

The case for Ecological Reparations in Africa

Models of alternative development, circular economy or just transition are insufficient to address the damage caused by imperialism

By Franklin Obeng-Odoom



Ecological Crises, the 15th, and the 27th Conference of the Parties (COP)

The just-ended COP 27 in Sharm El-Sheikh made the point: the world faces a novel problem. The scale of socio-ecological crises that afflict the earth is unprecedented. According to the latest assessment by the IPCC, these problems are worsening and will continue to do so. There is more than 50% chance that global warming will reach or exceed 1.5°C in the near-term (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2022). The ramifications are certain, but uneven (IPCC, 2022, p.14). Reversing rapid biodiversity loss has also eluded humanity since the first global agreement to do so by 2010.^[1] So, the forthcoming COP 15 in Montreal, Canada, will revisit the issue. This attempt to revisit the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio, ratified by every UN member state except the U.S, is critical for Africa.

Whether in terms of climate change or biodiversity loss, COP 27 or COP 15, the regions of highest exposure are Africa and elsewhere in the Global South (IPCC, 2022, p. 14). Not only 3.6 billion people face existential outcomes, but also many plants and animals risk total extinction (IPCC, 2022, pp. 14-16). In his book, *Extinction*, Ashley Dawson (2016, pp. 7-8) points out that in the last 20 years, 70,000 African elephants have been killed and the number of rare forest elephants in Africa has declined by 60%; We are all at risk of extinction. This is an emergency.

Wrong Way

How to deal with this problem has become the thorniest issue in history. Mainstream economists propose the use of markets, private property rights, behavioural nudges, or climate clubs as solution. For progressives, proposals range from 'limiting growth', designing circular economies, ensuring just

transition, and phasing out fossil. Many of these attempts are called 'nature-based solutions', but, as argued in the essay, 'how natural is natural', Naa Afarley Sackeyfio (2000, pp. 1-3), then Professor at the University of Cape Coast, points out that the Western concept of 'nature' is 'cosmetic..., a verbal worship'.

Mostly veiled attempts to make Africa fix itself, these approaches – both left and right - bring to mind the science fiction, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. There, one character successfully, but surprisingly, makes his spaceship invisible. When asked how he did it, he said he had simply hidden it as 'somebody else's problem' (Rutten, 2021).

That is evidently the case of demanding 'phase out' without compensation. Others are what I describe as 'populationist' – those who propose not only putting limits to growth as way of cutting down on production but also human reproduction. As one advocate (Czech, 2022, p. 4) points out, '[p]opulation stabilization is as fundamental ... as a horse is to a horse race'. Kenneth Boulding suggested auctioning birth rights to limit reproduction (See, for a discussion, Obeng-Odoom, 2022a, pp. 4 -6, 66 – 68). Jorgen Randers (2022), co-author of *Limits to Growth*, favours an even more controversial approach - promoting polyandry. This would entail pairing one woman to as many men as possible and locking the unmatched women in monasteries. In her book *What's Sex got to do with it? Darwin, Love, Lust and the Anthropocene*, Heather Remoff (2022, p.4) describes the inability of white male scientists to appreciate female choices as 'comic blindness'.

Ecological Imperialism

We need a different starting point. We can helpfully start with Alfred Crosby's (1986/2009) book *Ecological Imperialism*. It is centred on how the control of nature by force and fraud aided the expansion of the West, and generated disproportionate socio-ecological crises for the rest.

Three extensions are needed. One, consideration of historical power imbalances, institutionalised political-economic inequalities and socio-ecological stratification centred on land. Two, the emphasis on resource autonomy; And three, the centrality of ecological reparations. J.K. Boyce (2021) has shown that communities, cities, counties, and countries that are unequal face more severe environmental problems. Such harms are also disproportionately borne by the marginalised, often black poor, typically often contribute the least to the problem.

Internationally, such dynamics are at play, too. The greater inequalities persist, the more environmental problems intensify, as powerful transnational corporations and imperial states advance their interests by dumping their waste in Africa. As these entities compete to maintain status, the world development agencies impose conditions on Africa to catch up (Obeng-Odoom, 2019, 2020, 2021). The science of, and decisions about, sustainability, ecology, and environment follow a similar pattern.

The Global North, the place most guilty of driving the current ecological crises, is also the moral and ecological high ground. It is characterised by dominant scientists, decision makers, and activists who lecture the rest on what to do, usually devaluing the science and alternatives from the Global South (Masood, 2018; Nagendra, 2018; Obeng-Odoom, 2019). These imperial, monopolistic, and exclusionary dynamics must end for a more sustainable and inclusive world, but without ecological reparations, no alternatives can address the ecological crises. This inevitably raises the questions. Why are reparations needed? What is their proposed design? and how might they be redesigned? To address these questions, we must take the works of black scholars and activists seriously. Among these works, those by Stella Dadzie, Sylvianne Diouff, Wangaari Maathai, Hilary Beckles, William Darity Jr, Julian Agyeman, and Olúfemi Táíwò are particularly relevant.

The Foundations of Reparations

Based on these, three broad arguments could be made for advocating ecological reparations. Historical injustices, present imposed economic stratification driven by rent theft, and the need for an ecological remaking of our world. These reflect, but they are not reducible to slavery, colonialism, and neocolonialism. In his book *Britain's Black Debt*, Sir Hilary Beckles (2013) argues that Britain owes

Black debt because slavery was illegal from the start. It disproportionately enriched the British economy; and it damaged black economies. The situation persists today.

Financial outflows from Africa remain substantial. Between 1970 and 2018, the amount of such outflows and their resulting interest amounted to \$2.4 trillion. This amount is three times higher than the odious debts owed by the same countries which experience this capital flight but, rent theft is at the heart of the problem either way. Together, these illicit financial outflows weaken African economies and, reflexively, strengthen the urban and metropolitan economies of the Global North. The capital flight from Africa today builds real estate markets in London, Paris, New York, and Lisbon (Ndikumana and Boyce, 2022, p.3; Shaxson, 2022, p. 75).

But this is not new. Consider London. Its prosperity today can be traced to its trade in slaves, slave institutions, and the labour of enslaved workers, the extraction of rent from enclosed land, and the private appropriation of socially created value. In her book *A History of the British Empire*, Caroline Elkins (2022, pp.643-644) notes, '[c]ities including Liverpool and Bristol had been built on the trade of enslaved peoples and the empire's consumable goods'.

The industrial revolution was buoyed by black enslavement, as Walter Rodney (1972/2011) demonstrates in *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. Urban planning as a field developed to address the ecological costs of this structural change in the Global North. But cities in the Global South could be given more attention. Then and Now. For instance, not only did the enslavement of people in Port Harcourt, Nigeria damage the city's economy, the use of land for palm plantation helped to supply palm oil for Britain's industrial needs (Obeng-Odoom, 2021).

Then, through the extractives British oil major Shell, Port Harcourt continued to be drilled and drained of its fossil fuels for the development of London. With Shell as essentially the municipal government, monopolist, and municipal landlord, the resulting ecocide in Nigeria has been devastating. French oil firms like Total and the French state have pursued ecological imperialism with major socio-ecological consequences: spatial segregation, destruction of the commons, undermining Indigenous agriculture, and forestry, as the work Ambe Njoh (2022) shows.

Transnational corporations have created 'ecocide' at home, too, and like in Africa, black marginalised populations have suffered disproportionately. In their book *From here to Equality*, Darity and Mullen (2020, p. 235) note about the US 'Blacks are ...likelier than whites to live in communities located near hazardous -waste sites and to suffer from nitrogen dioxide exposure and ...more likely to lack potable water and sanitation'. Mainstream western economists and interests justify these experiences. In one example, Lawrence Summers (1991, n.p.), the then Chief Economist of the World Bank noted-'Shouldn't the World Bank be encouraging MORE migration of the dirty industries to the least developed countries? ... I've always thought that under-populated countries in Africa are vastly UNDER-polluted.' (Obeng-Odoom, 2022b, p. 444). The future must be different, but this is not an argument for just transition, limits to growth, or fair exchange.

Formulating Reparations

It is an argument for ecological reparations. Accordingly, existing green climate funds and proposals for clean energy are inadequate. Green funds are much less than existing estimates of economic reparations, ranging from US\$ 15-20 trillion in the US (Darity and Mullen, 2020, p.265), and some US 9-10 trillion in the Caribbean^[2] (Beckles, 2013, pp. 170-171), to some 100 trillion in Africa (Osabu-Kle, 2000, pp. 344-345). But even these estimates require substantial adjustments. At issue are ecological, not simply economic, reparations. Olúfemi Táíwò's (2022) book *Reconsidering Reparations* advances the case that reparations should be paid to enable the marginalised in the world to better face the future.

Apology and prevention are critical; historical and ongoing rent theft must be compensated. What William Darity Jr calls the racialised wealth gap could be one basis to estimate the amount (Craemer et al., 2020). The resulting compensation could be used to address broader developmental challenges, both to decarbonise and to delink. So, reparations might also be demanded in terms of infrastructure,

cash payments, capability investments, and rights to access and control the commonwealth (Wamai, 2022), for example, through what has been called ‘climate asylum’ (Souter, 2022).

Formulating ecological reparations, then, could be viewed as a roundabout. Claims may be made from different places and from different times, but they envision the same destination, to use an analogy by Sir Hilary Beckles (for a discussion, see Obeng-Odoom, 2022c).

Frontiers of a Just Ecological Political Economy

Olúfemi Táíwò’s (2022) engaged black philosophy of ‘climate reparations’ is a helpful start, precisely because of his insistence that reparations are not reactionary but a multi-pronged, multi-scale strategy to remake the world. But, we need to go beyond ‘climate’ to consider addressing ecological problems more broadly.

Ecological crises are not reducible to emissions. It is possible to decarbonise and be deprived of resource autonomy, face biodiversity loss, dispossession, displacement, extinction, and ecocide. Ecological reparations must be paid for all these, to Africans both on the continent and in the diaspora. There is the straightforward case of African migrants all around the world who tend to live in ‘sacrifice zones’ – impoverished spaces ‘where poor black residents lack political power,’ as Naomi Klein puts it (2014, p. 310).

These so-called economic migrants hold little land and control even less value. Forced African migrants, including the descendants of slaves, have also continued to experience these problems everywhere, including in Colombia, the Dominican Republic, and in Brazil. In the US, African Americans have been dispossessed of their land by force and fraud (Hinson, 2018). For the same land, black people can receive only 58 per cent of the value given to white families (Kamin, 2022).

Similar comments apply to the experiences of black people in Australia. In South Africa, apartheid shifted black wealth to white South Africans (Price, 2003). Tembeka Ngcukaitobi (2021, p. 110) shows that black people, who constitute 81% of the South African population, hold only 4% of land. White South Africans privately appropriate value which has largely been created by black South Africans. So, the economic advancement of black South Africans has stagnated, or increased slowly, while that of white South Africans has surged. This social stratification has had dire consequences on black lives, disproportionately harmed by floods, cyclones, and other ecological disasters. Black South African scholars are correct to label this dynamic ecological apartheid (Mphambukeli and Matamanda, 2022).

Delinking from this model is crucial, academically, economically, and ecologically. Academically, we need a new science of black political economy. Ecologically and economically, greater inclusion could minimise global rat race for ecologically destructive growth linked to maintaining status and better enable black communities to adapt.

The Single Tax Unlimited

Much has been written about asset repatriation and redressing illicit outflows, among others, to increase financial resources in Africa. The African Union has benefitted from the tireless effort of advocates like Souad Aden-Osman, the Head of the Secretariat of the African Union High-Level Panel on Illicit Financial Flows from Africa. Aden-Osman coordinated the preparation and adoption by the African Union Assembly of the Common African Position on Asset Recovery (CAPAR)^[3] Under CAPAR, ‘Some African countries have succeeded in recovering some of their stolen assets from foreign jurisdictions, including Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Mali, and more are at different stages of the return processes (African Union, 2022).

The academic scholarship on the issue is vast. It oscillates between a mainstream that emphasises corruption of Africans and a more progressive body of work that accepts the corruption literature (‘push’) but includes a more global twist (‘pull’). In their book *Capital Flight from Africa*, Léonce Ndikumana and James Boyce (2022, pp. 2-3) adopt this ‘push’ and ‘pull’ framework. Although not their approach, they inadvertently suggest an individualised, rational choice model, much like the push-pull framework

utilised by mainstream migration economists (for a detailed discussion, see Obeng-Odoom, 2022a). More fundamentally, this body of knowledge on capital flight and illicit financial flows tends to be more economic, than ecological political economy (Zagaris, 2022). It is sometimes grounded in repatriation analyses (Signé et al., 2020), but rarely grounded in the case for reparations and scarcely within ecological reparations.

Even so, we know that 'illegal wildlife trade is valued at anywhere between US\$7bn-US\$23bn per annum' and 'that Africa is one of the world's richest suppliers of IWT [international wildlife trafficking]' (Zagaris, 2022, p. 41). Existing economic approaches to repatriation overlook reparations; and reparations efforts sometimes overlook or narrowly define repatriation to exclude capital flight. Similar comments apply to biodiversity and tax justice arguments (Demsey et al., 2022). They are based narrowly on unequal ecological exchange, trade, to be specific (Hornborg and Martinez-Alier, 2016), not more broadly on ecological imperialism. Moralistic frameworks neglect ecological political economy; so do 'reparation ecology' literatures (e.g., Lampis et al., 2022).

Demands for 'cultural artefacts' are necessary. Currently, 'over 90% of the material cultural legacy of sub-Saharan Africa remains preserved and housed outside of the African continent (Sarr and Savoy, 2018, p.3). More work is needed in expanding the basis of such claims from 'culture' to ecological political economy. This would entail repatriating the artefacts, of course, but also taxing the rents extracted from hoarding them for years. This political economy would not simply be about implementing an unlimited number of taxes, however.

In any case, many existing taxes are highly problematic. Consider the Value Added Tax in Ghana. Placed on the fruits of labour, researchers (Andoh and Nkrumah, 2022) have recently shown that 'it has evolved from being progressive to regressive, thus hurting the poor more than it does the rich. We further find a rise in the burden on females in poorer households, the least educated and the unemployed. Finally, we find the current exemption regime to benefit richer households more, relative to poorer households' (Andoh and Nkrumah, 2022, p. 394). Similar comments apply to property taxes: they penalise effort and reward the speculation of the 'property alliance' (Obeng-Odoom, 2020). In *The Economics of Welfare*, A.C. Pigou (1920/1938) recognised the critical nature of the environment in economic processes. So, he proposed a tax to address environmental problems. Yet, this tax, now regarded as 'Pigouvian Tax', a "Polluter pay principle of environmental regulation", is understood and promoted as an attempt to address market failure (see *The Economist*, 2022, pp. 53-54). Yet such 'social costs' are central, the rule, not marginal or an exception to price and value theory (Kapp, 1950/1971, p.8). Legalistic approaches also overlook ecological political economy, while political economy frameworks neglect rent theft, the centre of gravity of the case for both ecological reparations and repatriation (Obeng-Odoom, 2021, 2022a, 2022b).

Much has been written about climate finance, net zero, and climate justice (e.g., Omukuti et al., 2022; Frankhauser et al., 2022). The trope of equity in green finance persists. Climate mitigation trust is one of them. This is an IMF-run trust that gives developing countries below-market rate loans to deal with climate-related disaster. Other ideas include the suspension of debt repayment for Global South countries which are struck by disasters *The Economist*, 2022, pp. 53-54). It is within this context that the additional fund created at the just-ended COP27 in Sham El-Sheikh in Egypt to address 'loss and damage' can be placed.

The Loss and Damage fund is important. The decision to create it (COP27, 2022) and the many resulting discussions (Harvey, 2022, pp. 22-23; *The Economist*, 2022, pp. 53-54) emphasise the point. To summarise, loss and damage within the context of COP27 is an aggregator fund that is aimed to address all other climate loss and damage for which adaptation is ill equipped. But it seems the principles of the fund emphasise needs and vulnerability of the Global South, not the responsibility of the Global North. Where it suggests responsibility, it is understood (see, for example, *The Economist*, 2022, p.53) as a global 'polluter pay' principle. Loss and Damage still reflects that the oppressors get to dictate or shape the form of liberation that they prefer or that makes them feel good. Loss and Damage is based on a mainstream/neoclassical theory of adaptation. In any case, loss and damage estimates are based on the quantum of emissions, not on the history of historical and continuing underdevelopment of the Global South. This is quite problematic because it leads to a list of polluters dominated by Global South countries like China and Brazil, Indonesia and Ukraine (see, for

example, Chen, 2022; *The Economist*, 2022, p.54, see figure, entitled 'sins of the fathers and sons'). Indeed, the beneficiaries are not necessarily 'developing countries', but rather 'developing countries that are particularly vulnerable' (COP27, 2022, p.2).

I propose to redress these problems. It is both possible and indeed desirable to increase capital inflows into African economies, make them inclusive, autonomous, and sustainable. Redefining reparations to incorporate repatriation could be done by implementing a single tax unlimited, as Georgist political economists propose. Many cities in Africa implement land tax policies, of course, but they are egregiously problematic. Often placed on land or buildings, they penalise the maintenance of urban housing, reward speculation, encourage urban sprawl, pillage, and pollution, and compensate absentee landownership, including former expropriation of black land. A land value tax, on the other hand, could address all these problems.

It could bring in revenue that could make taxing labour, most of which is done by black workers, unnecessary. On privatised land, that would entail taxing rent or land value created by the entire society. The resulting revenues could be put to public, social, economic, and ecological purposes. This strategy could also set up a disincentive structure to prevent land monopoly, speculation, sprawl, and absentee ownership, all key axes of ecological imperialism. Holding land as commons in this way and using common resources collectively without the control of the world development agencies, TNCs or the state might be another way to think about Samir Amin's (1990) vision of delinking.

If, as the Brundtland Report put it, "[t]his inequality is the planet's main 'environmental' problem" (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, section 17), then this alternative is the main ecological solution. Mobilising around this solution is desirable, if difficult. Difficult, but not impossible. In their stimulating book, *Africa Uprising*, Adam Branch and Zachariah Mampilly (2015) show that across Africa, urban social movements are hungry for political-economic alternatives.

Outside Africa, support for reparations has increased. In the last twenty years the proportion of white Americans who support reparations has increased from 4% to 29% (for a discussion see Dawson and Popof, 2004, p. 62; Obeng-odoom, 2022c, p. 436). Vigorous campaigns by civil society groups have made a difference.

Conclusion

Analytical delinking is central to my arguments. Stratification economics, developed by black political economists, is suitable for this purpose. Designing and demanding reparations are central to this school of political economy, as the authoritative survey of the field by its pioneering exponent, William Darity Jr, shows (Darity, 2022, p. 15).

Stratification economics can focus even more on ecological imperialism. This must be holistic and transformative, and hence my emphasis on the power of black cities and regions. Black lands matter; commoning them is crucial. The goal is to build a wider and deeper approach to black political economy, central to which is the study and redress of ecological imperialism by ecological reparations, inclusive delinking, and ecological autonomy.

This spatio-temporal, socio-ecological analysis and activism could pave the way for prosperity, sustainability, and progress. Malcolm X once said "If you stick a knife in my back 9 inches, and you pull it out 6 inches, that is not progress. If you pull it all the way out, that's not progress. The progress comes from healing the wound that the blow made" (Assensoh and Alex-Assensoh, 2021, p. 715). Aspatial analysis, capital-centric insights with limited emphasis on land, and Whiggish historical approaches to nature are problematic.

Without ecological reparations, no amount of alternative development, limits to growth, fair exchange, circular economy, or just transition will be sufficient to address ecological imperialism. We need change, but that change cannot be just a change, it must be a just change.



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[2] 7.5 trillion Pounds in Beckles' (2013, pp. 170-171) account.

[3] <https://codafrica.org/secretariat/>