Failure to Pursue Economic Reparations has, and Will Continue to Undermine Racial Reconciliation

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1 Introduction

Following long periods of violent repressive regimes such as slavery, colonialism and apartheid, economic redress for the victims is a crucial requirement for reconciliation between the victims and the former oppressors.1

Many countries following long periods of human rights abuses have used a number of core approaches which involves: seeking truth, acknowledging the injustice, retributive justice to bring perpetrators to book, restorative justice, providing reparations to victims, and fashioning a new post-abuse ‘reconstruction’ of society based on ‘mastering of the past.’2

A shared truth of what happened in the past, acknowledgement of the suffering of the victims and the responsibility of the perpetrators are key prerequisites for reconciliation.3


A key part of securing shared truth is for the acknowledgement from the perpetrator group that they had caused a great injustice to the victims. One scholar puts it succinctly: "It is not the lack of forgiveness on behalf of victims but the ‘culture of denial’ associated with the perpetrators, which is the largest obstacle to reconciliation."5

Another crucial prerequisite for reconciliation is reparations, redress or compensation, referring to the ‘act of making amends.’6 Providing redress includes financial transfers from the public purse, the return of repossessed or stolen assets or through redistribution and affirmative action practices.7

Reconciliation is particularly difficult in post-conflict situations where victim and perpetrators must together forge common statehood beyond the tragic event.8 Reparations are even more crucial in such situations to secure reconciliation between victims and perpetrators.

Reparations to victims contribute to reconciliation in that it recognizes the responsibility of the state and non-state perpetrators of oppression of the

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