism)
  - 1400-1200 Earliest Indian astronomical text—Vedānga Jyotiṣa considered one of the oldest astronomical texts
  - 427 BC Nalanda University set up as a site of Buddhist higher learning institution
  - 599 BC Mahavira is born (Jainism)
  - 563 BC Buddha is born (Buddhism)
  - 333 BC Alexander the Great comes to India
  - 321 BC Chandragupta Maurya sets up the Mauryan Empire
  - 265 BC Ashoka repents and sets up society on Buddhist lines
  - 1469 Guru Nanak is born (Sikhism)
  - 1483 Babar is born. Mughal empire to 18<sup>th</sup> Century.
  - 1658 Taj Mahal, Jamia Masjid and the Red Fort are completed
- 1066 Norman Conquest
- 1757 Company rule



# International Development as an enduring legacy of colonialism?

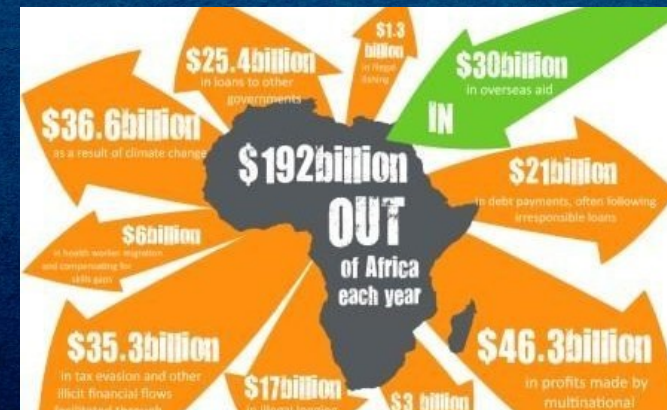


*From the White Man's Burden or the 'mission civilisatrice'*

*To International Development and Aid*



- We need to ask ourselves whether we think in a significantly different way to people living in colonial times.
- How were narratives created then?
- How are they created now?



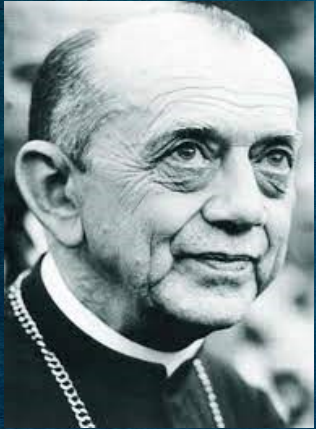
Did You Know?



Nearly 1 billion people throughout the world will go to bed **hungry** tonight



## Charity or Solidarity?



*Dom Helder Camara*

*When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint.*

*When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist*

- The SDGs distract us from asking why, after decades of international assistance, developing countries remain poor. They hide the role that power relations play in maintaining the status quo.

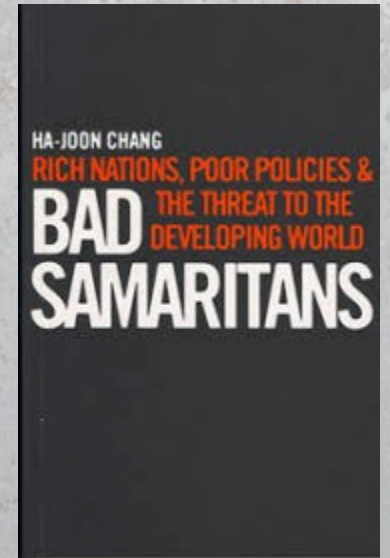


# The Political Economy of Injustice

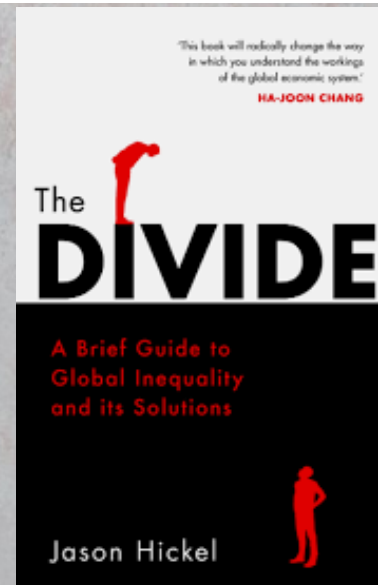
Before these books, the received wisdom was that developing countries needed to copy the policies of the developed countries to prosper and become developed.

But Chang showed that Western development is the product of precisely the kinds of state control policies – of protectionism, subsidies and the setting of price tariffs – that developed countries have since denied the developing world in the name of economic freedom and 'best practice.'

So having developed, the West has actually 'kicked away the ladder' to prevent the developing world to prosper.



*The **Divide** ... confronts the reader with the impossibility of environmentally sustainable development within the parameters of the current global system and puts forward an optimistic manifesto for change*



- *Just as we are beginning to face up to slavery, colonial rule and exploitation, we need to face up to the realities behind international development.*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PfnojfvwY5Q&list=PLsoCwyiBit20RnQxeys5eMNV-yzuA3hmz&index=66>



# Reimagining Ecological Civilisation

## The Earth Charter: Turning Conscience into Action

- If we accept that frameworks and metaphors are important, we need to look at other frameworks, other possibilities...
- I suggest that the Earth Charter is ideally placed to:



- create synergies across the globe and create a unified instead of a fragmented movement of educators to meet the social and environmental justice challenges we face.
- allow us to be bolder, more critical and radical.
- unite us on shared platforms for mass public education and action
- speak with a united voice, based on a people's movement
- end the fragmentation of the many 'educations'
- 'turn conscience into action'

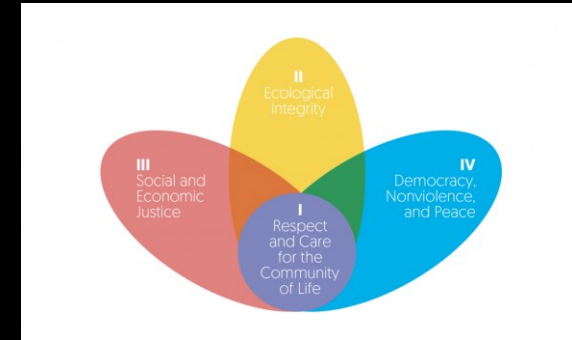


# *'Turning Conscience into Action'*

## The Earth Charter



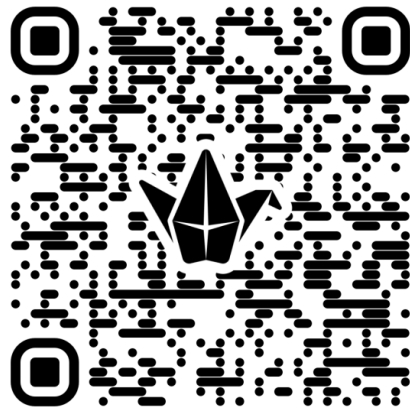
Seeks to inspire in all people a new sense of global interdependence and shared responsibility for the well-being of the whole human family, the greater community of life, and future generations. It is a vision of hope and a call to action.



# Questions for you:

1. What are we trying to sustain and for whom?
2. What would we like to see in the next stage of the SDGs after 2030?
3. How can we bring a critical engagement with sustainable development into our practice?
4. What further resources and conversations do we need to continue this critical discussion?

[Share your thoughts on our Padlet:](#)







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# Conclusions

**Rehema White**

University of St Andrews and  
Learning for Sustainability Scotland



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Decolonising  
education



# Join our next Learning for Sustainability Scotland Critical Sustainability Conversations webinar



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## Critical Sustainability Conversations

**‘Peace education: fighting for the future’**

**Tuesday 10<sup>th</sup> June  
16:00 – 17:15  
online**

[Click here to reserve  
your free place](#)



# Join the conversation with Learning for Sustainability Scotland!

<https://learningforsustainabilityscotland.org>



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A dense forest with tall, thin trees and lush green foliage. Sunlight filters through the canopy, creating a dappled light effect. The text 'Thank you!' is overlaid in white, sans-serif font.

# Thank you!

**Rehema White**  
University of St Andrews and  
Learning for Sustainability Scotland



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