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# Justice-based ideas: a provocation for constituents of the international development sector

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## About Bond

Bond is the civil society network for global change. We bring people together to make the international development sector more effective. [bond.org.uk](http://bond.org.uk)

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## Introduction

This is a provocation. It proposes a set of ideas to provide momentum towards a new way of thinking about development. The focus of the discussion is on **justice-led approaches** because of their transformative potential and because we are at a time when alternatives to the more traditional approach of charity is needed.

The UK international development sector started from an idea of generosity, launched from charitable endeavours linked to the idea of benevolence and acts of faith. The sector also had its origins in the UK government's former British Colonial Office, which engaged with geographies under the UK's control through economic, political and ideological means that had the power to colonise people's minds and bodies. This colonialism extended itself to the way in which the sector originated, and it has influenced how the sector is organised and has evolved, and its priorities. The charitable trickle of 'aid', disbursed via development activities, accompanies the greater damage done by the UK through policies in the areas of trade, tax, militarism and debt that still have **colonial aspects**. What makes aspects of these policies colonial is that they enable the UK to accumulate wealth unfairly while counterpart countries, for example trading partners, are drained, often both economically and environmentally.

Understanding the historical origins and ongoing dynamics in which the international development sector operates suggests that the sector could play a much more transformative role to help equalise conditions and achieve basic human rights. Why is this need for a greater transformational role for the development sector important now? The impact of current socio-economic relations, the climate crisis and other crises on people in low- and middle-income countries demands this fundamental change. As part of its commitment to realising the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, the UK has a role, nationally and globally, to reverse chronic underinvestment in public services, to combat inequalities and prevent further poverty, hunger and exclusion. It also has an obligation to prevent environmental degradation and help global efforts to adapt to climate change, particularly as we move towards tipping points that will lead to ecological breakdown.

Alongside this, it is important to consider whether the UK INGO sector's core mission has eroded or been curtailed by the different roles it plays within the global development system. These multiple roles include: a) as a consulting partner to the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) in the development of government policies and political positions relating to development, b) as a recipient of government-funded UK aid and through its engagement as a programme delivery agent, and c) as an advocate and a critical voice on the role and voting patterns of the UK in relation to multilateralism, especially the UK's power to veto. These considerations call into question the validity and purpose of the sector and present an urgent challenge for transformation. There is also recognition that structural forms of racism exist in the international development sector which need to be addressed (International Development Committee, 2022).

In facing the challenge to transform, making space for a stronger justice-orientated approach means confronting elements of coloniality. As organisations in the development sector increase momentum towards locally led models, a practical commitment to solidarity from the sector would mean ensuring that INGOs not indigenous to, or originating from, local areas no longer receive funds for deployment and no longer displace the social capital of communities in these settings. It also means re-appraising the voice of the sector and whether current government-focused advocacy goes far enough in any area, for example, the current framing around migration as an issue of policing borders rather than obligations to protect lives in danger. However, the current UK charity law and the regulation of the Charity Commission create limitations, and both would need to evolve so that some of the potential approaches that will be highlighted can happen.

The way we work in the UK must change to be in solidarity with countries that face a lack of sovereignty to determine their future or chart their own development. Solidarity can also mean organisations and actors in the sector recognising system-wide problems with the way that development processes work and their role within them. This can require power to be relinquished in problematic spaces to truly act in unity. The other part of this

to consider is what a transformed sectoral approach will lead to. It may mean potentially changing roles, increasing some functions while perhaps ending others, shifting priorities and demonstrating more equity in ways of working.

The origins of the UK's wealth from colonial extraction and drain have not been acknowledged, and the harm the UK caused through its empire remains unremedied. A first step is to look at the government's decision to provide 0.5% of GNI for official development assistance (ODA) and the size of this contribution relative to other flows. The UK aid budget, which was £15.4 billion for 2023 (House of Commons, 2023), can be compared with the money the UK owes for stolen wealth. It has recently been estimated that Britain is required to pay US\$24.011 trillion as reparation for transatlantic chattel slavery in 14 countries (Brattle Report, 2023). In India, the drain from the British Raj is estimated at US\$45 trillion (Patnaik and Patnaik, 2016). The amount the UK government dedicates to aid should also be viewed alongside the extent of lost revenue it facilitates through its enabling of tax havens; in effect an ongoing policy of colonialism. This is estimated to be a loss of US\$4.7 trillion over the next decade (Tax Justice Network, 2023), which could provide much-needed domestic revenue mobilisation for public services for many countries where there are huge gaps in meeting basic needs. These figures make the UK aid budget seem modest in comparison. They also present an important opportunity to address and remedy the harm that has impoverished many UK aid-recipient countries and created the need for aid in the first place. This colonial drain is one of the main root causes of poverty. Remedy requires moving beyond treating development challenges as a matter of getting the right modality of policies (i.e. aid effectiveness). It means addressing the injustice of previous and ongoing coloniality, as discussed in the rest of this provocation.

## Justice-based approaches: some core aspects

In the development landscape, rethinking approaches through a stronger focus on the pursuit of justice can provide new ways of re-imagining the world. Justice is seen as something objective which has the purpose of making the world a better place. From a decolonial perspective, the justice of the present is a function of the justice of the past (Macklem, 2005). Its pursuit is multi-faceted. Justice is achieved, as history demonstrates, through people and their movements fighting for change and resisting structures that serve the interests of powerful and elite groups. This means it is not necessarily achieved through more rule-based structures. Justice-based ideas matter in the way that economic decisions about the distribution of public spending are made. The foundation of a functioning society rests in its ability to provide public goods that guarantee essential services, such as health, education and social protection, to all. These are human rights-based obligations for states. Principles of justice should guide strategies for the redistribution of resources raised from taxation in an equitable way. Justice-orientated approaches also offer a way of examining inequalities that have been produced by histories of colonisation, ongoing neoliberalism and the hierarchy of human beings determined by markers such as race, whiteness, gender, class and sexuality, among others. Principles of justice encompass ideas for healing and the restoration of dignity and sovereignty and provide guidance and ideas for ways in which the UK INGO sector can change and evolve.

**Repair/remedy for harm caused:** ‘A way of acknowledging historic wrongs and accounting for them’ (Bhambra, 2022). Throughout history, reparations have been pursued by people, groups and communities that have often been agents of change in interrogating structural power relations and the factors that perpetuate exclusion, marginalisation and minoritisation. Colonialism has resulted in many forms of damage: economic, ecological, societal, political and psychological (Ibekwe, 1993). The concept of reparations is firmly based on the idea of repairing this damage.<sup>1</sup> A reparations approach acknowledges the experience of harm and the impact of policies that extract resources from former colonial states and result in unjust enrichment at the cost of oppressed communities. Repair and remedy also include the restoration of people’s dignity and are crucial to working in solidarity with communities that have experienced harm.

Reparations are also rooted in the idea of ‘planet repairs,’ a framing coined by activists and scholars in the pan-Afrikan, holistic reparations movement where there is an interconnection between cognitive justice, reparatory justice and environmental justice. In this approach, there is a focus on how we exist in relationship to one another, to the planet, to our ancestors and to spiritual knowledge. Restoration (returning to the original position), restitution (restoring lost items, like land) and rehabilitation (restoring from damage) also fall under this framing.

**International human rights legal framework for reparations:** The United Nations framework for reparations, adopted in 2003 by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, provides a framework for reparations for people who experience violations of human rights and humanitarian law. This contains the following key elements:

- Restitution: the restoration of the original situation before violation; it could include land, property, identity and liberty.
- Compensation: calculated not just in terms of mental harm, physical harm, and material damage, but also for lost opportunities and moral damage.

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<sup>1</sup> Professor Chinweizu Ibekwe’s made the following comments in his speech at the First Pan-African Conference on Reparations, The Abuja Gathering, in 1993:

“Let me begin by noting that reparation is not just about money: it is not even mostly about money; in fact, money is not even 1% of what reparation is about. Reparation is mostly about making repairs. Self-made repairs, on ourselves: mental repairs, psychological repairs, cultural repairs, organisational repairs, social repairs, institutional repairs, technological repairs, economic repairs, political repairs, educational repairs, repairs of every type that we need in order to recreate and sustain racialised societies.”

- Satisfaction: a need for truthful public discourse, acceptance of responsibility, commemoration, and tributes.
- Guarantees of non-repetition: these ensure that violations do not continue or are not repeated.

**Anti-coloniality:** While some of the more public debates on reparations focus on the need to acknowledge harm caused by institutions and states, and the sums that should be paid, there are broader concepts of reparations which are richly intertwined with anti-colonial perspectives that demand radical and justice-driven change (Stanford-Xosei, 2019; Karenga, 2022). The concept of reparations urges us to make links between historic injustice and present-day issues. The origins of social inequalities matter and could be more central to the way in which we think about development – whether these inequalities are between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, Black and white people – where repair could mean returning land and resources that have been taken. There are also disparities in ODA to explore, such as why it is allocated to particular settings and not to others, and whether there are patterns of bias in that.

In the UK's context, for steps to be made towards decolonisation there would need to be a reckoning of the country's own colonial project, the harm it has caused and the mechanisms through which it is continued and legitimised. It requires moving on from notions of guilt to engage in a truthful and participatory discussion of the inequality UK colonialism has led to between and within countries. It also requires looking at the UK's role in the G7, the UN Security Council and other decision-making structures, which have critical implications for the erosion or improvement of justice across the world.

**Participation:** The concept of how harm has been caused to affected communities is central to the pursuit of repair. How claims originate and are articulated by affected communities is important. Processes to determine this often establish themselves as truth and reparatory justice enquiries, which can lead to consultations and hearings in which evidence can be heard. Examples include the Nuremberg Trials after the end of the Second World War, which helped to establish the process for Holocaust reparations, and the process for truth and reconciliation in South Africa following the end of the apartheid. The UK INGO sector could play a role in providing historical education on the harms caused by the former British empire in order to engage the public in a more balanced way, as it has done on issues such as debt, tax, trade and climate breakdown over many years. Another approach to participation is the opportunity to work in partnership with diaspora communities based in the UK in the development of their home countries, aligned to the work of organisations like AFFORD and Shabaka.

## Mechanisms and approaches for justice-based approaches

Current 'charitable' framings disempower aid recipients and depoliticise development, while a justice-led approach is rooted in solidarity and recognises the desire for equity for everyone. A justice-led approach has the potential for development to contribute to building social justice through connection and shared perspectives with movements and activism in low- and middle-income countries. Reparations, repair and anti-coloniality hold radical potential to tackle the structural harms perpetrated by neo-colonialism which have created economic dependency and eroded economic sovereignty. These approaches could be front and centre of the work of the international development sector if they were better understood and explored. They also have relevance for promoting the transformation of systems of power and governance as discussed in the remainder of this paper.

### Solidarity for and with global justice agendas

- a) **The demarcation of the world:** Today's world is organised between a core and periphery of countries or a 'developed' North to the 'under-developed South' (Narayanaswamy, 2013). There are rich and poor sections of societies in both the labelled sections of the world, which are sometimes described as the 'Global North' and 'Global South.' Development is still structured as a system that gives to a homogenised 'Global South poor,' but this disregards the notion that there is a global elite and the rest of the world, among which there are deep divides based on class structures and proxies for class outside of the UK. It also ignores the experience of Black liberation movements in the 'Global North' that fight incarceration, and other excluded groups that were part of landless peasantries which laboured without the opportunity for asset ownership and still face disenfranchisement and exclusion in today's wealth structures. These problems of demarcation also apply to the way that migration is not always seen as an issue of justice, but instead a border protection issue. People often face precarious decisions to migrate because they face destitution linked to foreign policy, and the UK is implicated in this in many settings. Repair and responsibility for the political choices that determine global justice outcomes are crucially linked.
- b) **'Global North' knowledge generation and terminology:** Knowledge and ways of working from what are considered countries of the 'Global North' have often been viewed or presented as intrinsically more valuable than those of local and Indigenous communities and/or knowledge from what is termed the 'Global South' (Osofisan, 2020). This is relevant because many of the strategies underpinning aid and development create barriers to understanding or accepting the independent expertise and agency of actors from local settings (Olowookere, 2021). The language of development is significant here; 'race' has seemingly been rejected and has been replaced by ideas such as 'developed', 'underdeveloped' and 'developing'. In part, this has led to the invisibility of racial injustice and the need for the sector to focus on these disparities. This leads us to consider how the sector needs to change to become demonstrably anti-racist, building on the many commitments to act, like the [Pledge for Change](#), the [Charter for Change](#) and [CREED](#), among others.

### Progress to sustainable development and its financing

- c) **The provision of essential services, which are public goods and require state provision, is both a rights-based and a justice-based issue.** So many communities within countries across the world are denied their rights or are having their rights eroded as public services are cut or defunded. Poverty and its eradication have been the focus of donors, INGOs, states and grassroots collectives since the birth of the neoliberal system (late 20<sup>th</sup> Century ideas promoting reforms towards free markets) at the end of World War Two. We have enough food the world over, but there are perverse incentives within markets to speculate on food commodities which leads to shortages. Efforts to mitigate the worst impacts of this has become what development is about, rather than challenging the system to create an equitable world. A justice-based approach would start at the root cause of why so many countries are unable to currently provide adequate education, health, social protection, sanitation and other critical services for their population without a

model of privatisation. What role has the UK played here by extracting resources, which it has deployed towards its own infrastructure while leaving former colonised countries deep in poverty? Should INGOs be in the business of filling gaps left by state delivery for critical services, or should INGOs address why those gaps exist? What would closing service delivery mean? And what would it mean transitioning to?

- d) For many INGOs and NGOs, climate change is a key development challenge. A small number of high-income countries account for the vast majority of carbon emissions, the ongoing ecological colonialism of fossil fuel industries, extraction and deforestation. A **recognition of planetary boundaries** and the need to quickly transition due to the risk of a global systemic collapse, understood as the crossing of one or more tipping points leading towards ecological breakdown, is at the forefront of environmental and development agendas. A huge amount of financial transfer is needed for climate adaptation. However, almost 70% of international climate financing is taking the form of debt-creating loans (UNCTAD, 2023). Meanwhile, the scale of financing required to respond to global loss and damage is projected to reach approximately US\$1.2 trillion per year by 2060 (Aldy et al., 2009). This is a justice-based issue, as low- and middle-income countries cannot be expected to finance their adaptation when richer countries have caused much of the damage they are exposed to, with many lives lost every year as countries experience extreme weather conditions. How does the sector support climate adaptation and avert ecological crises using instruments other than debt, as has been the case so far and is envisaged in current loss and damage plans?

### Justice and militarism

- e) As the world has seen in Palestine, the West has been a driving engine for imperialism and will protect the human rights of particular groups of people but not others. The **selective application of international humanitarian law** in the name of 'freedom' and 'democracy' has resulted in genocide in many settings and called the impartiality of Western countries into question. This has fuelled the UK's arms and ammunition industry and other sectors that profit from the economic crisis points that wars create. A justice-based approach would require standing in solidarity with communities that have been made vulnerable in conflict-affected countries, especially in places where arms have been provided by the West and support has been provided to particular groups, which brings into question the idea of Western neutrality. The impact of conflict and post-conflict situations in which the UK has played a role through its foreign policy choices and arms trade must be better understood. This calls for a deeper level of introspection and for the power dynamics behind decisions for military responses to be exposed. The question should be asked whether any country should provide both arms and aid in the same context?

### From colonialism to people power and sovereignty

- f) A more permanent form of remedy would move beyond compensatory approaches and seek to dismantle a global economic system that keeps reproducing inequalities and only allows countries to participate in global structures on a limited basis. The practice of **accountability through reform of international architecture**, as a way to seek a commitment to non-repetition and confront a lack of transparency, is important. As has been seen with recent progress on tax justice governance, challenging rules-based functioning which operates in the interests of powerful countries and to the detriment of other countries is a critical step forward. However, it is important to recognise that having a seat at the table is not always enough to change the power dynamics of elite interests. While participatory models are important for the pursuit of justice, building on approaches that have progressed justice in an inclusive and meaningful way to reform or disrupt global mechanisms is also needed. An awareness of the patterns that can reify the power dynamics we are trying to get away from is important if we want to avoid repeating them. It is crucial to consider what is required to bring about these kinds of changes towards equitable mechanisms for global development, and how to build on the positive role the UK INGO sector has played.

- g) There are many ongoing campaigns for **reparative justice for enslavement and colonialism** from all corners of the world in relation to people whose subjugation, and the theft of whose labour and lands and virtually



all wealth, has not been acknowledged. This desire to seek outcomes broader than monetary compensation is reflected in the UK movement for reparations. At its 2020 conference, the Green Party of England and Wales passed a motion based on a proposal pioneered by the Stop the Maangamizi Campaign. It called on the UK government to establish a Commission of Inquiry for Truth and Reparatory Justice and commit to atonement and reparative justice for Afrikan enslavement. This is also relevant for addressing the harm caused by other aspects of the UK's former empire and associated campaigns for repair, for example in relation to former Caribbean countries of the Commonwealth. However, in 2023 when asked about the need for reparations, Rishi Sunak the then UK Prime Minister, said: "trying to unpick our history is not the right way forward" (House of Commons, 2023). We are still at the early stages of excavating the structural legacies of the UK's colonial past, and this is a potential area for UK INGO engagement and solidarity.

- h) **National sovereignty in monetary policy:** Many countries face challenges in financing their development needs because they experience a lack of accessible and affordable finance. Countries with a need for external finance, especially where this is required to deliver essential services, need to be able to borrow in their own domestic currency. This should not be more expensive, in terms of the cost of borrowing, as it currently is. The affordability of finance is a critical challenge for the indebtedness which expensive loans in Western currencies have created for low- and middle-income countries. This can only be disrupted by challenging the underlying market dynamics that assign Western currencies as more credible, credit-worthy and, therefore, powerful. The other part of monetary sovereignty for countries to consider is why loans are seemingly the only mechanism for financing development suggested by international finance institutions. Progress towards development should not rest on such a precarious resourcing model. Remedy would mean former colonised countries would gain more control over the mechanisms of their own economies, such as being able to opt out of currency pegging to the US dollar or the French franc – as is the case for many countries in Francophone Africa – and trade in their own currencies. This would enable greater domestic resource mobilisation for critical public spending. Strategies are urgently required that do not incentivise unjust Western enrichment and instead re-envision ethical methods for public financing beyond ongoing debt financing. This is also critical for the challenge of financing climate change adaptation.

### Repair for economic harm

- i) The global economy has been organised to facilitate powerful countries' access to cheap labour and raw materials (Hickel, 2017). Wealth is made globally, using predominantly the exploited labour of women and marginalised and minoritised groups, for trade that benefits countries that are the recipients of finished products. The structure of the global economy ensures that most of this wealth from export trade ends up concentrated in industrialised economies. This focus on free and open markets through globalisation has made any **equity-enhancing redistribution** challenging to achieve. This means an amplification of risk for many low- and middle-income countries (Rodrik, 2007) which are therefore operating with limited mechanisms for the protection of people and the extraction of their natural resources. Tackling this requires reforming tax regimes for multinationals to pay their fair share in countries of production and reforming exploitative trade rules, both of which are vital for economic justice.
- j) **The regulation of markets and sectors relevant for development:** The value in commodity and financial markets is put above all other financial flows and repositories, and it is the focal point of corporate power that becomes political power. Every 24 hours, trading valued at US\$16 trillion and rising takes place across key groups of commodities, many of which are food items that many communities depend on (Bharadia, 2023). Nearly two-thirds of all global speculation and trading takes place in the UK and the USA. Re-orientating capital and financial flows towards development outcomes is vital, given the challenges faced the world over, to invest more in public systems and services (Slobodian, 2018) to ensure more equitable outcomes. Similarly, the fair distribution of the benefits of science and technology and the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) is important. While AI can help to generate disaggregated data, it may help powerful countries accumulate more resources, resulting in more unequal world societies.

## Reflections for discussion

In this discussion, the connection between the accumulation of profits, wealth and, consequently, political power through processes of exploitation have been explored through a recognition of the need for repair. People and their movements need the space to heal and to tend to the grief and wounds of rupture, displacement and violence. Justice-based approaches offer perspectives on political resistance in relation to the inequalities of the global international system. The public financing required for sustainable development and redistribution needs reparative justice and systems change. The international development sector has the potential to lead and embolden the actions needed. This can lead to re-imagined positions, priorities and practices. The justice-based imperative facing international development is also relevant for the philanthropy sector. Directing funds from the same colonial machine that produced the need for development initiatives is another area that must be confronted.

In moving ahead, a suggested focus for organisations in the sector would be to consider a just and equitable approach, as described through the approaches in this paper or others, to fully guide the sector's work. This would require organisational structures to be reconsidered to reflect a newly envisioned purpose as well as considering what will make such organisational change possible.

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