

32nd Session of the United Nations Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent on Economic Empowerment of People of African Descent

Thematic Discussion: From Rhetoric to Reality: Reparatory Justice for People of African Descent

Reparatory Justice: Global Momentum for a Global Imperative

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I first want to thank the WGEPAD, Madam Chair Barbara Reynolds, and Catherine Namakula for your leadership of this panel. I also want to acknowledge and show gratitude for my ancestors who have paved the way for us to be here today and the work they have done to advance the cause for justice.

Last year, Poland's Foreign Minister signed a note to Germany demanding \$1.3 trillion in reparations for the damage incurred by Nazi Germany during World War II. Last summer, as floods ravaged its country, Pakistan Climate Minister and former ambassador to the U.S. Sherry Rehman [made the case for reparations](#) to Pakistan for the relentless nature of the country's climate catastrophes. Citing the fact that Pakistan contributes less than 1 percent to greenhouse gas emissions, Rehman asserts that "historic injustices have to be heard."

As the pummeling of the Ukrainian city of Mariupol dragged on and war weary officials held court with international bodies soliciting more support from around the world, U.S. Congressman Jared Golden along with three of his colleagues introduced [the Reparations for Ukraine through Sovereign Nation Support and Integration \(RUSSIA\) Act](#) – bipartisan [legislation](#) that would allow for frozen assets of the Central Bank of the Russian Federation to be sold and used to help pay for the rebuilding of Ukraine. Congressman Golden, describing the billions of dollars of Russian assets that countries around the world hold, called his proposal "common-sense", and declared that it would provide "critical resources" for the people of Ukraine and make Russia foot the bill.

I open with these examples because it's important to highlight the fact that calls for reparations are not the exclusive purview of PAD and that there exists precedent both current and historical, for reparations.

Once viewed in many spaces as a fringe issue, the concept of reparatory justice is gaining in momentum and visibility and I'm excited to be sitting next to my colleague who so thoroughly listed out many of the recent developments in Africa and the Diaspora to advance a global reparations agenda. Last summer several organizations including the African Transitional Justice Legacy Fund, Africa-America Institute and my own in partnership with the African Union commission organized an international Reparations and Racial Healing conference in Accra called Advancing Justice in which Ghana's President Nana Akufo-Addo keynoted and declared reparations a global

imperative for the harms caused by the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, colonialism, neocolonialism, and ongoing oppression of Black people around the world.

Out of that gathering, The Accra Declaration was issued which set forth a strategy to advance the Global Reparations movement. It's important to note that this Declaration builds upon the legacies established by social movements that produced outcomes such as the [1993 Abuja Proclamation](#) and the 2001 [Durban Declaration and Program of Action](#).

President Akufo-Addo's declaration is momentous considering the influence of Ghana as perhaps one of the most visible African countries and the potential influence on other African heads of state who may be thinking anew about what reparations could mean in the context of institution and systems-building and the linkages with reparations movements in the United States, the Caribbean and increasingly, in South America (for example the day after her inauguration as Colombia's first Afro-descended Vice President, Francia Marquez Mina [convened a global conference on reparations](#) as part of inauguration activities).

In the United States a [task force in California](#) has been formed to explore the issue of reparations and submitted the second part of a comprehensive report last month. Last year I myself along with a delegation of advocates from the Global Circle for Reparations and Healing, met with leadership of the Roman Catholic Church at the Vatican, where we offered a presentment that set forth the crimes, the harms, and the remedies and the role of the Catholic Church in the initiation of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Since that time, the Church has acknowledged its role and a process is being set forth to determine what reparatory justice must entail.

Another member of the Global Circle for Reparations and Healing, led by the Africa Transitional Justice Legacy Fund with whom I also have the pleasure of collaborating, is working closely with the African Union Commission and leadership across the continent to develop a common position on reparations as well as an agenda for healing between Africa and the African Diaspora.

Several months ago, a group of African economists convened in Dakar to address the critical issues of monetary sovereignty, economic sovereignty, and the nexus with reparations. Out of that convening came the Dakar Declaration. Since that time, a Global Working Group on Global Economic Systems Institutions and Policy convenes regularly bringing together the Global economic agenda with a Global reparations agenda to push toward transformation. This working group is advancing interventions in global economic institutions, for example, proposing a shift from Bretton woods (out of which were established the World Bank, IMF, and WTO), to Bandung woods – hearkening to the first large scale Asian-African conference in 1955 as the appropriate framework for global solidarity, which inspired the people in colonies to struggle for national liberation and played a significant role in promoting the anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist struggle for Asian and African people.

I share these examples because reparations is *already* moving from rhetoric to reality – and it is important to frame it as such. Despite the vociferous resistance by states – particularly Western states.

So what must happen to continue this shift from rhetoric to reality? It means we must engage in the corridors of power to advance reparations as my colleague Mr. Masiga rightly stated, as a global imperative. It means contending with the institutions that have perpetuated harm and the conventional wisdom that puts limitations on the possibilities of reparatory justice.

It also means we must be clear that those who perpetuated the harm are *not* those who determine the remedy. I mention this because there have been several instances over the last few years in which some states have established “apology funds”, “development funds” and the like. We must be clear that our fights for reparatory justice do not extend solely to the comfort level of those who have perpetrated the harm. It will require seismic shifts in the institutions, systems, and policies that created our current paradigm. Naturally, the systems, structures and people that have maintained such, will *have to be uncomfortable*. Ushering in a new paradigm built on reparatory justice ideals, will *require discomfort*.

Reparations *is* common sense. It’s no coincidence that the notion of reparations has gained in visibility as the edges of the societies we’ve built continue to fray. The unprecedented uprisings around the world in response to the police murder of George Floyd, and the increasing inequality in the face of continued economic fallout from the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic make clear that the foundations of the current global order - built on conquest, empire, subjugation, and exploitation – require reevaluation and transformation.

Without a doubt, a new global order is emerging. We have an opportunity at this juncture to determine the structure in which the new order will take, and the foundation of that order. A commitment to reparatory justice building on the examples set forth- building a global Pan-African movement, interrogating existing institutions and proposing new ones, pushing back against false limits on what is possible, and highlighting our progress, will usher in an order based on self-determination, our common humanity, peace, and accountability. It reinforces the notion that reparations is not just about the past, it’s about the future.

Biography

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