



WORLDEATER SERIES

industrialisation of colonial sustainability

The sustainability industry is built to sustain a colonial world order. What have been, and continue to be, the narratives, mechanisms and systems that establish and advance colonial sustainability?

Accelerating colonisation

Early industrial sustainability projects include “Sir” Richard Arkwright’s 1771 development Cromford Mills in Derwent Valley, England - the first industrial hydro-powered cotton spinning mill. It was supplied by raw cotton produced by enslaved people in the Americas. As acknowledged by the Derwent Valley Mills World Heritage Site, the mill “led to unprecedented demands for cotton, which contributed to an inhuman and brutal regime of historic global slavery”.

Whether it’s lithium mining for the solar energy industry, the wind energy industry’s non-recyclable turbine blades, or the food vs. fuel debate plaguing “sustainable aviation”, we see similar exploitative geopolitical and socioeconomic dynamics in the imperial governing of modern sustainability technologies today.

Colonial sustainability refrains from serious attempts at degrowth or reducing consumption, as this would expose the myths of conscious capitalism and the triple bottom line, hurt corporate profits, and infringe upon white comfort.

Institutional mechanisms uphold colonialism

“Global” institutions like the United Nations and the World Bank are colonial, patriarchal and white supremacist in nature, upholding imperialism through supranational governance mechanisms that include diplomatic and economic coercion. A colonial sub-class of environment and sustainability organisations and professionals has been created, nurtured and indoctrinated by United Nations forums since 1972, most successfully by annual Conference of the Parties (COPs) hosted on the platform of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

As COP29 gets underway, it is plain to see that the UNFCCC mechanism worshipped by the sustainability industry has long since been co-opted by the powerful interests of the extractive industries and their political proponents.

Institutional mechanisms uphold colonialism

The UNFCCC has been perpetually trapped by denial and delay tactics that include

- rejecting discussions on population size and overconsumption of rich countries,
- neglecting Global South demands for justice and reparations for colonial harms,
- funding research to advance Western climate science and colonial sustainability under the pretext of “requiring more information to be able to act”,
- allowing the consideration of unproven and untested technologies in formally-adopted and ratified strategies like the Paris Agreement,
- watering down aims, blurring responsibilities, and allowing voluntary reporting and superficial tokenisations of global goals like the [Sustainable Development Goals](#),
- investing in and promoting toothless non-binding schemes such as the [Green Climate Fund](#), etc.

Sustainability as a colonial class

The social class of proponents of colonial sustainability hold fast to similar beliefs, ideologies, values and practices, operationalised to create, exacerbate, and profit from the very problems the industry purports to address. The pervasiveness and popularity of colonial sustainability may itself be interpreted as an indicator of global societal collapse.

The narratives of the sustainability class typically centre around a blind optimism in techno-saviourism, aligning with colonial development narratives. Such hopium and solutionism do not stop the ecocides, genocides, ethnocides, and epistemicides perpetuated by ongoing colonisation. Why does the sustainability industry avoid addressing coloniality in incumbent systems of profit and governance?

- Normalised colonial and colonised worldviews: Colonial propaganda has been successfully propagated into cultures and beliefs around the world. The vast majority of humanity is not able to become aware of or begin to question the violent and oppressive world order that they are born into. Colonisers and white supremacists do not recognise themselves as such, and the colonised and oppressed are not generally aware of the boots on their necks.
- Institutional gaslighting: Institutions made powerful by our colonial world order would not allow ongoing colonialism to be revealed, identified or targeted in any way. Colonial power structures seeking to sustain themselves would never promote or support decolonisation. Institutions are therefore heavily invested in gaslighting narratives, promoting colonial sustainability.
- Corporate profit incentives: The factual narrative of colonialism having caused planetary systems collapse is incompatible with lucrative systems of extractive capitalism that provide corporate budgets for the sustainability industry to exist.
- White sustainability is already compatible with our colonial world order: The topic of colonialism distracts from the white supremacist development narrative that the sustainability industry subscribes to, which centres upon liberal ideology and technocratic carbon-centric interventions that already fit well within extractive profit structures.

Sustainability professionals and practitioners are therefore incentivised to ignore, neglect and downplay colonisation and coloniality in planetary crises they purport to concern themselves with, and to fall in line developing and promoting white sustainability.

