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Beyond Green Capitalism: Democratic Humanist Marxism and counter-hegemonic politics in South Africa

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1 Introduction

Capitalism, according to Marx, simultaneously develops and destroys. It generates a social crisis by creating extreme wealth for the few at one pole of accumulation, and poverty and insecurity for the majority at another pole of immiseration. In doing so, it also creates an ecological crisis through a production process that relies on fossil fuels that generate carbon emissions and other forms of pollution; depletes non-renewable resources; and causes the extinction of species (flora and fauna), all of which threaten the viability of the earth as a habitable planet. The exploitation of humans and nature has accelerated during the post-1970s 'neoliberal' phase of capitalism, generating even greater extremes of wealth and poverty globally.

South Africa is in many ways a microcosm of this global process of capitalist-colonial development, which was a racialized and gendered form of accumulation by dispossession. The post-WWII social welfare gains of the working class, as a result of class struggle, was primarily confined to Europe and North America, and notwithstanding recent shifts in global inequality (particularly with the rise of China and India) wealth remains concentrated in these zones of accumulation (which constitutes the core of the developed 'North'). South African capitalism also took on a highly racialized form, and as in Europe (as well as Australia and New Zealand) the white working class won major welfare gains for themselves (with limited benefits trickling down to black people). Instead of extending the substantial welfare benefits enjoyed by the white working class to all, the democratic transition since 1994 followed global trends and introduced neoliberal measures which undermined many welfare gains (and introduced new ones for everyone, but in much weaker form).

Today, again broadly mirroring global social relations, South African capitalism is characterized by widening social inequality, widespread poverty and considerable environmental deterioration. While the racial composition of the capitalist class has altered slightly, and the black middle class has increased considerably, the vast majority of the working class remain the working poor, with an increasing number working in precarious jobs, or living precariously in the informal sector or unemployed (the current unemployment rate is 42%). Modest welfare transfers have slightly ameliorated conditions, but social pressures for more radical socio-economic change is building.

The question, as elsewhere, is: given the weakness of the established Left, will this discontent be led by rightwing populist forces (who are currently growing in strength), or can an alternative working class counter-hegemonic movement be built, to become a viable pole of attraction? Invoking the 'necessity of Utopian thinking' (Turner 1972), this paper assesses the limits of the statist 20th century Marxist-Leninism that still persists in South Africa, and the alternative, society-focused, democratic Marxist perspective that informed the social movement unionism of the 1970s and 1980s, before looking at the various social-ecological alternatives that have emerged in the 21st century.

2 Hegemonic green capitalism

As the climate crisis accelerates, ecological modernisation, or green capitalism, has emerged as the dominant response. However, it is based on tinkering at the edges of the problem, with limited moves towards renewable energy alternatives, and the emergence of natural gas, itself a fossil fuel, as an ‘alternative’ source of energy. Most crucially, green capitalism keeps intact a global regime of inequality and poverty, both between nation-states and within them. Even if more ambitious Green New Deal proposals promise a form of ‘green industrialisation’ that can create jobs with ‘limited’ environmental impact, these proposals still rest on the logic of GDP growth – namely accumulation for the sake of accumulation, fuelled by the treadmill of global production/consumption that is rapidly depleting the earth’s resources and causing pollution of various kinds, including carbon emissions that cause climate change.

The climate crisis is but one aspect of a broad range of ecological disasters that threaten the fate of the earth as we know it (i.e. as a habitable planet for a wide range of life forms), and is for one school of thought a problem of *humankind’s* impact through the ages. For these thinkers, we have entered the age of the Anthropocene (Angus, 2016).

For Moore and Patel (2017:18), however, the Anthropocene is a vacuous concept. Instead, they place the causes of our civilizational crisis more firmly within the logic of fossil capitalism, or the viral force of unleashed Capital propelled by compound growth (see Harvey, 2014), and prefer to talk of the age of Capitalocene:

“Today’s human activity isn’t exterminating mammoths through centuries of over-hunting. Some humans are currently killing everything, from megafauna to microbiota, at speeds one hundred times higher than the background rate. We argue that what changed is capitalism, that modern history has, since the 1400s, unfolded in what is better termed the Capitalocene. Using this name means taking capitalism seriously, understanding it not just as an economic system but as a way of organizing the relations between humans and the rest of nature.”
(Moore and Patel, 2018:18).

Clearly, the notion of the Capitalocene directs attention to capitalism as the fundamental issue to be addressed, whether in the form of the hitherto predominant fossil-fuel capitalism or the so-called ‘green’ capitalism variant. What then, are the alternatives?

3 The limits of 20th century ‘marxism-leninism’

The crisis of capitalism, particularly since the 2007-08 financial crisis, has seen the rise of authoritarian populism in many parts of the world. This includes, particularly within the ‘developing’ world, rising admiration of the economic success of China, and its purported reinvigoration of ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ under President Xi (despite persistently high social inequality, and the suppression of independent working class organization within an authoritarian one-party state). China is also a key member of the expanded BRICS group of countries (which includes amongst others Brazil, Russia, India and South Africa), that is increasingly seen as an alternative to the US-dominated world order amongst the statist Left. China is ruled by a ‘Marxist-Leninist’ communist party, and as such has affinities with the communist parties of India and South Africa, amongst others.

The South African Communist Party (SACP) has a rich history in South Africa, where it played a pivotal role in building a non-racial class politics, in a tension-ridden embrace with the African nationalism of the African National Congress (ANC). However, its self-defined ‘vanguard’ role, in keeping with Leninist practice imported from the former Soviet Union, exposed its severe limitations as an agent of counter-hegemonic politics, cutting itself off from other social movements that did not follow the party line. During the post-apartheid era the ANC ran roughshod over the SACP’s pretensions to build a ‘working-class leadership’ that would lead the way to an increasingly ill-defined post-Soviet ‘socialist’ future. The party remains trapped in its alliance with the ruling party, a prisoner of its own history.

Marxist-Leninism has a deeply entrenched presence in South Africa. As Tom Lodge (2021) shows, the communist party played a significant role in drawing together disparate socialists, including anarchists, in the 1920s, to build a party in the image of the Bolshevik party, following the 1917 Russian revolution. However, after the death of party leader Vladimir Lenin and the exile of Leon Trotsky, the global communist movement split into a number of fragments, as Joseph Stalin established an iron grip on the Soviet Union and party. The Communist Party of SA (CPSA) followed the lead of its Soviet counterpart and continued to follow every twist and turn of the Soviet Union until its demise in 1991. Trotskyist groups emerged around the world to continue a different brand of Leninism, and both traditions played a major role in building the black trade union movement in South Africa during the 1920s to 1950s.

While the SACP (the successor of the CPSA which was banned in 1950) played little role in the re-emerging trade union movement during the 1970s – where an alternative brand of New Left Marxism was a dominating force (see later) – the party proceeded to establish a firm presence in the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) after the 1990s¹. The largest affiliate of COSATU, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), was firmly in the grasp of the SACP, whilst its second largest affiliate, the National Union of Metalworkers (NUMSA), having failed to win the debate on forming an independent working class party, proceeded to become a key presence within the SACP after the 1990s. Eventually NUMSA split off from Cosatu in 2014, and formed its own Marxist-Leninist party, the Socialist Revolutionary Workers Party, in 2019 (Pillay, 2021b).

The SACP was originally rooted in the white working class but went on to forge a ‘non-racial’ working class politics rooted primarily within the black working class. Its later alliance with the ANC during the 1940s, and its role in building the Congress Alliance in the 1950s, which included the formation of the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU), cemented this. Therefore, unlike other national liberation struggles on the continent, the South African liberation struggle had a stronger working class imprint, that grappled with the complexities of racial oppression and capitalist exploitation. However, critics pointed out that the SACP submerged itself into the nationalist struggle of the ANC, and with it an independent focus on class politics. The SACP on the other hand argued that its presence radicalised the ANC (Lodge, 2021).

Leninist-Trotskyist groups which split away from the Stalinist CPSA after the 1927 purges, and groups that formed in the 1930s², played an active role in labour struggles during the 1930s and 1940s, but then faded away (Hirson 2022 and Soudien 2019). In recent decades Trotskyist grouplets emerged, emphasising class politics, some of whom became absorbed into the SRWP in 2019. The Economic Freedom Fighters deputy president Floyd Shivambu was an active SACP member before joining forces with the former ANCYL president, Julius Malema, to form the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) in 2012. The EFF brands itself as a ‘Marxist-Leninist-Fanonist’ party (<https://effonline.org/about-us/>) – with a stronger emphasis on racial populism than class politics (and as such many place them on the Right of the political spectrum – even calling them fascistic (see Pillay 2021a))³.

1 Cosatu was formed in 1985 out of a merge between the independent unions that were inspired by the democratic Marxism of Rick Turner, and the ANC/SACP-aligned unions (see Pillay 2021b).

2 According to Baruch Hirson (2022) “The groups that appeared locally drew their members from those Socialists expelled by the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) or its front organisations, or individuals who sought a Socialist solution to counter a race-ridden and exploitative society”.

3 The black consciousness Azanian Peoples Organisation (Azapo), which emerged in the late 1970s, drew inspiration from the ‘Black Marxism’ of the USA (see Robinson 2000) and conflated race and class, arguing all blacks were workers, and all whites were capitalists. The EFF to some extent draws from this legacy. Black Marxism has been criticised for its narrow, economistic interpretation of Marx’s work (see Meyerson 2000).

In other words, South African left politics remains predominantly ‘Marxist-Leninist’ in inclination, derived from the CPSA/SACP. The initial syndicalist strands that formed part of the early CPSA (see Lodge, 2021) gradually disappeared as Leninism took hold in the 1920s (Van der Walt and Schmidt 2009). Leninist vanguard politics, whether in the CPSA/SACP or the various Trotskyist groups that emerge from the 1930s onwards (Hirson 2022 and Soudien 2019), or the more recent incarnations, placed great emphasis on ‘democratic centralism’. SACP leader Joe Slovo, in his seminal piece *Has Socialism Failed?* (1990), admitted that party practice was often more centralist than democratic.

Vanguardist politics of 20th century Marxist-Leninism is also characterised by its *patriarchal* nature – notwithstanding the enormous contributions women have made in socialist struggles. Patriarchy, even if recognised as a problem, was often regarded by Marxists as secondary (Bohrer, 2021), and in South Africa patriarchal oppression fell way behind the focus on racial oppression as the ‘dominant’ contradiction, and capitalism as the ‘primary’ contradiction⁴. Some Marxist-Feminists locate this blind spot in Marx’s own inability to see the reproduction of labour power – the unpaid domestic labour that women perform in the ‘private’ sphere – as being as integral to the emergence of capitalism as the primitive accumulation of capital (Federici, 2004; see also Yaman, 2022). This has given rise to what feminists call ‘body politics’.

Another critical plank of 20th century Leninist politics was ‘*productivism*’ – namely an unquestioned adherence to the GDP growth paradigm, centred around the ‘primary’ contradiction of capitalism, namely that between labour and capital. It ignored what some ecological Marxists called the ‘second contradiction’ between nature (the external conditions of production) and capital (see O’Connor, 1991). The second contradiction undermines the very conditions of capitalism’s existence (the destruction of nature), which pivots around three inter-related threats: firstly, the depletion of natural resources (including fossil fuels such as oil), secondly, the extinction of species (flora and fauna), and thirdly, pollution of various kinds (including carbon emissions that cause climate change; plastics that proliferate under the sea; vast landfills of waste; ocean acidification; water contamination; etc.).

Marxist-Leninism, while dominant, has not been the only current of Marxist thinking and practice in South Africa. An alternative brand of *democratic-humanist* Marxism, drawing on New Left thinking that arose during the 1960s, played a major role in influencing the bottom-up working class politics of the re-emerging union movement during the 1970s and 1980s. It also had an impact on activists in the United Democratic Front (UDF) and other formations, seeking to forge a participatory-democratic, socialist and feminist politics. They were seeking a path away from the pitfalls of repressive, bureaucratic statism, as observed in the Soviet bloc countries, as well as the post-colonial regimes in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

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 4 See SACP members Pat Horn (2022) and Jenny Schreiner (2021) still making ‘pleas’ for a greater focus on patriarchy, feminism and gender transformation in the SACP.

4 The democratic-humanist alternative

The thinking and practice of Rick Turner was an inspiration for a new generation of trade unionists and activists in the 1970s (Keniston 2010). He promoted “workers’ control” of both unions and industry, as a stepping stone towards maximum participatory democracy in society as a whole – a *society-focussed* socialist vision. His brand of Humanist Marxism was infused with a belief in universal love and the unity between inner (introspective) and outer (structural) transformations. In some ways, this resonated with the concept of ‘revolutionary love’ articulated by the Cuban-Argentinian revolutionary Che Guevara (Guevara 1965)⁵.

The feminist movement (echoing amongst other Mahatma Gandhi) warned that activists must be the change they want to see, if true radical transformation is to be achieved. This was in response to the failures of socialist and national liberation struggles, where revolutionary leaders, once in power, behaved as oppressively as those they replaced – what might be called the *Animal Farm* effect. Drawing on the thinking of the ancients (Armstrong 2006), activists were called upon to focus on both *personal transformation* and continuous introspection, as well as a *deep participatory politics*, where leaders are always held accountable to their organisations, members and communities.

A humanist socialist ‘love’ means rising above individualism, and embracing the whole of humanity, and as such is no different to the ‘spiritual’ essence conveyed by ancient secular and religious philosophers. While some of them imagined an external personal god or gods as the embodiment of the totality of Love, others, like the ancient Samkhya school in India and the Buddha (see Pillay 2020), found that capacity *within* all of us. Turner easily made connections between his humanist Marxism and the ‘spiritual’ (without embracing a theism or belief in a personal god).

Like the Buddha, Turner extended this humanism to the realm of non-human nature (i.e. the ‘environment’). He understood the limits to growth argument, arguing that capitalism is ‘intrinsically growth-oriented’, but there are ‘limits to the resources of our planet’ as well as ‘limits to our ability to dispose of our own rubbish’ (Turner 1972, 98). Unless this obsession with growth ended, and resources re-allocated to vital material needs (food, shelter and health), Turner argued, ‘we can only look forward to a future of famine, growing inequality, social conflict, and universal hate and fear in the struggle for survival’ (1972, 97).

⁵ An important point of difference, of course, is the use of revolutionary violence to achieve political ends. Turner leaned more to the Gandhian focus on non-violent but militant resistance.

Turner argued for the 'necessity of utopian thinking' (1972, 1-6) which resonates with the 'real utopias' of Marxist thinkers such as Erik Olin-Wright (2010) and that of the Latin American Marxist Atilio Boron (2012). Unlike a utopian politics that under-estimates power relations, a pragmatic utopian politics recognises the politics of 'non-reformist reforms' (Gorz 1967), that seeks short term tactical victories embedded in longer term strategic visions. However, these can only be guaranteed by a fundamentally democratic project, where power truly resides with the people. This was, indeed, the *modus operandi* of the independent South African trade union movement in the 1970s and 1980s (Friedman 1987). Turner's 'ecosocialist' prescience was, unfortunately, not taken up by his trade union colleagues at the time, and environmental awareness generally had a minimal presence in the UDF and other anti-apartheid formations.

In recent years, as climate science becomes irrefutable, the labour movement around the world, including in South Africa, is beginning to take the just transition towards a post-carbon future more seriously (see Rätzel et al 2021). This, combined with the rise of a range of other social struggles against neoliberal capitalism and patriarchy, has re-ignited the utopian imagination of 'another world' , where human flourishing for all is indeed still possible.

5 Another world is possible

The World Social Forum (WSF), which emerged in 2003 as an alternative to the World Economic Forum, popularised the slogan Another World Is Possible (see Sen et al 2002). This captured the hopes and dreams of oppressed and exploited people around the world, suffering under the ravages of globalised neoliberal capitalism. British prime minister Margaret Thatcher, who with the USA's Ronald Reagan ushered in the era of neoliberalism in the 1980s, boldly asserted There Is No Alternative (TINA). This was a response to the capitalist crisis of the 1970s, when the state-led Keynesian boom ran aground in developed countries, along with other statist experiments in the Soviet bloc and the post-colony around the world. This, in many eyes, de-legitimised socialism as a viable alternative to capitalism. The fall of the Berlin Wall put a final seal on totalitarian state-socialism, and by the time South Africa achieved democracy in 1994, 'socialism' existed only in the ideological discourses of the SACP, the Cosatu unions and a few other organisations. Neoliberal macro-economic policy was the only game in town (albeit tempered by some social-democratic reforms in certain sectors).

As neoliberalism continued to wreak havoc on peoples' lives and the natural environment around the world, movements that became part of the WSF came up with the counter-slogan to TINA, namely THEMBA (There Must Be Alternatives), meaning 'hope' in isiXhosa. The first wave of resistance came with the Zapatistas in Mexico, with their dramatic statement in 1994 against the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), followed by rise of the 'pink tide' in Latin America, led by Hugo Chavez's Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela, and the election of socialists in Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador and Uruguay. Chavez promoted a new '21st century socialism', which some termed 'utopia reborn' (see Barrett et al 2008). Bolivia and Ecuador gave the environment constitutional rights, which significantly boosted the hopes of a serious tilt toward an ecosocialist pathway. Along with the increased promise of 'solidarity economy' alternatives, this gave further confidence to social-ecological movements around the world. The slogan THETHA (There Are Thousands of Alternatives), 'speak' in isiXhosa, emerged, particularly within the South, and animated eco-feminist, anti-racist movements, indigenous movements grounded in communitarian solidarity, as well as 'peasant, trade union and degrowth movements' (Lowy 2018, 11).

However, the imploding of what some have called ‘petrosocialism’ in Venezuela, due in part to the decline in the oil price, US sanctions, internal bureaucratic blundering and corruption, did much to taint the idea of ‘21st century socialism’ (inasmuch as the Stalinist regimes tainted the idea of 20th century ‘actually existing socialism’). Environmental and indigenous groups became disillusioned with Bolivia’s return to extractivist economic development, and Ecuador abandoned all pretense of having an ecological sensibility. The pressures of development-as-usual, in order to meet immediate social needs, became irresistible. When Bolivia’s Evo Morales changed the constitution to seek a third term as president, his support was significantly reduced, which opened the way for a US-sponsored coup in 2018. However, a year later Luis Arce of Morales’s party the Movement for Socialism won the presidential election in a landslide victory. Indeed, in recent years, after the set-backs against the ‘pink tide’, the Latin American left have built up a groundswell of support, and have won significant electoral victories in Mexico, Argentina, Peru, Nicaragua, Honduras, Chile, Colombia and Brazil (Daphne 2022). The continued efforts of the Zapatistas to build a democratic alternative in a liberated zone in Chiapas, outside the control of the Mexican state, has inspired another social revolution outside the state, in Rojava, northern Syria, where a women’s revolution combines with building a social ecology alternative (see Dirik, 2022, Hatahet, 2019, International Commune of Rojava, 2018, Knapp et al, 2016).

In South Africa, an embryonic attempt to build an ecosocialist working class politics emerged within the National Union of Metalworkers during 2011-2014, and its proposals around socially-owned renewable energy. However, this was soon marginalised by a union leadership that paid homage to the 20th century politics of Marxist-Leninist vanguardism and a commitment to centralised state ownership of the commanding heights of the economy (Pillay, 2021). Nonetheless, the idea of ecosocialism persists, as the climate crisis and other environmental threats, alongside the social crisis generated by fossil capitalism, becomes impossible to ignore. As discussions around a ‘just transition’ towards a post-carbon future gathers momentum, an ecosocialist alternative continues to be argued in different spaces (see Cherry 2021 and Satgar 2022).

A recent edited volume *A Just Transition to a Low Carbon Future in South Africa* (Xaba and Fakir 2022), is an indication of a shift in public discourse around social-ecological issues (albeit mostly within the framework of green capitalism). In that volume, Mulaisi and Cock (2022) show that a wide range of community and labour organisations and activists continue to struggle for a more fundamental resolution of our social-ecological crisis. These include the Million Climate Jobs Campaign, driven by the Alternative Information and Development Centre and endorsed by Cosatu's central committee in 2011. However, the unions did not make this a central campaigning issue, but appears on the agenda of Cosatu's 2022 congress. The Coalition for Climate Justice is another initiative involving the SA Federation of Trade Unions (Safu). WoMin is an NGO campaigning for an African Feminist Just Transition Charter across Africa. The Climate Justice Charter, which emerged in 2020 through a participatory grassroots process, included a wide range of constituencies, including drought-affected communities, labour, youth and environmental and social justice organisations. The Charter is endorsed by a wide range of organisations in South Africa. Groundwork and Earthlife are still very active as early components of the environmental justice movement in South Africa, linking up different communities fighting against social-ecological threats of various kinds.

These and many other struggles, including struggles around land and a basic income grant, pose fundamental questions around a just transition to a low-carbon future, that go way beyond the limited visions of ecological modernisation or green capitalism. Some of these campaigns are led by former SACP members who left the party after daring to question its alliance with the ANC. There, however, remains a search for a democratic political centre to harness the multifarious energies contained in these struggles.

6 Conclusion

Green capitalism does not address the roots of the climate crisis, as it essentially leaves intact the GDP growth paradigm, which is based on incessant accumulation, and the crises of global poverty and inequality. Those that point to capitalism as the core issue, and refer to an age of the Capitalocene as opposed to the Anthropocene, seek fundamental alternatives to address the crisis of humanity and the natural environment. The left, however, remains caught between looking back to traditional 20th century statist alternatives (and here China becomes a point of reference), and more radical democratic-socialist alternatives. While 20th century Marxist-Leninism cannot be dismissed as a total failure, in that it has achieved significant social gains for working class people in different parts of the world, including women's empowerment within a still-predominant patriarchal order, its drift into authoritarianism and the repression of human rights is well documented. Notable exceptions to this include transformation of the CPI (M) in Kerala, India, and the PKK in Rojava, northern Syria, into participatory-democratic movements that resonate with the resurgent of social-ecological struggles in different parts of the world, with a strong feminist component. Some of these movements have resulted in the election of democratic leftist government in Latin America.

The SACP made partial moves towards revitalisation during the 1990s, and while it ditched the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' slogan, it stopped short of discarding its vanguardist heritage, to embrace a more democratic-humanist Marxism (even as it absorbed many trade unionists coming from that tradition). In its second century, the SACP, under its new leadership, struggles to break free from the shackles of its alliance with the ruling party, and join up with the various social-ecological struggles being waged in South Africa and abroad. It remains, with COSATU, locked in the embrace of the ANC's moribund 'national democratic revolution', despite recent turbulence around the Government of National Unity that emerged after the May 2024 elections. Indeed, if anything, the SACP's general secretary, along with some key union leaders, seemed to prefer an alliance with the forces of reactionary populism (such as the MK Party and the EFF) that has gained some momentum in South Africa.

South Africa, like most parts of the world, desperately needs to build a democratic-humanist, ecological and feminist political centre that can harness the various social-ecological struggles being waged around the country, in order to provide a viable counter-hegemonic alternative to the moribund politics of the country. If it does not, the forces of reactionary populism will gather strength.

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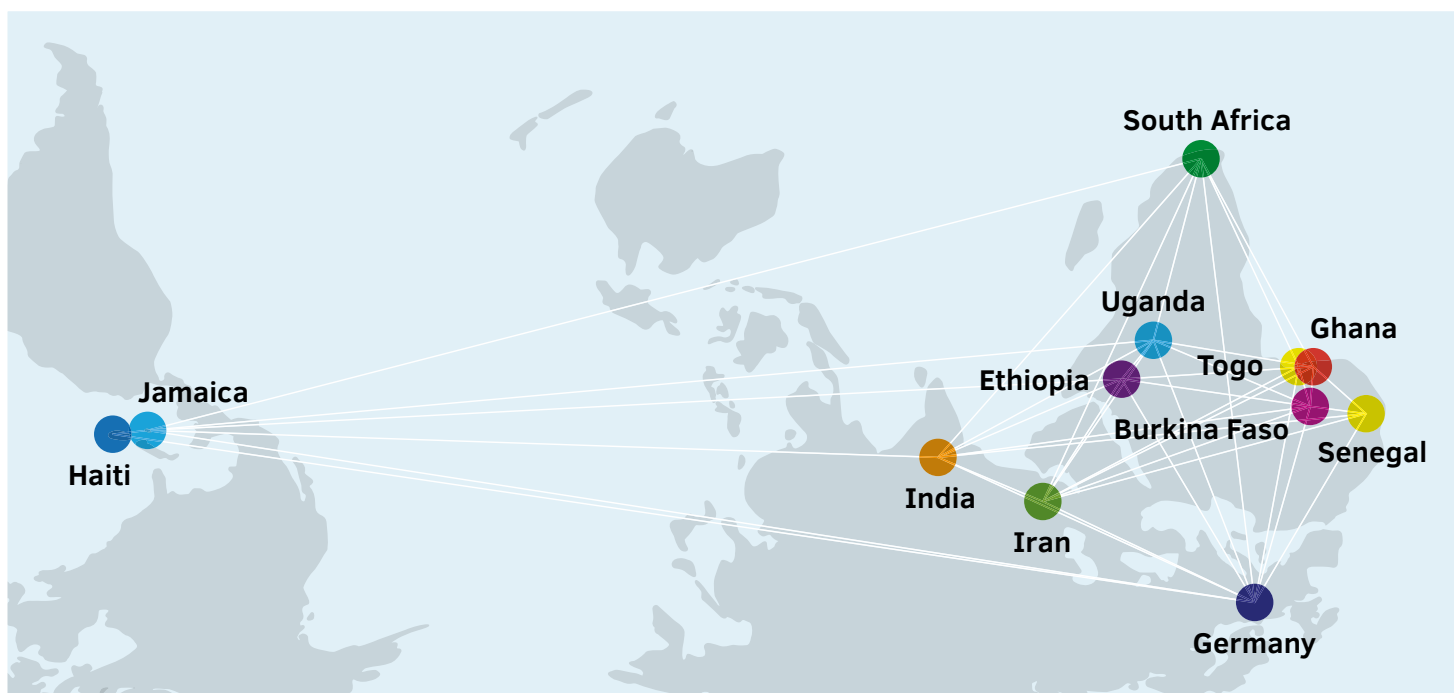
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The Global Partnership Network

This world map displays all countries in which GPN partner institutions are located. The South-Up projection draws attention to overcome Eurocentrism and to take a multitude of perspectives and knowledges into account.

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