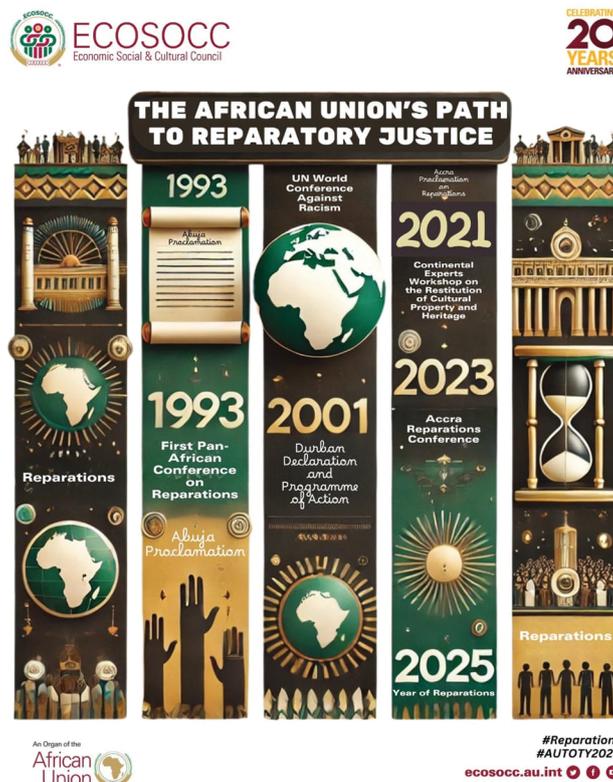


SPECIAL RESEARCH REPORT

WHY THE AU'S 2025 THEME OF THE YEAR MATTERS FOR THE REFORM OF THE MULTILATERAL SYSTEM

AMANI AFRICA

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. THE SCRAMBLE FOR AFRICANS AND THE SCRAMBLE FOR AFRICA AND THEIR ENDURING CONSEQUENCES.....	2
3. CONTINENTAL EFFORTS TOWARDS REPARATIONS.....	4
4. THE FORMS OF REPARATIONS FOR THE HISTORICAL INJUSTICES SHAPING THE CONTEMPORARY LIFE CONDITIONS OF AFRICANS AND PEOPLES OF AFRICAN DESCENT.....	7
4.1. The imperative for reparatory justice.....	7
4.2. Brief overview of key elements of reparatory justice.....	8
5. REPAIRING THE PAST THAT IS INTERTWINED WITH THE PRESENT-DAY INTERNATIONAL ORDER.....	9
5.1. Redressing the injustice of Africa’s exclusion from UNSC permanent membership.....	11
5.2. Resetting the international financial architecture.....	12
6. CONCLUSION.....	14

If the purposes of the Charter are to be achieved, redressing the pervasive historical imbalances that characterize the international system – from the legacies of colonialism and slavery to the deeply unjust global financial architecture and anachronistic peace and security structures of today – must be a priority.

António Guterres,
The New Agenda for Peace (July 2023)

1. INTRODUCTION

The 2025 African Union (AU) theme of the year is 'Justice for Africans and peoples of African descent through reparations.' This theme presents a unique opportunity for achieving progress in addressing the historical injustices that Africa endured and haunt the world, if properly seized by the AU and the international community. As enunciated in the Accra Declaration that set the foundation for the theme of the year, the theme has the objective 'to usher in transformative change to the systems, structures and institutions that have perpetrated harm against Africans and people of African descent around the world.'¹ Of no less significance is also the Declaration's framing of justice in terms of reparations and healing through, among others, enforcing the demands of full repair from the perpetrating nations, institutions, governments and families that have negatively impacted the African world via the crimes to chattelise Africans, (Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade), enslavement, colonialism, apartheid, and genocide.²

¹ Accra Summit, Accra Declaration on Reparations and Racial Healing, August 2022.

² Ibid.

It is not just in the halls of AU policymaking that this call for justice for these historical injustices is being made, as the speech of Ghana's former president, Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo, to the General Assembly (GA) makes clear. In his address to the GA in September 2023, he pointed out that '[I]t is time to acknowledge openly that much of Europe and the United States have been built from the vast wealth harvested from the sweat, tears, blood and horrors of the transatlantic slave trade.'³ Indeed, **the issues that the AU theme of the year concerns itself with are not just about Africa and people of African descent. They also concern the world.** And more specifically, they concern the origin and evolution of international economic relations, considering that slavery and colonialism cannot be separated from the emergence of the modern world and the hierarchical relationship they engendered between Africa on the one hand and those who excuted and benefited from the historical injustice.⁴

This special research report introduces the background to the theme of the year and **examines how the focus on remedying the way the international system is shaped by these historical injustices can help narrow the gap between the commitments of international human rights and the Sustainable Development Goals on the**

³ Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo, President of Ghana speech to the 78th General Assembly of the UN 20 September 2023 available on [https://gadebate.un.org/en/78/ghana#:~:text="It%20is%20time%20to%20acknowledge,of%20reparations%20to%20the%20fore](https://gadebate.un.org/en/78/ghana#:~:text=)

⁴ See Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after empire: The rise and fall of the right to self-determination* (2019); Howard W. French, *Born in Blackness: Africa, Africans and the Making of the Modern World 1471 to the Second World War* (2021).

one hand and how the international financial and trading system operate in practice vis-à-vis Africa and parts of the world affected by slavery and colonialism.

2. THE SCRAMBLE FOR AFRICANS AND THE SCRAMBLE FOR AFRICA AND THEIR ENDURING CONSEQUENCES

The transatlantic 'slave' trade, termed by Howard French as a *Scramble for Africans* which lasted for more than four centuries and foretold the most known *Scramble for Africa*, had profound and enduring effects on the peoples of Africa and African descent as well as the resources of the continent. Beyond the immediate impact of the loss of millions of lives, disruption of the political development, racial hierarchies, discrimination and economic exploitation, the consequences that continue to persist today are manifested in the form of economic inequalities, long-term socio-economic disparities and the lack or underrepresentation of African voices in decision-making forums within multilateral institutions.

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The Human Cost of Injustice

<p>Unmeasured trauma and multi-generational harm from slavery and colonization.</p>	<p>Persistent inequalities: Africa loses billions annually due to unfair trade practices and debt burdens rooted in colonial legacies.</p>	<p>Colonization erased languages, traditions, and indigenous knowledge, weakening social cohesion.</p>
<p>Forced labor and stolen resources laid the foundation for generational poverty in Africa.</p>	<p>Colonial neglect and unethical medical practices created long-term health challenges.</p>	<p>Colonial borders caused displacement and statelessness, leaving many without basic rights.</p>
<p>Colonial legal systems evolved into modern racial profiling and unjust mass incarceration.</p>	<p>Resource exploitation led to climate vulnerability and environmental degradation in Africa.</p>	<p>Educational Inequality: Restricted access to education during colonization left lasting gaps in opportunity and development.</p>

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The trade in African human beings has led to the forcible uprooting for enslavement of tens of millions African peoples from the continent⁵ that formed the backbone of the plantation economies that helped European nations and American colonies to accumulate the wealth that propelled them into unprecedented economic advancement.⁶ On the flip side, apart from halting, if not reversing, the trajectory of Africa's economic development,⁷ slavery also created the conditions and precipitated the subsequent colonization of Africa, thereby institutionalising the looting of its natural resources and the subjugation of its peoples to serve the interests of the colonial centres. While decolonization led to *de jure* independence, the states that emerged from colonial rule remained entangled in a relationship of dependence, having been rendered providers of raw materials.⁸

5 United Nations (UN), 'Slave Trade: International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade', [Website], <https://www.un.org/en/observances/decade-people-african-descent/slave-trade>

6 Despite persistent disputation of the degree of slavery's contribution to the economic advancement of the West, the significance of its contribution to the economic advancement of the west is no longer contested based on evidence.

7 See UN Africa Dialogue Series Policy Brief , *Learning from the past: Transatlantic Slave Trade, colonialism, extractive economies and institutions in Africa (2025)* available on https://www.un.org/osaa/sites/www.un.org.osaa/files/sub-theme_1_-_policy_brief_-_draft.pdf; Nathan Nuun, *The long-term effects of Africa's slave trades, 123(1) The Quarterly Journal of Economics 123-176.*

8 Frantz Fanon (1963), *The Wretched of the Earth. On how colonial extractive practices and institutions continue to shape the economic trajectory of former colonial societies*, see Acemoglu, D., Johnson, S., & Robinson, J.A. (2001), *The colonial origins of comparative development: An empirical investigation, 91(5) American Economic Review 1369-1401 and the study by Gaston Nieves and Thomas*

This economic imbalance that slavery and colonial rule instituted further deepened the cycle of exploitation in the aftermath of colonial rule, in part owing to the failure of post-independence leadership, leaving African societies with limited autonomy and control over their natural resources and economic trajectory.⁹

Social hierarchies were often strengthened or established through the Trans-Atlantic trade in African humans and colonization, as race, ethnicity, or class played significant roles.¹⁰ The European Scramble for Africa and the borders that European colonial powers imposed on Africa, as they divide the continent among themselves as a follow up to the Berlin Conference of 1884, 'left an enduringly debilitating legacy for the continent: a plethora of puny and scarcely functional states, with conflict among and between ethnic groups, with some once coherent groups left pointlessly straddling borders and others with far less in common, just as illogically, jumbled together in an artificial confection.'¹¹ This frequently resulted in political instability and enduring conflicts

Piketty (2025), Unequal exchange and North-South relations: Evidence from global trade flows and the world balance of payments 1800-2025, World Inequality Lab Working Paper 2025/11, which established that colonial extraction and unequal exchange have shaped two centuries of North-South inequality.

⁹ See Kwame Nkrumah, *Neocolonialism: The last stage of imperialism* (1965); ACHPR, *SERAC v. Nigeria*.

¹⁰ Iheanyi J. Samuel-Mbaekwe, 'Colonialism and social structure', *Transafrican Journal of History*, vol. 15, 1986, pp. 81-95; Solomon A. Dersso, *Taking ethno-cultural diversity seriously in constitutional design: A theory of Minority Rights for addressing Africa's multi-ethnic challenge* (2012).

¹¹ See Howard W. French, *Born in Blackness: Africa, Africans and the Making of the Modern World 1471 to the Second World War* (2021) 147-48.

that persist to this day. In some instances, such as in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Namibia, colonization encompassed acts of genocide, where colonial powers deliberately engaged in actions aimed at the complete or partial destruction of specific ethnic, religious, or cultural communities. Such actions could include widespread killings, forced displacement, or the intentional dissemination of diseases.

In his ground-breaking and widely acclaimed work, French Howard makes the profound observation that 'this period (of the Scramble for Africa) was preceded by an even more consequential, not to mention deadly, scramble...We will call this earlier and longer-lasting scramble a Scramble for Africans.'¹² As noted earlier, carried out over the span of four centuries, this *Scramble for Africans* also involved 'a long series of unconventional and largely undeclared conflicts that were waged for control over Africa as well as Africans and especially over the domination and exploitation of the black body.'¹³

While it is driven by the quest for profit and economic prosperity, underneath slavery and arising from it was also the total negation of the very human-ness of African peoples and their reduction into chattels, engendering enduring and multi-generational harm. As Nkrumah observed, the invention of the 'myth of "colour" inferiority', which he deemed to be a consequence of slavery, 'supported the rape of our continent' during the slavery and subsequent 'exploitation under the advanced forms of colonialism and imperialism.'¹⁴ Despite

¹² *Ibid*, 147.

¹³ *Ibid*, 159.

¹⁴ Kwame Nkrumah (1963), *Africa must unite*,

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all the progress registered in the context of the struggle for emancipation and self-determination as well as in the normative pronouncements of international human rights instruments, the absence of reckoning with history's worst abominations that were slavery and colonialism perpetuates the entrenchment of the racial prejudice and inequalities, which were embedded in the hierarchical international financial and economic arrangements.¹⁵ 'Reduced to the production and export of primary goods through this process of unequal integration,' observed Adom Getachew in her work that earned her notable academic accolades, 'postcolonial states were not endowed with the capacity to steer and control a national economy that was subsequently limited.'¹⁶

3. CONTINENTAL EFFORTS TOWARDS REPARATIONS

The reparations movement gained momentum for several years as a response to historical injustice and enduring legacies of exploitation faced by African states and their descendants. The movement was initiated in the Organization of African Unity (OAU) during the 54th Ordinary Session of the Council of Ministers on 1 June 1991,¹⁷ with the establishment of the Group of Eminent Persons, led by Bashorun M. K. O. Abiola and consisting of 12 members.

¹⁵ See Adom Getachew (2019), *Worldmaking after empire: The rise and fall of the right to self-determination*.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 113.

¹⁷ Organization of African Unity (OAU), CM/Res.1339 (LIV), 54th Ordinary Session of the Council of Ministers held in Abuja, Nigeria from 27 May - 1 June 1991. Available at: https://au.int/sites/default/files/decisions/9621-council_en_27_may_28_june_1991_council_ministers_fifty_fourth_ordinary_session.pdf

Following the establishment of the Group, the Council of Ministers mandated the Secretary General of the OAU to establish mechanisms such as a sponsoring committee, a committee of scientific experts, and a secretariat at the headquarters.¹⁸ Notably, the issue of reparation was last mentioned by the OAU during the 56th session of the Council of Ministers that was held in June 1992.

However, the first Pan-African Conference on Reparations was held in April 1993, sponsored by the Group of Eminent Persons and the Commission of Reparations of the OAU. As a result, the Abuja Proclamation was adopted, calling for the 'international community to recognize that there is a unique and unprecedented moral debt owed to the African peoples which has yet to be paid'.¹⁹ Therefore, the proclamation envisaged compensation with 'proper and reasonable representation of African peoples in the Political and economic areas of the highest decision-making bodies' and 'total relief from Foreign Debt'. It also requested to enhance its endeavours in reorganizing the global system in the pursuit of fairness, particularly regarding a lasting African position on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

Another initiative on the issue came in 1999 with the organization of the 'World Reparation and Truth Commission Conference' in Ghana, followed by

¹⁸ Organization of African Unity (OAU), CM/Res.1373 (LV), 55th Ordinary Session of the Council of Ministers held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia from 24 - 28 February 1992. Available at: https://au.int/sites/default/files/decisions/9618-council_en_24_28_february_1992_council_ministers_fifty_fifth_ordinary_session.pdf

¹⁹ The Abuja Proclamation, <https://ncobra.org/resources/pdf/TheAbujaProclamation.pdf>

a second conference in 2000. The outcome of these conferences led to the adoption of the Accra Reparations and Repatriation Action Plan. The Action Plan acknowledges that the enslavement and colonization of African people over a 400-year period are the root causes of Africa's problems today. By establishing that premise, it called for African nations to suspend all debt payments and establish a global team of lawyers to pursue the \$777 trillion owed to African States.²⁰

In September 2001, the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance was held in Durban, South Africa, sponsored by the United Nations. The Declaration adopted by the Conference acknowledged that 'slavery and the slave trade... are a crime against humanity,' indicating the role of colonialism in perpetuating present-day issues such as racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance. The Declaration also emphasizes the importance of ensuring that individuals who have suffered human rights violations due to racism and related injustices have the right to receive compensation.

The momentum on reparations that emerged in the 1990s did not continue in the 2000s and 2010s. After the Durban Summit and the transformation of the OAU to the AU, the Executive Council only made reference to the outcomes of the Durban Conference during two of its ordinary sessions.²¹ However, the

20 *The African Descent* [Website], <https://estooks.wixsite.com/the-adid/blank-cika>

21 *African Union (AU), EX.CL/Dec.463(XIV), 14th Ordinary Session of the Executive Council, 26 – 30 January 2009, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Available at: https://au.int/sites/default/files/decisions/9628-council_en_26_30_january_2009_executive_council_fourteenth_ordinary_session.pdf and EX.CL/*

momentum has recently returned with initiatives such as the Conference on Advancing Justice: Reparations and Racial Healing organized by Ghana in August 2022. The declaration adopted by the Conference emphasized the need for political leaders, guided by African people and CSOs, to enforce demands for full repair not only from perpetrating nations and governments, but also institutions. The declaration also called for the strong support and active involvement of social movements within the Global African Reparations Movement, including the Global Pan African Movement and Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Reparations Commission, with the goal of strengthening and expanding the movement through outreach, mobilization, and capacity building.

During the conference, Ghana's President Akufo-Addo delivered a keynote speech highlighting the importance of the AU prioritizing reparations and setting an expectation for the engagement of other African Heads of State in this endeavour. These notions of solidarity and political will were also echoed by the Conference.

In covering the human rights aspect of reparation, the AU Commission on Human and Peoples Rights (ACHPR) also adopted resolution Res. 543 (LXXIII) on Africa's Reparations Agenda and the Human Rights of Africans in the Diaspora and People of African Descent Worldwide.²²

Dec.494(XV), 15th Ordinary Session of the Executive Council, 24 – 30 June, 2009. Available at: https://au.int/sites/default/files/decisions/9633-council_en_24_30_june_2009_executive_council_fifteenth_ordinary_session.pdf

22 *African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, Resolution on Africa's Reparations Agenda and the Human Rights of Africans and People of African Descent – ACHPR/Res.543 (LXXIV) 2023 <https://achpr.au.int/index.php/en/adopted->*

In February 2023, during the 36th Ordinary Session of the AU Assembly, the proposal by the Republic of Ghana to co-organize and host an International Conference in collaboration with the AU Commission was endorsed. The conference aimed to build a united front for justice and the payment of reparations to Africans. Subsequently, the international conference on ‘Building a United Front to Advance the Cause of Justice and Reparations to Africans’ took place in November 2023 in Accra, Ghana. The Conference resulted in the adoption of the ‘Accra Proclamation on Reparations’.²³

In line with the decision of the 36th AU Assembly that directed the AU Commission in consultation with Member States, ECOSOCC, other AU organs, and the RECs, to establish an African Committee of Experts on Reparations, the Accra Proclamation has also recommended for the establishment of the Committee. As indicated both in the proclamation and the Assembly decision, the committee’s purpose is to develop a Common African Position on Reparations and incorporate an African Reparatory Programme of Action. However, the Proclamation further proposed considerations that should be taken in establishing the committee. Additionally, the AU Assembly directed the AU Commission to collaborate with the CARICOM to establish an African Caribbean Joint Mechanism on Reparative Justice. Going beyond regional confines,

[resolutions/543-resolution-africas-reparations-agenda-and-human-rights-africans](#)

²³ African Union (AU), (November 2023), ‘Accra Proclamation on Reparations’, International Conference on Building A United Front to Advance the Cause of Justice and Reparations to Africans held in Accra, Ghana. Available at: https://au.int/sites/default/files/decisions/43383-Declaration_-_CIDO_.pdf

the Accra Proclamation envisions the creation of a transcontinental partnership framework involving the AU, CARICOM, Latin American States, and the African diaspora in Europe and other global regions. Importantly, this framework is designed to include, where appropriate, relevant Civil Society Organizations (CSOs).

The Proclamation also recommends the establishment of a dedicated Global Reparations Fund, specifically earmarked for advancing the reparations campaign. Additionally, it suggests the creation of the AU Special Envoy for Reparations of Africans. Furthermore, the Proclamation puts forth the exploration of legal and judicial avenues for reparations. This entails a close partnership with the African Union Commission to delve into how international law intersects with and supports the pursuit of reparations, including the contemplation of litigation options in both regional and international courts. In this regard, the Proclamation also recommends for the establishment of a legal reference group to assist the AU Committee of Experts and the AU Special Envoy, by offering legal counsel regarding the issue of reparations.

In addressing the enduring linkage between historical injustices committed against Africans and contemporary challenges, the Proclamation calls for an increased role of the United Nations and a unified front advocating for the reform of global financial systems and structures. It also underscores the importance of climate justice and reparatory justice, emphasizing the urgent need for immediate, just, and comprehensive reforms within the prevailing architecture of multilateral institutions.

4. THE FORMS OF REPARATIONS FOR THE HISTORICAL INJUSTICES SHAPING THE CONTEMPORARY LIFE CONDITIONS OF AFRICANS AND PEOPLES OF AFRICAN DESCENT

4.1. The imperative for reparatory justice

In the words of the Durban Declaration and Program of Action of the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, 'slavery', which laid the foundation for colonialism and apartheid, constitutes 'a crime against humanity' and an 'appalling tragedy.'²⁴ The suffering, pain and destruction that the two Scrambles for 'Africans' and for 'Africa' inflicted and the cumulative impact of these experiences underscore the essential character of slavery and colonization as the most systematic historical injustices that left enduring harm that continues to reverberate to date. The complex tapestry of exploitation, subjugation and lasting harm echoes through generations, contributing to persistent challenges in economic development, social cohesion, political stability across the continent and other parts of the world affected by slavery such as the Caribbean.

Recognizing and addressing these historical injustices and their continuing manifestations is not only a social and

²⁴ World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance: Declaration and Programme of Action. Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Publications/Durban_text_en.pdf

political imperative but is also a moral and historical necessity for responding to the urgent but long-overdue need for reparations. An essential component of this is recognising that the marginalisation of those most affected by slavery and colonial rule from the structures of decision-making in the international order and the resultant hierarchical and asymmetric economic relations is not accidental but a result of how slavery and colonialism structured their integration into the global economy.

Signifying how reparation is intertwined with slavery and colonialism, Adekeye Adebajo, in an edited volume published in 2024, called 'slavery, colonialism and reparations' the 'Black Atlantic's Triple Burden.' As he perceptively put it, '[o]ne cannot understand colonialism without comprehending transatlantic slavery from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, while the quest for reparations cannot be effectively pursued without exposing how slavery was used to promote and justify colonialism and racism.'²⁵ Reparatory justice is thus grounded in both its interconnectedness with slavery and colonialism on the one hand and the enduring harm and continuing legacies of these injustices on the other.

Reparations is also a necessary condition to realising the objectives of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The UDHR and the SDGs imagine and seek to achieve an environment in which all individuals and societies live a life of dignity and freedom. Yet, this quest is perpetually frustrated by the

²⁵ Adekeye Adebajo, *The Black Atlantic's Triple Burden: Slavery, Colonialism and Reparations* (2024) 5.

inequality and injustice arising from slavery and colonialism that continue to structure international economic relations. Realising the ambitions of the UDHR and the SDGs would thus require repairing these historical injustices and their enduring consequences, and hence the 'remaking the international order that sustained relationship of dependence and domination.'²⁶

4.2. Brief overview of key elements of reparatory justice

Reparation encompasses a wide range of actions such as making amends, providing restitution, and offering satisfaction or compensation. The specific terms and conditions of reparations may differ depending on the circumstances of each case. Reparation aims to address and rectify the consequences of an unlawful act, with the primary goal being the coming to terms with the harm caused and the facilitation of the healing of those who suffered from the consequences of the harm caused. Additionally, reparation can serve to stop ongoing violations, deter future ones, facilitate reconciliation and rebuild relationships between the wrongdoer and the affected parties.²⁷ Of significance from the perspective of the focus of this brief is that reparation also demands institutional reforms necessary to rectify the structural inequalities and discriminatory practices that slavery, colonialism, apartheid engraved into the global systems of economic relations.

The focus on the injustices of slavery, colonial rule and apartheid does not concern itself with only the violations

that these injustices inflicted on the ancestors of present-day Africans and peoples of African descent. Indeed, it in the first instance concerns itself with those heinous violations and the need for confronting those violations as a prerequisite of acknowledging the absolute wickedness, or in the words of the Durban Declaration 'abhorrent barbarism', of such violations, and of affirming the dignity and full humanity of those who were brutalised by such violent enterprises. As Mia Motley, Prime Minister of Barbados, pointed out in her address to the 38th Ordinary Session of the AU Assembly, 'when we call for reparations from the international community, we first ask for something simple: an apology. A sincere acknowledgment of wrongdoing.'²⁸ In this sense, the AU theme of the year is about affirming their fundamental dignity as human beings. It is as much about memory and memorialisation as the commemorative events that mark the holocaust or World War II are. It is about paying homage to the victims and survivors of those violations. It is also about repudiating the ideology underpinning slavery, colonialism and apartheid that treated Africans as non-human beings.

Yet, coming to terms with these historical injustices goes far beyond memory and memorialisation. In material terms, making amends in this context would entail and require compensation including through the establishment of a reparations fund. It also involves restitution through recognising the full

²⁸ Statement by H.E. Mia A. Mottley, Prime Minister of Barbados, at the 38th AU Summit, available on https://www.liberianobserver.com/region/statement-by-h-e-mia-a-mottley-prime-minister-of-barbados-at-the-38th-au/article_0ced30c0-eb97-11ef-ada8-23459eaa1afe.html

²⁶ Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire*, 17.

²⁷ Oxford University Press (2015), 'Reparations', *Max Planck Encyclopaedia of Public International Law*.

ownership by Africans of the artifacts and sacred materials being housed in former colonial countries and facilitating the restoration of these artifacts and sacred materials to the owners. From the vantage point of the present and the future, reparations is concerned with addressing the enduring legacies of slavery, colonialism and apartheid, which continue to define the life conditions of Africans and peoples of African descent the world over. At a time when inequality and socio-economic deprivation constitute among the most profound development challenges of the world, it is noteworthy that one of the major axes of such inequality and deprivation centres around race, whose origin is to be traced back to the 'Scramble for Africans' and the 'Scramble for Africa'. It is about confronting and overcoming both the evils of racism that Africans and people of African descent are subjected to and continue to face and the conditions that enable racism.

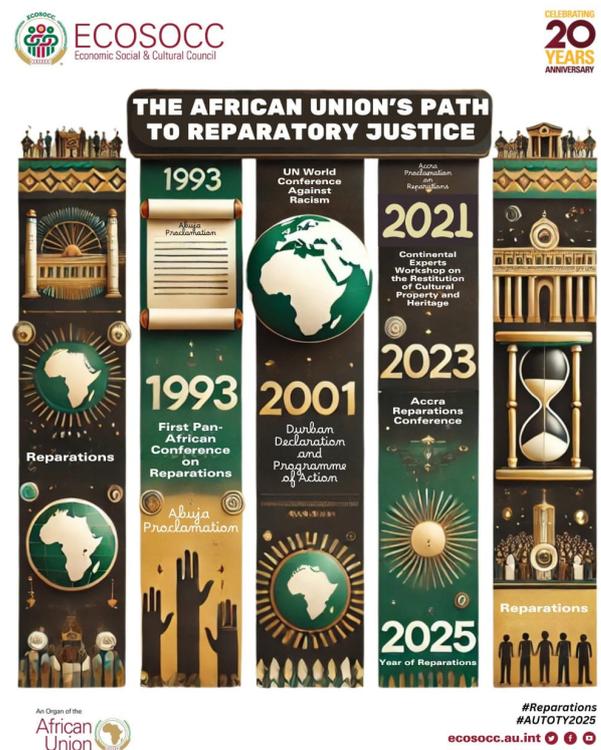
Addressing these historical injustices is thus additionally about removing the conditions that perpetuate such inequality and deprivation, including how the international financial and trading system positions and shapes Africa's economies. This echoes Prime Minister Mottley's affirmation that 'reparations must also ensure fair access to development and compensation, because our journey to independence started with a chronic deficit—a deficit of resources, fairness, and opportunity.'²⁹

Such measures of reparations targeting both the manifestations and the structural foundations of these historical injustices that shape mindsets, behaviours and power relations of

individuals, communities and institutions are essential for any claim of commitment to equality and justice to be meaningful. Reparation as such is not just looking back for redressing the historical injustices, but it is also forward-looking as it seeks to create conditions for equality and justice.

5. REPAIRING THE PAST THAT IS INTERTWINED WITH THE PRESENT-DAY INTERNATIONAL ORDER

As the quote from the *New Agenda for Peace* of the UN Secretary-General at the beginning of the special research report makes clear, repairing the historical injustices is a *sine qua non* for achieving the objectives and principles of the UN Charter. Central to this is removing the structural and operational conditions that excluded and continue to marginalise those affected by the historical injustices of slavery and colonialism.



The intricate relationship between past injustices and the current multilateral system remains a pressing issue for all Africans and other parts of the world that remain affected by and continue to endure the consequences of the slave trade and colonialism. The various reparation movements have also acknowledged the profound impact of how international economic dynamics have historically shaped the distribution of power, wealth and resources among nations, often stemming from past injustices and colonial legacies. There is now a growing body of research work that conclusively supports this how these historical injustices shaped the place of Africa and other parts of the world affected by these injustices in the global economic and trading system.³⁰

In today's world, the aftershocks of historical injustices are unfolding through various manifestations. As noted earlier, these include pervasive inequality and poverty, which largely follow racial lines whose roots are to be traced back to the Trans-Atlantic Trade in enslaved Africans. Africa contributed very little to climate change, but it is one of the parts of the world that bears the brunt of the climate crisis. As a continent with little say in the pricing of the resources extracted from its territories and that faces the most punishing and extortionist interest rates for accessing development finance, African peoples and those of African descent not only endure higher levels of development challenges but also are vulnerable to displacement, forced migration and refugee crisis.

³⁰ See Howard W. French, *Born in Blackness: Africa, Africans and the Making of the Modern World 1471 to the Second World War* (2021).

These various manifestations of the enduring effects of the historical injustices are both the outcome of and further accentuated by Africa's place in the economic and political power structures and decision-making processes of the international system. The failure of the international system to mobilise the requisite level of collective action in a fair way when faced with the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences and to enforce international law even-handedly and without selectivity is reflective of the flaws in the design and operation of the system. The lack of recognition of and an attempt by the system to address the historical injustices and their consequences are reflections of these design and operational flaws of the system. Therefore, the call made by the Accra Conference on Reparations on the reform of the architecture of the multilateral system is the most pertinent one. Indeed, this call for reform of the structure of the multilateral system with a particular attention to the historical injustices suffered by Africa also resonates with the views canvassed in the policy reports being articulated for the reform of the multilateral system.³¹

As part of providing framing analysis for UN member states for their negotiation towards the Pact for the Future to be adopted in the Summit of the Future, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has in the course of 2023 released several policy briefs. One of the major ones released in July 2023 titled, the [New Agenda for Peace](#), which captured the direct connection between the historical injustices that continue to shape today's world and the reform of the multilateral

³¹ See, for example, *Joint Namibia and Amani Africa High-level Panel of Experts, Africa and the reform of the multilateral system* (August 2024).

system, summed up in the quote at the beginning of this special research report. This and the pursuit of the AU theme of the year as it relates to the impact of the historical injustices on the place of Africa and peoples of African descent in the decision-making structures and processes of the multilateral system entail both the reform of the UN Security Council and the international financial institutions.

5.1. Redressing the injustice of Africa's exclusion from UNSC permanent membership

UN Security Council Reform constitutes a key aspect of the proposed area for reform highlighted in the New Agenda for Peace. The lack of equitable representation, particularly for Africa that traces its history back to slavery and colonialism, has dented the legitimacy of the multilateral system since the start of its current form after World War II. The Council's current composition and its exclusion of Africa and the Caribbean have remained a major mark of its defectiveness. As rightly stated by Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo, President of Ghana 'We cannot rebuild trust when the Organization that should bind us, is seen by many as helping to perpetuate an unfair world order'.³²

In underscoring a 'Security Council that is more representative of the geopolitical realities of today, and of the contribution that different parts of the world make to global peace, is urgently needed,' the *New Agenda for Peace* thus provides a framework for addressing these historical injustices. To this end, it proposed

³² United Nations (UN), (September 2023), *Seventy-Eighth Session of the General Assembly [Press Statement]*. Available at: <https://press.un.org/en/2023/ga12532.doc.htm>

that 'urgent progress is made in the intergovernmental negotiations on the reform of the Security Council to make this body more just and representative.' Echoing the first Pan-African Conference on Reparations call for the reform of the UNSC, the Secretary-General's [High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism](#), which proposed that the Summit of the Future announces a Charter review conference focused on Security Council reform, underscored that the UNSC 'should be expanded to reflect equitably those regions that are chronically underrepresented, including those with large and growing youth populations, and to ensure that voices from conflict-affected regions are more meaningfully included in the Security Council's decision-making'. Affirming Africa's position, it also held that '[o]ptions for allocating seats to regions rather than specific countries, and for extending the tenure of non-permanent seats, should also be explored.'

Following the first historic high-level debate in the UNSC on the reform of the UNSC under Sierra Leone's presidency of the UNSC in August 2024³³ and the Report of the High-Level Panel of Experts on Africa and the Reform of the Multilateral System,³⁴ a notable progress was achieved in recognising Africa's position on UNSC reform when the Pact for the Future, adopted by world leaders during the

³³ See Solomon A. Dersso, *Sierra Leone leverages its presidency for Africa's seat at the Security Council*, available on <https://amaniafrica-et.org/sierra-leone-leverages-its-presidency-for-africas-seat-at-the-security-council/?print=print>

³⁴ Joint Namibia-Amani Africa High-level Panel of Experts, *Africa and the reform of the multilateral system: The Summit of the Future and Beyond*, available on <https://amaniafrica-et.org/wp-content/uploads/AFRICA-AND-THE-REFORM-OF-THE-MULTILATERAL-SYSTEM.pdf>

Summit of the Future in September 2024, committed to '[r]edress the historical injustice against Africa as a priority' and 'treating Africa as a special case.'³⁵

One of the action points recommended by the UNSG was the strengthening of peace operations and partnerships and support to the AU and subregional peace support operations (PSOs). In line with this, the African Group has advocated for predictable, adequate, and sustainable financing for peace operations. In this regard, the three African members of the UNSC (A3) drafted and tabled a draft resolution on the financing of AU-led PSOs through UN-assessed contributions for voting by the UNSC. As a result of the strong advocacy by the African Group and the A3, the resolution 2719 (2023) on the financing of AU PSOs was adopted on 21 December 2023, capping access to UN-assessed contributions to 75%, with the remaining balance to be mobilized from various sources in addition to the AU. This would possibly change the way the AU and UN interact and it could also improve the engagement between the two.

5.2. Resetting the international financial architecture

As to the international financial architecture, at the time of the establishment of the global financial institutions, most African states were either under colonial rule or in the process of gaining independence from colonial powers. Consequently, representatives of African states were not present at the UN Monetary and Financial Conference, also known as the Bretton Woods Conference. As the UN Secretary General observed

³⁵ See *Pact for the Future* available on https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/soft-pact_for_the_future_adopted.pdf

in his policy brief on the Reform of the International Financial Architecture,³⁶ similar to Africa's fate in the UNSC, '[g]lobal economic governance has not kept pace with changes in the global economy...including the end of colonialism and the recognition of the human right to self-determination.' It goes on to state that the 'Governments of the largest developed countries continue to hold veto powers in the decision-making bodies of these institutions' and developing countries, including most notably African ones, lack 'representation in international financial institutions, regional development banks and standard-setting bodies.'

Despite these structural deficiencies of the global financial architecture, as the Secretary-General's policy brief called it, and hence the lack of meaningful representation and absence of influence in decision-making, African countries have been made to comply with and operate within the bounds of the rules and decisions that these institutions have set in their economic, social and financial policy making even if these rules or decisions (such as structural adjustment policies) are to the detriment of their socio-economic wellbeing. These rules stunted the policy independence of African nations, impeding their capacity to pursue development strategies that are specifically designed for their circumstances. This lack of autonomy has contributed to the perpetuation of debt vulnerabilities that African States are in. In 2024, it was expected that Africa would spend around \$74 billion on debt service, amounting to 10.6% of GDP in Africa. According to the United Nations

³⁶ United Nations, *Our Common Agenda policy brief 6 - Reforms to the international financial architecture* (May 2023).

Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the public debt of Africa as a continent reached \$1.8 trillion, increasing by 183% since 2010.³⁷ UNCTAD's report also indicates that in 2020, there were 27 countries in Africa with a debt-to-GDP ratio above 60%.³⁸ In 2022, there were 21 low-income countries that were in, or at risk of, debt distress.³⁹

Hence, the reform of the international financial architecture truly requires a collective effort, as emphasized by the Proclamation of the Accra Conference. Additionally, it necessitates the consolidation of the progress made thus far in the reform process. Notable efforts include the work undertaken by the High-level Working Group on the Global Financial Architecture and the African caucus's position on the Evolution Roadmap of the World Bank Group.

Additionally, over the past decade and in more recent years, African states have faced an added difficulty posed by climate change. Climate change advocates strongly argue that nations with a greater historical contribution to climate change should provide compensation and assistance to countries that suffer disproportionately as a way of reparation. The Accra Conference also recommended campaigns for climate justice and reparatory justice.

³⁷ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), 'Africa: A sequence of shocks beyond its borders diminished Africa's ability to develop and led fast increasing debt levels', [Website]. Available at: <https://unctad.org/publication/world-of-debt/regional-stories>

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ One Campaign, 'African Debt', [Website]. Available at: <https://data.one.org/topics/african-debt/>

Despite Africa contributing only 4% of global carbon dioxide emissions, it experiences a disproportionate impact from the effects of climate change. The adverse weather conditions not only have a significant effect on agricultural productivity, water resources, and ecosystems, directly impacting the lives of millions of people, but they also impose a substantial economic toll resulting in considerable losses in their GDP as a result of the consequences of climate change. The current financial architecture only provides 3% (\$16 billion) of the \$2.5 trillion that is required for Africa between 2020 – 2030.

The Climate finance debate has taken the centre stage in discussions of the Conference of the Parties (COP). During COP28 in December 2023, State Parties agreed to activate the loss and damage fund. This fund, operationalized through the World Bank, aims to provide grant-based financing for reconstruction, rehabilitation, and relocation efforts following extreme weather events. However, it is crucial to recognize that the fund's operationalization represents the first step in addressing broader climate challenges, particularly affecting nations with minimal contributions to climate change. Furthermore, deploying the fund within the existing international financial structure may not adequately address accessibility issues for African countries. Therefore, it is crucial to thoroughly evaluate and consider comprehensive reforms to the entire international financial architecture. Additionally, the Green Climate Fund (GCF), another multilateral fund for climate change, has received total pledges of \$12.5 billion from 29 countries. The GCF aims to support mitigation and adaptation measures in developing

countries. Again, as the next programme cycle (2024 - 2027) begins, it is important to closely examine the equitable operationalization of the fund.

Nevertheless, in the quest for climate justice and reparatory justice, it is also important to consider the already existing AU mechanisms, such as the Committee of African Heads of States and Government on the Environment, African Ministerial Conference on the Environment and African Group of Negotiators on Climate Change.

Besides the discussion on climate change and the reform of the UNSC, as well as the international financial architecture, this year also presents significant opportunities for African states to participate in other multilateral negotiations. Of significance are the negotiations for the new Global Tax Convention and the UN Cyber Convention. These negotiations could provide African states with a platform to voice their concerns, advocate for their interests, and shape global policies that create fairness for their economies and digital landscapes.

6. CONCLUSION

The historical injustices of slavery, colonialism and apartheid that continue to shape the socio-economic circumstances of affected societies not only had devastating consequences on Africa's socio-economic standing but also framed how Africa integrated into the global economy. Given the international dimension of the historical injustices and how they fashioned the integration of the societies affected by slavery and colonial oppression into the global economy, reparative justice would

not be effective without addressing the ways by which slavery and colonialism shaped the hierarchical and asymmetric system of international relations in which the makers of decisions and the takers of decisions of the system mirror the parts of the world responsible for the historical injustices and those on the receiving end of these injustices respectively.

As expounded in this special research report and viewed as such, reparative justice entails and conceives of a more egalitarian system of global order with international mechanisms of distribution that would offset the structural inequalities of trade. This is a system that would end the cycle of indebtedness of societies affected by the historical injustices and ensures fair access to development finance through a just international trade and tax regime.

A transformed global security architecture that ends the exclusion of those affected by these historical injustices from seating at the decision-making table with full rights.

Reparative justice should also inform the kind of measures that need to be adopted for addressing the unequal burden in contributing to and shouldering the consequences of climate change. Such conception of reparative justice is critical to the realization of a more equitable and just international relations that is closer to the proclaimed commitment of the UDHR for the equal worth and dignity of every human being irrespective of their race, social origin or history and is a pre-requisite for achieving the SDGs. In so doing, it provides further historical, moral and legal bases for the current reform efforts that seek to bridge the gap between the normative commitments of

the global order (as espoused in the UDHR and the SDGs) and the realities of the historical process of shaping the design and operation of its security, trading and financial systems.



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