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The 2020 Impact: Rethinking Brand Approach to Sustainability through a Postcolonial and Environmental Justice Framework

Simone Hassan-Bey
University at Albany, State University of New York, shassan-bey@gmail.com

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The 2020 Impact: Rethinking Brand Approach to Sustainability

through a Postcolonial and Environmental Justice Framework

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Simone Hassan-Bey

Research Advisor: Paul Miesing, Ph.D.

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Abstract

Social unrest as a result of a pandemic and the movement for Black lives created a greater demand for big brands to increase their involvement in social responsibility. In this work, I examine the relationship between big brands to their colonial and environmental legacies to analyze how they have historically responded to social justice issues and how it has helped or hindered their journey towards sustainability. My research suggests that these brands may be failing to live up to their social responsibility claims because they struggle to see how the two actors are interconnected, as a result, I offer a few suggestions for enacting authentic sustainable change.

Keywords: *Social responsibility, Sustainability, Colonialism, Environmental justice, Brands, "Black Lives Matter"*

Acknowledgements

Table of Contents

Introduction

In 2020, the world was shaken by two pandemics: COVID-19 and the fight against social injustice. The spread of the COVID-19 virus has been confirmed to have infected over 32 million Americans and killed over 571,938 Americans (John Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center, 2021). The unsettled tensions of social injustice exploded under mandatory government lockdowns forcing millions of Americans to take notice of the rising death toll, and news of egregious policing behavior sparked public demand for greater social equality. Black Lives Matter, a movement that began in 2013, galvanized the public and at its peak in June 2020, 15 to 26 million joined the protests making it possibly the largest movement in U.S. history (Buchanan et al., 2020).

Unlike ever before, people were spending more time at home as a result of government-mandated stay-at-home orders and couldn't avoid the news of social unrest. Distractions commonly found on social media were replaced by jam-packed educative content in the form of infographics curated by everyday people, community groups, and experts in hopes of educating and informing the public on a variety of social justice issues such as defunding the police, the crisis in Lebanon, human rights abuses, resources on mental health and allyship, or LGBTQIA+ icons as just some examples of the digital education boom. Big brands, in particular, seemed to be more vigilant of what they should or should not post, as their silence on the issues assumed complicity which could often lead to major public upset. These brands were taken to task as consumers demanded they take a stance and publicly state: "Black Lives Matter", leading much of corporate America to participate in online advocacy movements such as Black Out Tuesday. The initiative started by two Black women Jamaila Thomas and Brianna Agyemang originally in observance of the long-standing racism and inequality in the music industry expanded to include

the participation of several industries and everyday users leading to over 28 million posts of black squares on the day of the social media blackout, June 2, 2020, in support of the movement for Black Lives (Monckton, 2020). Though taking a public stance is important, my question is: where are the black squares now? From farmworkers to employees in the corporate office, many brands fell on their words to hold themselves to account, failing to take the necessary steps to create actionable change throughout their organization. As a young Black woman, it's been hard to watch those I thought I knew and those I've never met debate on how much my life matters.

In the last year, I've done a lot of mediating and self-reflection on my own capacity to be of service and though I'm grateful to have engaged in some forms of positive social impact this year, I also realize it is not my responsibility. The summer of 2020, the pandemic, the continual grief I've experienced this year isn't because there's something I did right or wrong. These injustices were intentionally built within our systems and are only continuing to fester and grow. In this paper, I look to examine the colonial legacy of big brands and their relationship to environmental and social injustice. I will present my findings behind why brands are failing to align to its projected sustainability claims, its impact, and its lessons. Following, I will present twelve sustainable strategies brands should consider in implementing authentic social change throughout its total operations.

Environmental Justice Is Social Justice

Our racial inequality crisis is deeply intertwined with our environmental crisis. The movement for Black lives brought a sense of urgency for a massive culture shift that has been in the works for hundreds of years. The movement reemphasizes the various intersections that have led to and continue to uphold the systemic inequalities we face today, a large component being environmental racism. Environmental racism is the disproportionate impact of environmental

hazards on working class, immigrants, and Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) communities (United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, 1987). The enormity of environmental racist practices and policies contributed to the formation of mass social movements such as the Civil Rights movement, Farmers' Rights movement, and other movements for equality going back to the mid to late 1900s. Industrialization which boomed during this time period was poorly regulated and allowed various industries to pollute the surrounding air, land, and water forcing these communities to navigate dangerous working conditions and unsafe living environments. Meanwhile, affluent, and white communities fled to suburbia far away from the pollution, to neighborhoods with cleaner air and more access to green spaces (Pulido, 2000). Redlining, racial, and economic discrimination keep these affected communities out of suburban neighborhoods (Pulido, 2000).

Regarded as foundational literature for the environmental justice movement, Toxic Waste and Race in the United States, published by The United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, was the first national study exposing the blatant disregard for people of color as toxic waste facilities occupied these communities throughout the nation. The work was revisited by Dr. Robert D. Bullard, known as "the father of environmental justice", and other accompanying authors with Toxic Wastes and Race at Twenty which marked the twentieth anniversary of the original publication. Their research reasserted and further established that low-income and BIPOC communities are often more concentrated around hazardous waste facilities, and that race continues to be an independent predictor of where these hazardous wastes are located (Bullard et al., 2008). Communities of color makeup 56% of those living within two miles of the nation's commercial hazardous waste facilities, and 30% live just beyond two miles (Bullard et al., 2008). 69% of communities of color live with multiple hazardous facilities that occupy their

neighborhoods (Bullard et al., 2008). These toxins emit mercury, arsenic, lead, and other contaminants into the water, food, lungs, of these communities (Bullard et al., 2008). As a result, communities of color have higher rates of air pollution and are disproportionately affected by climate change which results in an increased risk of asthma, cancers, heart disease, developmental harm, reproductive harm, and various other health issues (Bullard et al., 2008). Their research also revealed that despite public attention to environmental racism, current policies and institutions failed to adequately protect communities of color and working-class communities from toxic threats. In order to maximize profits, industries operate in what are known as sacrifice zones where "land, labor, and lives are cheap" (Bullard et al., 2008, p. 14).

Despite passing of the Title VI Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Environmental Justice Executive Order 12898 it is well-documented that many of the United States' landfills, hazardous waste facilities, pipelines, factory farms, highways, and flood zones continue to be primarily located in working class, immigrant, Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) communities today. Natural disasters and climate change such as Hurricane Katrina, and intentional industry and government neglect such as the construction of Dakota Access and Keystone pipeline and the unremedied water crisis in Flint, Michigan are just a few examples of how these same communities continue to be at the brunt of environmental calamity. Environmental justice is the movement's response to environmental racism (*Environmental Justice & Environmental Racism*). The environmental justice movement aims to broaden our perspective of the environment beyond conservation and preservation of natural resources centering communities of color who are most impacted by the environmental crisis. (See Appendix A for the principles of the environmental justice movement established by the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice).

Since 1988, 100 energy companies have been responsible for 71% of the world's carbon emissions (Griffin, 2017). Three companies account for 14% of the branded plastic population worldwide (Break Free from Plastic, 2020). The agrochemical industry exposes 385 million global workers to pesticide poisoning each year (Boedeker et al., 2020). 15 American food and beverage companies produce 630 million metric tons of greenhouse gases every year (Engage the Chain, 2019). Food production is responsible for 26% of global greenhouse gas emissions (Poore & Nemecek, 2018). Similar cycles can be found in many other industries and despite green marketing attempts to shield corporations from the responsibility of their actions, in recent years the reality has become too overwhelming to ignore. All of these industries depend on immigrant and BIPOC communities as the foundation of their labor population yet manufacture and pollute in their neighborhoods forcing these communities to navigate dangerous work and living conditions with the depth of this impact further exploding last year.

Since the World Health Organization officially announced COVID-19 as a pandemic in March 2020, overwhelming evidence has shown the circumstance has disproportionately impacted communities of color in the United States. Implicit biases in the medical field are found responsible for why people of color do not receive the same quality health care that their white counterparts receive (Institute of Medicine, 2003). Indigenous and Black Americans have the highest mortality rates of any racial or ethnic group, dying from the virus at 2x or higher than the rate of white Americans (APM Research Lab, 2021). Underlying health conditions, a key risk factor in getting severely ill from COVID-19, are found to be 1.5x to 2x more likely to develop in BIPOC than their white counterparts (John Hopkins University, 2020). Chronic stress and immunity are distinctly linked to factors such as income inequality, health care discrimination, violence, and systemic racism which makes these populations even more vulnerable to the virus

(Maxwell & Solomon, 2020). Racist attacks against Asian and Pacific Islander communities have spiked worldwide since the start of the pandemic which can have a devastating psychological impact on anyone with Asian or Pacific Islander heritage (Maxwell & Solomon, 2020). This increased stress can negatively impact their immunity making them at greater risk for the disease.

Intersectionality, a term coined by professor Kimberlé Crenshaw, describes how race, class, gender, sexuality, and other individual characteristics overlap and intersect with one another (Crenshaw, 1989). Through applying an intersectional analytical lens, we are able to recognize and understand that these mass movements throughout history representing different communities fighting for social justice also face interrelated yet diverse forms and degrees of oppression that overlap with and furthers the goals of the environmental justice movement. When tracing these roots using intersectional theory, my research has found these are compounding and interrelated issues largely stemming from industries' active role in building its wealth off of these communities they treat as disposable, i.e. sacrifice zones. The complicity in wildlife trade, forest devastation, and other unsustainable ecological practices are driving forces behind global pandemics as a result of infectious animal pathogens leaping onto humans (Cui et al., 2017). 60-70% of all new diseases found in humans since 1990 have derived from wildlife (Jones, 2008). Zika, Sars, Ebola and COVID-19 are just some of the major diseases originating from animal species put under severe environmental pressure (World Health Organization, 2021). The global, devastating effects of COVID-19 have been regarded as a "SOS signal for the human enterprise" by leading environmental and economic experts that our current economic thinking does not recognize human wealth is dependent on nature's health (Dasgupta & Anderson, 2020). By underestimating the importance of preserving the natural and human capital

we depend on to produce our goods and services, we have led ourselves into a climate crisis consequently resulting in large disruptors such as the coronavirus proving how unsustainable are practices truly are.

In business, we constantly discuss the importance of scale, the desire to increase profits and consumer reach. Though growth is important, considerations of the environmental consequences of how scaling is conducted is often neglected, leading to a false sense of security that furthers ecological and societal destruction. Given the evidence, tangible remediation would require corporate powers to acknowledge and address how they have been the active force behind pollution and climate change for decades and that they have often created insufferable working and living conditions that their essential employees, largely comprising BIPOC communities, are dying throughout a pandemic to navigate. Therefore, when corporations ask themselves how they can be of service to this same population it means taking a look at how they've treated these communities historically, and what they are doing presently that marginalizes communities that should be centered. Without properly addressing these racial and social injustices we not only put our environmental health at risk but maintain a racial and social caste system needed to uphold unsafe, linear cycles of production. In order to further interconnect big brands' historical relationship to environmental injustice, my succeeding findings will examine corporate structures through postcolonial theory.

The Colonizers' Economy

The giant myth of colonialism is that it ended with a moral reckoning of global powers and through an esteemed consciousness and democratic process all was eradicated, this is of course false. Colonialism *is* capitalism only under a different name with racism being the cement that holds it all together.

Colonialism was conceptualized by Adam Smith, known as the "Father of Capitalism",

as "the extension of civilization" (Smith, 1776). The ideology places man at the top of the

pyramid and through a colorism and caste system, white men are placed at the very top of this

pyramid, with all other racial, ethnic groups, and animal species placed below (Semaan, 2020;

see Appendix B). Despite Smith's own admission of "cruelties", colonialism was used to justify

the racial and cultural superiority of the European Western world over other racial and cultural

groups with the aim of economic dominance (Smith, 1776). Joseph-Ernest Renan in *La Réforme*

intellectuelle et morale furthers Smith's argument claiming that creating systems that extend the

power and values of the European Western world would reform the "inferior" races and create

harmony as every person would be assigned to a distinct cultural identity, caste rank, and

economic role leading to economic prosperity (Renan, 1871):

> The regeneration of the inferior or degenerate races, by the superior races is part of the
>
> providential order of things for humanity.... Pour forth this all-consuming activity onto countries,
>
> which, like China, are crying aloud for foreign conquest. Nature has made a race of workers, the
>
> Chinese race, who have wonderful manual dexterity, and almost no sense of honour; govern them
>
> with justice, levying from them, in return for the blessing of such a government, an ample
>
> allowance for the conquering race, and they will be satisfied; a race of tillers of the soil, the
>
> Negro; treat him with kindness and humanity, and all will be as it should; a race of masters and
>
> soldiers, the European race.... Let each do what he is made for, and all will be well. (pp. 390-91)

Universalism is a founding principle of colonialism described as the conquest of vast

territories and cultures brought under central control of the colonial domain (Semann, 2021).

This is best expressed by the continued enforcement of a universal language, religion and images

that intentionally neglects the reality of cultural pluralism. A historical, and lasting example of universalism is the Roman's acquisition of Christianity in which genocide and ethnic cleansings of nations were justified as an act of honoring the Christian God. Despite, the Roman Empire's three-hundred-year history of persecuting the original followers of the prophet Jesus when the religion gained notoriety for its powerful influence it was weaponized by emperor Theodosius who issued the Edict of Thessalonica and Christianization began to strip the identity of Jesus Christ, a dark-skin Palestinian, into their Eurocentric likeness, creating the foundation for global beauty standards we see today. Statues, paintings, poetry, and other art forms that present Jesus as a fair-skin European perpetuate the idea of the superiority of whiteness by arguing that as the Bible states we are "all created in God's image" (*King James Bible*, 1769/2008) the closest proximity to whiteness is closest to Godliness therefore it is by divine right that whites assert power over non-whites and expand the Christian God's teachings by any means as dutiful believers.

These colonial philosophies expanded across the world through works such as White Man's Burden, Manifest Density, and the Bible to further a false sense of superiority and indoctrinate communities of colors into their beliefs stripping these communities of their multitude and diverse languages, cultures, religions, and beliefs into a centralized ideology that perpetuates white supremacy. This is replicated today in modern media through digital colonization, a theory Herbert Schiller conceptualizes in Communication and Cultural Domination that the emergence of new technologies positions dominant countries atop poorer global regions, forcing the impoverished, Global South to the will of the Global North (Schiller, 1976). When you digitally search the words: "beauty", or even simply "woman" the majority of images that appear will be of whiteness. This demonstrates that corporate structures today are

still operating in colonial ideology, which proposes reasoning for why environmental and social

injustices are so rampant, and often overlooked in corporate structures it is because these

ideologies have long been embedded in existing business operations.

As industrialization began to rise these colonial powers began to morph into industrial

powers such as the Dutch East India Company, the Mississippi Company, the East India

Company, and South Sea Company all which dispersed into the capital powers prominent today.

Unilever and Nestle are two companies that have emerged from a colonial era are now often

regarded for being champions of sustainability and have made impressive strides in their

journey. Unilever is often regarded as a pioneer of the sustainability movement, awarded the

highest accolades by the Dow Jones Sustainability Index for their work in environmental and

social justice (Unilever, 2020). Unilever first presented their Sustainable Living Plan in 2010

which aimed to further reduce their environmental impact and invest in social equality

initiatives. Their *Sustainable Living Report of 2020* which concluded their decade long

commitment shared some impressive feats. Their research has shown they have reduced their

total waste footprint per customer by 32% and achieved zero waste to landfill across all of their

facilities (Unilever, 2020). Their social initiatives have been reported to have benefited 2.34

million women, and they made strides towards a gender balanced workplace with 51% of

managerial roles being held by women (Unilever, 2020). Nestlé is also becoming a large voice in

the sustainability movement with goals to reach zero environmental impact across their

operations by 2030 and have become pivotal figures of corporate justice by monitoring and

remedying their labor standards throughout their supply chain to empower their farmers and

eliminate past use of child labor (Nestlé Global, 2021). These brands have come a long way and

their dedication to building sustainable initiatives have been impressive, particularly for

organizations of their size, as Unilever's CEO, Paul Polman shared in an interview with Forbes: "it's not about putting purpose ahead of profits; purpose drives profits" (Forbes, 2020). Yet if these profits are putting the people in danger, is it truly sustainable?

As argued previously several big brands have been active polluters in the communities they serve, and struggle to authentically incorporate social issues into their operations, Unilever and Nestle aren't any different. In an effort to learn more about Unilever's success with their Sustainable Living Plan, I sought out objective reports on their initiatives progress, yet I was unsuccessful in finding any statistics with empirical data outside of Unilever as their progress numbers are self-reported. This raises concern as to the validity and accuracy of these sustainability reports. For instance, In July 2020 Kenyan farmers on Unilever's tea plantation filed a lawsuit with the United Nations against the company for failing to protect them against human rights abuses they faced while working on their plantations (Hervey, 2020). When the farmers who make up 10% of Unilever's global workforce asked the company to remediate issues of violence, Unilever instead temporarily shut down their farms and failed to pay their employees for six months (Hervey, 2020). In 2020, amidst the protests for social and racial justice Unilever posted to their Instagram support for #BlackOutTuesday and #BlackLivesMatter, but it was met with mass volumes of criticism as the brand is also known for manufacturing the skin lightening cream Fair & Lovely which further perpetuates universalist ideology. Their action plan for racial justice was also called out for lacking transparency (Sethi, 2020). The company pledged to donate to organizations and activists working toward social justice and racial equality but when taking a closer look at these plans $5 million dollars of their $7 million dollar pledge goes to their own company, Dove, which raises questions as to the authenticity of this pledge (Unilever, 2020).

Nestle, despite their claims to eradicate child labor from their supply chain, was recently hit with a lawsuit by the International Rights Advocates this past February on behalf of eight former child slaves from the Ivory Coast who accused the corporation of the enslavement of thousands of children on their coco plantations (Whoriskey et al., 2019). The case highlights the company's continued systematic abuses against people in the Global South despite their claims of implementing meaningful programs and work for their suppliers' evidence has shown they continue to exploit their workers. In 2020 the brand attempted to show support for Black Lives Matter, but we're also called out for their neglect and active participation in these slave trades damaging the lives of Black farmers and children since their founding in 1866 (Hitchings-Hales, 2020). Their action plan was also very broad with no stated plans to donate to social or racial causes, and instead asked for their consumers to volunteer and donate to these issues themselves inciting further controversy as the multibillion corporation could arguably do a lot more (Nestlé, 2020). This demonstrates that despite these companies claims towards sustainable growth, they have a lot of work to do in ensuring workers' rights and addressing their historical failings in the communities they serve. Unilever has built its wealth off of enslaved labor in the Congo, and today sells whitening cream to former colonized and Global North regions (RIAO-RDC & Grain, 2015). Nestle continues to actively be active participants in human trafficking forcing children into slave labor farming on coco plantations for a crop many never know the final product of (Whoriskey & Siegel, 2019). Therefore, it is evident that colonialism *is* capitalism, in that resource exploitation is the capitalist model.

Despite the misconception that corporations like Apple, Amazon, Google, or Walmart are the largest most successful companies in history when we put this in comparison it fails to have even half the market capital of its forefather the Dutch East India company (see Appendix D).

Colonial rule ceased formally as result of world wars, rebellions, and when the emergence of industry made it financially unfeasible for these structures to continue operating in the same way, this power however was transferred into our current capital structures. Capitalism is sustained by garment workers who are paid slave wages; in place of administered governments in the Global South, capital powers use their political influence to usher coups and government sanctions. Politicians and elites of the Global South are often bribed into upholding lenient labor laws that leave their people in a cycle of poverty, trapping them in debt. Border control keeps these people from the Global South from migrating, unable to get visas, green cards, or citizenships to immigrate elsewhere, and the fraction of countries will allow them into their borders, charge at a time-consuming and high financial cost. Capital powers participate in giving regions, plagued by wars resulting from the Scramble for Africa or pillages in the Middle East, with weapons to continue the destruction and dependence on these "white saviors". Meanwhile these same "saviors" will argue in courts in the Global North to occupy their former colonized regions with military troops and threaten war against regions that refuse to oblige to their demands that would leave them without human or natural resources that would increase their profit margins. Capitalism is sustained by racism dehumanizing these regions so pervasively that despite the multitude of examples of immense poverty and slave trades, the Global North refuses to do much of anything to eradicate it because we are unable to grasp these issues as a reality that affects us all. Therefore, when these same industries, such as Unilever and Nestle, are regarded as exemplary figures of sustainability it furthers the erasure of this colonial legacy and actively harms those most affected by systemic racism. The perspectives of the workers, families, and communities most impacted are continually silenced while industry perspectives are counted as

knowledge and research, using data and findings to rationalize and maintain a caste system while claiming to be sustainable (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

As Frantz Fanon argues in Black Skin, White Masks universalism is meant to establish a hierarchical relationship between the settler and colonized under the guise that European notions of societal progress advance just and secure mutual benefit between the two, despite evidence of psychological alienation and displacement on Black and Indigenous peoples as a result of colonialism (Fanon, 2008). Glen Coulthard revisits Fanon's work in Red Skin, White Mask: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition, arguing that colonialism is still happening today through methods of dehistoricization and neutralization of various actions of violence against Indigenous communities (Coulthard, 2014). Coulthard advocates for methods of decolonization, embracing Indigenous sovereignty that embodies a "self-reflective revitalization" of traditional values, principles, and cultural practices (Coulthard, 2014).

Decolonization is an important step forward in dismantling settler colonialism. However, I am conscious that the term is often co-opted and tokenized as an abstract ideology deflecting from the necessary actions demanded: repatriation of land to Indigenous peoples. Tuck and Yang (2012) state very clearly in their essay *Decolonization is not a metaphor*:

> Decolonize (a verb) and decolonization (a noun) cannot easily be transposed onto existing discourses or frameworks, even if they are critical, even if they are anti-racist, even if they are justice frameworks. The easy absorption and adoption of decolonization is yet another form of settler appropriation. When we write about decolonization, we are not offering it as a metaphor; it is not an approximation of other experiences of oppression. Decolonization is not swappable for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools. Decolonization doesn't have a synonym, it is not a metonym for social justice. (pp. 3, 21)

In my introductory sections, I have attempted to recognize decolonial literature as an integral part of the journey toward sustainability and environmental justice however, I am careful not to conceal the intentions of decolonization as solely decentralizing whiteness (though it does) understanding by doing so it guises the settler as innocent which relieves the settler of guilt or responsibility and conceal the need to give up land or power or privilege. Therefore, I have chosen to use postcolonial analysis in my research to explore the ongoing legacy of colonialism, how this delays attempts at sustainability, and what are possible starter strategies to move business toward a circular model of operations though I keep in mind the importance of Indigenous sovereignty.

The legacy of colonialism asserts unreasonable authority as an attempt to justify slavery, and ethnic and cultural cleansings of Indigenous peoples for economic gain. Colonialism attempted to destroy civilizations that had been sustainable for thousands of years and could have continued to sustain for thousands more if not the supposed supremacy of the Global North. By underestimating the importance of the people who produce our goods and services, we have underestimated the impact this negligence has on us all. The endless exploitation of resources ends with us running out of these resources and through continued exploitation we have led ourselves deeper in the grapes of a climate crisis literally leaving us with less of the Earth than we started with. Environmental justice is closely interconnected to this colonial legacy as overwhelming evidence suggests. Despite Global North nations being the leaders in the climate change disaster the Global South is the most affected (see Appendix E & F) and this will continue to impact all of us. As argued previously, this is also exhibited on a microlevel as places within the Global North, communities of color, are populations that resemble the Global South and are also placed at the brunt of the environmental crisis through redlining and other existing

forms of segregation. Colonization not only happens through the supply chain, or economic gain but through societal values and beliefs stemming from these universalist systems that we have adopted that even predates the Global North's colonial empire such as Christian ideologies. In order for corporate structures to truly become sustainable it is not just considering reducing carbon emissions or endorsing charity initiatives as corporations such as Unilever and Nestle have done, but we also should consider that our current economic structures may be unstable and unsustainable, as they are dependent on select communities being at the brunt of environmental and social racism. To quote Audre Lorde, the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house (Lorde, 2018).

What IS Sustainability?

Though there isn't a universal definition for sustainability, the word is often defined in relation to the processes and actions of humankind to avoid the further depletion of natural resources to meet our own needs and the needs of future generations. The concept of sustainability has strong roots in environmentalism and conservationism that are core to sustainable development however simplifying sustainability to ecological preservation fails to include the communities that are most impacted by unstable industrial and environmental practices. When we look at the etymology of sustainability, to sustain means to: "to hold up", "to bear", or "give support to" (Merriam-Webster, (n.d.). The Global South, working class, immigrant, Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) and other communities placed at the margin are the ones that have been made to "hold up" our economic structures therefore it is impossible to achieve sustainability without centering the prosperity of these communities and their resources in sustainable discourse. The simplification dilutes the goals sustainability to a metaphor.

Greenwashing is a prime example of how the sustainability movement can be overwhelmed with gimmicky marketing tactics employed by companies to deceit the public into believing their offered products or services are environmentally friendly. As argued by Aja Barber, greenwashing is the act of socially and environmentally irresponsible corporations using green marketing and woke movements in order to continue to gain market share while still contributing to the destruction of both the environment and humanity (Aja Barber, 2020). One of the largest examples of greenwashing in modern media, is the 'Keep America Beautiful' campaign by the organization of the same name, founded in the 1970s by over 20 companies like Coca-Cola and Dixie Cup, as a public service announcement against "litterbugs" to shape the public narrative into believing that 'litter crisis' was the fault of the general public. This effectively pushed the responsibility toward the American people and molded many to believe it was their personal responsibility to keep the environment clean, not the industries who created the crisis to begin with (Abdelfatah & Arablouei, 2019). The campaign led with an infamous commercial, known as one of the most successful greenwashing advertisements in history, featuring the "Crying Indian" portrayed by Italian-American actor, Espera Oscar de Corti better known as Iron Eyes Cody who wept: "Some people have a deep, abiding respect for the natural beauty that was once this country. And some people don't." which gained favor from the public, and even the White House as Lady Bird Johnson joined the campaign to promote highway beautification (Abdelfatah & Arablouei, 2019). 'Keep America Beautiful' played on the emotive response of the public by appropriating Indigenous culture and diverting attention from the beverage and packaging industry responsible which has had lasting impact. Today, mainstream portrayals of environmental issues continue to prioritize individual responsibility over industry accountability. The notable irony of the time is this propaganda was filmed and released at a time

where occupation of Alcatraz protests were ensuing which demanded the protections and rights to their land that was being unlawfully seized yet, it remains a great example of how colonial legacies and environmental injustice are often ignored and erased; fantalizing the Indigenous community for corporate greed. The "Keep America Beautiful" campaign poses an example of how centering conservation and preservation of nature in sustainability alone can diminish those most impacted by the depletion of these resources which furthers my argument that these industry campaigns are not actually sustainable.

With this history, it's not surprising to learn that only 2% of sustainability programs are achieved by companies trying to develop sustainable business strategies throughout their total operations (Davis-Peccoud et al., 2016). Many of today's industry leaders have grown up with campaigns like 'Keep America Beautiful' so despite their stated intentions to do good, they don't know how and with lack of sound investment, and senior leadership support, their public claims to become more sustainable too often fail (Davis-Peccoud et al., 2016). To get started, C-suite level and managerial leadership should work to play an active role to ensure that sustainable and justice initiatives are built at the core of total operations; how they treat their employees throughout their supply chain is interconnected to what and how they produce their goods and services and is also interconnected to the validity of their social and environmental justice claims. Building authenticity and value-based action is a necessary, ongoing process in achieving a brand's sustainability goals. This cannot be properly achieved by the efforts of one dedicated workstream but should at the core of what they do however, defining what the values are requires analysis at the micro and macro level.

Global consensus is an important first step in the sustainability movement to ensure industries are operating under common goals, system of measurement and action plans for

sustainable development. The United Nations recognizes the importance of sustainability with 17 interconnected Sustainable Development Goals signed by 193 countries in 2015, in accordance with the 2030 agenda for sustainable development. The agenda is a plan of action for "people, planet and prosperity" seeking to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all (United Nations, 2015) Each goal applies to all countries who committed to these practices to take urgent action and recognize that ending poverty in all forms, is interconnected with strategies for gender equality, quality education, and a range of social needs that must be tackled in partnership (see Appendix B for the full list of Sustainable Development Goals).

As we've witnessed from 2020's impact, we are quite far from reaching these global goals by 2030. The unprecedented year has revitalized the importance of the three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental increasing urgency to address our foundational issues. Corporate social responsibility is practiced with large brands attempting to integrate social and environmental concerns into their company's management operations. Though it is idealized as an opportunity for good impact and good profit, social responsible initiatives often fail because they are not treated as a priority and often too broad in their objectives to provide substantial impact. As a result, corporate social responsibility initiatives are criticized as poor, greenwashing and whitewashing marketing attempts to dress up a brand's image. BP Oil's greenwashing campaign response to Deepwater Horizon Spill, Pespi's "Live for Now" social justice campaign and mass big brands failures to #PayUp are just a few gross examples of how corporate social *irresponsibility* can trivialize the progress toward social and environmental justice and consumers are taking notice. According to Edelman Trust Barometer 2020, 64% of consumers expect brands to take a definitive stance on social issues and 74% believe that CEOs should implement authentic social change rather than waiting for the

government to impose it and they've taken this seriously (Edelman, 2020). Millennial and Gen-Z consumers in particular have shifted the market by switching, boycotting, or outright avoiding brands based on their commitment to social issues. A 2019 Forbes found 62% of Gen-Z prefer to buy from sustainable brands, and 73% of millennials are willing to pay more for sustainable goods with 50% of the same demographic stating they are willing to spend 10% or more on sustainable offerings and 54% of Gen-Z committing to doing the same (Petro, 2020). Companies that are implementing authentic social changes are not only seeing higher consumer retention, but they are able to manage threats to their supply chain long-term through innovation leading to significant cost reductions and efficiency in their total operations. Outside of improvements in risk management, increased employee engagement, and positive brand building, high sustainability companies are found more likely to have established processes for stakeholder engagement and outperform their counterparts in terms of stock market and accounting performance in the long-term (Eccles, Ioannou, & Serafeim, 2014).

Without actively working to dismantle, unlearn, and redesign environmentally unjust and colonial structures which continue to fail us, we remain paralyzed in a cradle-to-grave system that further harms our ecological and social systems. Often, "zero waste", plant-based and other alternative green lifestyles are marketed towards individuals to take better care of our environment. Though these initiatives claim to mean well, it's only feasible to those privileged enough to dedicate the time, money, and other resources necessary ultimately pushing the responsibility onto the individual instead of corporations and governments who should be held to account.

Recommendations

Equity-centered design should be the framework we strive for in business strategy and is the core of true environmental and social responsibility at work. Organizations seeking to be partners in creating lasting, positive social impact should work to reimagine their existing practices creating circular, cradle-to-cradle systems centering the environment and Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) communities. We can begin to effectively remove the burden continually placed on Black, Brown, and Indigenous peoples by redistributing the power, wealth, and responsibility equitability. These processes of sustainable design should also be regenerative to allow for continual change to address the ever-changing needs and philosophies of our complex world aligning with internal and global goals for sustainable development. With this in mind, general recommendations for implementing sustainable design strategies have been complied:

Adopt and Uphold Written & Legally Binding Good Neighborhood Agreements

Though GNA's are rarely used, evidence shows it is an effective and appropriate approach to address company-community conflicts. Businesses seeking to build sustainable impact in the communities they operate should consider GNA's as an essential tool for to hold them to account for performance standards negotiated with local communities this may include but is not limited to community access to information, environmental and health monitoring, right to inspect facilities, proper accident preparedness procedures, and means for conflict resolution (Bullard et al., 2008).

Support Community and Worker Right-to-Know

The public, workers, and local communities must have access to information about the companies use and release of toxic chemicals and industries' supply chains. Businesses must

disclose the chemicals and materials, list quantities of chemicals produced, used, released and exported, and provide accommodating access to this information to be inclusive of the needs of the community (Bullard et al., 2008).

Support Small and Local Businesses

Build strong relationships with small and local businesses to foster the health and prosperity of the communities you operate in. Implementing impact investments, grants, or even promoting these brands through your networks can create lasting impact and trust within the community.

Keep Things Local

Reduce the environmental impact incurred by transportation and energy emissions by working with local suppliers and vendors. This will also provide an opportunity to engage with the community directly and understand the potential social and environmental impact your operations will have. (Leibowitz, 2019)

Develop Strong & Ethical Relationships with Your Workers

Not only should businesses adhere to the internationally recognized labor rights but ensure workers throughout their supply chain are being provided *living* wages and safe working conditions. Businesses should be especially conscious that workers deepest in their supply chain are being treated properly. Strong communication with your suppliers and doing through checks to make sure legal and ethical standards are being followed should be a priority. (Ethical Trading Initiative Base Code)

Develop Long-Term Relationships with Suppliers

Supply chain management is one of the biggest challenges in circularity, building and maintaining strong relationships with suppliers experienced in implementing sustainable design can positively impact your total operations. (Kumar & Rahman, 2015)

Design for Circularity

Cradle to Cradle imagines a world "where design is a positive, regenerative force, producing effects that we want to expand rather than shrink" allowing us to not only consider how we can reduce harm but how we can actually positively benefit society and the environment along the product's entire life cycle. This systems thinking approach allows products to create no waste, all materials should either be infinitely recyclable or biodegradable. (Leibowitz, 2019).

Design for Durability & Longevity

Create high quality products with strong materials that are able to take wear and tear for easy maintenance, reparability, disassembly. upgrades and customization to extend the product's life cycle. Also consider providing the customer with clear care instructions (EcoDesign Circle, 2009).

Use Circular Materials & Processes

Core to the circular economy, heavily considering the amount and impact of all the materials involved in your supply chain: raw materials, water, energy, carbon footprint, chemicals, waste, biodiversity, packing, people are just a few central factors to consider; here are a few questions compiled by the CFDA's materials worksheet: what raw materials are going into my supply chain? How much water is used? How much water is wasted? How are we measuring our carbon footprint? How are we helping to maintain and preserve biodiversity? Do we provide

our workers with a good, stable income? Do we protect their right to organize? (Leibowitz, 2019).

Create Closed-Loop Systems

Commit to being accountable for the end life of your product, by implementing take back programs to reuse and recycle your products. (Leibowitz, 2019).

Build Sustainable Workspaces

By investing in green businesses not only can reduce environmental harm by use of less water, energy or resources but positively impact the environment by generating their own energy and increasing biodiversity (Leibowitz, 2019). Where possible, consider remote working, if 2020 has taught us anything, it's taught us it's more than possible.

Conduct Self-assessments and Certifications

Objective self- assessments and certifications from reputable organizations dedicated to sustainable justice, can help your brand evaluate and take the necessary steps to see where you have grown, and areas that still need improvement. Some of the top evaluation programs are: B Corp Impact Assessment, Natural Step (ABCD Method), LEED Certifications, C2C Certified, Natural Capital Coalition and Kering E P&L.

<div align="center">

Conclusion

</div>

The pandemics of COVID-19 and racial injustice are results of a colonial legacy enshrouded with social and environmental injustice. The insurmountable losses we faced in 2020 brought an awakening of the mass social injustices and proved how far we are from achieving our sustainability goals. Online and in-person activism highlighted the structural injustices at work, for once demanding corporate and government entities take responsibility rather than putting the onus on individuals of the general public. In my thesis, I looked to the rise of the

environmental justice movement and compare two literary works: Toxic Waste and Race, and Toxic Waste and Race at Twenty seeking to analyze the impetus of the environmental justice movement, its progress twenty years later in 2007, and it is progress today nearly fourteen years. Despite the industry's dependence on immigrant, work classing, and BIPOC communities they continue to actively pollute and redline these communities through various forms of environmental racism. They are using up our natural resources and exploiting the people core to the supply chain that will deplete our current resources and the needs of future generations, impacting future profitability and business opportunities in the long-run.

In my thesis, I've argued that environmental racism is a result of colonial legacies, and its structures still stand in our capitalist society today. Therefore, without addressing eco-social injustices, big brand attempts at socially responsible initiatives continue to fail. These brands further ignorance by leading "socially responsible" programs and initiatives in corporate and government without acknowledging or properly re-working these strategies. This has been primarily displayed in 2020, as corporations made billions as a result of the pandemic by prioritizing profits before their workers and their communities. Meanwhile, jumping in on social justice movements much to the dismay of the public who are using their dollars to vote out brands engaged in performative activism.

Sustainability has been defined as the processes and actions in which we preserve and regenerate our natural resources for our own needs and the needs of future generations. I've argued that this can only be achieved by centering the voices and experiences of communities most vulnerable to environmental and social pandemics. Concluding my research, I provided starter recommendations brands should consider to best pivot to the demands of a worldwide culture shift that prioritizes transparency and strong stances on social issues above all else, and I

have noted that brands that refuse to make changes are being replaced by those who do. Though there are certifications and assessments that provide a critical analysis of a brand's progression to sustainability it should be noted there has yet to be a certification that assesses complete sustainability that is equally good for both people and planet. The recommended self-assessments and certifications do not look at all areas of sustainable growth but a specific area of their progress based on the certifiers own set of ethics which can be controversial. This could be a company's commitment to regenerative agriculture or paying fair and living or commitment diversity & inclusion efforts but most often all three are not evaluated which are important in the sustainability movement. This should not discourage organizations from seeking to make substantial changes throughout their business operations, however it should be understood that these seals of approval are only the beginning to commitment in building sustainable justice.

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Appendix A. The Principles of EJ

WE, THE PEOPLE OF COLOR, gathered together at this multinational People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, to begin to build a national and international movement of all peoples of color to fight the destruction and taking of our lands and communities, do hereby re-establish our spiritual interdependence to the sacredness of our Mother Earth; to respect and celebrate each of our cultures, languages and beliefs about the natural world and our roles in healing ourselves; to ensure environmental justice; to promote economic alternatives which would contribute to the development of environmentally safe livelihoods; and, to secure our political, economic and cultural liberation that has been denied for over 500 years of colonization and oppression, resulting in the poisoning of our communities and land and the genocide of our peoples, do affirm and adopt these Principles of Environmental Justice:

The Principles of Environmental Justice (EJ)

1) **Environmental Justice** affirms the sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity and the interdependence of all species, and the right to be free from ecological destruction.

2) **Environmental Justice** demands that public policy be based on mutual respect and justice for all peoples, free from any form of discrimination or bias.

3) **Environmental Justice** mandates the right to ethical, balanced and responsible uses of land and renewable resources in the interest of a sustainable planet for humans and other living things.

4) **Environmental Justice** calls for universal protection from nuclear testing, extraction, production and disposal of toxic/hazardous wastes and poisons and nuclear testing that threaten the fundamental right to clean air, land, water, and food.

5) **Environmental Justice** affirms the fundamental right to political, economic, cultural and environmental self-determination of all peoples.

6) **Environmental Justice** demands the cessation of the production of all toxins, hazardous wastes, and radioactive materials, and that all past and current producers be held strictly accountable to the people for detoxification and the containment at the point of production.

7) **Environmental Justice** demands the right to participate as equal partners at every level of decision-making, including needs assessment, planning, implementation, enforcement and evaluation.

8) **Environmental Justice** affirms the right of all workers to a safe and healthy work environment without being forced to choose between an unsafe livelihood and unemployment. It also affirms the right of those who work at home to be free from environmental hazards.

9) **Environmental Justice** protects the right of victims of environmental injustice to receive full compensation and reparations for damages as well as quality health care.

10) **Environmental Justice** considers governmental acts of environmental injustice a violation of international law, the Universal Declaration On Human Rights, and the United Nations Convention on Genocide.

11) **Environmental Justice** must recognize a special legal and natural relationship of Native Peoples to the U.S. government through treaties, agreements, compacts, and covenants affirming sovereignty and self-determination.

12) **Environmental Justice** affirms the need for urban and rural ecological policies to clean up and rebuild our cities and rural areas in balance with nature, honoring the cultural integrity of all our communities, and provided fair access for all to the full range of resources.

13) **Environmental Justice** calls for the strict enforcement of principles of informed consent, and a halt to the testing of experimental reproductive and medical procedures and vaccinations on people of color.

14) **Environmental Justice** opposes the destructive operations of multi-national corporations.

15) **Environmental Justice** opposes military occupation, repression and exploitation of lands, peoples and cultures, and other life forms.

16) **Environmental Justice** calls for the education of present and future generations which emphasizes social and environmental issues, based on our experience and an appreciation of our diverse cultural perspectives.

17) **Environmental Justice** requires that we, as individuals, make personal and consumer choices to consume as little of Mother Earth's resources and to produce as little waste as possible; and make the conscious decision to challenge and reprioritize our lifestyles to ensure the health of the natural world for present and future generations.

More info on environmental justice and environmental racism can be found online at www.ejnet.org/ej/

Delegates to the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit held on October 24-27, 1991, in Washington DC, drafted and adopted these 17 principles of Environmental Justice. Since then, the Principles have served as a defining document for the growing grassroots movement for environmental justice.

Above are the 17 principles of the Environmental Justice movement established by the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice. Source: http://www.ejnet.org/ej/principles.html

Appendix B. Food Chain Hierarchy
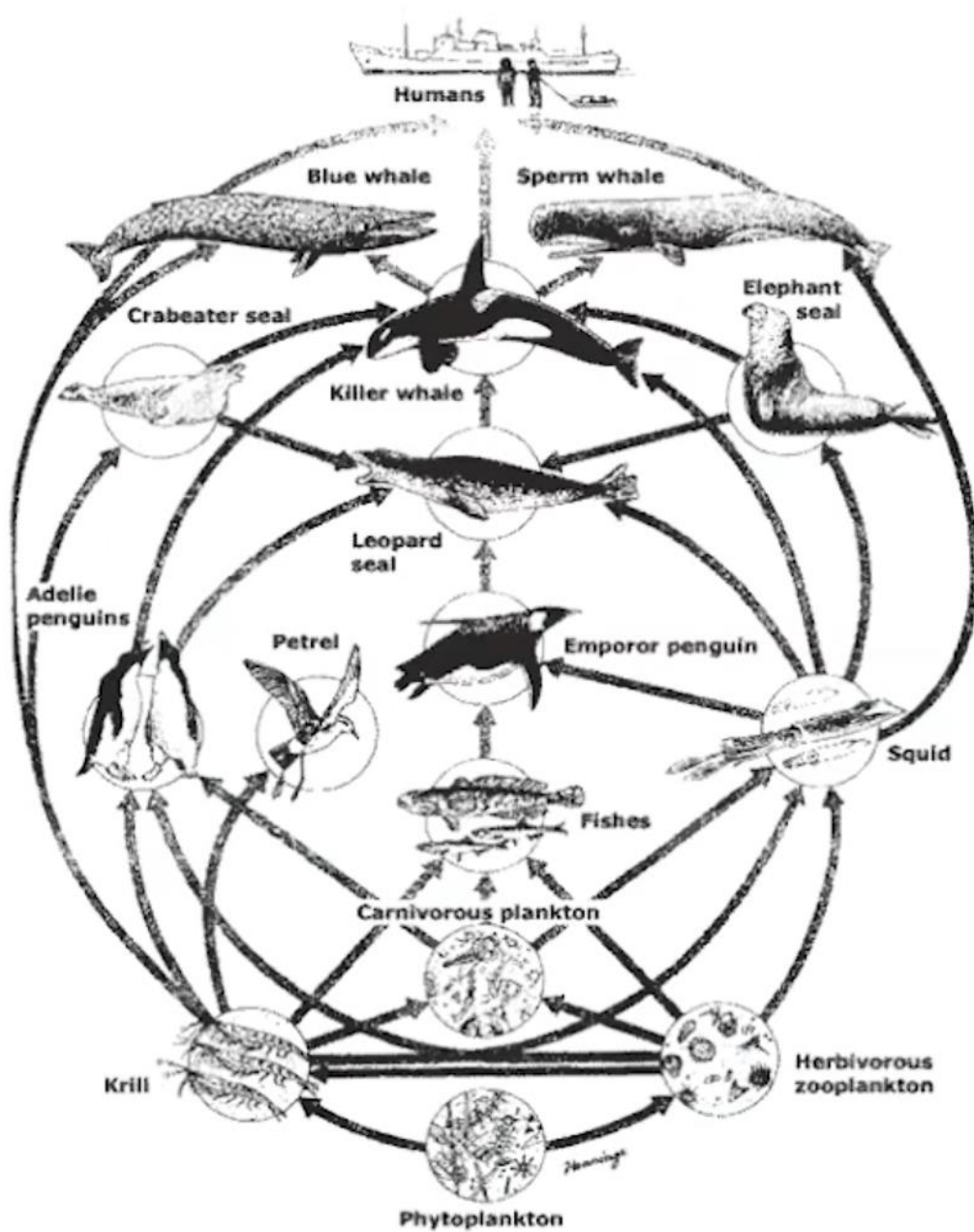
A food chain representing the hierarchical series of organisms
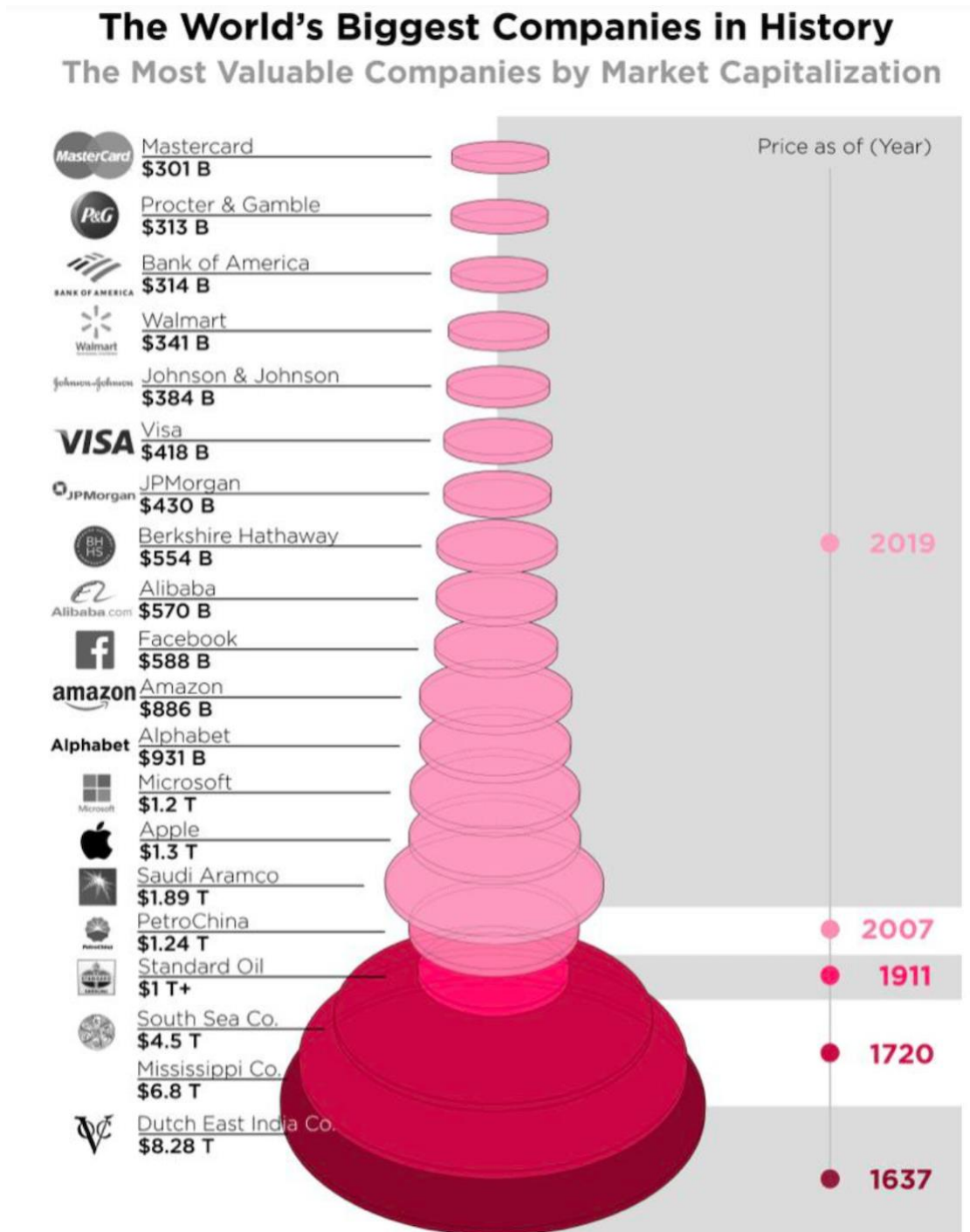Source: http://images.slideplayer.com/2/766606/slides/slide_15.jpg

Appendix C. United Nations Sustainable Goals

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) established by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations.
Source: https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2015/12/sustainable-development-goals-kick-off-with-start-of-new-year/

The World's Biggest Companies in History
The Most Valuable Companies by Market Capitalization

Company	Value
Mastercard	$301 B
Procter & Gamble	$313 B
Bank of America	$314 B
Walmart	$341 B
Johnson & Johnson	$384 B
Visa	$418 B
JPMorgan	$430 B
Berkshire Hathaway	$554 B
Alibaba	$570 B
Facebook	$588 B
Amazon	$886 B
Alphabet	$931 B
Microsoft	$1.2 T
Apple	$1.3 T
Saudi Aramco	$1.89 T
PetroChina	$1.24 T
Standard Oil	$1 T+
South Sea Co.	$4.5 T
Mississippi Co.	$6.8 T
Dutch East India Co.	$8.28 T

Price as of (Year)

2019
2007
1911
1720
1637

The world's biggest companies in relation to their colonial industries
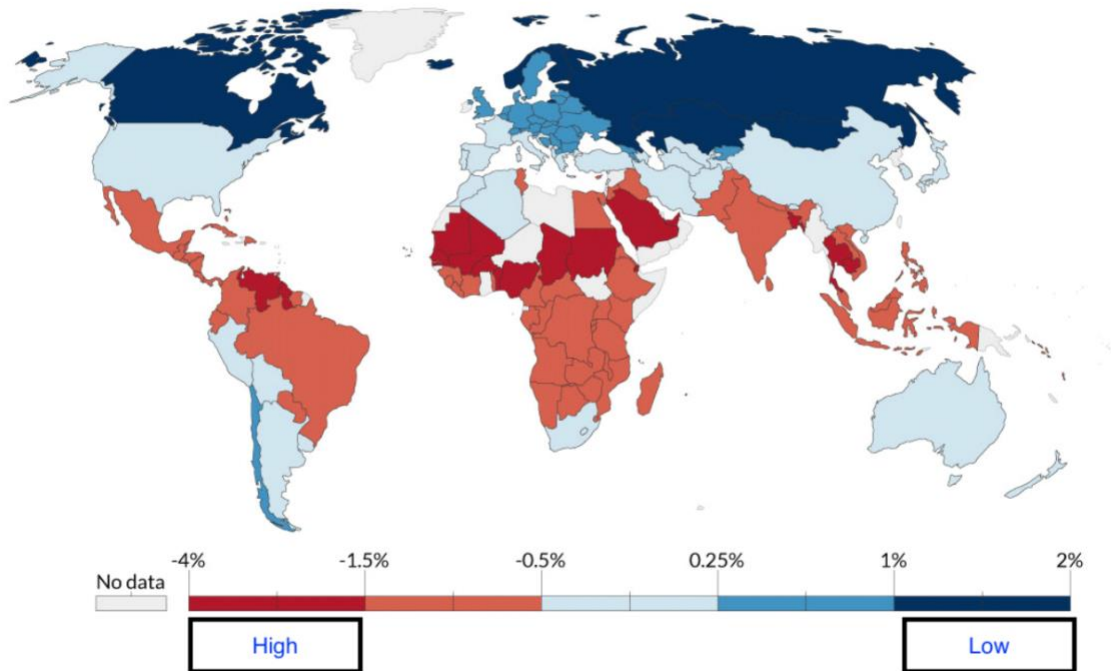Source: https://howmuch.net/articles/the-worlds-biggest-companies-in-history

36

Appendix E. 'Developing' Countries Will Suffer

Developing Countries Will Suffer

Projected change in GDP per capita growth if temperatures rise 2°C

| No data | -4% | -1.5% | -0.5% | 0.25% | 1% | 2% |
| High | | | | | | Low |

Source: Uncertain impacts of 1.5°or 2°C warming - Pretis et al. 2018, doi: 10.1098/rsta.2016.0460   papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm • CC BY
Note: Map shows median impact on economic growth, bar charts show 97.5% - 2.5% (2SD) and 83% - 17% (1SD) range of likely impacts.

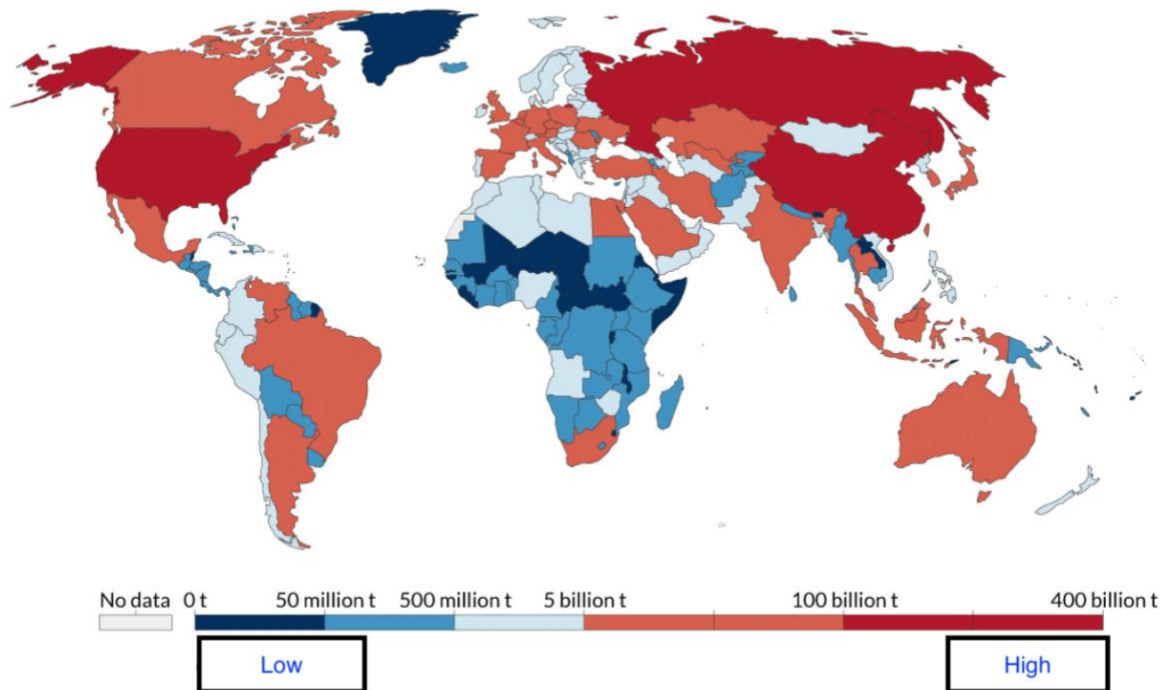Global South countries increasingly impacted by climate change
Source: https://indica.medium.com/climate-winners-and-losers-in-two-maps-c89f17ef0a80
Edited by: Simone Hassan-Bey

Appendix F. 'Developed' Countries Cause Climate Change

'Developed' Countries Caused Climate Change

Cumulative (CO₂) emissions up to 2017

Our World in Data

| No data | 0 t | 50 million t | 500 million t | 5 billion t | 100 billion t | 400 billion t |

Low   High

Source: Global Carbon Project (GCP); Carbon Dioxide Information Analysis Centre (CDIAC)
OurWorldInData.org/co2-and-other-greenhouse-gas-emissions/   • CC BY

Global South countries increasingly impacted by climate change
Source: https://indica.medium.com/climate-winners-and-losers-in-two-maps-c89f17ef0a80
Edited by: Simone Hassan-Bey