

UNITED NATIONS OFFICE | 2016 RESOURCE PACKET



United Nations Sunday Service

The Colors of Inequality: Costs and
Consequences

Part II

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Economic Inequality Issues at the United Nations

The United Nations has been working against inequality since its founding in 1945. Part of the UN Charter states that “We the peoples of the United Nations [are] determined ...to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom, and for these ends... to employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples...” An essential Principle within the Charter is the sovereign equality of all Member States. With the goal of achieving “the economic and social advancement of all peoples,” all the areas in which the UN works are contributing to achievement of reduced global inequality.

The main areas in which the UN works include:

- Maintain International Peace and Security
- Promote Sustainable Development
- Protect Human Rights
- Uphold International Law
- Deliver Humanitarian Aid

In the maintenance of international peace, equality between countries is upheld, rather than dominance of one over another. In the promotion of sustainable development, similar opportunities are available to people regardless of their country of origin. In the protection of human rights, discrimination is not tolerated based on income, gender, sexuality, religion, or other status. In the upholding of international law, justice and equity are required from all people. And in delivering humanitarian aid, the human family lends a helping hand to our siblings in crisis. Certainly, all of these efforts are necessary in order to reduce global economic inequality.

Prior to the creation and adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in September of 2015, the UN formed a Task Team to assess what the main aims of the 2030 Agenda should be. The UN System Task Team on the Post-2015 UN Development Agenda (which eventually became the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development) issued a [“thematic think piece”](#):

Addressing inequalities: The heart of the post-2015 agenda and the future we want for all.

It notes that “Income inequality is ...on the rise both within and across countries, developed and

developing alike. Approximately two thirds of countries with available data experienced an increase in income inequality between 1990 and 2005, despite globally robust economic growth.” The think piece also provides important insights into the result of income inequality when it intersects with issues of gender and race:

GENDER

“Inequalities and discrimination based on income, location, disability and ethnicity intersect with gender and are often mutually reinforcing. For example, there are many countries where the likelihood of having skilled assistance at childbirth, a critical basic service for preventing maternal mortality and morbidity differs by more than 50 percentage points between wealthy, urban women and poor, rural women.”

RACE

“A number of countries, both high and low income, have experienced jobless economic growth, with the result that those at the top end of the income distribution have benefited far more than those at the bottom. For example, in the United States, a recent study shows a growing wealth gap between ethnic groups. From 2005 to 2009, inflation-adjusted median wealth fell by 66% among Hispanic households and 53% among African-American households, compared with just 16% among white households.”

BROAD IMPLICATIONS AND CONSEQUENCES OF ECONOMIC INEQUALITY:

When the gap between the wealthiest and poorest members of a society grows larger and larger, all aspects of the society are affected, often in harmful ways.

“...increased inequalities are not just bad for the individuals thereby disadvantaged, but for society as a whole. Highly unequal societies tend to grow more slowly than those with low income inequalities, are less successful in sustaining growth over long periods of time and recover more slowly from economic downturns. High levels of inequalities can jeopardize the well-being of large segments of the population through low earnings/wages and have subsequent effects on health, nutrition and child development... High levels of inequality also reduce the impact of economic growth on poverty reduction. Finally, crime, disease, and environmental problems are also found to be exacerbated by inequality. When inequality and disparities reach extreme levels, they foment discontent that can lead to political instability and in some cases violence and conflict.”¹

¹ *Addressing Inequalities: The Heart of the Post-2015 Agenda and the Future We Want for All.* UN System Task Team on the Post-2015 UN Development Agenda, May 2012. Web. <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/10_inequalities_20July.pdf>.

In order to reduce inequality globally, the UN is focusing on promoting sustainable development. The 2015 UN General Assembly adopted seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (also called “Global Goals for Sustainable Development”) as an action plan to make the planet more just, equitable, safe, and livable. With the recognition that no one country can achieve success alone, the UN is building on the principle of interdependence. The seventeenth and final Sustainable Development Goal is “Strengthen the means and implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development.” The concepts reflected in this goal build off of the principles of the Charter of Economic Rights and Duties of States, wherein “All States have the responsibility to co-operate in the economic, social, cultural, scientific and technological fields for the promotion of economic and social progress throughout the world, especially that of the developing countries.”²

By energizing nations, communities, and citizens of the world to work together toward the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, the UN is fostering a global community where all people’s rights are respected and equal opportunities are available to them.

UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS – ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

The following articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are particularly relevant to economic inequality:

- Article 1: All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights...
- Article 2: Everyone is entitled to all the rights set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status...
- Article 3: Everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security of person.
- Article 7: All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination.
- Article 23:
 1. Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favorable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.
 2. Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work.
 3. Everyone who works has the right to just and favorable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection.
 4. Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests.

² Article 9, Charter of Economic Rights and Duties of States, UN General Assembly Resolution 3281; 12 December 1974. <http://www.un-documents.net/a29r3281.htm>

- Article 24: Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay.
- Article 25: Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control...

Economic Inequality and the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism

Here is a brief breakdown of UU principles and their connection to economic inequality:

The inherent worth and dignity of every person:

Every person, regardless of their economic wealth or status, deserves to be treated with respect and recognized as an equal member of society. However, economic inequality often prevents people from having equal opportunity – although each person is born with equal rights, those rights are not respected in the society where they live. We must work to provide all people with the possibilities and opportunities they deserve in life, to promote and ensure their access to the inherent human rights they possess.

Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations:

Regardless of our own economic situation, we must work to understand the circumstances of others. Each person must be given the justice they deserve, because justice should never depend on a person's economic position. As such, our personal interactions must be rooted in kindness and a desire to promote fairness in all facets of society.

Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations:

It is crucial that we allow ourselves to accept all people, regardless of their economic position. In order to give every individual their rightful ability to grow within our congregations, we must each be glad to welcome every person into our community. Spiritual growth and acceptance should never be limited by a person's wealth, class, income, or other status.

A free and responsible search for truth and meaning:

One of the most crucial rights of all individuals is the right to learn, understand, and search for what is true and right in the world. When all people have equal access to

education and employment opportunities, they can be free to take responsibility for their own lives and their own quest for meaning. We must make our congregations places where these personal quests for understanding can occur by promoting open and accepting discourse for all.

The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in societies at large:

Every person has the right to voice their own opinions, and for those opinions to have equal weight as another person's. Wealth or status should never be a determinant for how much of a say a person has in the political process in their country, their community, or their congregation. The democratic process is not functioning properly when money can buy someone political power and influence.

The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all:

Across the globe, those with limited economic opportunities are more likely to take up arms and become involved in violent conflict. The extreme economic inequality our world faces only exacerbates this issue. In order to achieve a truly peaceful global community, we must work together to alleviate economic inequality in order to guarantee liberty and justice for all.

Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part:

Just as a person's economic status impacts every aspect of their life, all other social issues are caused and affected by economic inequality. Global inequality between wealthy countries and developing countries is perpetuated by changes to our planet's climate, by racial and ethnic discrimination, by homophobia and misogyny, by lack of opportunities based on gender identity, and so much more. It is critical to remember that all these issues are interdependent, but also that to solve them, all people must recognize our common humanity and band together. We must rely on each other.



UU United Nations Office Intergenerational Spring Seminar The Colors of Inequality: Costs and Consequences

Summary of what was discussed at this year's Spring Seminar:

The economic disparity between the human inhabitants of planet Earth is becoming more and more extreme. At this year's Intergenerational Spring Seminar, participants learned about this topic and the important work that can be done to counter the causes and effects of economic inequality.



This year's keynote speaker was Dale Jamieson, who discussed trends in inequality across countries and the connection between economic inequality and climate change. He spoke about how the poorest and most powerless communities always suffer much more from extreme climate events. For example: during a heatwave in Chicago, violence outside kept people in certain neighborhoods from opening their windows. Not being able to afford air conditioning, they were forced to suffocate in the heat of their homes. In working to become more resilient in the face of threats from climate change, wealthy developed countries such as the United States are able to spend millions of dollars to protect their coasts from natural disasters and receding coastlines, but such technology and funding is simply not possible in poor and developing countries. On a much smaller scale, throughout the world, protection and social benefits tend to benefit those who are already in the wealthiest and most privileged sections of society.

The first panel at the Spring Seminar was an introduction to global economic inequality. An important distinction exists between wealth inequality and income inequality: since wealth is income accumulated over time and across generations, wealth inequality is more extreme than

income inequality. Wealth affects voter turnout, campaign contributions, and representation in policymaking and legislative decisions, so inequality is perpetuated across generations as the rich create and endorse policies to make them richer and the poor are powerless to have a say in the conversation and remain in continuous cycles of poverty.

In the second panel, we took a look at how different institutions in society – education, religion, health care, etc. – can either help or hinder efforts to reduce inequality. Overall the conclusion was that these institutions all have the *potential* to help reduce inequality, but often they are corrupted and end up serving as hindering factors. An example in the context of education was the case of literature class in an inner city. It is impossible for the students to connect with and learn from the stodgy British 19th Century texts they are forced to read, because it has no relevance to their lives. It is important for teaching methods to be adapted to the context in which the students live, so that one student’s rap is just as valid as another student’s sonnet.

In the evening, youth and adults gathered at All Souls Church for an evening spoken word/hip hop performance. The first performer was Unitarian Universalist poet and activist Christopher Sims who shared his spoken word pieces which were very inspiring for attendees, speaking about Black Lives Matter and women’s empowerment. The next performance was by a group called Truthworker. They are a social justice based hip-hop theatre company for youth in Brooklyn. The performers rapped, sang, and danced in an emotional piece about the justice system and the school-to-prison pipeline. This was an especially powerful performance since many of the performers had some personal connection to the prison system.



The next day, the third panel was held at the United Nations Headquarters; it focused on the influence of bias on economic opportunity. Whether in employment, courts of law, or in everyday interactions, people face discrimination based on their race, national origin, gender, criminal record, and so much more. These forms of discrimination, whether subconscious or overt, inhibit their ability to succeed economically by presenting barriers that stop them in their tracks. That panel was live-streamed and is available to view on UN Web TV – go to <http://webtv.un.org/watch/uu-uno-spring-seminar-2016/4837786864001>



The fourth and final panel brought together speakers from diverse backgrounds, addressing the need for our societies to be inclusive and not give up on people. It is essential for survivors of natural disasters to engage actively in rebuilding their communities. That way they have control over their own futures, as well as gaining new skills, community services, and more active and engaged communities. Development will be more sustainable and communities can become economically independent. Similarly, societies must not give up on those who are addicted to drugs. The global drug prohibition has created mayhem and poor public health in communities. There are clear connections between an increase in poverty and disenfranchisement as a result of punitive drug law. Portugal's decriminalization of drugs has stabilized communities and has actually decreased use of various drugs, since the emphasis is placed on treatment and rehabilitation, rather than punishment. The last panelist spoke about the influence of money in politics and how it disenfranchises people and prevents democratic engagement.



The seminar offered a fantastic opportunity for participants of all ages to learn together about all of these issues and more, and commit to going back to their communities to take action. At the end of the seminar, participants collaborated to create a statement in which they affirmed all that they had learned and resolved to do something about it. Below, you can read the 2016 Intergenerational Spring Seminar Statement.

For more information on this year's spring seminar from a youth perspective, check out our blog: <http://international.blogs.uua.org/united-nations-2/the-colors-of-inequality-2016-uu-uno-intergenerational-spring-seminar/>

2016 Intergenerational Spring Seminar Statement

THE COLORS OF INEQUALITY: COSTS AND CONSEQUENCES

Whereas:

As Unitarian Universalists, we recognize the inherent worth and dignity of all people and covenant to work toward equity in human relations.

We are all part of the United Nations, which functions collaboratively to further the development of all countries.

UN Sustainable Development Goal 10 calls for reduced inequalities within and among countries.

1% of the world's population controls 50% of global wealth, and legal systems favor the status quo.

People suffer unfairly in a world where our goals of community should include peace, liberty, and justice for all, not just for a select few.

We have witnessed inequality in our communities' systems, including but not limited to the judicial, the personal, and the educational.

People are often born into such inequality and lack the means to change their own circumstances.

Personal and systemic bias has led to massive injustice for people in historically looted communities, including youth.

Issues such as climate change, mass incarceration, solitary confinement, and poverty disproportionately affect those already disenfranchised globally.

Every individual and social group has unique needs that should be respected and addressed in ways that help them grow and approach them with dignity.

We Therefore Resolve To:

Raise awareness about the overall goals of the United Nations, including humanitarianism, respect for universal human rights, and diplomacy.

Stand in solidarity with individuals and communities who are experiencing the effects of income inequality.

Utilize our positions of privilege to engage our communities and call them to action through campaigns, protests, and collaboration.

Call our congregations to partner with organizations that are already working to identify and address the root causes of income inequality.

Work actively to create globally aware communities that promote fair living wages and equal opportunities for groups facing biases and systemic oppressions.

Lobby and use other methods to change policy and influence legislation in our governments.

Educate intergenerational allies, especially youth, to continue to fight for equality.

Remember the importance of the human story and lift up those stories in our communities.

Affirmed by the participants of the Unitarian Universalist United Nations Office Intergenerational Spring Seminar, New York City, 9 April, 2016.

Thinking Globally, Acting Locally

As part of the Global U/U Story, Unitarians and Universalists around the world work for social justice causes they care about. Here are just a few examples of the many issues related to economic inequality that you may want to use your UN Sunday service/event to promote action.

INCREASE THE MINIMUM WAGE

The minimum wages currently in place in most US states and Canadian provinces are not living wages. Because the minimum wage is so low, many people are forced to work multiple jobs in order to survive at the most basic level, leaving them no time or energy to spend with their families and friends, or taking care of themselves properly. By raising minimum wages, more people will have a chance to move up in the world economically and socially. Consider supporting an existing raise-the-wage campaign in your area with a group from your congregation.

PROTECT OUR PLANET

The effects of global climate change have already begun intensifying inequality levels worldwide, overwhelmingly impacting poor communities across the globe, causing droughts, floods, extreme weather, receding coastlines, and more. Wealthy nations have some ability to hold back the consequences of these disasters, but small and developing countries do not. It is crucial that we take action to make sure that our countries live up to (and exceed) the commitments made in Paris at the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change conference in 2015.

REMOVE PRIVATE MONEY FROM US ELECTIONS

The current laws in the United States allowing corporations to contribute to election campaigns means that politicians are held captive to corporate interests that influence the policies they do and do not support. This sabotages the democratic process by giving wealthy people and corporations a huge say in the success or failure of public policies, while those with less wealth have next to no influence. One way to get involved is through Move to Amend, a coalition calling for constitutional amendment to state that inalienable rights belong to human beings only.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM

Prison systems in the United States contribute to cycles of intergenerational poverty, preventing those in “historically looted” communities from breaking through social and economic barriers. By increasing rehabilitation, education, and treatment programs in prisons, as well as improving and expanding re-entry programs upon release can contribute to breaking these cycles. One way to counter the stigma and barriers faced by previously incarcerated job-seekers is through “Ban the Box,” a campaign to remove the question about criminal record from initial hiring applications.

Documentaries, Films, and Videos on Economic Inequality

- Robert Reich. *Inequality for All* (documentary)
- Robert Kenner. *Merchants of Doubt* (documentary)
- Jamie Johnson. *The One Percent* (documentary, available on YouTube)
- Democracy Now. “The 1% Economy: The World’s Richest 62 People Now have as much as Poorest 3.6 Billion” (Story. January 21, 2016), “Part 2: Oxfam Says Privatization, Tax Havens Drive Global Inequality to Staggering Levels” (Web Exclusive. January 21, 2016)
- TED Talks:
 - Richard Wilkinson: *How economic inequality harms societies*
 - Dan Ariely: *How equal do we want the world to be? You’d be surprised*
 - Nick Hanauer: *Beware, fellow plutocrats, the pitchforks are coming*

Books, Websites, and Articles on Economic Inequality

- Alexander, Michelle: *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in an Age of Colorblindness*
- Bellware, Kim: “Another Study Shows Why ‘Pulling Yourself Up By Your Bootstraps’ Is a Complete Fantasy,” Huffington Post Politics, January 27, 2016
- Leopold, Les: *Runaway Inequality: An Activist’s Guide to Economic Justice*, Labor Institute Press, 2015
- Lemann, Nicholas: “Evening the Odds: Is there a politics of inequality?” *The New Yorker*, April 23, 2012
- Putnam, Robert D: *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*; Simon & Schuster, March 2016
- OXFAM Briefing Paper: “An Economy for the 1%: How privilege and power in the economy drive extreme inequality and how this can be stopped,” January 18, 2016.
- UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs: “Inequality Matters: Report of the World Situation 2013” <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/reports/InequalityMatters.pdf>
- UN System Task Team on the Post-2015 UN Development Agenda: “Addressing inequalities: The heart of the post-2015 agenda and the future we want for all,” May 2012.

More Resources on Economic Inequality

- Find useful facts, statistics, resources, opportunities to take action, etc. at www.inequality.org
- United for a Fair Economy has information about the many costs and consequences of economic inequality at www.faireconomy.org
- Tools for engaging your congregation more deeply in the topic of economic inequality can be found in the UUA’s “[Study Guide on Escalating Inequalities](#),” for the 2014-2018 Congregational Study/Action Issue