

# Reparations and climate justice

## What are climate reparations and why are we talking about them?

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Civil Society stage a sit in at the COP21 climate conference in Paris.

### Summary

- The historic and present day emissions of rich countries and corporations in the global north are overwhelmingly responsible for the climate crisis. Yet the vast majority of the 3.6 billion people who are “highly vulnerable to climate change” and least responsible for it live in the global south.<sup>1</sup>
- In response, social movements from the global south have demanded climate reparations from rich countries, but governments from the global north have blocked these demands. However, pressure is growing again on rich countries to provide finance to the global south to compensate for ‘loss and damage’ caused by climate change.
- International campaigns for reparations have been influenced by social movements and diaspora groups from the global south, who have called for reparations for the lasting harm done to the global south by transatlantic slavery and colonialism.
- As global justice advocates in the UK, we have a duty to push our government to support demands from the global south for loss and damage finance, and to try to prevent polluting corporations and financial institutions doing further damage.
- The global north should acknowledge historic responsibility and wrongdoing for climate change and colonialism, and should support a transformative programme for reparations which involves deep, structural changes to the global economy.

## Introduction

Before, at and since COP26, climate and social justice movements have been talking about the need for climate reparations.

Of course, broader demands for reparations have a far longer history, both at UN climate negotiations and in a longer history of resistance to British colonialism. The work done by social movements from the global south, the Pan-Afrikan reparations movement and diaspora groups has made calls for reparations powerful and compelling.<sup>2</sup>

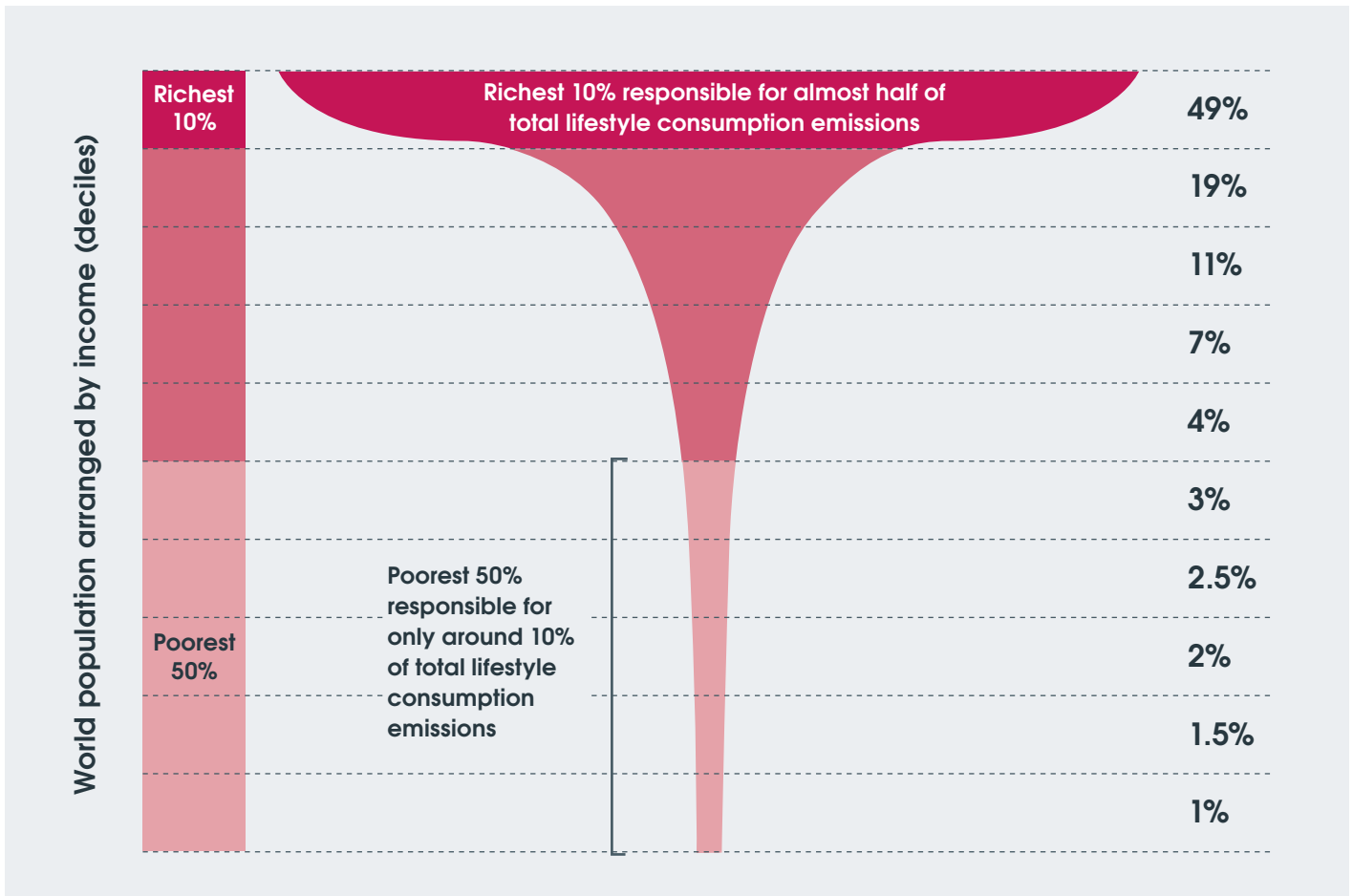
In the increasingly urgent context of the climate crisis, however, the importance of such demands take on a new dimension. This briefing introduces the concept and history of climate reparations, and considers how we can campaign for them together.<sup>3</sup>

## Why are reparations necessary and just?

We know that global warming and the climate crisis have been overwhelmingly driven by rich countries and corporations in the global north. Rich countries have contributed between two-thirds and three-quarters of historic greenhouse gas emissions, and the UK has the 5th highest historic CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in the world (without including overseas emissions under colonial rule).<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, despite having contributed hardly any historic carbon emissions, communities across the global south make up the vast majority of the 3.6 billion people deemed 'extremely vulnerable' to climate impacts by the UN. Former UN rapporteur Philip Alston says that climate change will usher in a new era of "climate apartheid" where "the wealthy pay to escape overheating, hunger and conflict while the rest of the world is left to suffer".<sup>5</sup>

Graph 1: Percentage of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by world population



Reproduced from Oxfam *Extreme Carbon Inequality*, 2015





Photo: © Weitzer-Huphu Tapia / Germanwatch e.V.

**Saúl Luciano Lliuya, a farmer from the Peruvian Andes who is suing the German corporation RWE for their contribution to global warming which is melting the Palcacocha glacier and threatening his hometown in Huaraz with flooding.**

With this in mind, climate justice movements and governments from across the global south have been calling for reparations for climate change at UN climate talks for many years. Movements such as Third World Network, the Asian People’s Movement on Debt and Development, Jubilee South networks and the Global Campaign to Demand Climate Justice network have argued that major historic emitters in the global north owe a huge climate and ecological debt to the global south.<sup>6</sup> More recently, the Climate Reparations coalition, Stop the Maangamizi Campaign, Climate Justice Charter movement and Fridays for Future MAPA (Most Affected Peoples and Areas) have called for reparations for the global north’s role in climate change and colonialism.<sup>7</sup>

This ‘climate debt’ refers to, in part, the huge financial burden that has been placed on the global south to mitigate and adapt to climate impacts, despite these having been driven by the carbon-intensive industrialisation of the global north (fuelled through colonial extractivism and looting from the global south). According to UN scientists, approximately 2,390 gigatonnes of carbon dioxide

### **Box 1: UN Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation**

1. *Restitution* should, whenever possible, restore the victim to the original situation
2. *Compensation* should be provided for any economically assessable damage
3. *Rehabilitation* should include medical and psychological care as well as legal and social services.
4. *Satisfaction* should include...measures aimed at the cessation of continuing violations; verification of the facts and full and public disclosure of the truth... public apologies; commemorations and tributes to the victims.
5. *Guarantees of non-repetition*.

## Box 2: The history of reparations

Many modern understandings of and movements for reparations come from resistance by African peoples to British and European colonialism.

- The International Social Movement for Afrikan Reparations (ISMAR) and Pan-Afrikan Reparations Coalition in Europe (PARCOE) have called for holistic reparations including systemic changes to societies, and the repair of physical, epistemic and cognitive harms.
- In the US, the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America (N'COBRA) and the Movement for Black Lives have called for reparations for the descendants of enslaved peoples in the US.
- In the Caribbean, the CARICOM Reparations Commission has demanded a full formal apology and reparations from European governments for slavery and genocidal actions against Indigenous communities.
- While there are some historic examples of individuals successfully petitioning for reparations, compensation has usually been paid to the slaveholders rather than those harmed by slavery. In 1835 the British government borrowed £20 million (about 5% of its GDP) to compensate slaveholders after abolition, and it took the Haitian government over 100 years to pay the debt created by French demands for slaveholder compensation after independence.

equivalent was emitted from 1850 to 2019, which was responsible for an increase in global surface temperatures of roughly 1-1.3°C.<sup>8</sup> Studies estimate that the most industrialised countries are responsible for between two-thirds and three-quarters of historic greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>9</sup>

As a result, countries in the global south are now facing severe climate impacts that cannot be adapted to, and have lost many economic opportunities to develop in the way that the global north has done. Emissions from richer countries caused an estimated \$2.3 trillion worth of damage to lower income countries between 1961 and 2000 alone.<sup>10</sup> To account for some of this, countries in the global north should pay large financial reparations to the global south (while recognising that this would not cover many of the more difficult to quantify losses).

In 2010, social movements argued in the Cochabamba People's Agreement that rich countries should each contribute approximately 6% of GDP each year to pay for their climate debt.<sup>11</sup> In 2009, Global Justice Now and Jubilee Debt Campaign calculated that the UK should contribute roughly \$30 billion a year to UN climate finance funds to pay for its climate debt.<sup>12</sup> However, climate justice movements have also

advocated for non-financial forms of reparations, such as the transfer of technology, the elimination of restrictive immigration policies, and guarantees of non-repetition.

## Reparations at the UN climate talks

- Social movements at UN climate talks have demanded reparations and the repayment of the **climate debt** owed by the global north to the global south. This included the transfer of technology and finance, the elimination of restrictive immigration policies, and an end to fossil fuel-led development, measures that would collectively form a programme for "restorative justice".<sup>13</sup>
- However, demands for reparations have been categorically rejected by the US and other rich countries, who have only committed to contributing some limited **climate finance**. Crucially, the refusal to acknowledge wrongdoing and historic responsibility for climate change means that climate finance continues to be perceived as an act of charity rather than a form of reparations in the global north.



- At the UN, **climate finance** refers to the \$100 billion/year promised by Annex 1 (the most industrialised) countries in the global north to the global south for **mitigation** (reducing greenhouse gas emissions) and **adaptation** (coping with the effects of climate breakdown).
- However, the \$100 billion/year target was not based on the needs of countries already suffering from climate-related catastrophes, and is therefore completely insufficient.
- Nevertheless, as of 2022 this target was still not met, and governments have been heavily criticised for using loans, overseas aid and private finance to inflate their claimed contributions.
- Social movements are calling for increased climate finance plus funding for **loss and damage**.
- **Loss and damage** would compensate countries for the financial costs created by extreme weather events such as floods, droughts, heatwaves, hurricanes and typhoons, as well as by slow-onset events such as sea level rise, desertification, glacial retreat and land degradation (but cannot compensate for many unquantifiable impacts on biodiversity, society, culture and human life).
- **Loss and damage** is therefore only one small contribution towards the initial demands for reparations made decades ago. Nonetheless, many governments and movements see it as an important interim step and means of establishing liability for climate change.
- The Alliance of Small Island States first raised the issue of loss and damage in 1991, but rich countries have regularly blocked attempts to set up a compensation mechanism in international talks.
- At COP26, countries of the global south proposed a loss and damage finance facility, but rich countries would only commit to return to the issue at the COP27 in Egypt. Then, at the latest climate talks in Bonn this June, rich countries tried to remove loss and damage from the agenda of COP27 altogether.<sup>14</sup>

## How can we support these demands?

### Make polluters pay

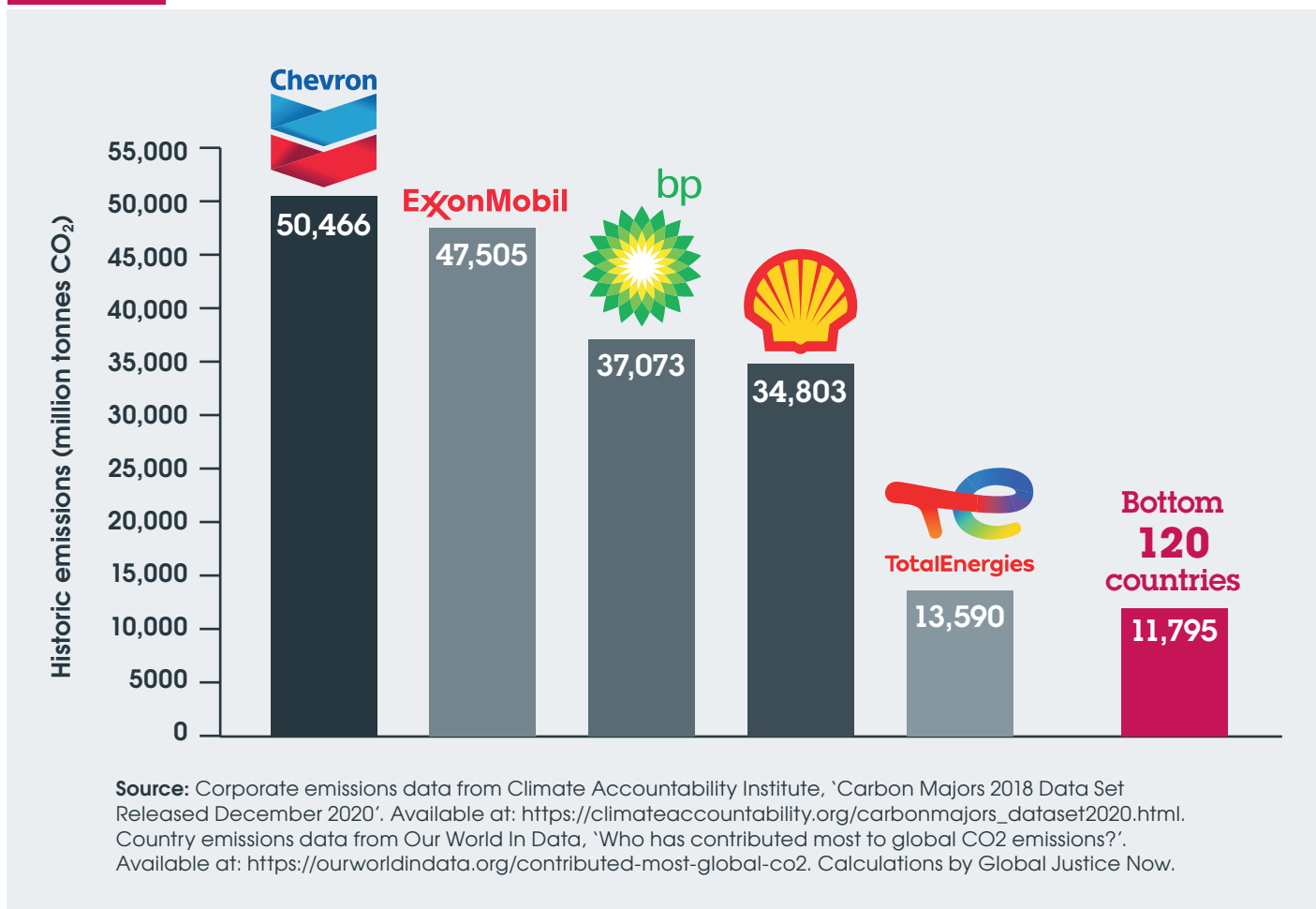
Transnational corporations, particularly fossil fuel companies, are among the biggest emitters of greenhouse gases in the world. **Just five private companies (Chevron, ExxonMobil, BP, Royal Dutch Shell, Total) were responsible for more than 10% of global greenhouse gas emissions between 1750 and 2015.**<sup>15</sup> These companies have contributed significantly to global warming and need to be held to account. Law professor Maxine Burkett argues that climate reparations must include a recognition of wrongdoing, financial compensation, and guarantees of non-repetition.<sup>16</sup>

So, campaigns to expose and stop the harms being done by fossil fuel corporations, by shutting down production and supporting a just transition to renewable energy, are incredibly important. But there are also increasing calls for polluting corporations to pay climate compensation to those suffering the worst impacts. For example, Saúl Luciano Lliuya (a farmer from the Peruvian Andes) is suing the German corporation RWE for compensation because global warming is shrinking the glaciers around his hometown in Huaraz, threatening the city with flooding.<sup>17</sup> More broadly, 65 organisations globally have endorsed a proposal by Stamp Out Poverty for a climate damages tax to be imposed on all fossil fuel corporations in order to raise funds for loss and damage.<sup>18</sup>

But it's not just the fossil fuel corporations that are fuelling the climate crisis – a huge role is also played by the finance industry. **In 2020 alone, investments by US financial firm Blackrock generated approximately 503.25 million tonnes of carbon emissions – more than Brazil, Australia or the combined total of the 125 lowest emitting countries.**<sup>19</sup> Financial corporations such as Blackrock need to stop the harm they are causing by financing fossil fuel projects and should face claims for taxation and reparations to compensate for their polluting. If they refuse, then governments should explore bringing corporate assets into public ownership so that, as the thinktank Common Wealth has argued, “they are used to provide economic and social benefits for everyone”.<sup>20</sup>

Graph 2:

## Historic emissions of the 'Big 5' energy companies vs. the 120 countries with lowest emissions



We also have to consider the vast inequalities in carbon consumption between the global majority and the super-rich billionaires with their private jets, superyachts and now even private space flights. Over one billion people around the world contribute less than one tonne of carbon emissions per person per year. In Europe, the bottom 50% of the population emits around 5 tonnes per person per year. Meanwhile, the richest 0.1% of people globally contribute 467 tonnes each every year, and the top 0.01% contribute a staggering 2,530 tonnes per person per year. Of course, even without taking billionaires into account there are still wide inequalities between carbon consumption levels in the global north and the global south. But a mixture of progressive taxation and specific measures to tax and limit the emissions of the super-rich are needed to ensure justice within countries when it comes to the question of who pays for climate damages.

### What rich governments must do

While corporations are disproportionately responsible for greenhouse gas emissions, they have always been enabled by their friends in government. Rich countries in the global north have provided the basis for our global, extractivist economy; first by colonising the world to loot wealth and resources, and then by writing the rules of the global economy that give corporations a right to pollute. With the world's fifth-highest level of historic carbon emissions, as well as arguably the worst colonial impact and most globally damaging financial centre in the City of London, the UK is particularly culpable.

The claim that the UK, and other rich countries, owe loss and damage compensation to the global south is therefore completely justified. Loss and damage by itself doesn't represent a holistic programme of climate reparations, but it could provide some compensation for economically assessable damage and be an important practical

step towards ensuring rich countries accept responsibility for climate change. The demands being made at the UN climate talks by the global south, by the Association of Small Island States and the Climate Vulnerable Forum among others, for rich countries to establish a fund for loss and damage is therefore crucial. We must increase pressure on the UK government to support this proposal and contribute to it.

Based on the UK's historic contribution of 4.6% of greenhouse gas emissions, **the UK should contribute at least \$20 billion a year to a loss and damage fund by 2030.**<sup>21</sup> In addition, climate finance to the global south for mitigation and adaptation must be greatly increased; southern leaders have called for the UK alone to contribute \$46 billion a year.<sup>22</sup> This means that, for the UK to pay its fair share of climate finance based on its historic emissions, it should be contributing approximately \$66 billion a year to loss and damage and climate finance combined – a little over 2% of gross national income.<sup>23</sup> This would be a substantial increase in UK contributions compared to current levels, and will take a major political shift to secure. But it could be funded by carbon and climate damages taxes as well as taxes on wealth, luxury goods and financial transactions. According to the *World Inequality Report* A 10% wealth tax on “carbon assets owned by global multimillionaires” alone could generate “at least \$100bn in a year” – more than the annual climate adaptation costs developing countries”.<sup>24</sup>

## Support holistic reparations and deep structural transformation

That being said, we know that the UK's contribution to the climate crisis, and the damage that transnational corporations and financial institutions based here are doing to the planet, cannot be repaired through financial compensation alone. It is not as simple as accounting for and reducing greenhouse gas emissions – as the economists Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen have argued, our entire extractivist economic model and “mode of living” is based on the “worldwide exploitation of nature” and people, with far ranging impacts on ecosystems, communities and human rights.<sup>25</sup> Reparations as a project therefore must be understood holistically. It might not be something that can be campaigned for and won overnight, or even over a few years, but is, as the philosopher Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò says, “central to the expansive project of building a more just world” in the long term.<sup>26</sup>

In support of this, we will continue to campaign for deep, structural transformation to the global economy in order to stop the harm, and begin repairing some of the damage, being done by big polluters and global north governments. That includes continuing to campaign for debt cancellation and a fairer global debt system, against intellectual property laws, and to end racist border policies across the global north.

Beyond this, movements from around the world have proposed numerous other ways in which reparatory justice requires fundamental redesign of our economies. This includes movements to end extractivism, promote ‘degrowth’, to democratise our energy systems, or to support local sovereignty through direct financial transfers to communities.<sup>27</sup>

We do not have all the answers to what the right sort of model or programme for this kind of transformation might be. But we will continue to work collaboratively with movements from across the global south, diaspora groups and internationalists to create platforms for the discussion of these ideas and build solidarity between movements seeking justice together.

## What can you do?

Our immediate focus is on supporting global south demands for loss and damage at COP27 and beyond. In the first instance, supporters can **sign and share our petition** on loss and damage: [globaljustice.org.uk/loss-damage-action](https://globaljustice.org.uk/loss-damage-action)

We will also be asking people to **write to their MPs** about loss and damage in the run up to COP27 in November. Check the campaign section at [globaljustice.org.uk/our-campaigns/climate](https://globaljustice.org.uk/our-campaigns/climate) or contact [Daniel.Willis@globaljustice.org.uk](mailto:Daniel.Willis@globaljustice.org.uk) for guidance.

Local groups can also **organise local meetings** to discuss these issues, or to hear from an expert on reparations. Contact [Daniel.willis@globaljustice.org.uk](mailto:Daniel.willis@globaljustice.org.uk) to discuss further.

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- 2 Some Pan-African groups use a 'k' in their spelling of 'Afrika' because they argue that 'Africa', using a C, is a European imposition and a product of colonialism. When referring to these groups in this briefing, we have deliberately followed this spelling.
- 3 We would like to thank Harpreet Kaur Paul, Esther Stanford-Xosei, Guppi Bola, Lumumba Di-Aping, the Cooperative and Policy Alternative Center, Mary Atkinson, Aliya Yule and Mika Minio-Paluello for feedback on this work, while acknowledging that any errors are our own.
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## Take action

To find out how you can help tackle corporate power and become part of a movement for real change visit [globaljustice.org.uk](https://globaljustice.org.uk)



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