Journal of Social Equity and Public Administration, 2023, 1(2): 1-10.
https://doi.org/10.24926/jsepa.v1i2.5096

Social Equity in Public Administration: A Global Challenge[1]

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Achieving social equity presents a formidable challenge for public administrators around the globe. While nations are distinctive in terms of their culture, language, political systems, demographics, and history, this article focuses on the five overarching actions that offer promise in addressing global inequities. These actions include: 1) embracing the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights; 2) focusing on social inequities as problems rather than conditions; 3) strengthening commitment to core democratic principles; 4) promoting accountability for race, colonization, and slavery; and 5) advancing a humanitarian approach.

Social inequities both within and among nations is a critical concern. Public administrators around the world are tasked with implementing the provision of public services to all, with commitment to core public service values such as effectiveness, efficiency, and equity. My previous research has argued that "governments around the world face the challenge of espousing principles of fairness while practicing inequity in their administration among particular groups" (Gooden 2020, 1). These groups face patterns of inequity that are both historical and contemporary. The patterns are repetitive and predictable along various characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, class, and ability status. Issues of equity and justice are fundamental concerns of public administrators who constantly struggle to evaluate the country's social climate and ensure equity in governance (Akram 2004). Public administrators directly impact social equity. This article provides a global challenge to public administrators to advance social equity in five specific ways. These actions include: 1) embracing the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights; 2) focusing on social inequities as problems rather than conditions; 3) strengthening commitment to core democratic principles; 4) promoting accountability for race, colonization, and slavery; and 5) advancing a humanitarian approach.

Embrace the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a Guiding Compass

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR is a milestone document in the history of human rights. Drafted by representatives with different legal and cultural backgrounds from all regions of the world, the Declaration was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in Paris on December 10, 1948 as a common standard of achievements for all peoples and nations. It sets out, for the first time, fundamental human rights to be universally protected and has been translated into over 500 languages—the most of any document (United Nations n.d.).

As Eleanor Roosevelt, the first chairperson of the Commission on Human Rights, and a key leader in the document's development stated,

> In giving our approval to the declaration today, it is of primary importance that we keep clearly in mind the basic character of the document. It is not a treaty; it is not an international agreement. It is not and does not purport to be a statement of law or of legal obligation. It is a declaration of basic principles of human rights and freedoms, to be stamped with the approval of the

[1] Delivered as keynote address at the Social Equity Summit, an event celebrating the launch of the *Journal of Social Equity and Public Administration*, held October 6-8, 2022, Charlottesville, Virginia.

Table 1. Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Preamble

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world,

Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people,

Whereas it is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law,

Whereas it is essential to promote the development of friendly relations between nations,

Whereas the peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women and have determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,

Whereas Member States have pledged themselves to achieve, in cooperation with the United Nations, the promotion of universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms,

Whereas a common understanding of these rights and freedoms is of the greatest importance for the full realization of this pledge,

Now, therefore, The General Assembly, Proclaims this Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction.

Article 1.

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 2.

Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.

Article 3.

Everyone has the right to life, liberty and the security of person.

Article 4.

No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.

Article 5.

No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Article 6.

Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law.

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 8.

Everyone has the right to an effective remedy by the competent national tribunals for acts violating the fundamental rights granted him by the constitution or by law.

Article 9.
No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.

Article 10.
Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him.

Article 11.
1. Everyone charged with a penal offence has the right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty according to law in a public trial at which he has had all the guarantees necessary for his defence.
2. No one shall be held guilty of any penal offence on account of any act or omission which did not constitute a penal offence, under national or international law, at the time when it was committed. Nor shall a heavier penalty be imposed than the one that was applicable at the time the penal offence was committed.

Article 12.
No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honour and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.

Article 13.
1. Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each State.
2. Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.

Article 14.
1. Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.
2. This right may not be invoked in the case of prosecutions genuinely arising from non-political crimes or from acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

Article 15.
1. Everyone has the right to a nationality.
2. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality.

Article 16.
1. Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution.
2. Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.
3. The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.

Article 17.
1. Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others.
2. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property.

Article 18.
Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

Article 19.
Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Article 20.
1. Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.
2. No one may be compelled to belong to an association.

Article 21.
1. Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.
2. Everyone has the right to equal access to public service in his country.
3. The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.

Article 22.
Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.

Article 23.
1. Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable 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 favourable 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.

Article 24.
Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay.

Article 25.
1. 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.
2. Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection.

Article 26.
1. Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.
2. Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.
3. Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

Article 27.
1. Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.
2. Everyone has the right to the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author.

Article 28.
Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized.

Article 29.
1. Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible.
2. In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society.
3. These rights and freedoms may in no case be exercised contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

Article 30.
Nothing in this Declaration may be interpreted as implying for any State, group or person any right to engage in any activity or to perform any act aimed at the destruction of any of the rights and freedoms set forth herein.

Source: https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights

> General Assembly by formal vote of its members, and to serve as a common standard of achievement for all peoples of all nations. (Roosevelt 1948)

The UDHR is aspirational, not legally binding, but it provides an important directional compass for all nations to aspire. Without dispute, it has been a powerful influence for nations across the world in developing and interpreting laws, and influencing political and social actions. A central feature of the UDHR is that it provides universalist language without mention of any specific political system, culture or religion.

Importantly, the UDHR addresses three critical domains of equality and equity: 1) Equality of rights—the elimination of all forms of discrimination and respect for the fundamental freedoms and civil and political rights of all individuals; 2) Equality of opportunities—stable social, economic, cultural and political conditions allows all individuals to fulfil their potential; and 3) Equity in living conditions—a contextually determined acceptable range of inequities in income, wealth, and other aspects of life in society (United Nations 2006).

As a field, we should give much more attention to the UDHR and identify it as a core aspirational anchor of our social equity work. The UDHR applies to *all* individuals in the world, yes everyone, without regard to race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, class, ability status, income, wealth, or any other categorization. All 193 member states have signed on in agreement with the UDHR; yet, the extent to which it is assigned and discussed in our professional associations and public administration courses—even such courses with a direct focus on social equity—is understated.

Focus on Social Inequities as Problems, Rather Than Conditions

Inequities around the world represent serious problems to be solved, not conditions to be tolerated. Global inequities are high and have been increasing over the past several decades. The Gini coefficient is a common measure of income inequality that scores zero when everyone has identical incomes (perfect equality) and one when all income goes only to one person (perfect inequality). Developed by Corrado Gini, the Gini is based on the difference between the Lorenz curve (the observed cumulative income distribution) and the notion of a perfectly equal income distribution. A Gini coefficient between .30 and .40 is generally viewed as desirable by economists in order for nations to prosper (see https://databank.worldbank.org/metadataglossary/world-development-indicators/series/SI.POV.GINI).

In the late 20th century, the income Gini coefficient ranged between a low of .24 in Slovenia and a high of .49 in Mexico. Particularly since the 1980s, Gini coefficients have steadily increased in many countries (See Figure 1). Based on 2010 data, "in OECD countries, the average income of the richest 10 percent of the population is about nine times that of the poorest 10 percent—a ratio of nine to one. However, the ratio varies widely from one country to another. While much lower than the OECD average in the Nordic and many continental European countries, the ratio reaches 10 to 1 in Italy, Japan, Korea, and the United Kingdom; around 14 to one in Israel, Turkey, and the United States; and 27 to 1 in Mexico and Chile" (OECD 2011, 22). Today, among all countries, South Africa has the highest Gini coefficient (.63), while Slovenia remains the lowest (.25). In South Africa, the richest 10 percent have 71 percent of the wealth, while the poorest 60 percent have 7 percent of the wealth (see https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/gini-coefficient-by-country).

The immediate and long-term consequences of these inequities have significant impacts at the individual and societal levels. These individuals and their families are systemically disadvantaged and this directly impacts access to education, employment, earnings, health, housing, food, transportation, and safety, to name a few. At its worst, extreme economic inequality results in a very real loss of life. An estimated 5.6 million people die every year for lack of access to health care in poor countries. More financial resources not only provide access to health care, it also lengthens life. For example, in São Paulo, Brazil, people in the richest areas can expect to live 14 years longer than those who live in the poorest areas. It is estimated that there would be 143 million more women worldwide if not for a combination of excess female mortality and sex-selective abortions (son preference). And, hunger kills over 2.1 million people each year (see Ahmed 2022).

From a societal stance, this leads to a massive loss of human capital that could have been invested into the betterment of society. A large segment of individuals,

Figure 1. Income Inequality Increased in Most, but Not All OECD Countries

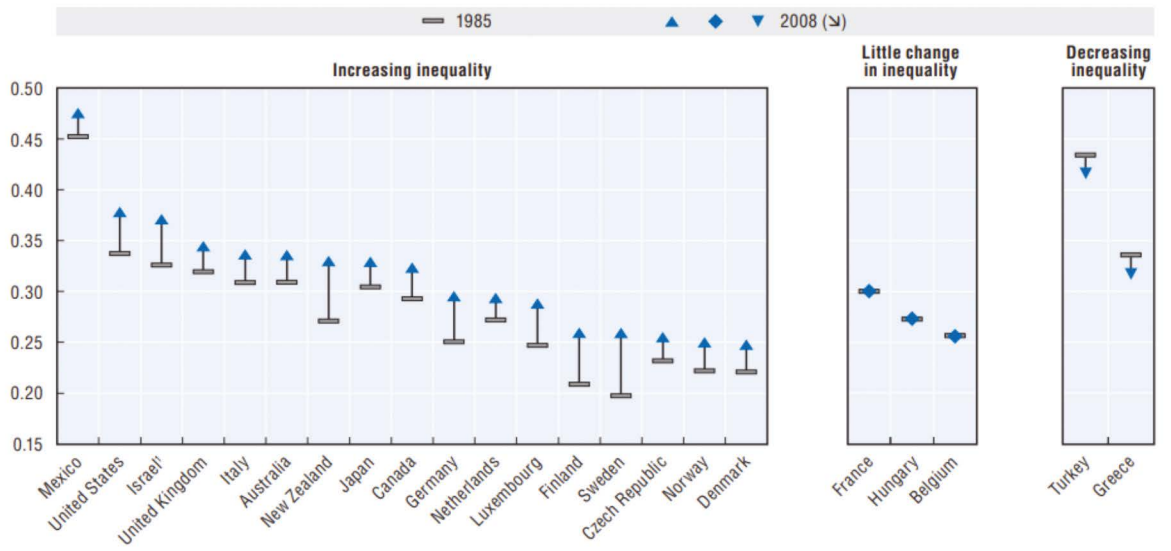


Figure 1. **Income inequality increased in most, but not all OECD countries**
Gini coefficients of income inequality, mid-1980s and late 2000s

Note: For data years see Table 1. "Little change" in inequality refers to changes of less than 2 percentage points.
1. Information on data for Israel: http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932315602.
Source: *OECD Database on Household Income Distribution and Poverty.*

StatLink http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932535185

with the ability to contribute to many societal needs across the country, such as teachers, lawyers, engineers, physicians, accountants, technical workers, IT professionals, entrepreneurs, artists, and athletes, are unable to acquire these skills and share their talents within the broader nation-state, and within the global economy. This is a real problem that needs to be intentionally addressed to reverse these long-term societal losses. Viewing these increasing equity gaps as unfortunate but unavoidable conditions is not only shortsighted but also self-destructive over the long run.

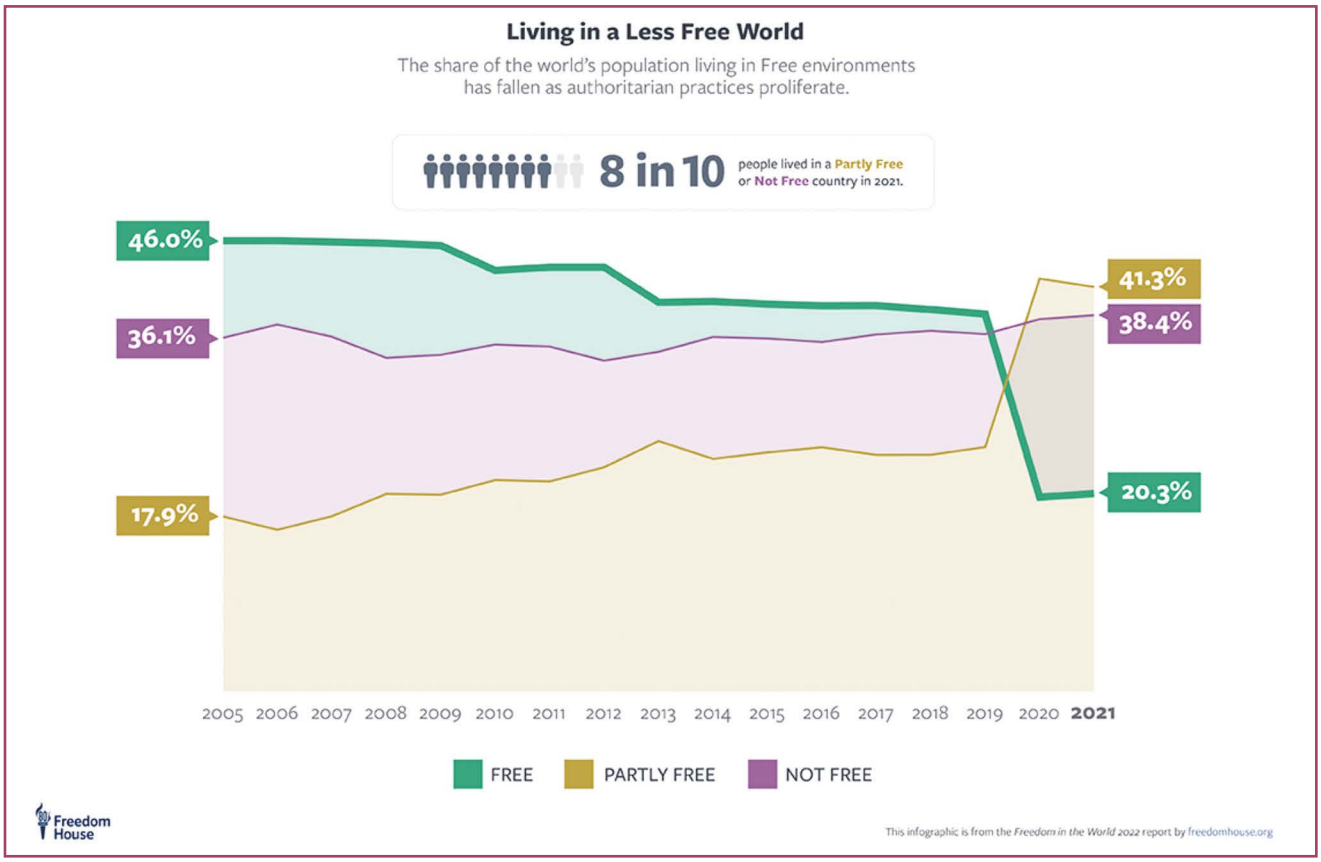
Strengthen Our Commitment to Core Democratic Principles

Advancing social equity is directly tied to core democratic principles. As succinctly articulated in a Freedom House 2022 report,

> In its ideal form, it [democracy] is a governing system based on the will and consent of the governed, institutions that are accountable to all citizens, adherence to the rule of law, and respect for human rights. It is a network of mutually reinforcing structures in which those exercising power are subject to checks both within and outside the state, for example, from independent courts, an independent press, and civil society. It requires an openness to alternations in power, with rival candidates or parties competing fairly to govern for the good of the public as a whole, not just themselves or those who voted for them. It creates a level playing field so that all people, no matter the circumstances of their birth or background, can enjoy the universal human rights to which they are entitled and participate in politics and governance. Democracy is also more than just an ideal. It is a practical engine of self-correction and improvement that empowers people to constantly, peacefully struggle toward that ideal. When one part of the system falters, the others can be used as tools to repair and strengthen it. (Repucci and Slipowitz 2022, 3)

Although the decline in democracies and the commitment to democratic principles is more commonly discussed, it is critical to note that authoritarian rule is also simultaneously increasing. This is an important and disturbing trend. As Figure 2 depicts, the share of the world's population living in a free world has signifi-

Figure 2. Living in a Less Free World



cantly decreased over time, based on an assessment of 10 political rights indicators and 15 social liberties indicators. Moreover, the scores of free democratic countries, like the United States, have dropped within the "free" category. There is a rise of populist leaders who are fueled by unchecked power to advance specific interests at the expense of minority groups.

To be sure, all democracies are imperfect, but their core principles offer important goal posts to realizing social equity. The decreases in democratic practices combined with an increase in authoritarian practices yields a troubling net loss for social equity around the globe. Public administration researchers and practitioners can and must advance the upholding of core democratic principles and practices within government. This is a key component of good governance which includes an emphasis on transparency, accountability, responsiveness, inclusion, equity, ethics, efficiency and effectiveness.

Promote Accountability for the Historical Impact of Racism, Colonization, and Slavery

The role of race and racism is woefully missing in global social equity analysis. Global inequities are most commonly presented in terms of financial terms, such as income, assets, poverty, and employment. When group analyses are conducted, these are most commonly reported relative to educational level, gender, and age. Global social equity research needs to significantly increase standard reporting of group analyses by race and/or ethnicity. As W. E. B. DuBois stated in 1897, ". . . the history of the world is the history, not of individuals, but of groups, not of nations, but of races, and he who ignores or seeks to override the race idea in human history ignores and overrides the central thought of all history."

"Today's historic inequality between rich countries and the majority of nations—and between racialized groups and White people within rich countries and within the global population—stems in large part from a brutal era of the slave trade, of racist policies, and of colonialism" of the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries (Ahmed 2022, 26). The role of state-sanctioned racism and colonialization is very scant in global inequality analysis and reports published routinely by organizations such as the World Bank, OECD, and the United Nations.

"There is a long tradition of scholarship that highlights how Europe became wealthy at the expense of the places that it colonized . . . Not only did wealth distribution in former settler colonies (Australia, Canada, Latin America, and South Africa) primarily benefit European settlers at the expense of indigenous and colonised people, but economic 'development' (the generation of wealth) in many non-settler colonies was limited to the extraction of resources for the benefit of the colonising country, often using forced labour" (ODI Bites 2022).

Reparations are a public policy solution designed intentionally to provide financial redress for colonization and slavery. Viewed through a human rights lens, reparations include not only acknowledgment and apologies for past abuses and the harm they continue to cause, but fiscal redress as well. Reparations, paid by the state, help recognize failure of the state to protect human rights and the administration of justice (Lockhart 2021). A recent example includes the convening of a special committee in Belgium in 2021 which advanced a comprehensive program of reparations to address colonization offenses in Burundi, Congo, and Rwanda. Even more curious, is an examination of wealthy nations that have received reparations, such as payments made from Haiti to France. "France only recognized an independent Haiti in 1825, after its former colony agreed to pay reparations that would be worth $22 billion today. Over the next 120 years, as much as 80 percent of Haiti's revenue went to paying off this debt" (Labrador and Roy 2021).

Governments have not been innocent bystanders in the state of global inequity. Violations of fundamental human rights through colonialization and slavery, as well as their continuing aftermath, have been systemically minimized relative to actions of accountability. Serious efforts to address global inequities require sober consideration of all factors that contributed to their manifestation, including appropriate historical redress.

Advance a Humanitarian Approach

In affluent countries, the problem isn't that there isn't enough money—the problem is that money is in too few hands. Achieving social equity requires strong and deliberate pre-distributive and/or redistributive policies. Pre-distributive policies include more direct labor market interventions, such as increasing the minimum wage or increasing the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). Redistributive policies involve tax transfers from the wealthy to the poor, such as unemployment compensation and food stamps. "Even in relatively affluent countries with a strong liberal tradition, the 'deals' struck by Governments and societies to resolve the economic and social crisis of the 1930s were pursued with increasing vigour; most notably, public programmes were implemented to fight poverty, and universal social security schemes financed by extensive and progressive tax systems were adopted" (United Nations 2006, 4).

While such policies can be very effective in reducing inequities, there must be political will to support such actions. Since at least the days of England's Elizabethan Poor Laws in the 17th century, societies have characterized people who are in poverty as "deserving" or "non-deserving." The deserving poor are those who are considered poor through no shortcoming of their own—for example, individuals who were born with disabilities. The non-deserving poor are those who are considered poor because of their own choices or behaviors. These individuals are viewed as lazy and/or poor decision makers. This sets up a conundrum: There is a willingness to help those who are deserving, but an unwillingness (or more precisely blatant opposition) to helping or enabling those who are not deserving.

Over the past several decades, there has been a weakened redistributive role of the state. Support for redistributive policies must first be preceded by empathy. Empathy occurs when individuals can relate to, or see themselves in, the individuals who are struggling. Terms such as "deserving" vs. "undeserving," "belonging" vs. "othering," "inclusion vs. exclusion," and "in-group" vs. "out-group" are all terms that differentiate the status of groups in terms of access to resources controlled by those who are in positions of power and influence (Barbelet and Wake 2020).

Advancements in social justice, except in extraordinary situations and circumstances such as the gaining of political independence, the aftermath of a long war or the depths of an economic depression, require pressure from organized political forces. Brief and sporadic protests against injustices, even if vehement, usually have a limited effect. Within society, the advancement of social equity involves efforts to realize greater equality in the life conditions of different social groups, including vul-

nerable populations. These efforts require intentional actions by policymakers and public administrators. "Distributive and redistributive policies were necessary for societies, and eventually for the entire international community, to progress towards social justice" (United Nations 2006, 6). According to Rawls (1999) a core principle of justice is that social and economic inequalities are arranged so that they are both (a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged, consistent with the just savings principle and (b) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity.

The global COVID-19 pandemic shone a bright light on fundamental inequities. Across the world, those who are poor fared much worse. This holds true, not only in terms of developed health care systems, access to health care and the vaccine, but also in other critical areas such as employment (ability to work remote vs. not); earnings (sectors such as restaurants and hospitality); access to education; access to the internet; and overall well-being. However, there were also some important silver linings where there was political will to make health care more accessible (telehealth); provide income support for those who were unemployed; and develop and support many innovative and remote service delivery structures. These swift and broad public policy changes were unprecedented. While multiple groups benefitted from these changes, they were largely motivated by the randomness of COVID-19's upper hand, particularly during the first year of the pandemic. In many ways, the pandemic closely approximated Rawl's veil of ignorance. Because we did not fully understand how COVID-19 spread, the best way to advance our self-interest of avoiding illness, hospitalization or death, was to protect everyone.

Conclusion

To be clear, the achievement of social equity in public administration is a global challenge. The crux of the challenge is the lack of a truly humanitarian approach, where the well-being of all individuals is prioritized in order to advance the collective. James Kinney's poem, "The Cold Within," offers a clear and sobering characterization of what individuals, governments, and indeed nations must overcome.

Six humans trapped by happenstance
In bleak and bitter cold.
Each one possessed a stick of wood
Or so the story's told.

Their dying fire in need of logs
The first man held his back
For of the faces round the fire
He noticed one was black.

The next man looking 'cross the way
Saw one not of his church
And couldn't bring himself to give
The fire his stick of birch.

The third one sat in tattered clothes.
He gave his coat a hitch.
Why should his log be put to use
To warm the idle rich?

The rich man just sat back and thought
Of the wealth he had in store
And how to keep what he had earned
From the lazy shiftless poor.

The black man's face bespoke revenge
As the fire passed from his sight.
For all he saw in his stick of wood
Was a chance to spite the white.

The last man of this forlorn group
Did nought except for gain.
Giving only to those who gave
Was how he played the game.

Their logs held tight in death's still hands
Was proof of human sin.
They didn't die from the cold without
They died from the cold within.

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