

## Who owes whom? AIDS and reparations

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By Salih Booker

**WASHINGTON** - On June 19, 1865, Texas announced the emancipation of all slaves in the state, two years after the rest of the country. The Juneteenth anniversary is observed by events across the US to mark the supposed end of slavery. But has slavery really ended if its consequences still persist - and if there are no reparations?

The movement for reparations in the US has gained legal ground and political and social momentum in recent years. Several legal cases have been filed against private corporations that benefited from the institution of slavery. Suits soon to be filed will target the culpability of the government for sanctioning this crime against humanity. The discourse about reparations in this country isn't just about putting a price tag on past injustices and securing payments for individuals. It's about a much broader commitment to investing in social changes that will address the lingering damages of these injustices.

In Africa, the reparations movement is pursuing similar legal strategies and inspiring a broader mobilization for social justice. In South Africa, the movement for reparations for the apartheid era has led to recent legal cases, filed in the US, against corporations that provided economic support to the apartheid regime. More broadly, the question of reparations for Africans for centuries of slavery, colonialism, and exploitation requires a comprehensive answer that addresses the consequences of this history. Reparations are, moreover, necessary to enable Africans to meet today's challenges.

The greatest challenge facing blacks today throughout the African world is the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Africa is "ground zero" of the global AIDS pandemic, home to almost three-quarters of those living with HIV/AIDS worldwide. Here in the US, more than half of all new HIV infections are among blacks. In the Caribbean, infection rates are among the world's highest.

The disproportionate impact of AIDS on blacks is closely related to the history of oppression and discrimination that people of African descent share.

Vulnerability to AIDS is increased by impoverishment and marginalization, which remain the most important aspects of the continued legacy of slavery and colonialism. The same racist double standard that justified centuries of discrimination is visible today in the failure of Western policymakers to respond with the urgency that the AIDS pandemic requires.

The AIDS crisis has become the deadliest manifestation of a system built upon the legacy of slavery, colonialism, and global racism. AIDS is the greatest challenge that people across the African diaspora share, and it makes plain the inseparable nature of the struggles for justice and reparations. While the debate over reparations continues, it must be an immediate priority to address the urgent crisis of HIV/AIDS, which has become the most serious threat to the survival of the black race since the transatlantic slave trade.

A real commitment to defeating AIDS must begin with an increase in funding for programs that reach those most affected by this health crisis. In the US, this means greater funding for the AIDS Drug Assistance Program (ADAP) and other initiatives that can respond to the needs of blacks living with HIV/AIDS in poor communities. Internationally, the US must increase its support for the Global Fund to Fight HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, the multinational organization that will be key to turning the tide of the pandemic in Africa. The US government's shameful failure to provide its promised share of funding for this essential vehicle means the fund faces bankruptcy later this year.

Finally, Africa's external debts must be canceled outright. It is more than a cruel irony that African countries are today paying back \$15 billion annually on "debts" to the very countries - and their institutions - that owe Africa so much. Debt cancellation is a matter of justice, and it ought to be seen as a down payment in the process of reparations.

As we commemorate Juneteenth this year, the real question must be: Who owes whom?

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