

Journal of Tropical Futures Inaugural Editorial

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Introducing the *Journal of Tropical Futures: Sustainable Business, Governance and Development*

With almost 3.8 billion people living between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn, the tropics is one of the fastest-growing regions in the world (Callender and Topp, 2020). Almost 99% of the people in the Tropics are considered to be living in 'developing nations' (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019). These figures are set to grow further with many predicting that those living in the tropics will include one in every two people by 2050 and 55% of the world's children under the age of five years old (State of the Tropics Report, 2014). In terms of its geographic and environmental significance, the tropics make up only 40% of the world's total surface area; however, the region hosts more than 80% of the planet's terrestrial biodiversity and more than 95% of its mangrove and coral reef-based biodiversity (State of the Tropics Report, 2014). From an economic development perspective, the tropical region's economy is growing 20% faster than the Rest of the World, with many tropical nations acting as key contributors to world trade, politics and innovation (State of the Tropics Report, 2020). Nonetheless, only a little more than 17% of the world's gross national product is generated in the tropics, with the vast majority of economic activity, some 65%, occurring in more temperate climates (State of the Tropics Report, 2020).

While these figures provide an helpful overall picture of the general direction of travel in the tropics they do, of course, mask a great deal of geographical diversity and localized patterns of change. In terms of demographics, for example, the rising share of global tropics has key implications but it should be acknowledged that there are significant divergences in play. Southern India, Sri Lanka, many parts of Southeast Asia, much of the Americas are all now at or below replacement level in terms of total fertility and the populations in those places are ageing (Roser, 2014). On the other hand, the population is still growing rapidly in Northern India, Eastern and Central Africa (Ram and Ram, 2021; Roser, 2014).

In Southeast Asia, we are witnessing consolidation of Tiger Economies and corresponding movements in income status. Meanwhile, rapidly growing economies in places like India, Vietnam and Brazil are experiencing significant demographic shifts as their middle classes expand and exercise increased levels of purchasing power and political influence (Clement et al., 2022, Kharas, 2010). As a consequence, whilst pockets of intransigent poverty remain, especially in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa (Alkire, Roche and Seth, 2013), conditions in a range of tropical countries are improving significantly with respect to education levels, housing, food security and health provision.

Economic relationships within the tropics are shifting. There are now far greater levels of South-South trade which has successfully challenged and circumvented the previously dominant North-

South global order. Whilst hitherto it has been acceptable to speak of 'developing economies', this parlance is rightly being superseded by the language of Low and Middle Income Countries (LMICs) the better to reflect emerging patterns in the Twenty-first Century New World Order (Fantom and Serajuddin, 2016). Similarly, the trade arrangements between the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) cannot be ignored. It is no longer the case that countries in the tropics look exclusively to Western powers as their first port of call for 'assistance' and it goes without saying that China has been remarkably effective in exercising soft power in vastly extending its economic and political influence globally.

From an environmental management perspective, global climate change represents a major universal challenge that presents potentially catastrophic consequences for the world. The UN Climate Change Conference (COP 26) held in Glasgow in 2021 together with official reports (UN 2019; IPCC 2018; IPCC 2022) and academic research (e.g., Lenton & Latour 2018; Steffen et al. 2018; Kemp et al 2022) provide compelling evidence of the multiple deleterious impacts that human activity is having on the planet. The effects of systemic interactions between water, climate, pollution and ocean acidification threaten catastrophic collapse of the condition for human civilisation and planetary life, possibly in our very lifetimes and, surely, in those of the next generation.

Yet the concerns of global warming and the disproportionate effects it is likely to have in the Global South serve to compound an extant set of issues that have plagued the tropics since colonial powers first began systematically exploiting its resources and populations. Climate change adds to the litany of environmental degradation, such as, deforestation, palm oil plantations, irresponsible mining and hydropower projects, land grabbing and monoculture agriculture (itself fuelled by over-utilisation of pesticides and fertilisers and over-extraction of water). Taken in combination, such developments have led earth scientists increasingly to frame the predicament in terms of exceeding 'Planetary Boundaries' (Steffen et al., 2015, Rockström et al., 2009).

Added to the now well-established narratives of climate change and environmental degradation, we also witness the portents of epidemiologists in a COVID-19 pandemic world, which offer visions of the potentially catastrophic impacts that future global diseases might unleash on the world. Sitting cheek by jowl with these now mainstream scientific predications about *natural* systems under threat (and threatening) in the epoch of the Anthropocene, are the disturbed and disturbing socio-political responses to these threats, and to the increasingly evident self-harm that is implicit in global capitalism. Polarisation, denial and techno-escapism appear as some of the more potent influences as we seek new ways of governing and organizing in the face of catastrophe (Creed et al 2022; Gosling, 2021). Dominant narratives in the current milieu have a decidedly apocalyptic tone and many now take the position that it is already too late to prevent catastrophic collapse (Servigne and Stevens 2020, Bendell & Read 2021; Lovelock 2006).

In the face of planetary crises, certain scholars and activists (Demaria et al., 2013; De Perthuis and Jouvet, 2015; Jackson, 2016) have long been pushing for the abandonment of traditional measures of economic growth, arguing that the obsessive pursuit of GDP, for example, incentivizes expansion of the very activities that are primarily causing climate change and environmental degradation. The adoption of alternative policies propounded by those who advocate radical economic "degrowth", however, will be a very difficult sell to populations who harbour expectations of improved prosperity and material wellbeing. It will be difficult, not least in liberal democracies, for politicians to advocate for courses of action that will potentially diminish the material living standards of the citizenry and hence their electorate. In other words, the turkeys in this case are unlikely to vote for Christmas. Perhaps new forms of national sovereignty need to be imagined and the creation of forms of state

that would enable politically unpopular but necessary degrowth policies to be pursued. If nothing else, climate change has served to reveal the structural limitations of the forms of liberal democracy that characterized the post-war Washington Consensus. We might also add that such political dilemmas are not troubling China, characterized as it is by a political economic system that Bloom (2016) frames as 'authoritarian capitalism'.

In the face of this crisis, it might well be that the peoples and nations of the tropics will find their own political and economic solutions to the paradoxes inherent within Western liberal democracies. There are certainly signs that this might be the case. When it comes to development strategies, for example, in Latin America the social philosophy of *Buen Vivir* is having a marked impact as non-capitalist, low growth and collective principle for organizing activities (Beling et al., 2018).

As the world emerges from the aftermath of COVID-19, the tropics, like many parts of the world, is looking for governance structures and processes that will drive sustainable social and economic development. Many argue that technological development, particularly in the field of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), will play a vital mediating role (Avotra et al., 2021). As the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General António Guterres stated, access and use of ICT could be the greatest equalizer and enabler of our times (UN, 2020). However, as things currently stand, many tropical communities are in danger of being left behind as digital technology expands in ways that potentially marginalize and exclude them. On the other hand, approaching such challenges with creative imagination, they present significant opportunities for businesses, governments and the Third Sector alike; and with the pandemic driving change in this space, tropical regions stand ready to embrace such developments.

The human aspect of the tropics looms large as well, with the region home to mainly LMICs. Given this pretext, more needs to be done to address concerns around poverty and hunger and building sustainable communities. The tropics must also pay particular attention to ways in which its growing urban communities are developed, as their environmental, social, and health impacts can be significant, particularly when growth has not been effectively planned. Cities, for example, are a key reason behind natural habitat and biodiversity loss and a major source of global carbon emissions. Notwithstanding the improvements noted earlier, they are home to areas of inadequate housing, water, and sanitation infrastructure, and where poor healthcare outcomes remain commonplace (State of the Tropics Report, 2020). As the tropics becomes increasingly urbanized, greater attention will need to be given to the so-called "urbanised poor" and the associated food systems that are meant to support them. However, some LMICs in the tropics have struggled to adapt their food production to meet the ever-increasing food demands of these urban populations, a factor that has only been exacerbated by adverse impacts of climate change and natural disasters which have led to further problems with the production and availability of food (Szabo, 2016).

Almost all aspects of the environment, health, wellbeing and economic development in the tropics will, arguably, be disproportionately affected by the planetary crisis (State of the Tropics Report, 2020). Faced with these unprecedented challenges what is to be done? Doubtless many solutions and innovations will hail from countries within the tropics.

With a focus on representing and addressing the complex and heterogeneous nature of the challenges facing the tropics, the *Journal of Tropical Futures (JTF)* seeks to explore the interrelationship that exists between business, management, political economy, development, and the environment. It is within this highly dynamic, complex, and rapidly evolving context, that *JTF* seeks to uncover the economies, political institutions, and socio-economic conditions of tropical regions and the considerable challenges that many countries face. *JTF* offers a platform for the critical reassessment of key sociocultural, economic, environmental, and political factors that influence the ways in which business, governance and development can be taken forward in

sustainable ways within the tropics, and will provide both current theoretical and practical policy-based content for academics, business leaders, and institutional bodies alike.

JTF's Purpose and Mission

JTF seeks to generate knowledge and scholarship on sustainable and responsible business, management, economic development, and governance in the tropics. The key mission of the journal is to help address the challenges relevant to sustainable business and management, economic development, governance, and international trade in the tropics. We are particularly interested in the many tensions that exist between demands for economic growth, social and material wellbeing of populations and corresponding environmental impacts. Can the developmental needs of people be met in equitable and socially just ways by the expansion of business, trade, and innovation in the tropics; or other approaches, such as, “de-growth” required? What forms of responsible stewardship, organizational practice, resource management and governance might help navigate the unique and precarious concerns of the tropics? We invite a critical re-examination of contemporary responses to climate and environmental emergencies, and welcomes research and scholarship that can contribute constructively to widening the repertoire of available actions.

The complex challenges faced in the tropics demand multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary perspectives. As a multi-perspectival journal, *JTF* will provide a forum for thinking radically about alternative workable possibilities for the future of the tropics. Contributions to the journal are welcome, therefore, from scholars working in the fields, inter alia, of business, management, economics, trade, employment studies, tourism studies, political science, development studies, gender studies, sociology, social policy, anthropology and geography. Contributions to the following themes are welcome: Sustainable Tropical Environments: Public Policy, Regional Development and Governance; Human and Workforce Development; International Business and Trade in Tropical Regions; Sustainable Business and Social Responsibility; Sustainable Tourism, Hospitality and Marketing. *JTF* articles will be of interest and relevance to a range of readers, including, academics, practitioners and policy makers.

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