VIEW FROM AFRICA

Who are you calling 'international community'?

A colleague recently sent me back an interesting note on a piece we were co-editing. 'Why doesn't Africa need to act first?' they commented in reference to a sentence calling for the international community to take action on an issue of regional importance. Looking at the sentence again I realized that I had taken the 'international community' to mean African countries within the region, acting together to support an African country particularly damaged by a natural disaster. My co-editor, an American, thought that the international community basically meant the West.

It's a well-worn trope. The unspoken rule, when discussing international politics, is that the international community comprises only rich and predominantly white countries – although lately a crack in the door has been left for Asian countries like Japan and China.

Similarly, if Western audiences aren't talking about an event, the question becomes: 'Why isn't the world paying attention?' The presumption being that if the West isn't engaged then *no-one* is.

When did the 'international community'

become a synonym for the West? It's difficult to say but it's one of those euphemisms that diplomats and governance experts use to conceal intellectually lazy categories that sustain racist tropes about political and social hierarchies between nations. There are numerous examples of this in development and political discourse. For example, 'sub-Saharan Africa' is often used as a euphemism for black; 'sub-Saharan Africa minus South Africa' was, for a while, used as a euphemism for black and poor. 'Global South' isn't a geographical category but a political one, as countries like Singapore, Australia and Aotearoa (or New Zealand) are geographically in the south, but politically part of the 'international community'.

The people who come up with these terms have a story that they want to tell, and they need the categories in order to maintain the internal validity of their theories. If the 'international community' were suddenly to include countries in Africa, Asia or South America, it would dilute the West's belief not only in its inherent exceptionalism, but its right to act whenever the world order it presides over is threatened.

In the case of the piece of writing we were co-editing, if the international community were to include African countries it would reveal distinctions between those nations and challenge the Western view of Africa's political destiny as amorphous and uniform.

This lazy framing of the 'international community' does a great deal of damage to the concept of international empathy.

It reduces the concerns of the people who are most affected by global tragedies to mere footnotes in their own stories. It decentres the needs of the affected people and strips the very communities that the West claims to want to help of a significant measure of their agency. They are no longer the story but merely characters in one narrative of the world.

Frantz Fanon talks about making room in our political imagination for all nations that want a part of the rendezvous of history: to make room in our view of the 'international community' to see the concerns of all societies as valid within their own contexts.

We are here. We are also the world. ●

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BIG BAD WORLD