

Reparations as a pathway to decolonisation

As the devastating legacies of European slavery and colonialism are finally under discussion, there is a real danger that ‘decolonisation’ becomes the latest buzzword in the international development sector, increasingly devoid of real meaning. Therefore, this briefing explores the concept of ‘reparations approaches’ and considers whether these could ensure that the process of ‘decolonisation’ brings about transformative change.

Starting with the need for former European enslavers and colonisers to acknowledge and take responsibility for past harms, the briefing looks at what remedy and redress look like – beyond just financial compensation. It examines how these can be used as ways to repair the present unjust global structures that sustain the harmful legacies of slavery and colonialism and create new alternative paradigms. Why reparations are owed by former European enslavers and colonisers is then considered, including a review of some past and ongoing harm, followed by a brief look at how the issue of reparations has played out in Britain. The briefing goes on to outline the various demands for reparations from governments, regional bodies and civil society organisations. It then concludes by offering some initial thoughts aimed at international development practitioners, both for their own work and in holding their Northern governments to account.

1. Introduction: the case for reparations

For more than 500 years, the actions of a small number of Western European countries have had devastating impacts across every continent. Their design of, and participation in, the transatlantic slave trade, together with their territorial domination – or colonisation – of non-European people as well as their resources and land, have continued to have enduring consequences.¹ The British Empire, in particular, was responsible for the mass exploitation, violence, genocide and dispossession experienced among formerly colonised people² – all in service of building wealth and prosperity for colonisers.¹ At its height, the British Empire colonised a quarter of the world’s population and landmass.³ The pervasiveness and scale of the harm perpetrated by former European empires continue to this day, including through an unequal global economy, persistent environmental degradation across the Global South, and an ongoing cultural imperialism

¹ The transatlantic slave trade and European colonialism were integral in the creation of racial hierarchies; a system that was used to justify the violence and domination enacted by western Europeans on non-white people all around the world. The wealth and prosperity generated from their exploits served to benefit white people, especially those who were already wealthy.

that deems inferior the languages, cultures and knowledge systems of non-white people. Global Black Lives Matter protests, glaring disparities in the way climate breakdown affects countries in the Global South and Global North,⁴ and the growing momentum among some Commonwealth states to sever formal ties with the British monarchy⁵ have all been instrumental in starting the long overdue public dialogue about the UK's role in making amends for the historic and ongoing harm caused by slavery and colonialism.

However, while there has been growing recognition⁶ in the UK and some other European countries⁷ of the role played by many former European empires in the transatlantic slave trade, including calls to compensate for those atrocities, there has been less attention given to the need to remedy and repair the insidious ways in which colonisation – and its ongoing legacies – continue to dominate and shape the international political and economic order.

Based in the UK international development sector, the Gender and Development Network (GADN) sees decolonisation as a central element to our work on promoting and fulfilling gender equality and women's rights for all. In doing so we understand 'decolonisation' as the practice of recognising, making visible and addressing the legacies that colonialism, empire, racism and patriarchy continue to have across the world.⁸ However, as the term 'decolonisation' increasingly enters the lexicon of the UK international development sector, there is a very real danger that its meaning becomes diluted. When a concept that challenges the status quo finally makes it into accepted discourse, the response of those with power is often, either consciously or subconsciously, to co-opt the term, turning it into something less disruptive. How then can we best ensure that 'decolonisation' retains its imperative for transformative change?

A 'reparations approach' could provide the answer as a substantive way to achieve decolonisation. At the time of the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, Michelle Bachelet, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, observed that: *"Behind today's racial violence, systemic racism and discriminatory policing lies the failure to acknowledge and confront the legacy of the slave trade and colonialism."* She went on to highlight the need to: *"make amends through formal apologies, truth-telling processes, and reparations in various forms."*⁹

This briefing explores what a 'reparations approach' entails, referring to analysis from governments, regional bodies, reparations movements and scholars, and recognising that there is no one single definition. First, three components found in reparations approaches are examined, starting with the need for European countries that were former enslavers and colonisers to acknowledge past and continuing harm and to accept responsibility for remedy and repair. Financial redress as a form of reparations is then considered as the second part of this approach, including historic examples that help shape precedent. Thirdly, the briefing examines the need for 'repair' of the global political and economic systems that perpetuate the unjust legacies of slavery and colonialism and the need for alternative visions for a future world. Some of the legacies of harm that give rise to the need for reparations are then touched upon, before consideration of the way institutions in the UK are responding. Ultimately, it will be those who continue to be harmed by the legacies of slavery and colonialism who must shape the nature of

reparations and the next section shares such examples of demands from regional bodies, governments and civil society organisations. The briefing concludes with the suggestion that those of us working in Global North-based international development organisations should support the creation of political space to discuss and consider reparations approaches as part of decolonisation efforts.

In doing so, GADN is mindful of our own positionality. As a UK-based organisation, we do not in any way claim to have the answers but recognise our responsibility in trying to be part of the solution, rather than perpetuating the problem. In this briefing we hope to draw attention to some of the debates and to provoke discussion, particularly about the response in the UK – where we are located – and which we recognise has had and continues to have a disproportionate impact on global politics and financial architecture..

2. What are reparations and what do they look like?

In its simplest form, reparations can be understood as a moral, legal and practical process of recognising the impact of historic and continuing harm, and the way those responsible for this harm take responsibility for it by providing transformative redress. Thus, reparations are both an approach for analysing and understanding historic and continuing injustices, as well as demands for redress crafted by different governments and movements in response to the harms they have experienced.

Reparations can take a variety of forms and while not meant as a definitive exploration, below we present a brief analysis of some of these forms and how they may be applicable particularly in relation to the British Empire, as well as Britain's central role in the transatlantic slave trade. The explanations are based on the analysis of reparations advocates, scholars, nation-states and United Nations (UN) frameworks and language. Here, the explanation of reparations goes well beyond the narrow concept of financial redress for past harm to include repair and transformative change of the systems which continue to perpetuate harm.

This section introduces the UN's internationally agreed principles and framework on reparations, demonstrating how the concept is already recognised in international law. After first addressing the need to acknowledge and apologise for the harm done as necessary first steps, reparations as a form of financial redress are then discussed. Next is an examination of calls from reparations scholars for 'repair' – a concept that speaks to the need for individual as well as collective 'self-repair' by those who have experienced harm, as well as the need to repair the global structures and paradigms that perpetuate these past and ongoing harms.

The right to effective remedy under international human rights frameworks

The case for reparations has already been established under international law. There is a long-established principle for states to provide access to the right to an effective remedy for victims of human rights violations enshrined in the Universal Declaration of

Human Rights (1948) and made legally binding in subsequent conventions and protocols.¹⁰

In 2001, the UN World Conference against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance explicitly addressed the legacy of slavery and colonialism. Its final Declaration and Programmes of Action recognised that slavery and the transatlantic slave trade, as well as colonialism and their ongoing legacies, were among the root causes of racism, racial discrimination and xenophobia.¹¹ It called for measures to address their ongoing impacts, including the provision of reparations and the promotion of economic, social and cultural development.¹²

The UN Basic Principles and Guidelines (2005) provides a useful starting point as a framework for remedy and reparations for victims of violations of human rights and humanitarian law.¹³ Importantly, in Section IX, this broadened out the concept of reparation from a financial transaction and covers the following concepts:

- Restitution: the restoration of the original situation before violation; it could include land, property, identity and liberty.
- Compensation: calculated not just in terms of mental harm, physical harm and material damage, but also for lost opportunities and moral damage.
- Satisfaction: a need for truthful public discourse, acceptance of responsibility, and commemoration and tributes.
- Guarantees of non-repetition: these ensure that violations do not continue or are not repeated.¹⁴

However, the framework falls short in not recognising the right of those who have been oppressed to define the nature of reparations and the fundamental changes needed to shape a more just world.

2.1. Acknowledgement of responsibility and apology as a precondition of reparations

An acknowledgement and apology for past harm by those entities responsible for colonialism is an important first step for addressing historical and present injustices and working towards reconciliation and healing. This includes the process of unlearning and then relearning history as a way of gaining a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of the past. This may be especially so for white people whose knowledge of European empires may be incomplete, biased or intentionally distorted for centuries via different education systems. The need for acknowledgement and apology appears frequently among the set of demands being made by reparations groups and movements around the world.¹⁵ In recent years, former colonies have called on the British state to apologise - including during the royal tour of the Caribbean in 2022¹⁶ - for the atrocities it committed during the British Empire.

There have been some moves by European governments towards acknowledgement and apology, mostly in relation to the transatlantic slave trade. In 2019, a European Parliament resolution on racial bias within the European Union (EU) was important in

acknowledging the *“histories of injustices against Africans and people of African descent in the context of European colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade”*.¹⁷ It calls on EU member states to formally acknowledge past and ongoing injustices committed under European colonialism and to declassify colonial archives.¹⁸

In December 2022, Prime Minister Rutte of the Netherlands issued a formal apology to the descendants of enslaved people for the Dutch state’s role in slavery, acknowledging that, *“Centuries of oppression and exploitation still have an effect to this very day.”*¹⁹ Importantly, he made clear that apology was just the first step and that future actions would take place in consultation with those most impacted, funded through a €200 million (GB£160 million) ‘apology fund’.²⁰ More recently – in April 2023 – Portugal’s President Rebelo de Sousa expressed that the country should apologise and take responsibility for its role in the transatlantic slave trade.²¹

Germany, in 2021, also went some way in recognising and apologising for its role in the Herero and Nama genocide that took place during its colonisation of Namibia between 1884 and 1919.²² After six years of negotiations, Germany formally acknowledged the genocide and apologised for its moral, historical and political obligation – without, however, using the terms ‘reparations’ or ‘compensation’, and pledged €1.1 billion (GB£967 million)ⁱⁱ towards existing aid programmes and a foundation for reconciliation.²³ However, this has been rejected by Herero and Nama communities who say they have been excluded from the negotiations and that redress will not be made to them directly.²⁴ Similar concerns have been raised by the UN special rapporteurs.²⁵

Such acknowledgements can be important first steps in a process of decolonisation that recognises harms caused. But their efficacy is limited if they do not lead to an unlearning and relearning of history and an acceptance of the need for redress and repair through reparations, defined by those who have been harmed, particularly in the UK where the British Empire is still heralded as a force for good.

2.2. Financial redress as part of reparations

The term ‘reparations’ has most commonly been understood by a narrow definition, as a form of monetary redress recognised by the state and judiciary. This is also known as the tort model of reparations: a legal approach in which, typically, states compensate victims for the harm, violence and loss they have suffered. Financial redress can also be made by corporations and institutions such as universities and churches that have caused harm.

In relation to European colonisation and enslavement, financial reparations are considered to be due both in relation to the transatlantic slave trade and also for the past and ongoing impacts of colonialism in relation to physical and psychological, economic, social and cultural damage perpetrated on colonised and enslaved people.

ⁱⁱ The rates of exchange used in this briefing are based on Xe.com’s conversions as of 2 May 2023.

Historical precedents

Historical precedents exist where states have paid reparations for harm done. Under the Treaty of Versailles, the German government had to pay substantial amounts for its role in the 1914-18 war.²⁶ After the 1939-1945 War, following pressure from the newly created state of Israel and Jewish advocacy groups, West Germany's chancellor agreed to pay reparations to Holocaust survivors as well as to the state of Israel – redress which the German government continues to pay to this day.²⁷

The obligation for reparations has also been acknowledged by the British state, specifically in response to atrocities it committed in Kenya under colonial rule. In 2013, after years of legal wrangling, the British government paid a GB£3,800 compensation package to each of the 5,228 Kenyans that it acknowledged had been “*tortured, and ill-treated under the hands of the British colonial administration*”²⁸ during the Mau Mau anti-colonial rebellion of 1952-1960.

Financial redress to former European enslavers

Shockingly, colonial powers granted reparations to enslavers rather than those who had been enslaved, an injustice often quoted by those seeking reparations today. The concept of reparations has long been established but used highly selectively and unjustly. When Britain abolished slavery throughout its colonies in 1834, it paid GB£20 million to slave owners for the loss of their ‘property’: paradoxically, this sum has been reported as ‘reparations’. According to the UK Treasury, it was only in 2015 that British taxpayers finished ‘paying off’ the debt that the British government incurred, which amounted to 40 per cent of the Treasury’s annual income or about 5 per cent of GDP at the time.²⁹ At the same time, no compensation was paid to those who were enslaved.

Similarly, in 1825, 21 years after enslaved Haitian rebels secured a major victory against the French colonial authorities and became the world’s first Black republic, Haiti was forced to pay reparations to France as a condition of its independence.³⁰ As one of the largest colonial powers in the world at the time, France demanded compensation for the loss of its colony and slave-based economy. The exorbitant sum demanded by France – 90 million francs or the equivalent of US\$21 billion (GB£16.8 billion) today – was paid in instalments over a period of more than 100 years, with the final payment made in 1947.³¹ This has placed significant financial strain on the newly created republic of Haiti and continues to have long-lasting consequences to this day. In 2020, French economist Thomas Piketty reignited this discussion and argued that France owes Haiti at least US\$28 billion (GB£22.4 billion).³²

2.3. The importance of ‘repair’ in reparations approaches

For many advocating for reparations, the concept of reparations is an approach or a way to understand, and change, the world, and not just a monetary transaction. The concept of repair as a form of reparations speaks to the need for both individual and collective ‘self-repair’ as a way of undoing years of psychological and cultural harm. Further, it also

refers to the repairing of the global structures that continue to be shaped by the ongoing legacies of slavery and European colonialism. As expressed by reparations scholar Maulana Karenga, “...[F]rom its inception, reparations has been an emancipatory, a liberational project, not only a compensatory one. In other words, it is a larger project than one of money and wealth, although money and wealth are indispensable elements of it. Again, it is about justice and finishing the liberation project of our people, achieving a freedom that is real in every realm, including economics.”³³

Self-repair

The term ‘self-repair’, in the context of reparations, emerged at the First Pan-African Conference on Reparations in 1993.³⁴ It describes a process in which the harm caused by European colonialism and slavery is repaired through the individual and collective efforts of affected communities, rather than relying solely on external sources for reparations. According to reparations scholars like Professor Chinweizu, self-repair should be holistic, addressing not only the economic but also the psychological, cultural and spiritual dimensions of harm done. He explained, “*Let me repeat that the most important aspect of reparation is not the money the campaign may or may not bring: the most important part of reparation is our self-repair: the change it will bring about in our understanding of our history, of ourselves, and of our destiny; the change it will bring about in our place in the world.*”³⁵

Therefore, for individuals and communities harmed by the legacies of European colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade, including those now living in Europe, the process of unlearning the cultural imperialism and psychological harm perpetrated over centuries is long and arduous, but critical. Professor Chinweizu went on to further explain, “*Now, we who are campaigning for reparations cannot hope to change the world without changing ourselves. We cannot hope to change the world without changing our ways of seeing the world, our ways of thinking about the world, our ways of organizing our world, our ways of working and dreaming in our world.*”³⁶

Repair of unjust systems and structures

Moreover, the concept of repair goes beyond acknowledging and recompensing for the harm and injustices perpetuated by slavery and European colonialism in the past and, moving forward, works to challenge and repair the systems that continue to produce these harms, by re-envisioning solutions to the current global crises they have created.

These calls for a repaired world have a long history. At the start of formal ‘independence’ in the middle of the twentieth century, prominent figures in the growing global anti-colonial movements sought to establish a new set of rules and relationships with their former colonisers, including demands for a New International Economic Order that would see the redistribution of wealth from the Global North to the Global South.³⁷ However, as new international structures such as the UN and the Bretton Woods Institutions came into place after the 1939-1945 War, these simply maintained exploitative relationships under a new guise and was described by Ghana’s first prime minister, Kwame Nkrumah, as ‘neo-colonialism’.³⁸

Building on this existing work, and acknowledging the harm and injustice perpetuated by slavery and European colonialism, there are growing calls for a reparations approach that seeks to create a future world that is just, equitable, and which challenges the systems that perpetuate harm. Philosopher and scholar Dr. Olúfemi O. Táíwò outlines such an approach as *“a historically informed view of distributive justice, serving a larger and broader worldmaking project. Reparation, like the broader struggle for social justice, is concerned with building the just world to come. But its more specific role concerns how we get there.”*³⁹ Similarly, emerging work from others, framed as ‘reparative futures’, suggests that in order to create futures characterised by justice, it is critical to engage with ongoing histories of violence, domination and repression.⁴⁰

Thus, this approach is future-oriented as well as transnational and global in scope, rather than merely seeing reparations as a means of remedying past wrongs. It considers the new ways in which colonial legacies persist and identifies those who now hold power, including governments, international financial institutions (IFIs) and transnational corporations (TNCs). The proposed approach suggests that the cost of building this reimagined world should be borne by those people and institutions that have benefitted the most from historical processes.

The need to repair the legacy of colonialism is also recognised in many modern-day climate justice movements,⁴¹ including the growing calls for climate reparations that go beyond the narrow framing of ‘loss and damage’⁴² within the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).⁴³ The link between the current climate crisis and colonialism arises from centuries of European exploration and exploitation that led to the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century that initiated the emission into the atmosphere of billions of tonnes of greenhouse gases.⁴⁴

The argument then is that, in response to the need to bring an end to the ongoing legacies of colonialism, decolonisation based on reparations approaches must include fundamental reform of the global financial architecture that perpetuates colonial exploitation under the guise of formal institutions and rules. It requires those countries who have benefited from colonialism to relinquish power to those who have been harmed and those who continue to be harmed, so that solutions are based on the demands and visions of those exploited by the current structure.

3. Why are reparations owed by former European colonisers and enslavers?

Former European colonisers and enslavers have been integral in developing the world as we know it today, given the pervasiveness of European colonisation over half a century (see Figure 1). The transatlantic slave trade has had far-reaching consequences for both the enslaved Black people taken from Africa and the societies in which they were enslaved. Further harm was caused by the system of indentured servitude that replaced slave labour on plantations across the Americas, the Caribbean and beyond with poorly paid and exploited labourers, largely transplanted from other parts of Europe’s empires – especially South Asia.⁴⁵ In addition to the enormous human suffering and loss of life

experienced over the four centuries in which the slave trade was in existence, racial hierarchies – used to justify the enslavement of Black Africans – continue globally to this day, in the form of structural racism. Moreover, the establishment of slave-based plantation economies⁴⁶ across the Americas and the Caribbean effectively wiped out the Indigenous peoples, cultures and economies of the region and played an important role in the foundation of the contemporary global financial system which breeds poverty and inequality.⁴⁷

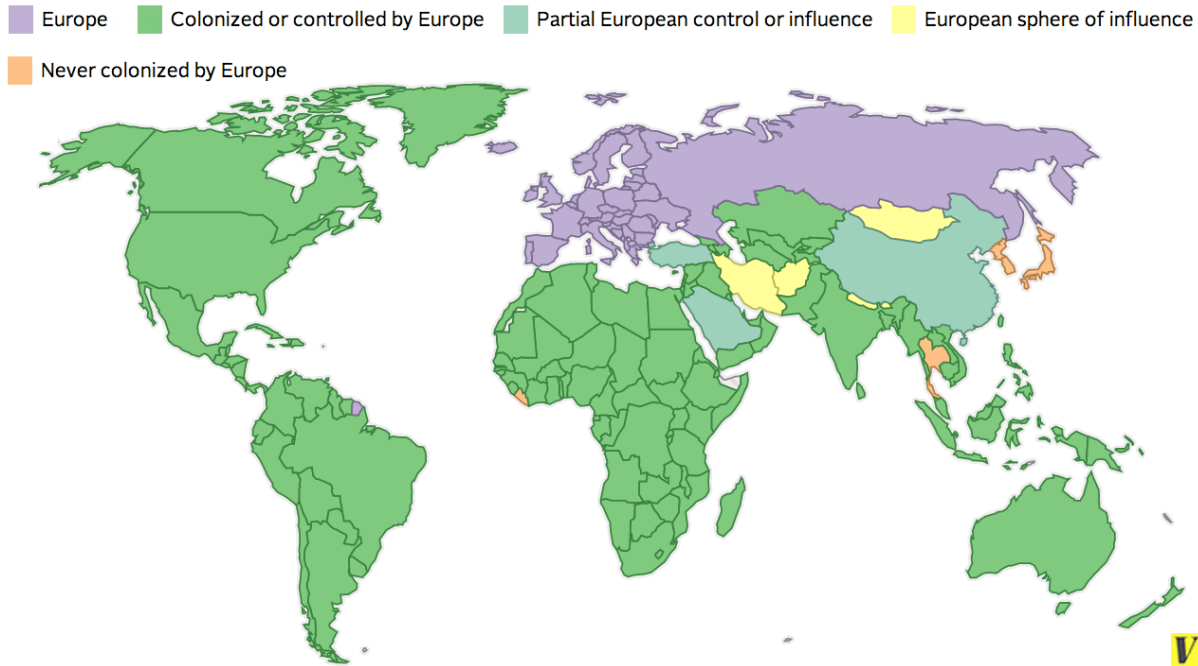
Less recognised is the destruction caused by the British Empire. At its height, the British Empire colonised a quarter of the world's population and landmass.⁴⁸ British colonisation of India was a devastating process of exploitation and deindustrialisation which funded Britain's own industrialisation, leaving impacts still felt today. India's textile and other manufacturing industries including steel were deliberately run down, leaving it as an exporter of raw materials and importer of British goods, where the share of global manufacturing fell from 27 to 2 per cent under British rule⁴⁹. Exorbitant 'taxes' were imposed which were then spent not on local public services but sent to Britain to fund investment in its industrialisation and militarisation.⁵⁰ Failure to pay taxes caused many to lose their land, creating landlessness that remains an issue today. Most famously, the Kohinoor diamond⁵¹ and other precious stones were looted and remain in Britain to this day. Beyond the economic impact, the British Raj imposed artificial national boundaries, in the form of Partition, creating violent conflict and political division within the Indian sub-continent that persist today.⁵²

Across Africa, the continent was deliberately and systematically exploited and underdeveloped by European powers during centuries of colonialism and imperialism.⁵³ In particular, Walter Rodney evidenced the way Africa experienced the extraction of its wealth and resources and was kept 'underdeveloped' to create a market for European goods and services and to maintain the continent's dependence on Europe.⁵⁴ This systematic underdevelopment led to African economies' continued dependence on the trade of a small number of raw materials, as well as its technological stagnation and physical infrastructure being designed for the extraction of commodities for European gain.⁵⁵ This continued exploitative relationship is further borne out in evidence which shows that although US\$162 billion (GB£129 billion) flows into Africa in the form of loans, grants and aid, this is dwarfed by the US\$203 billion (GB£162 billion) that flows out in illicit financial flows, debt payments, profits and the costs of adaptation to climate change.⁵⁶

That the current international economic system continues to create and perpetuate inequalities between the Global North and the previously colonised countries in the Global South has been well documented. The legacy of colonialism can be seen in the continued flow of resources from the Global South to the Global North as well as in the governance of international economic structures. International debt is one of the persistent legacies of European colonial systems, with the majority of current international debt still being governed by English law which favours the creditors.⁵⁷ Furthermore, the two main institutions that govern global economic policymaking – the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), have decision-making structures that are weighted towards wealthier countries.⁵⁸ While formal voting within the World

Trade Organization is apparently more democratic, the real power continues to reside with the wealthy countries of the Global North.⁵⁹ These institutions in turn protect and promote the operations of TNCs whose profits are largely remitted back to the Global North via unfair tax rules and regressive trade and investment regimes.⁶⁰

Figure 1: Countries that have been under European control (1500s-1960s).⁶¹



*Disclaimer: While French Guiana is officially a part of modern-day France and Europe, it was colonised by Europeans.

4. Britain and reparations

The question of reparations for those harmed by Britain's role in the slave trade and colonisation is one that has been gaining traction across the UK over the last decades. This section explores the different ways in which the issue of reparations has been addressed by various British institutions, including past and present governments. Many of the official responses have focused on the transatlantic slave trade, not yet extending their response to the full impact of colonisation.

After centuries of silence, the British establishment has slowly started to recognise its responsibility for the atrocities of the transatlantic slave trade, although this is yet to fully include the ongoing legacies of colonialism. In 2006, then British Prime Minister Tony Blair expressed his “*deep sorrow*” for the transatlantic slave trade⁶², and in 2007 went on to apologise.⁶³ In November 2021, as Barbados removed the British monarchy as its Head of State, then Prince Charles acknowledged: “*From the darkest days of our past, and the appalling atrocity of slavery, which forever stains our histories, the people of this island forged their path with extraordinary fortitude.*”⁶⁴ In both these instances, over a decade apart, representatives of the British state acknowledged that harm had been done, but did not offer any remedy for it or propose any future measures to address its

ongoing legacies. Instead, the British government's continued opposition to reparations was recently apparent in its response to a public petition in 2020 demanding it pay slavery reparations to all Caribbean and African descendants. It stated: "*While reparations are not part of the Government's approach, we feel deep sorrow for the transatlantic slave trade, and fully recognise the strong sense of injustice and the legacy of slavery in the most affected parts of the world.*"⁶⁵

However, there are some small signs of progress. In October 2021, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on African Reparations (APPGAR) was established by a group of UK Members of Parliament to "*examine issues of African Reparations and the repatriation of art and cultural artefacts, as well as exploring policy proposals on reparations and development, and how best to redress the legacies of African enslavement and colonialism*".⁶⁶ Some campaigners see this as an important step in the recognition of reparations and have called for it to establish a Commission of Enquiry for Truth and Reparatory Justice crafted by African people who have experienced harm at the hands of the British Empire or the current British state.⁶⁷

London is one of the global centres of finance, with a history tied to the transatlantic slave trade.⁶⁸ It was significant therefore, that in the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, the Bank of England issued a statement acknowledging the institution's historical links to the slave trade, recognising that some of its former governors and directors were slave traders and plantation owners.⁶⁹ Ongoing research by the Bank of England has also identified that it provided a range of services to slave merchants and the British government, including lines of credit and the underwriting of expensive colonial wars that expanded Britain's Empire and trade routes.⁷⁰ Similarly, Lloyd's of London, one of the world's largest insurance firms, played a significant role in insuring the ships and cargoes (including enslaved people) involved in the transatlantic slave trade. This was a highly lucrative business from the exploitation of enslaved labour. In 2020, Lloyd's of London issued an apology for the role it played in the slave trade and made a gesture to provide financial support to charities and organisations supporting Black and Minority Ethnic groups.⁷¹

Small forms of reparations have been paid by UK institutions benefiting from slavery. In 2019, The University of the West Indies (UWI) and the University of Glasgow (UoG) signed a Memorandum of Understanding, framed as a 'Reparatory Justice' initiative, which recognised the significant financial benefit that the UoG received from people whose wealth was derived from African enslavement.⁷² The terms of the agreement call for the establishment of the Glasgow-Caribbean Centre for Development Research and for the UoG to provide GB£20 million to fund research and promote development initiatives to be jointly undertaken with the UWI from 2020-2040.⁷³ University College London has also been integral in establishing the Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery, as a way of tracing the impact of slave ownership in the formation of modern Britain.⁷⁴ This includes a comprehensive database on slave-owning British individuals. Relatedly, in 2020, the city of Edinburgh initiated an independent Slavery and Colonialism Legacy Review which sought to examine the city's links to its colonial and slave-owning past.⁷⁵

In January 2023, the Church of England committed to establishing a GB£100 million fund in recognition of the ways it financially benefitted from the transatlantic slave trade.⁷⁶ The Church is not using the term 'reparations' and has advised that the fund will support dedicated projects, but the Archbishop of Canterbury has issued an apology.⁷⁷

Meanwhile, UK-based civil society groups, led by descendants of enslaved people as well as the wider African and Caribbean diaspora, continue their long-standing calls for reparations. In 1994 the Africa Reparations Movement (UK) demanded that the British government make reparations and give full compensation to peoples of African origin for *"the economic exploitation and dehumanisation inherent in European enslavement, colonialism and neo-colonialism"* by acknowledging and putting in place *"machinery to redress the perverse imbalances in the international economic and financial system"*.⁷⁸ Currently, the International Social Movement for Afrikan Reparations (ISMAR) – a key advocate for the creation of the APPGAR – calls for the parliamentary group's objectives to include public disclosure about which financial institutions were involved in the enslaver compensation loan taken out by the British government in 1835 to compensate former slave owners once slavery was abolished (see section 2.2). ISMAR also calls for the return of the value of taxes unfairly paid by taxpayers of African heritage in Britain to service this loan.⁷⁹ (A non-exhaustive list of UK-based reparations campaign groups can be found in Annex 1).

Relatedly, analysis by political economist Keval Bharadia – as part of a 2020 conference by the UK-based Tax Justice Network – examined how recalibrating financial transaction tax (FTT) policy, via a revolutionised Robin Hood Taxⁱⁱⁱ, could raise billions of pounds to deliver reparations.⁸⁰

5. Demands for reparations

Central to reparations approaches are that the forms they should take must be shaped by those who have faced harm and continue to face harm. In the context of the transatlantic slave trade and European colonialism, this consists of the people of formerly colonised countries and their descendants. Below are just some of the many calls for reparations from regional bodies and governments representing countries that were colonised, including those who were at the centre of the transatlantic slave trade, and civil society organisations from within those countries. They range from apology, to the need for former enslavers and colonisers to acknowledge the moral debt they owe. Demands then also include financial recompense such as the cancellation of sovereign debts, and the need for repair through the democratisation of the global economic architecture as former colonisers cede power to those they have harmed.

Africa

Across Africa, there have been demands for reparations made to former colonising states by those they have harmed. The Abuja Proclamation, born out of the first Pan-

ⁱⁱⁱ A Robin Hood Tax would see a small fee imposed on certain types of large financial transactions in order to raise money for a range of social issues including international aid and the climate crisis.

African Conference on Reparations held in Nigeria in 1993, called on the international community to recognise the *“unique and unprecedented moral debt owed to the African people”*. It served notice on all states that had participated in the enslavement and colonisation of African people to begin the process of conciliation through reparations.⁸¹ The Abuja Proclamation further urges the former Organisation for African Unity (now the African Union) to *“call for full monetary payment of repayments through capital transfer and debt cancellation”*.⁸²

In a 2009 address to the UN General Assembly, former Libyan leader and then chairperson of the African Union, Muammar al-Gaddafi, argued that Africa deserves compensation amounting to US\$777 trillion (GB£621 trillion) from the countries that colonised it.⁸³ This figure was based on a calculation by the African World Reparations and Truth Commission in 1999.⁸⁴

There are also calls by civil society groups in Namibia for reparations from Germany for the Herero-Nama genocide driven by descendants of that genocide (see section 2.1), as well as lesser-known campaigns such as the calls in Malawi for reparations from the UK for the Nyasaland Massacre.⁸⁵ The Malawian claim for reparations from survivors of the massacre dates back to 1959. At this time Britain, which ruled what was then Nyasaland, imposed a state of emergency to stop protests by political activists of the Nyasaland African Congress who were fighting for self-rule. The 33 unarmed people were protesting the detention of freedom fighters on a passenger ship when they were killed by the British.

Especially in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic and the unsustainable levels of debt accrued by formerly colonised states, there have been growing calls for debt cancellation as a form of reparations by some feminist and wider civil society groups around the world. An open call to the African Union, African Heads of State, IFIs and private creditors by Womin African Alliance and CADTM Afrique highlights that: *“Debt cancellation is not ‘aid’ but reparation and a right for the people who have been wounded and sacrificed on the altar of repaying odious and illegitimate debts, and who bear the brunt of the climate crisis.”*⁸⁶

The Caribbean

In 2013, CARICOM nations (a political and economic union of Caribbean member states) came to a unanimous agreement to set up a Reparations Commission that would *“establish the moral, ethical and legal case for the payment of reparations by the governments of all former colonial powers, and the relevant institutions of those countries, to the nations and peoples of the Caribbean community”*.⁸⁷ In 2014, the Commission developed a ‘Ten Point Plan’ outlining their demands for reparations, which includes the cancellation of international debts, illiteracy eradication and a formal apology from European governments, among others.⁸⁸

In 2003, former Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide demanded that France pay Haiti a sum of US\$21 billion (GB£16.8 billion) as reparations – the modern-day equivalent of what Haiti was forced to pay France for its independence.⁸⁹ The Haitian

government hired a law firm to draft legal arguments and find a court where Haiti could make its case.⁹⁰ However the following year, Aristide was ousted from power in a coup that critics have argued was intimately tied to his growing demands for reparations from France.⁹¹

The British royal tour to the Caribbean in 2022 has amplified existing calls for reparations from both governments and civil society groups in the region. In Jamaica, the Advocacy Network called for apology and reparations for the atrocities of slavery.⁹² Further still a petition spearheaded by parliamentarian Mike Henry, which seeks compensation from Britain for the transatlantic slave trade, is under consideration by Jamaica's National Reparations Commission.⁹³ As far back as 2014, the National Commission on Reparations in Jamaica concluded that at least GB£2.3 trillion is owed by Britain to Jamaica as a result of the slave trade. This sum would be sufficient to pay off Jamaica's entire national debt of US\$2 trillion (nearly GB£1.6 trillion).⁹⁴

Jamaican calls for reparations were echoed in Belize⁹⁵ and in the Bahamas.⁹⁶ The Bahamas National Reparations Committee has considered the need for reparations in relation to the economic and social impacts of slavery and colonialism.⁹⁷ In Trinidad and Tobago, Prime Minister Keith Rowley wrote to Prince William acknowledging his expression of sorrow over slavery but went on to call for reparations for the *"ills and inequity suffered during slavery and the consequences experienced today."*⁹⁸

In 2020, Barbados' Prime Minister Mottley argued: *"For us, reparations is not just simply about money, but it is also about justice... I do not know how we can go further unless there is a reckoning first and foremost that places an apology and an acknowledgement that a wrong was done. And that successive centuries saw the extraction of wealth and the destruction of people that must never happen to any society, to any race in any part of this world again. And for that to happen you have to first acknowledge you're wrong."*⁹⁹ More recently, Prime Minister Mottley argues in her Bridgetown Agenda that global financial architecture reform is needed to ensure a more equitable system.¹⁰⁰ In this context, Mottley has also called for reparations, recognising the centuries of exploitation and the damaging ongoing legacy of colonialism – not least as it manifests in climate change, recognising that for many lower-income countries, economic policies do not serve their needs and they cannot access financing for their own transitions to green economies.¹⁰¹

Asia

At a seminal Oxford University debate, Shashi Tharoor – former UN Under Secretary General, former Minister of State and now Member of the Indian Parliament – called for reparations as a result of the way Britain violently devastated the Indian economy in order to build its own. Rather than assigning a numeric figure, he focused on the precedent calling for reparations as *"a tool for you to atone, for the wrongs that have been done."*¹⁰²

Professor Utsa Patnaik's calculations for the drain on India between 1765 and 1938, in real terms in 2016, comes to GB£9.2 trillion.¹⁰³ However, this does not take into account

the opportunity cost of deindustrialisation, nor the human suffering and continued conflict left by the Raj.¹⁰⁴

Calls for reparations have also come from other former colonies in the region including Sri Lanka and Malaysia. In February 2023, Sri Lankan Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena called for an assessment to be conducted on the scale of atrocities committed by imperialists in Sri Lanka, and the need for compensation.¹⁰⁵ The families of the victims of the 1948 Batang Kali massacre in Malaysia have also called upon the UK government to issue an apology and provide reparations.¹⁰⁶ The British administration is accused of rounding up and killing 24 unarmed villagers during the Malayan Emergency, a battle between pro-communist independence groups and the British.¹⁰⁷ In 2015, the UK Supreme Court ruled that the government was not obliged to hold a public inquiry into the killings given how long ago it had happened and the subsequent difficulties in conducting a proper inquiry.¹⁰⁸

Echoing calls from other CSOs around the world, an open letter penned by the Asian Peoples Movement for Debt and Development, signed by over 550 civil society organisations and delivered to governments, international institutions and lenders, calls for “*Reparations for the damages caused to countries, peoples and nature, due to the contracting, use and payment of unsustainable and illegitimate debts and the conditions imposed to guarantee their collection.*”¹⁰⁹

USA: reparations for slavery and its ongoing impacts

In the USA, African Americans who have borne the harm caused by the ongoing legacies of slavery have also called for reparations from their own government. For over a century and a half, since the abolition of slavery in the USA, there have been many African American groups demanding reparations of varying forms, from calls for a national apology to the creation of a separate Black-majority country.

Calls for a national apology for slavery have appeared frequently among many groups, including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).¹¹⁰ Further to this, the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America (N'COBRA) has called for financial reparations to be paid directly to the descendants of enslaved Africans to compensate for the wealth and labour that was stolen from their enslaved ancestors.¹¹¹ Others, like the National African American Reparations Commission (NAARC)¹¹², through their Preliminary 10 Point Reparations Program, have also called for reparations to redress the ongoing legacies of slavery that have produced wide socioeconomic and political disparities in the US today in areas such as housing, healthcare, and education. The H.R. 40 Bill, introduced in the US House of Representatives in 2019, if approved, would establish a federal Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African Americans.¹¹³

Some reparations groups and advocates have gone further. In his seminal piece, ‘The Case for Reparations’, Ta-Nehisi Coates argued, “*What I'm talking about is*

*more than recompense for past injustices – more than a handout, a payoff, hush money, or a reluctant bribe. What I'm talking about is a national reckoning that would lead to spiritual renewal".*¹¹⁴ In 1968, the “Republic of New Afrika” demanded the US cede land for the creation of a Black-majority country and also sought US\$300 billion (GB£239 billion) from the federal government to establish this new nation.¹¹⁵ This money would need to be sufficient enough to ensure the new nation was able to succeed in the face of the adversity experienced by African Americans and their descendants.¹¹⁶

6. Conclusion

The legacies of European empires and the transatlantic slave trade are intricately connected to the historic and ongoing harms visible in the world today. The exploitation of natural resources and people, through slavery and colonialism, have created deep-rooted inequalities and systemic injustices that continue to impact the lives of billions of people. Reparations approaches to decolonisation could provide an essential step towards creating a more just and equitable world.

For this to happen, former European colonisers and enslavers will first need to acknowledge and apologise for the harm they have caused and take responsibility for providing remedy and repair. In the UK, the precedent for financial remedy already exists, but was made to former slave owners and not the enslaved or their descendants. Just and comprehensive reparations encompassing those harmed by slavery and colonialism are needed as part of restorative justice. Importantly, reparations approaches are not just about financial compensation, but also about ending the ways in which global economic and political structures perpetuate the legacies of inequality. Colonialism continues to shape and devastate the Global South through undemocratic global economic governance including international trade and investment rules. Challenging these undemocratic systems so former colonisers cede power to those who were colonised could be part of reparations approaches that work towards delivering decolonisation.

The exact nature of reparations, though, must be rooted in the demands of those most harmed, and while specific demands for reparations may vary between governments and movements worldwide, there is a united recognition of the long-lasting harm caused by European colonisers and enslavers and the need for redress and repair.

For those of us working in the international development sector in the UK and other former European empires, the legacies of colonialism and slavery have a direct impact on shaping our work. We, therefore, have a responsibility to hold our respective governments accountable for past and current harms perpetuated across former colonies in the Global South. This includes creating the necessary political environment for reparations approaches, driven by the demands of those who have been and continue to be harmed.

Annex 1: Reparations groups in the UK

Afrikan-focussed movements

An important fabric of the process of reparations is the autonomous community-rooted institutions that have been set up by activists fighting for reparations. These movements adopt their own frames and constructs: for example: 'Afrikan' rather than 'African' as used by European colonisers. In the UK context, the organisations listed below are doing trailblazing work – all led and coordinated through the passion of phenomenal women, from Esther Stanford Xosei and Jendayi Serwah to Dr. Joyce Hope Scott.

The **Pan-Afrikan Reparations Coalition in Europe (PARCOE)** is a grassroots alliance of organisations and movements amplifying the calls for reparations in Europe. Its basis for reparation is in holistic repair and it takes the OHCHR principles as a framework.

The **International Network of Scholars and Activists for African Reparations (INOSAAR)**¹¹⁷ brings together movements and scholars to provide global legitimacy and visibility to the broad range of reparations viewpoints through bilateral knowledge exchange.

The **International Social Movement for Afrikan Reparations (ISMAR)** is a grassroots movement based in the UK and comprises the Afrikan Emancipation Day Reparations March Committee and the Stop the Maangamizi: We Charge Genocide/Ecocide Campaign. Collectively, ISMAR is mobilising with scholars and activists, including Extinction Rebellion, to demand that the UK government establish an All-Party Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry for Truth and Reparatory Justice and also commit to reparations in accordance with UN Resolution 60/147: Right to Remedy and Reparations. ISMAR collaborates with Extinction Rebellion through its Internationalist Solidarity Network (XRISN) – a network of UK-based radical activists working in solidarity with its partner networks, across Indigenous and other communities of resistance, in their ongoing reparatory justice work.

The **People's Reparations International Movement (PRIM)** brings together a broad alliance of social forces among communities across the world. It consists of a broad range of constituencies of various ideological orientations, who work in diverse ways to obtain redress for historical atrocities and injustices that have contemporary consequences. PRIM also works to rehabilitate the victims in the process of effecting and securing the anti-systemic objectives of reparations.

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The Gender and Development Network (GADN) brings together expert NGOs, consultants, academics and individuals committed to working on gender, development and women's rights issues. Our vision is of a world where social justice and gender equality prevail and where all women and girls are able to realise their rights free from discrimination. Our goal is to ensure that international development policy and practice promotes gender equality and women's and girls' rights.

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