

Concept Note

Second edition of the

Conference on African Economic and Monetary Sovereignty

‘Facing the socio-ecological crisis: Delinking and the question of Global Reparations.’

Dakar, Senegal, October 25-28, 2022

During the first edition of the Conference on African Economic and Monetary Sovereignty, held in November 2019 in Tunis, participants recognised that African countries, despite their great diversity, lacked control over their real and financial resources as well as over their development agendas. Colonial legacies, manifest in the political fragmentation of the continent and its role as an exporter of raw materials or of manufactured goods reliant on low-cost labour, distinctive constraints of the global monetary and financial system and class dynamics have shaped the ways African societies struggle to increase the control over their own resources. The dominance of the mainstream economics, both in university teaching and in public policies, contributes to the marginalisation of discussions and approaches that would allow development issues to be considered differently. One of the main recommendations of the first edition was that the continent must work to increase its economic and monetary sovereignty, in order to protect itself from a volatile global economy, as shown by the recurrence of sovereign debt crises, and to be less dependent on aid programmes from Northern countries, the results of which remain mixed.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has only confirmed the diagnosis made in Tunis. While the pandemic has highlighted the structural weaknesses of the African continent, it has also served as a full-blown demonstration of the limitations of the global economic system. Faced with a global public health issue, Northern countries preferred to keep vaccines for their own populations and exclude those of the Global South. They have been reluctant to waive the intellectual property rights that prevent the production of vaccines by the countries of the South at prices they can afford. Furthermore, they have chosen to side with private and multilateral creditors rather than granting the debt forgiveness called for by the exceptional circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, the issuance of new Special Drawing Rights has only highlighted the asymmetric nature of the international financial system. With distribution based on economic clout rather than objective need, the SDRs have largely gone to Northern countries that do not really need them and are even at a loss as to what to do with them. The meagre share allocated to the countries of the South does not allow them to meet their economic challenges.

The selfish management of COVID-19 by Northern countries has only reinforced the vision calling for the Global South, and Africa in particular, to delink from the global capitalist system. The idea of delinking, as formulated by Samir Amin, is not synonymous with national autarchy but, rather, with a struggle to reshape global relations, aimed at ensuring that the interests of the peoples of the South will enduringly prevail over the demands of the global system. But how to delink? Who can delink? What conditions need to be met? These practical questions are far from being straightforward, and the second edition of the Conference on African Economic and Monetary Sovereignty intends to address them in greater depth.

In Africa, debates around the idea of delinking date back to the early 1980s with the implementation of structural adjustment plans, or even to the dawn of independence if one considers the pan-Africanist vision of Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah or the call for self-sufficiency by his Tanzanian counterpart Julius Nyerere. Today, there seems to be a need to frame the issue of delinking as part of a triptych that includes two other adjacent issues: the socio-ecological crisis and the question of global reparations.

A growing body of work exposes the environmentally unsustainable trajectory of the global economy. The continuing patterns of economic accumulation, as observed in the Global North and, to a lesser degree, in China, contribute to escalating climate change, biodiversity loss, melting glaciers, ocean acidification, and more. It is now scientifically established that the average temperature of the planet began to increase significantly from the 19th century with the industrialization of today's rich countries. The beginning of this new geological era, described as the Anthropocene or even, more tellingly, as the Capitalocene, has triggered a veritable race against time. Humanity must act before it is too late, before we reach a tipping point, when things will no longer be in our hands. This is the fundamental message regularly conveyed by the many reports issued by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

It will therefore be necessary to change our economic model. A shift towards 'green' forms of industrialisation and, more generally, towards production and consumption patterns that are less dependent on fossil fuels, more resource-efficient and more mindful of ecological sustainability is required. On this point, a variety of approaches can be observed in the North, ranging from more radical perspectives such as Degrowth to more conservative ones revolving around the idea of 'green growth' based on technological innovation and pro-market solutions. Halfway between the two are the Green New Deal projects promoted by social-democratic leaning political parties.

From the perspective of the countries of the South, and African countries in particular, the question is how to eventually achieve delinking within that framework. First, it is implicit that past models of industrialisation will not be accessible to these countries, as they were based on an ecological exceptionalism that is unsustainable today and therefore not

generalisable to all countries of the world. Second, while countries in the Global South are struggling to ensure access to electricity and a decent life for their populations, the Northern countries seem to be telling them that they must shift away from fossil fuels which, for some, constitute an important source of export revenues and fiscal income. Third, the countries of the North do not seem to guarantee that the ecological transition scenarios they are considering will not be to their own detriment, by reintroducing forms of dependence. Some activists are already raising the spectre of ‘green colonialism’.

Aware at once of the urgency of the climate issue, the unique challenges facing the countries of the South, and the fact that the latter have been (and will continue to be) more the victims of the Capitalocene than its spearheads, climate justice movements have gradually emerged over the past few decades to demand that Northern countries make global reparations to their racial minorities and to the countries of the South. Such reparations cover crimes against humanity, such as slavery and colonialism, in addition to climate injustices. Although global reparations movements include both memory and epistemic dimensions in their demands, they tend to focus primarily on unilateral monetary transfers.

Whatever view one may take of the issue of global reparations, it is clear that a win-win energy transition for people in both the North and the South will require net transfers of resources from the North to the South. So far, however, the opposite has been the case. For a variety of reasons, Northern countries tend to receive net transfers of resources from Southern countries. How can this ‘anomaly’ be reversed? To what extent can the need for net resource transfers from the North be combined with a strategy of delinking for the South? What reforms may be required to the global economic order to achieve a comprehensive and inclusive ecological transition? What changes should be considered for monetary and financial systems at national and global levels? What are the implications for industrial and trade policies? Etc.

These are some of the questions that will be on the agenda of the second edition of the Conference on African Economic and Monetary Sovereignty. The event, which will emphasise international solidarity, will feature distinguished guests from around the world. In addition, the diversity of analytical perspectives — Pan-Africanism, Eco-socialism, Degrowth, Modern Monetary Theory, Institutional Economics, Marxism, etc. — is sure to make for fruitful debates. This conference may well be an opportunity to form the backbone of a new internationalist movement sensitive to issues of political economy and global justice.