

Agenda Item: Reparations for Historical Injustices Caused by Colonialism

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 1. Letter from the Secretary General**
- 2. Letter from the Under Secretary General of SPECPOL**
- 3. Introduction to the Committee**
 - a. What is SPECPOL?
 - b. History of SPECPOL
 - c. Key Words
- 4. History of the Colonialism: 15th–20th Century**
- 5. Continuing Socioeconomic Inequalities and Consequences of Colonial Exploitation**
 - a. Economic Consequences
 - b. Cultural Consequences
 - c. Social Consequences
- 6. Neo-colonial Practices and Economic Dependence**
- 7. International Perspectives on Reparations for Colonial-Era Violations**
- 8. Role of ICJ and Human Rights Mechanisms in Decolonisation**
- 9. Questions Need to be Answered**
- 10. Bibliography**

1. Letter from the Secretary General

Dear Delegates,

It's an indescribable honour to welcome you to the AKA Model United Nations 2025. As the Secretary General of this conference, I am truly excited to witness your debates as you work to find meaningful solutions to global issues.

As you attend this conference, I strongly encourage you to open your mind to new ideas. This year, our academic team has worked diligently to provide you with guidelines that will support your MUN journey. We advise you to approach the agenda earnestly. Over many years, the world has changed in both bitter and hopeful ways, and through this conference, we aim to emphasize the importance of world peace more than ever.

AKA Model United Nations is a place where your voice can be heard. We believe that this conference is a great opportunity for you to express yourselves and discuss current topics. Our hope is that AKA Model United Nations will open new doors for you. I look forward to meeting you all and witnessing the remarkable debates ahead.

Warm regards,
Oğuz TEKİNSOY
Secretary-General
tekoguz40@gmail.com

2. Letter from the Under Secretary General of SPECPOL

Dear Delegates,

It's my pleasure to welcome you all to the AKAMUN '25 Conference as the Under Secretary General of SPECPOL. It is an honour for me to guide your debates on one of the most challenging global issues with diplomacy, collaboration and passion over the next two days.

I believe that our agenda, -which emphasises the consequences of colonialism that has led to slavery, racism, poverty in many regions and wealth gap between colonisers and colonised- will help you to gain awareness and ambition about global and historical injustices.

As the SPECPOL committee, with our agenda item being "Reparations for Historical Injustices Caused by Colonialism", we will be reviewing the historical context of the issue, debating the social, economic, cultural and infrastructural consequences of colonialism and discussing the solutions to repair the injustices in colonised regions and countries. I highly encourage you to read our study guide to understand the context of the issue and attend the debate well-prepared.

I hope we can have a wonderful two days with both debate and enjoyable moments. I look forward to meeting you in the conference. Please do not hesitate to contact me via my e-mail address if you have any questions.

Best Regards,

Defne KADAM

Under Secretary General of SPECPOL

defnekadam35@gmail.com

3. Introduction to the Committee

a. What is SPECPOL?

The Special Political and Decolonization Committee (SPECPOL) is the Fourth Committee of the United Nations General Assembly. When the UN was founded, 750 million people lived under colonial rule. Since 1945, over 80 former colonies have gained independence, thanks in part to the work of the SPECPOL. Today, fewer than two million people live in 17 Non-Self-Governing territories, and SPECPOL holds hearings with petitioners, including civil society organizations and private individuals, from these areas. SPECPOL also covers issues related to the Middle East, Palestinian refugees, and Israeli practices, as well as topics like the effects of atomic radiation, peacekeeping operations, space exploration, and international cooperation for peaceful uses of outer space.

b. History of SPECPOL

The Fourth Committee of the United Nations General Assembly, SPECPOL (Special Political and Decolonization Committee), was created to oversee the decolonization process that started after World War II. It supports the right of colonial peoples to self-determination. When the United Nations was founded, many regions were still under colonial rule. This situation was viewed as a major barrier to peace and human rights. Because of this, the UN made ending colonialism one of its main goals shortly after it was established. In this context, the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples (1514 (XV)), adopted in 1960, provided the legal and moral foundation for SPECPOL's efforts.

Over time, SPECPOL's responsibilities have grown beyond just ending classical colonialism. It now addresses new forms of colonialism, violations of self-determination rights, and disputes over sovereignty. The Committee keeps track of the situation in 17 “Non-Self-Governing Territories” that have yet to achieve independence. It also prepares reports on protecting the rights of the people living in these areas. Additionally, SPECPOL focuses on issues like the return of cultural heritage, territories under foreign occupation, and the ongoing socio-economic effects of colonialism. In this way, SPECPOL has become not only a critic of past mistakes but also a key player in the ongoing fight for global justice and equality.

c. Key Words

Reparations: Refers to all measures taken to remedy damages resulting from unlawful acts committed in the past. This includes material compensation, symbolic gestures, institutional reforms, and cultural restoration.

Colonialism: Refers to a state controlling other societies politically, economically, and culturally, exploiting and managing their resources.

Neo-colonialism: The situation where economic and political dependence continues despite gaining political independence.

State Responsibility: In international law, this refers to a state's obligation to compensate for damages arising from its unlawful acts.

Compensation: The compensation of financial losses or damages through money or material resources.

Restitution: The return of land, cultural assets, or resources acquired through unlawful means to their rightful owners.

Cultural Heritage: All historical artifacts, works of art, traditions, and cultural values belonging to a society.

Historical Injustices: Historical injustices refer to the systematic injustices faced by peoples during the colonial period. This concept encompasses practices such as forced displacement, enslavement, exploitation of natural resources, suppression of cultural identity, and creation of economic inequalities. As their effects continue today, discussions on reparations require a restorative approach that involves both acknowledging the violations and addressing the current problems faced by victimized communities stemming from this legacy.

4. History of the Colonialism: 15th–20th Century

From the late 15th century, when Portuguese and Spanish maritime voyages opened sustained contact between Europe, Africa, Asia and the Americas, European powers built trading posts that quickly evolved into territorial empires; Columbus's 1492 crossing and subsequent Iberian conquest of large parts of the Americas inaugurated a pattern of conquest, disease, resource extraction and forced labor that continued and expanded for five centuries.

Between the 16th and 19th centuries the Atlantic economy grew around plantation agriculture and the transatlantic slave trade, which forcibly moved millions of Africans to work in sugar, cotton and tobacco colonies. In the 19th century a second, more systematic wave of expansion known as New Imperialism reconfigured global politics: industrial demand for raw materials, strategic rivalry and advances in military and medical technology accelerated land grabs, culminating in the Scramble for Africa and the Berlin Conference of 1884–85.

Colonial rule imposed new taxation systems, cash-crop economies, rail and port infrastructure designed to extract wealth, and legal and educational systems that displaced indigenous institutions. The demographic and cultural consequences were severe, for example catastrophic indigenous population losses in parts of the Americas after contact and social dislocation across Africa and Asia; by 1914 roughly ninety percent of Africa fell under European control.

Although decolonization after 1945 ended direct imperial rule, the political borders, economic dependencies and social inequalities established during the 15th-20th century persist and form the historical basis for contemporary claims for reparations.

a. The United Kingdom

From 17th to early 20th century, the UK was the largest empire in history which expanded through chartered company and sea power primarily into a global government. Much of the modern political economy of India (1858-1947), a good portion of East and West Africa (Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana), Southern Africa (South Africa, Zimbabwe) as well as the Caribbean and even Oceania trace their current systems to British colonialism. Land dispossession, indirect rule, plantation economies and forced labor have left deep-seated inequalities in their wake which provide both the backdrop for today's reparations discussions as well as some case studies of what might be success or obstacles. British culpability claims largely derive from the transatlantic slave trade, the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya (1952-1960) and aftermath of India's partition (1947).

b. France

Beginning in the 17th century, France emerged as a significant imperial force, extending its influence into Southeast Asia, the Caribbean, West Africa, Central Africa, and North Africa. The French Empire ruled over nations like Algeria, Tunisia, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and a significant portion of the Sahel during its height in the 19th century. French colonialism frequently imposed the French legal system, administrative structures, and language, placing a high priority on direct rule and cultural assimilation. The Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962), one of the bloodiest decolonization conflicts, continues to influence reparations and memory politics.

c. Spain

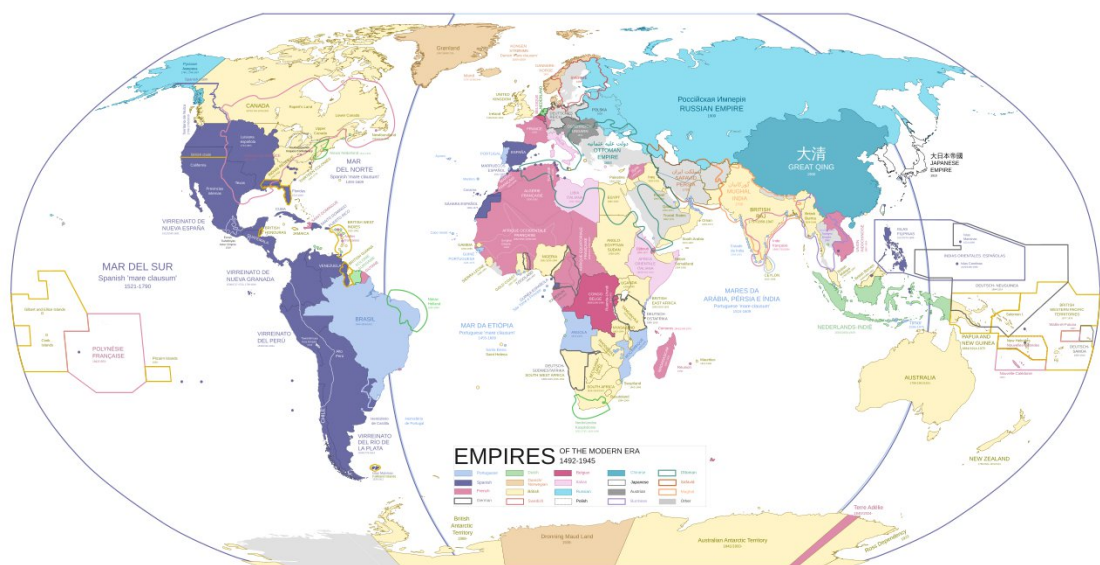
After 1492, Spain founded one of the first empires in history, controlling much of the Americas, including Mexico, Peru, the Caribbean, Central America, and South America, until the early 1800s. Mining, particularly silver mining, forced labor schemes like *encomienda* and *repartimiento*, and missionary growth were the main drivers of the Spanish colonial economy. Spanish rule was overthrown by independence movements in the 1800s, but extractive economic systems and racial hierarchies persisted. Spain's imperial era came to an end in 1898 when it lost Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines.

d. Portugal

Portugal established the first outposts in West Africa, Brazil, India, and Southeast Asia during the 15th century, spearheading European overseas expansion. Portugal was among the last European nations to decolonize, with its longest lasting colonies-Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau-remaining under Portuguese authority until 1974-1975. Reparations claims are largely based on Brazil's exploitation (1500-1822) and its pivotal role in the transatlantic slave trade. Forced labor, resource exploitation, and protracted independence conflicts shaped Angola and Mozambique.

e. The Netherlands

From the 17th century until 1949, the Netherlands established a merchant-based colonial empire centered on the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia). Plantation systems, forced cultivation (particularly of coffee, sugar, and spices), and monopolized maritime trade were all established under Dutch rule. In addition, the Dutch had colonies in the Caribbean (Suriname, Curaçao), and they briefly ruled South Africa through the Cape Colony. When discussing compensation for economic exploitation, the Indonesian Cultivation System (1830-1870) is often brought up.



5. Continuing Socioeconomic Inequalities and Consequences of Colonial Exploitation

a. Economic Consequences

Many of the economic difficulties that post-colonial states face today are rooted in the way their economies were shaped under European rule. Empires such as Britain, France, Portugal, Spain, and Belgium built their colonies around extracting raw materials—rubber from the Congo, cotton from India, cocoa from Ghana, or copper from Zambia. Because the goal was to serve the economic needs of the metropole, local industries were either neglected or actively blocked. When independence arrived, most countries inherited economies that were narrow, export-dependent, and highly vulnerable to global price changes.

This vulnerability still shapes national decision-making. For example, when cocoa prices fall, Ghana's economy immediately feels the impact; when copper prices drop, Zambia faces budget pressure. Decades after independence, many governments still struggle to diversify their economies, partly because they lack the capital, technology, and fair trading conditions needed to support new industries. The global economic system also continues to favor countries that industrialized early—mostly the former colonial powers—making it harder for developing states to break out of their inherited structures.

As a result, building long-term development strategies becomes extremely challenging. Poverty reduction, public investment, and institutional capacity are all held back by economic foundations that were never intended to support sustainable growth. These historical patterns continue to influence how governments plan, spend, and respond to crises today.

These challenges show that the economic impact of colonialism is not just a historical issue but an ongoing structural constraint. Many post-colonial governments must balance immediate economic pressures with long-term reforms, often without the resources needed to transform their economies. As a result, the struggle to build resilient and diverse economic systems remains one of the most significant barriers to sustainable development today.

b. Cultural Consequences

Colonialism also reshaped cultural life in ways that remain visible across Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and the Pacific. In territories ruled by Britain, France, Spain, and Portugal, indigenous cultures were often sidelined. Missionaries and administrators promoted their own languages, religions, and educational systems, while local languages and traditions were pushed into the background. This created a sense of cultural displacement, especially in places such as Kenya, India, Algeria, and the Philippines, where younger generations grew up in structures that did not fully reflect their own heritage.

Even after independence, many countries kept the colonial languages—English, French, Spanish, or Portuguese—in government, education, and law. Although this sometimes helped with global communication, it also deepened social divides. Those who mastered the colonial language gained access to better opportunities, while others were left at a disadvantage.

Today, many societies are trying to restore what was lost. Efforts to protect indigenous languages in South Africa, revive traditional knowledge in Indonesia, or strengthen local cultural institutions in Peru show how communities are trying to reconnect with their heritage. Yet these efforts often take place within systems still shaped by colonial-era norms. This creates a constant tension: people want to reclaim their identity, but they must do so within frameworks that were never designed for them.

This ongoing tension highlights how deeply cultural identities were shaped by colonial influence, creating a mix of continuity and disruption that still affects people's sense of belonging. As countries work to recover and preserve their cultural heritage, they must also navigate modern global expectations and internal social changes. The effort to rebuild and protect cultural identity therefore remains a central part of the post-colonial experience.

c. Social Consequences

The social divisions established under colonial rule remain one of its most lasting legacies. Colonial administrations often relied on ethnic or class-based separation to maintain control—policies clearly visible in British India, Belgian Rwanda, or French Algeria. These divisions were strengthened through unequal access to education, employment, and political authority, which created hierarchies that survived long after independence.

Today, these patterns still influence daily life. In many countries, urban centers receive far more investment than rural regions, reflecting colonial infrastructure strategies that prioritized administrative and commercial hubs. This imbalance continues to limit access to healthcare, education, and economic opportunity for people living outside major cities.

Colonial borders also contribute to social fragmentation. In countries such as Nigeria, Sudan, and Cameroon, borders were drawn with little regard for ethnic or cultural realities, which has led to long-term tensions and, in some cases, conflict.

All of this makes it difficult for governments to create inclusive policies and build trust between different communities. The social structures inherited from colonial rule—unequal, fragmented, and deeply stratified—still shape political life and social cohesion across the post-colonial world.

These social patterns reveal how colonial rule established divisions that continue to shape interactions between communities and the state. Even when governments introduce new policies or reforms, the underlying structures often limit their effectiveness. Overcoming

these inherited inequalities requires long-term commitment and cooperation, showing how deeply colonialism continues to influence social cohesion and national stability.

6. Neo-colonial Practices and Economic Dependence

After official decolonization in the middle of the 20th century, many former colonies gained political independence, but for many, this independence was more symbolic than real. Instead of using troops or direct rule, powerful nations, multinational corporations, and international financial institutions used economic, financial, trade, and cultural strategies to maintain control over formerly colonized nations under neocolonialism.

In this arrangement, newly independent governments were frequently bound into exporting raw materials, minerals, agricultural products, or other primary commodities while importing largely manufactured goods from richer countries. This pattern maintained the previous colonial structure: the former colony provides cheap raw materials and labor, while value-added, manufacturing, and profit flows remain in the developed countries.

Furthermore, many post-colonial republics relied on external debt to fund development, infrastructure, and even fundamental government activities. Loans from institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank sometimes included conditions like austerity measures, structural adjustment programs (SAPs), opening up economies to foreign investors, liberalization, and deregulation, which limited economic sovereignty.

As a result, several countries remained economically underdeveloped, despite their political independence. Their ability to create diverse businesses, invest in human resources, and chart their own economic development path was severely curtailed. Structural reliance meant that economic policies, currency valuation, trade terms, and foreign investment flows were all subject to external forces and interests.

7. International Perspectives on Reparations for Colonial-Era Violations

Reparations, under international law, are restorative measures by a state to victims for the harm caused by its past unlawful acts. In the context of colonialism, the concept involves not only compensation for material losses but a multidimensional process entailing restoration of dignity for colonized peoples, recognition and preservation of their cultures, and the establishment of historical justice. During that period of time, millions of people were forced into labor, were displaced, and became victims of systematic exploitation of natural resources. The inequality that resulted in enriched colonial centers and impoverished colonies as part of that process continues even today. For this reason, the question of reparations is treated not just as facing the past but as a moral, political, and legal responsibility for tackling current socio-economic injustice.

Reparations are not limited to monetary payments; rather, they may take many different forms. In contrast to material reparations, which tend to be more direct and compensate for economic losses, practices like development funds, debt cancellation, infrastructure investments, and educational support also constitute reparations. Official apologies, days of remembrance, and the acknowledgment of historical crimes fall into the symbolic sphere, while measures like the restructuring of education systems, correction of historical narratives that reflect the legacy of colonialism, and the restitution of cultural assets fall under institutional reparations. These restorative steps are necessary not only to compensate for damages but also to create a healing effect on the collective memory of societies and prevent similar injustices from ever happening again in the future. In this sense, reparations should be pursued as a central method for building a more equitable global order, reaching beyond simply coming to terms with the past.

Claims for compensation have not remained theoretical; they are still on the agenda today with concrete examples in many regions. One of the most notable of those is the negotiations between Germany and Namibia related to the genocide committed against the people of Herero and Nama. The German government officially recognized these crimes and agreed on financial support, which is provided in the form of development aid. However, this deal received serious criticism because active participation was not provided to the communities that had become victims of these actions, and the name “development aid” was used instead of “compensation.” This situation clearly shows that solving an issue such as compensation cannot be achieved by financial arrangements only; the sense of justice should be satisfied as well.

Another important example concerns the claims for compensation by CARICOM countries against former colonial powers on behalf of their collective membership. These countries argue that the economic backwardness resulting from slavery and colonialism continues to impact today and demand comprehensive support in the areas of education, health, and infrastructure. In contrast, CARICOM's “10-Point Justice Plan” proposes not only monetary compensation but also multifaceted solutions such as development partnerships, technology transfer, and cultural restitution. Compensation paid to victims as a result of lawsuits filed over serious human rights violations committed by the United Kingdom during the Mau Mau Uprising in Kenya represents an important precedent that individual demands for justice can be met at the state level. What these examples go to show is that the debate on reparations must be conducted not only between states but also directly with the victimized communities. The question of reparations is a point of grave disagreement among the international community. Former colonial powers, such as the United Kingdom, France, Belgium, Spain, and Portugal, are generally reluctant to accept the concept of “reparations” directly. Their main argument is that retrospective application of legal responsibility may be disruptive in the development of international law, and they offer an alternative of assuming responsibility through development aid or cooperation programs. On the other hand, the former colonial countries believe this is insufficient and evasive, since such proposals do not adequately deal with the structural inequalities created by colonialism. The demand for reparations is also explicitly supported by regional organizations like the African Union and CARICOM. Based

on this, actors claim that reparations need to be not only economic but also cultural, social, and institutional. Meanwhile, UNESCO does important work with regard to the restitution of cultural heritage and the building of historical justice, while OHCHR outlines the need of documentation and recognition of human rights violations occurring during colonization processes.

8. Role of ICJ and Human Rights Mechanisms in Decolonisation

The International Court of Justice (ICJ), as the principal judicial body of the United Nations, plays a central role in addressing the legacy of colonialism by upholding the principle of self-determination and clarifying states' legal obligations under international law. Through its advisory opinions and judgments, the Court has affirmed that colonial domination violates international legal norms, particularly when it suppresses the political will of peoples and denies them the right to determine their own political, economic, and social futures.

Although the ICJ does not exercise criminal jurisdiction, it plays a decisive role in establishing state responsibility. Under international law, when a state breaches an international obligation, it is required to make full reparation for the harm caused. Reparations may take several forms, including restitution, compensation, satisfaction, and guarantees of non-repetition. By identifying specific colonial practices as violations of international law, ICJ decisions provide legal legitimacy for reparatory claims and strengthen the position of formerly colonised states in diplomatic and political negotiations. Furthermore, although the ICJ and human rights mechanisms cannot entirely eliminate the consequences of colonialism, they provide an essential legal framework for confronting historical injustices, affirming that reparations are not voluntary gestures, but binding legal and moral obligations under international law.

The Namibia Advisory Opinion (1971)

In its advisory opinion on the legality of South Africa's continued presence in Namibia, the ICJ declared that South Africa's administration of the territory was illegal. The Court emphasised that the people of Namibia had an inviolable right to self-determination and instructed UN member states not to recognise the legality of South Africa's rule.

This decision reinforced the idea that colonial domination is unlawful when it contradicts the collective will of the people and strengthened the legal foundations for liberation movements worldwide.

The Western Sahara Advisory Opinion (1975)

This case addressed whether Morocco or Mauritania had sovereignty over Western Sahara prior to Spanish colonisation. The ICJ concluded that neither state held territorial sovereignty and reaffirmed that the people of Western Sahara had the right to self-determination.

This opinion highlighted that historical claims cannot override the political rights of indigenous populations and provided legal support for the concept that land cannot be lawfully acquired through coercion or colonial arrangements.

The Chagos Archipelago Advisory Opinion (2019)

The ICJ ruled that the decolonisation of Mauritius was not lawfully completed due to the UK's continued control over the Chagos Islands. The Court required the administering power to end its administration of the territory as soon as possible.

This case significantly reinforced the idea that colonial arrangements, even decades later, could still be legally invalid, opening the door for reparative claims grounded in international law.

Role of Human Rights Mechanisms in Addressing Colonial Injustices

Following the Second World War, the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948 marked a global commitment to the protection of human dignity and fundamental freedoms. Although many colonial practices occurred before the establishment of modern human rights law, contemporary international legal frameworks recognise that grave violations such as slavery, genocide, racial discrimination, and crimes against humanity are not subject to statutes of limitation. As a result, colonial-era abuses continue to fall within the scope of international accountability mechanisms.

Several United Nations human rights treaties and institutions directly address the consequences of colonialism. These include the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), and the Convention Against Torture (CAT). Together, these instruments provide a legal foundation for addressing systemic discrimination, forced displacement, cultural destruction, and economic exploitation rooted in the colonial era.

UN treaty bodies play a crucial role in monitoring states' compliance with these international obligations. They examine state reports, receive individual complaints, and issue recommendations based on documented violations. Through these mechanisms, victims of colonial injustices are able to report abuses, seek remedies, and draw international attention to unresolved human rights violations. Moreover, the findings of treaty bodies often serve as authoritative evidence in international legal and diplomatic discussions regarding historical accountability.

In addition to treaty bodies, the UN Human Rights Council has established Special Procedures, including Special Rapporteurs and Working Groups, to investigate ongoing forms of colonial legacy such as structural racism, the marginalisation of indigenous peoples, and persistent economic inequality. Reports produced by these mechanisms play a vital role in raising awareness, shaping international policy, and strengthening advocacy efforts aimed at justice and reparations.

Transitional Justice Mechanisms

Transitional justice frameworks are increasingly applied to colonial contexts, as colonialism is now recognised as a form of structural and systematic injustice comparable to post-conflict violations. These frameworks aim not only to ensure legal accountability but also to promote social healing and historical recognition.

Common transitional justice mechanisms include Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, reparations programmes, institutional memory projects, and reforms of discriminatory legal structures. Such measures acknowledge victims' suffering, promote national and international awareness of historical wrongdoing, and work toward restoring trust between affected communities and institutions.

In this respect, colonialism is no longer viewed as merely a historical phenomenon but as an ongoing injustice with present-day consequences. The application of transitional justice tools reflects the growing recognition that lasting reconciliation requires not only development efforts, but also truth, accountability, and meaningful reparations.

9. Questions Need to be Answered

1. How can the post-colonial economies be structurally transformed to lessen inherited dependency?
2. Which forms of reparations are most effective without reinforcing economic dependence?
3. To what degree are former colonial powers bound by law and morality to pay reparations?
4. How might cultural, social, and identity-based harm due to colonialism be made right through reparations?
5. What kind of oversight might ensure transparency and fairness in reparations programs?
6. How can education and capacity-building ensure sustainable independence in the post-colonial states?
7. What should be the responsibility of the UN and regional organizations regarding coordination and enforcement?
8. What strategies should the United Nations and other international organizations adopt to conduct a more effective awareness campaign about the decolonisation process?
9. What strategies can formerly colonised states adopt to effectively overcome the long-lasting impacts of colonialism?

10. Bibliography

<https://philpapers.org/archive/TANCRA-2.pdf>
<https://press.un.org/en/2024/gaspd807.doc.htm>
<https://www.theglobaljusticenetwork.org/index.php/gjn/article/download/216/170>
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/neocolonialism>
<https://www.un.org/dppa/decolonization/en>
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colonialism>
<https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/decolonization>
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_colonization
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Atlas_of_colonialism
https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Caribbean_Community-_CARICOM_08_2022.pdf