

# General Assembly – Research Report

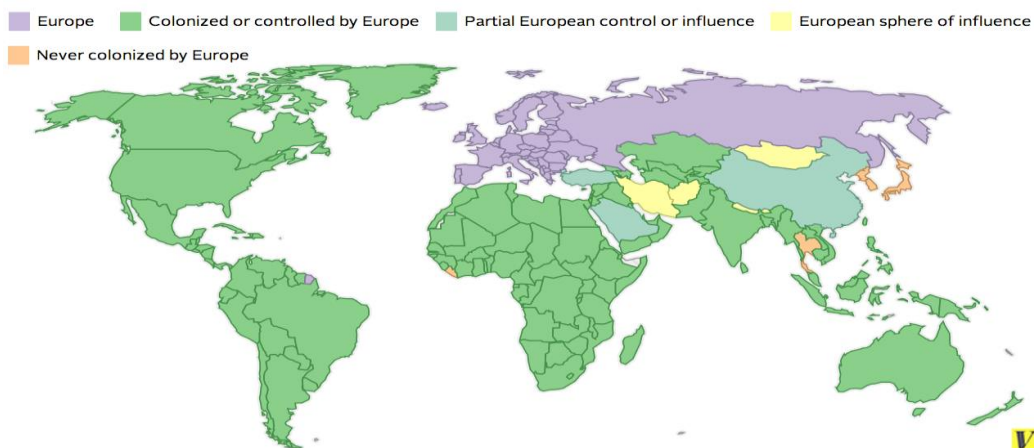
## Examining the Role of Developed Nations in Reparations for Historical Colonialism and Exploitation

### Introduction to the Topic:

Colonialism is defined as “control by one power over a dependent area or people.”. It occurs when a country dominates and exploits another, usually while imposing its own language and cultural norms on its citizens.

From 1492 to 1914, Europeans conquered or colonized more than 80 percent of the entire world. However, several non-European countries, such as Japan and China, also engaged in colonial or imperial activities at some point. This left behind a legacy of social, economic, and cultural upheaval in colonized areas.

### Countries that have been under European control



**Figure 1** – Countries that have been under European control (retrieved from Vox)

In 1945, the year when the UN was founded, around 750 million people, nearly a third of the world's population, lived in territories that were dependent on colonial powers. Today, this number has gone down to less than 2 million people, as there are now only 17 non-self-governing territories remaining. This success is mainly due to the creation of the UN Charter, which affirmed the principle of self-determination. This was one of the factors that contributed towards the wave of decolonisation, which led to many countries becoming independent and joining the UN.

However, as stated by the UN Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights Nada Al-Nashif; “While many former colonies have gained independence since the establishment of the United Nations, the process of decolonization remains incomplete.”. The effects of colonisation are still felt in many ex-colonies, especially in terms of economic imbalance, racial discrimination,

xenophobia, intolerance, and the erosion of indigenous cultures. Additionally, the topic of colonialism remains, to this day, a source of disparity and animosity between many nations. Therefore, it is up to the international community to come up with long-term solutions that will amend these fragile diplomatic ties. Although at a first glance this may seem simple to achieve, it is more complicated than it sounds, due to complexities regarding accountability and the degree of impact of the implementation of certain measures – thus, we must ask ourselves the questions: “What do former colonial powers owe the descendants of those they colonized?”, and “Is it enough to apologize and return cultural objects?”.

## Background Information:

### History of colonialism

Colonial practices can be traced back as far as antiquity, as colonialism was practiced by empires such as Ancient Greece, Ancient Rome, Ancient Egypt, and Phoenicia. These empires established colonies that used the physical and population resources of the people they conquered to increase their own power.

Later, in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, during the Age of Discovery, the Portuguese became the first Europeans to promote overseas exploration and colonisation. Soon after, their rival nation Spain decided to follow suit, and Portugal and Spain became locked in competition for new territories and took over Indigenous lands in the Americas, India, Africa, and Asia. These lands were exploited for their natural resources, labour, and strategic importance, often at the expense of local populations and cultures. Driven by the desire for economic gain, political dominance, and cultural supremacy, other nations such as the Netherlands, Germany, Britain and France followed Portugal and Spain’s footsteps.

While European colonialism is most often highlighted, colonial practices were not exclusive to Europe. Empires such as the Mongols, the Ottoman Empire, and Imperial Japan also engaged in forms of colonial expansion.

The motive or rationale behind the colonialism movement was the claim made by many colonial powers that they had an ethical and religious obligation to control the land and culture of Indigenous peoples, due to the belief that these populations were “savage” and were, therefore, in dire need of western assistance. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Catholic popes laid out a religious justification for colonization, issuing a series of papal bulls now known as the *Doctrine of Discovery* that asserted colonization was necessary to save souls and seize lands for the growth of the Church.

While colonialism was widely justified by its proponents, it was also critiqued even during its height. Figures such as Bartolomé de las Casas condemned the exploitation and mistreatment of Indigenous peoples. These critiques show that not all Europeans supported the colonial agenda, adding complexity to the historical context.

## **Subjugation and Revolutions**

Starting even before the decolonization movement, Indigenous people on all continents staged violent and nonviolent resistance to their colonizers. These included the Pueblo Rebellion in 1680, which temporarily ended Spanish rule in what is now New Mexico, and the Haitian Revolution in 1791, a successful slave revolt that established the first Black-led republic. In India, there were numerous uprisings against English rule, including the First War of Independence in 1857. Other regions, such as Southeast Asia, Africa, and Oceania, also witnessed significant resistance movements, demonstrating how much Indigenous peoples longed for independence and freedom from their colonizers.

Throughout history there have even been instances where former colonies eventually became colonizers themselves, namely the United States of America, which was formerly held by Great Britain. Shortly after the American Revolution in 1776, the U.S. extended its territory and later expanded its claims to the Pacific and Latin America.

## **Consequences of colonialism**

Firstly, one of the many visible impacts of colonialism is global economic inequality. This comes from the reality that colonizers, driven by greed, extracted many resources and wealth from their colonies, leaving local populations without the means to develop their own economies. This has resulted in an economic dependency pattern where many countries that were once colonies continue to rely on raw materials exports. For example, minerals and agricultural products are sold at low prices, while developed countries control the manufacturing and processing industries. Additionally, old debt and trade inequalities between the colonizer and the colonized still exist today.

Secondly, social and racial inequity stems largely from colonisation. E. Tendayi Achiume, former Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, said that some of the most entrenched forms of systemic racism come from legacies of slavery and colonialism. Racial hierarchies established during colonial rule have perpetuated inequality which, unfortunately, is still prevalent nowadays in many places. For example, in the United States, systemic racial inequities trace back to the transatlantic slave trade which was one of the backbones of many colonial economies.

Thirdly, colonialism also contributed towards the erosion of many cultures. This came about in the form of the loss of Indigenous knowledge and languages due to many Indigenous groups being suppressed during the colonial rule. In fact, UNESCO estimates that around 43% of the 7000 languages in the world are endangered, many of them spoken by communities impacted by colonization. Moreover, artifacts and heritage items taken during colonial rule are still housed in museums in Europe and the US.

Lastly, colonialism has also left behind a trail of political instability in its wake. During the colonial period, colonial borders were often drawn without regard for ethnic or cultural divisions, and this

has led to several conflicts and instability. For example, the partition of Africa by European powers resulted in ethnic tensions, seen in conflicts like the 1994 Rwandan Genocide. Furthermore, colonial governments often suppressed local leadership, leaving post-colonial nations with weak institutions. For example, the Democratic Republic of Congo has faced chronic instability and corruption rooted in colonial practices.

## **Recent Developments:**

The effects of colonialism are still felt to this day in many African, Asian, and American countries. Racial inequalities, economic disparities between developed and developing nations, and the loss of indigenous ancestral heritage, practices, and knowledge, are said to be fruit of this period.

In recent years, some developed nations have come forward issuing formal apologies for their historical actions, undergone discussions on reparations that could be provisioned, created social initiatives, etc. Although, many people state the actions that have already been taken do not suffice. Philanthropic projects and organisations have been set in place to aid countries and descendants of slave victims.

The MacArthur Foundation strives to reach global ethnic and racial justice. In 2021, it gathered \$80 million for this cause and continues to advocate for the empowerment of Black-led and Black-focused organizations, emphasising their role on combatting racial inequity. Moreover, they seek to allocate reparations to those needing of such, while also supporting for the self-determinations of indigenous peoples, allowing them to have their autonomy and not lose their culture and traditions.

The Decolonizing Wealth Project strives to minimize the effects of colonialism, focusing on uplifting diversity, equity, justice, inclusion, and awareness. This is done via philanthropic giving circles, making decolonized resources more accessible, and using media to educate people and allow others to share their stories on the matter.

Certain nations have committed to restore historical artifacts from their museums back to colonized countries, where these items are originally from. For example, in June 2020, France passed a bill which restored 26 historical artifacts back to their original African countries, Nigeria and Senegal. However, the French government estimates that they hold around 90,000 objects looted from Africa alone, deeming 26 an insultingly low number. In 2022, Germany transferred ownership of over 1,000 bronzes back to Nigeria, and in 2023, Belgium announced it is planning on returning items, such as ceremonial masks and statues, to Congo. Nevertheless, there are still museums and countries who aren't keen to restore the objects they possess, including the British Museum, which depends on a law that gives reason for them not to return heritage objects.

## Focus of the Debate:

Delegates should focus on creating effective measures that developed nations can take to address their historical responsibilities while promoting development and reconciliation. Key areas of focus should include economic reparations, cultural and historical acknowledgment, sustainable development partnerships and global economic and institutional reforms

## Significant Parties:

**France:** In 2001, France was the first country worldwide to pass a law, the Taubira Law, that recognised slave trade as a crime against humanity. However, this law does not provide any form of reparations, as this was not included in the implemented version.

**Portugal:** Portugal trafficked almost 6 million Africans during its slavery period, being the European country who most participated in slavery. Despite this, little sensibilisation is done in schools and, even though internal debates have occurred on the matter, no reparation process has been put in place. The current President said the country is responsible for its historical actions and suggested the need for reparations and a formal apology.

**England:** The Prime Minister and King Charles have communicated their sorrows towards the slavery done by the British and accepted research to be done to inspect the monarchy's role in slavery. However, the British government has rejected the provision of reparations.

**Netherlands:** King Willem-Alexander as well as Mark Rutte, former Prime Minister, have issued apologies for the Netherlands' previous involvement in slavery. Instead of reparations, the government has set €200 million for the inheritors of enslaved people and other groups.

**Belgium:** In 2022, King Philippe reiterated his grief for the exploitation, racism, and violence during Belgium's colonisation of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Despite this, colonialism is not a very disclosed topic in the country and reparations have not been concluded.

**United States:** A proposition to study what reparations could be set has been stalled in Congress for 35 years. California tried to pass a bill regarding slavery and racial discrimination, but this was vetoed by Governor Gavin Newsom. In 2021, Illinois became the first U.S. state with a city that offered reparations to Black inhabitants, targeted at housing aid. The country has showed support for the U.N. Permanent Forum on People of African Descent.

**Venezuela:** In October 2024, Nicolas Maduro stated that Venezuela and other Latin American countries wanted to put forward a strong declaration for Spain to pay reparations for the exploitation of their lands as well as the slavery imposed during the colonisation period.

## Past UN Actions:

- **Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples (1960):** This resolution marked a significant step toward decolonization by condemning colonialism and affirming the right to self-determination. While it catalysed political independence, it did not address the economic consequences of colonial exploitation
- **Durban Declaration and Programme of Action (2001):** Adopted during the World Conference Against Racism, this declaration recognized the profound and lasting effects of slavery and colonialism, calling for reparative measures. It encouraged states to acknowledge historical injustices and take steps to address racial and economic inequalities.
- **Sustainable Development Goals (2015):** Several SDGs, such as Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and Goal 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), emphasize international cooperation to address disparities that stem from colonial legacies. These goals provide a framework for tackling systemic inequalities through development-focused initiatives.
- **International Decade for People of African Descent (2015–2024):** This initiative, proclaimed by the UN General Assembly, has drawn attention to the legacies of slavery and colonialism. It encourages states to adopt policies that address the social and economic disparities experienced by people of African descent, many of which result from colonial histories.

## Possible Solutions:

- **Global Reparations Fund:** Proposing the creation of an UN-administered fund for development projects in former colonies, with contributions based on historical colonial involvement.
- **Cultural Restitution:** Developing frameworks for returning cultural artifacts and heritage items taken during colonial rule.
- **Economic Reforms:** Examining ways to make global financial institutions and trade policies more equitable for developing nations.
- **Debt Forgiveness:** Suggest cancelling or restructuring debts of developing nations tied to colonial legacies.

## Glossary and Key Terms:

**Colonialism:** The control by one power over a dependent area or people.

**Decolonisation:** The action or process of a state withdrawing from a former colony, leaving it independent.

**Imperialism:** A policy of extending a country's power and influence through means such as colonization or the use of military force.

**Reparations:** The action of making amends for a wrong one has done, by providing payment or other assistance to those who have been wronged.

**Philanthropy:** The desire to promote the welfare of others, mainly through donations of money.

**Self-determination:** The process by which a country determines its own status and forms its own government.

**Exploitation:** The act of using someone or something unfairly for your own advantage.

**Xenophobia:** The dislike of or prejudice against people from other countries.

**Slavery:** The activity of legally owning other people who are forced to work for or obey you.

**Slave Trade:** the procuring, transporting, and selling of human beings as slaves, in particular the former trade in black Africans as slaves by European countries and North America.

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