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REPARATIVE ECONOMIES

A Joint Thought Piece by the Open Society Foundations and United Nations Development Programme Regional Service Centre for Africa

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This thought piece builds on a workshop on reparative economies jointly convened by Open Society Foundations and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Regional Service Centre for Africa in December 2025 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The workshop provided an opportunity to reflect on emerging thinking and practice in this area. The paper is intended to contribute to ongoing collective reflection, rather than to set out a formal policy position.

Reparative economy refers to an approach that brings together principles of reparative justice, community-led prosperity, and the democratization of economic systems. It seeks to address historical and structural inequities by placing communities that have experienced harm, exclusion, or marginalization at the center of shaping their own economic futures.

While the concept of reparative economics is relatively new, it draws on a range of existing practices across development, peacebuilding, and social justice. It sits at the intersection of economics, society, and peace, and explores how economic systems and policies can either reinforce inequality and social harm or contribute to repair, inclusion, and resilience at the community level.

Our hope is that this document contributes to ongoing discourse and stimulates further dialogue on this emerging concept, helping to identify practical entry points and opportunities for how a reparative economy approach can be applied in practice and deliver meaningful impact for communities across the continent.

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Reparative Economies

Reimagining Healing, Repair, Justice, and Community-Led Prosperity for Sustainable Peace

Many of Africa's conflicts are rooted in political and economic systems that not only concentrate wealth and power among a small elite, but also systematically exclude large segments of the population through structural violence. The scale of this concentration is stark: across sub-Saharan Africa, the richest tenth of the population captures roughly 56 percent of national income, a level of inequality rivalled only by the Middle East and North Africa, while South Africa remains the most unequal country on record (World Inequality Lab, 2026; World Bank, 2024). This exclusion is visible in the widespread dispossession of land, in extractive industry contracts that enrich elites at the expense of communities, and in deeply entrenched gendered divisions of labor. Socioeconomic inequalities are not accidental. They are structured. They are historical. They are political.

Peacebuilding must go beyond managing the absence of violence. A broader "sustaining peace" paradigm is needed—one that emphasizes proactive, systemic approaches to building more inclusive and democratic political and economic systems. Only such an approach can adequately address historical injustices and offer a credible pathway to sustainable peace and development.

This proposition is now well established in mainstream development thinking. The joint United Nations–World Bank study *Pathways for Peace* found that grievances over exclusion—from access to power, natural resources, services and justice—are among the most consistent drivers of violent conflict, and estimated that a scaled-up investment in prevention could save between US$5 billion and US$70 billion a year (United Nations & World Bank, 2018). A reparative economy—follows this diagnosis to its logical conclusion: if exclusion drives conflict, then the deliberate, justice-centered redistribution of economic power is itself a form of conflict prevention rather than a cost incurred after the fact.

The following describes a framework for reparative economies, developed and shaped through a joint convening hosted by the UNDP Regional Service Centre in December 2025 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, bringing together participants across Africa working at the intersection of alternative resourcing, economic justice, peacebuilding, democracy, and reparative justice.

What Is a Reparative Economy?

The term reparative economy refers to an approach that integrates the principles of reparative justice, community-led prosperity, and the democratization of economic structures. It seeks to redress historical and systemic inequities by centering communities that have experienced harm, exclusion, or marginalization—placing them at the heart of shaping their own economic futures.

In practice, this means concrete economic transformation: the redistribution of assets such as land and natural resources to historically excluded communities; the promotion of cooperative ownership models for local enterprises; and the creation of mechanisms for shared, community-managed stewardship of key resources. These shifts are intended to foster not only economic empowerment but collective prosperity rooted in justice and participation.

A reparative economy also transforms how peacebuilding and development are understood, embedding economic transformation within the broader project of historical healing. Economic wellbeing is inseparable from justice, voice, and healing. Reparative economies are grounded in the understanding that social and economic repair are deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing.

How Does a Reparative Economy Framework Differ from Existing Development Approaches?

A reparative economy differs fundamentally from traditional development models in both purpose and approach. While conventional frameworks—such as inclusive growth, local economic development, or post conflict-recovery—primarily focus on expanding economic opportunities, increasing incomes, and stabilizing systems, they often operate within existing structures that have historically produced exclusion and inequality. In contrast, a reparative economy begins with an explicit recognition of historical harm, structural injustice, and power imbalances, and seeks not only to include marginalized communities but to redress past injustices and transform the systems that created them.

Rather than treating communities as beneficiaries of externally designed interventions, reparative approaches position them as agents of change, with decision-making authority over resources, priorities, and development pathways. Moreover, while traditional models tend to separate economic growth from social healing, a reparative economy integrates economic transformation with processes of trust-building, psychosocial repair, and political empowerment, ensuring that development is not only inclusive, but also restorative, justice-centered, and sustainable over the long term.

The contrast can be drawn across several dimensions:

Dimension	Conventional development approaches	Reparative economy approach
Point of departure	Expanding opportunity and incomes within existing structures	Explicit recognition of historical harm, structural injustice and power imbalance
Role of the community	Beneficiaries of externally designed interventions	Agents of change with decision-making authority over resources and priorities
Growth and healing	Economic growth treated separately from social and psychosocial repair	Economic transformation integrated with trust-building, healing and political empowerment
Principal metrics	Income, GDP, jobs and system stability	Trust, dignity, expanded decision-making power, and reduced grievance
Time horizon	Short-to-medium term, results-driven	Long-term, process-based, and community-paced
Primary source of capital	External aid and foreign investment	Reparations, community-stewarded capital, diaspora and local resources

Table 1. Conventional development approaches and the reparative economy approach compared.

A Framework Rooted in African Knowledge and Practice

This framework emerged through a process of analytical and reflective dialogue. It crafts a language and a set of practices for navigating the crises and tensions that underpin the conditions a reparative economy seeks to address—among them, the centralization of wealth and power, and the disenfranchisement of communities.

The framework, shaped by a Pan-African feminist praxis, centers the gendered harm experienced by women and young people as active agents of this work.

Many of the solutions we seek already exist within African traditions. Communities and civil society organizations across the continent have a long and ongoing practice of reparative economy. What this framework does is reassert these logics in a context defined by modern inequities and global entanglements. Reparative economy is not a new invention—it is a naming, an acknowledgment that communities have long cultivated holistic models of living in harmony and cooperation that reconnect wealth with the collective, and power with participation.

Three Core Pillars of a Reparative Economy

1. Participatory Governance

Communities affected by conflict or injustice form collectives to manage shared resources for their collective benefit. This practice fosters everyday democratic engagement and ensures communities actively shape their own economic futures.

Communities define what counts as a resource—financial, cultural, environmental, or relational—and set the terms of how those resources are used. This means shifting toward community-defined priorities, community-stewarded capital, and collective governance structures.

When communities collectively manage land, enterprises, savings groups, or resource funds, something deeper than income generation takes place. Community agency, autonomy, and sovereignty are restored. Social cohesion is strengthened. The economic becomes relational.

Community-led governance is embedded within local government systems, with participatory structures—assemblies, cooperatives, and resource committees—recognized and integrated into planning, budgeting, and decision-making. National and local resources are directed to communities affected by extraction or conflict, revenues are reinvested into community-owned initiatives, and collective enterprises are co-financed.

This can look like:

- Establishing legal frameworks for community land ownership and shared resource governance.
- Designing cooperatives or collective enterprise models or alternative resource models
- institutionalizing participatory budgeting, mandating community representation in local councils

2. Reparative Investment

States and non-state actors invest in community collectives and support their development plans. Unlike traditional development aid, this targeted investment is explicitly justice-driven, it acknowledges past harms and treats investment as an act of historical redress, grounded in community-defined priorities.

This can look like:

- Multinational corporations acknowledging their role in fueling conflict and repairing the damage, including environmental degradation and the destruction of livelihoods—through meaningful reparations
- Reparations and restitution for harms and violations arising from slavery and colonization are directed to affected communities, with communities themselves determining how these resources are used.

- State policies that expand access to finance and markets, promote local value addition and direct ownership of production, support innovation and startups, grow household income and savings, invest in transformative infrastructure, raise the value of labor, and de-risk local production

- Concessional lending from financial institutions for reconstruction, development, and climate adaptation anchored in community-led priority setting and decision-making.

- Community-level skills-building, capacity development, and technical accompaniment by civil society organizations

- Diaspora remittances directed toward community priorities and investment in local businesses

These commitments are no longer purely aspirational. In February 2025, the African Union adopted "Justice for Africans and People of African Descent Through Reparations" as its theme of the year. Member states subsequently endorsed a commitment to make 2026–2036 the AU Decade on Reparations, building on the Caribbean Community's Ten-Point Plan for Reparatory Justice, released in 2014. In March 2026, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution recognizing the transatlantic trafficking and enslavement of Africans as the gravest crime against humanity and supporting reparations (African Union, 2025; CARICOM, 2014; United Nations General Assembly, 2026). A reparative economy provides the missing link between these continental and global commitments and the community level at which redress is actually experienced.

Reparative investment also means recognizing the resources communities already command. Remittances to Africa reached an estimated $95 billion in 2024—about 5.1 percent of the continent's GDP and, in net terms, more than either official development assistance or foreign direct investment—yet they remain largely absent from formal development planning (Institute for Security Studies, 2025). Directing even a fraction of these flows toward community-defined priorities, on terms that communities themselves set, would constitute a substantial and self-determined source of reparative capital.

3. Inclusive Economic and Political Empowerment

Economic systems are political systems.

Economic empowerment cannot be separated from political empowerment. Every economic system reflects power: who owns land, who controls capital, who defines value, who absorbs risk. In fragile and conflict-affected contexts, these imbalances are often flashpoints. Economic programming that ignores these dynamics may generate income while reinforcing the very structures that produce harm.

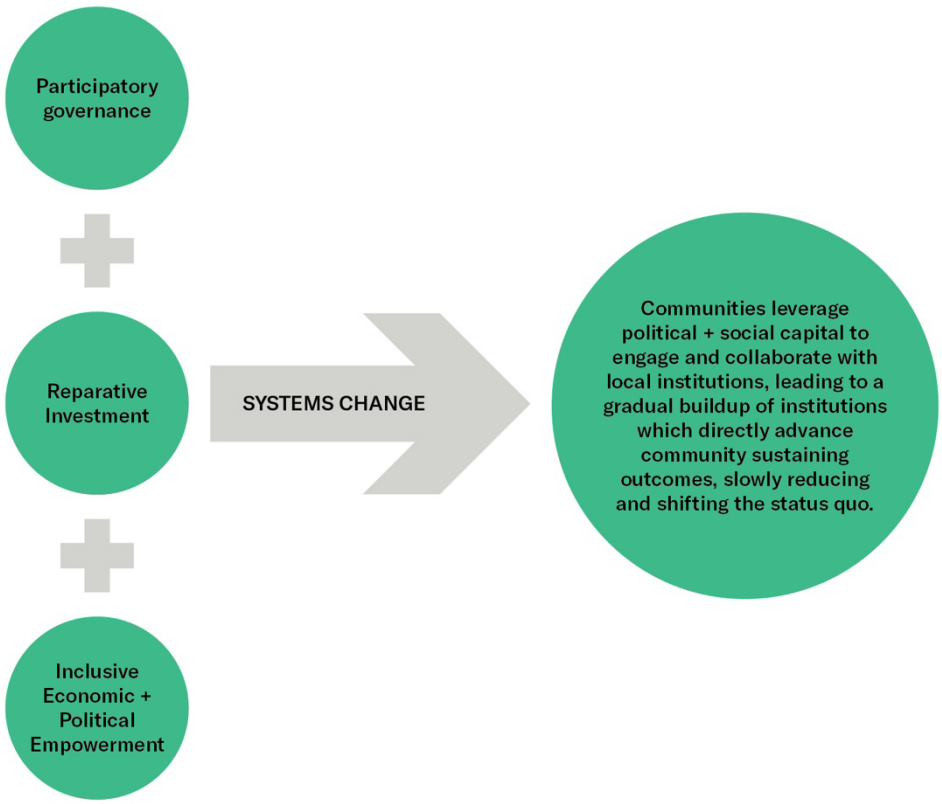
Reparative economies recognize this. Beyond economic access, community collectives are politically empowered to leverage their resources, and influence and collaborate with local institutions. This extends political participation beyond elections and embeds it in daily decision-making. These efforts help protect and strengthen democracy within their communities.

The goal is not to support isolated livelihoods or income-generating projects. It is to advance a transformative agenda aimed at inclusive economic and political empowerment as well as advancing gender-equitable policies.

This looks like:

- Processes of repair led by communities that have been impacted by extraction and exploitation.
- Creation of community structures that go beyond economic access, with a deliberate focus on systems change through political education and the building of alternative systems rooted in justice, dignity, care, and collective ownership.
- Cultivation and mobilization of community knowledge to sustain initiatives and address socioeconomic injustices.
- Provision of resources to communities, strengthening of existing skills, and cultivation of community leadership.

How Change Happens: From Harm to Repair



Economic repair is inseparable from social repair.

As these community-sustaining approaches scale and connect to broader political, economic, and social systems, they should begin to anchor an alternative order grounded in inclusive values. When reparative economic models deliver tangible benefits, they build community resilience and mobilize collective action—laying the foundation for new forms of social and political power.

Cooperatives and collectives, through shared ownership and participatory governance, expand everyday practices of democracy. Their sustained engagement with institutions—local councils, service providers, oversight bodies—extends political participation beyond elections, embedding it in daily decision-making. By leveraging their social and political capital, these groups advocate for fairer service delivery, more responsive governance, and policies that reflect community priorities. Over time, these efforts not only strengthen institutions but redistribute political voice and influence, ensuring that marginalized communities gain meaningful agency in shaping their own futures.

Shared Understanding of a Reparative Economy Framework

This workshop served as an opportunity for attendees to collectively develop a shared understanding of the principles of reparative economies and evidence of their potential impact.

Culture and Historical Healing

Historical harms continue to shape present conditions, including through enduring social, institutional, and cultural impacts that affect wellbeing and cohesion. Economic repair should therefore extend beyond material recovery to address these dimensions, including rebuilding trust and restoring dignity. A reparative economy incorporates mechanisms to engage with past harms and their ongoing effects, drawing where appropriate on locally grounded knowledge systems and practices to support social repair and resilience.

> In Al-Gadarif, Blue Nile, and Khartoum states in Sudan, organizations **Nabta, SHAGN, and Andariya** are working with 41 self-organized women and girls' groups to develop an autonomous resourcing infrastructure through resilient cooperative economic models while at the same time supporting these self-organized groups to continue using cultural and Indigenous healing practices such as Ga'adat Al-Jabana, drumming and singing gatherings, and accessing psychosocial support. The project situates itself within a transformative justice framework, aiming to build collaborative, healing spaces for dialogue and learning, while directly addressing key drivers of conflict: poverty, economic injustice, disempowerment, and exclusion.

Culture is both critical and grounding. It shapes processes, rituals, traditions, engagements, and choices. The conditions for a reparative economy are contextual;

what remains consistent is the presence of a cultural orientation that shapes how communities articulate change and define their needs. It is the task of a reparative economy to create the conditions for those cultural perspectives to thrive.

Trust Infrastructure as a Guarantee of Non-Repetition

A reparative economy is not simply about reparations or patterns of redistribution. It is also about creating an economic structure that supports non-recurrence and builds credible, sustained trust that such harms will not reoccur. In transforming the relationship between present systems and historical memory, trust may be the most important form of capital available. The framework seeks to address distrust between communities and state and non-state actors, among communities themselves, and between citizens and markets shaped by extractive systems.

A trust infrastructure is characterized by a local peace architecture that brings together inclusive dialogue processes, democratized economic decision-making, political empowerment, participatory governance, restorative justice mechanisms, and psychosocial healing spaces. Together, these elements lay a practical, contextual, and responsive foundation for the non-repetition of past violations. Economic transformation without trust repair—and without structures to sustain the benefits of a people-centered economy—remains brittle.

In Niger, **CITCOM** has put in place a multi-stakeholder dialogue platform that meets monthly to discuss issues related to social cohesion, local governance, and justice. From these discussions, community development projects are designed to address the issues raised. Finances and resources are also pooled to support these initiatives. In addition, communities map sectors favorable to the realization of income-generating activities. They are then trained on entrepreneurship and identified value chains and given access to credit to encourage local entrepreneurship. Resources from these initiatives go toward the community development projects.

Agro-Ecology as a Reparative Approach

For many communities, historical harms are inseparable from territorial loss and environmental damage. For example, in many parts of Africa, communities could not use their land owing to improvised explosive devices (IEDs) remained after conflict. In these cases, a reparative economy approach should remove explosive and dangerous material from the land and restore it for the community's use. The same applies to land that has been destroyed from harmful mining practices. A reparative framework goes beyond the restoration of land to integrate Indigenous land stewardship practices, agro-ecological approaches, and land governance reforms that center the rights of individuals and communities to the land which they inhabit and cultivate. Land is not only a productive asset—it is identity, memory, and cultural continuity. A reparative economy approach therefore recognizes food sovereignty as a form of political sovereignty.

Intersectional and Intergenerational

In this framework, "community" refers to those whose economic past, present, and future are shaped by conflict, dispossession, or disenfranchisement. Yet within any given community, harm is not experienced uniformly. Women and girls disproportionately bear the burden of conflict and exploitative economic systems; youth inherit structural exclusion; displaced persons lose not only assets but identity and belonging. Repair must reflect how harm is gendered and generationally differentiated, and how violence, displacement, and dispossession reverberate across generations.

An intersectional approach provides a framework for recognizing the gendered dimensions of harm and for grounding decisions in an understanding of how racial, class, gender, cultural, and political identities shape lived experience. A gender-transformative lens also helps navigate complex contexts and identities, and recognizes the unpaid care work and invisible labor of women in processes of economic and social reconstruction.

The economic weight of this invisible labor is not marginal. Globally, women and girls perform an estimated 12.5 billion hours of unpaid care work every day—worth at least $10.8 trillion a year, more than three times the size of the world's technology industry—and 42 percent of women are kept out of paid employment by these responsibilities, against just 6 percent of men (Oxfam, 2020). Any reparative economy that overlooks the redistribution of care work would simply rebuild inequality on a different foundation; recognizing, reducing and redistributing it is therefore central, not peripheral, to economic repair.

Intergenerationality is also key to upholding an intersectional perspective—building continuity and an inclusive knowledge base by connecting elders' memories of dispossession with the aspirations of youth for autonomy and creativity. When elders and youth co-create visions of repair, societies begin to heal their temporal ruptures.

In Mali, land tenure security can be a formidable lever for socioeconomic autonomy for women and young people who are today almost entirely excluded from land ownership for various reasons. The consortium **CERDES-ESEN** aims to improve this situation by providing Malian women, including those who are internally displaced or refugees, with the information, services, incentives, and networks necessary to benefit from secure access to land in order to improve their economic opportunities and socioeconomic status and promote lasting peace and reconciliation through the consideration of their interests. Land conflict has been one of the drivers of the larger crisis in Mali since 2012. This project is designed to promote the intergenerational transmission of land ownership by women and girls, and the transformation of institutional and sociocultural mechanisms that marginalize women in the area of land.

Community-Led and Community-Owned

A reparative economy framework recognizes that processes and decisions must center the power, agency, and self-determination of communities. The framework must serve communities and center their vision for how they wish to evolve and transform. Repair must be defined by communities themselves, promoting customary and Indigenous governance systems and creating space for locally engineered practices of resource allocation and prioritization.

How we frame questions, language, and areas of interest must prioritize community perspectives as the first and primary source of knowledge. This is part of a practice of cultural, linguistic, and epistemic decolonization that involves rethinking, deconstructing, and questioning perspectives and inherited normative frameworks that originate outside the community.

In the work led by **Tilwate Peace Network, Mali**, the reparative economies framework is structured around three core components. First, it supports communities to collectively map their available resources and determine how these can be organized to generate shared economic benefit through collective decision-making. Second, it enables communities to engage constructively with the Ministry of Reparations, positioning the state to fund locally driven economic development plans rather than imposing top-down solutions. Third, it leverages community-level economic power to mobilize social capital and engage local institutions in addressing broader socioeconomic needs, including access to water, health care, and other essential services. Through this process, communities are not passive recipients of aid, but active leaders shaping their economic and governance futures.

The Role of State, Non-State Actors, and Diaspora in Resourcing

Both state and non-state actors have a role to play through collaboration, facilitation, investment, and resourcing—but always in service of community decision-making authority. Communities retain the right to reject external resources. Resources are understood broadly, encompassing both financial and non-financial support; the knowledge and structures that already exist within communities are themselves local resources to be mobilized in support of self-determination and longevity.

A reparative economy also recognizes the need to repair our relationship with international resourcing, integrating international support—financial and non-financial—into structures of care that have been created with communities, so that it complements rather than displaces local resources. Diaspora resources, distinct in their contextual and relational character, are recognized as an integral layer of this ecosystem.

The private sector, too, is understood expansively—not limited to large commercial enterprises but inclusive of local business owners such as shopkeepers. In some contexts, the private sector can play a reparative role by supporting local activities through investment.

Engaging the State and Market—on Community Terms

A reparative economy does not romanticize isolation. Communities operate within state and market systems, and engagement with those systems can itself be reparative. In some contexts, strengthening local government institutions may constitute repair. In others, communities may negotiate revenue-sharing agreements with extractive industries or advocate for national reparations policies. The critical shift is this: engagement is not passive incorporation into existing systems—it is negotiated participation aimed at redistributing power.

In Mozambique, the **Association of Organizations for Integrated Socio-Economic Development** is working to promote initiatives for fair compensation for resource exploitation projects and the promotion of initiatives for the social and economic empowerment of women and young people. In addition, in partnership with local government structures, they are working to develop a common methodology for local reparation, which takes into account the aspect of fair compensation for resource exploitation projects involving the community, community leaders, and local, provincial, and national government. Lastly, this initiative is creating safe spaces where these empowered women and girls can meet, reflect, and question economic development models linked to violence and war.

In Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali, the **Legal Empowerment Fund** is focusing on bringing grassroots cooperatives together on a learning agenda about how to build community power, self-directed by what communities want to learn and achieve. This intervention is reparative because it does not assume what communities need but tailors its intervention based on what is communicated by communities as the driving needs. Other practical examples include building a common methodology for local reparations that includes how to initiate fair compensation for resource exploitation projects. This is a practical intervention that seeks to remedy terms and conditions of engagement with enterprises that seek local resources, while also repairing the relationship between communities and government structures.

Certain tensions persist and must be held openly as part of the process:

- Can we work with resources from state actors that often reproduce harm?
- How do communities hold the private sector accountable while forging spaces for partnership?

Rather than resolving these tensions prematurely, reparative economies hold them open—as generative questions that animate, rather than obstruct, the objectives of the approach.

Community-Led Measurement and Accountability

How we measure success reveals what we value.

Repair cannot be imposed; it must be co-created. Context defines the terms of engagement; culture grounds the meaning of justice. It is this context-specific ethic that gives the reparative framework its strength. It resists universal metrics and prescriptive timelines, measuring progress instead through trust, adaptability, and resilience—the subtle but powerful indicators of genuine transformation. Success is defined through long-term change, reflective learning, and care, not quick outcomes.

A reparative economy is a transformative, process-based framework. It recognizes that healing and repair occur through sustained engagement, driven by what is encountered collaboratively with communities. The process itself is how people learn and grow through participation, which is rooted in care. This is the substance of the work. Time and reflective attention are central to any process that genuinely heals, and a systemic learning approach must be embedded as a core practice.

Repair also means reconfiguring the standards and rubrics by which impact is defined. In some contexts, a community's ability to adapt under difficult economic conditions is itself a form of repair. Reparative economy must shift the power of defining measurement to communities, in their own context-specific terms, centering adaptability as a core principle.

A reparative economy asks:

- Has community decision-making power expanded?
- Has trust between groups improved?
- Do people feel greater dignity and safety?
- Are the drivers of grievance being reduced?

Resisting universal metrics need not mean resisting evidence. The practical task for development partners is to hold community-defined indicators—shifts in decision-making power, trust, dignity, and the reduction of grievance—alongside the accountability and value-for-money requirements of funders, treating the two as complementary rather than opposed. Where the two are placed in tension, the burden of proof should rest on demonstrating that externally imposed metrics do not themselves reproduce the exclusion the framework seeks to repair.

Measurement itself becomes reparative when communities define both the indicators and the timelines. Slow consensus-building may matter more than rapid scale. Adaptability can signal resilience.

As practitioners of international development, we find that these reflections offer an opportunity to consider how the principles of a reparative economy can be embedded in our work. Any operational framework for reparative economy interventions should be grounded in transparency, accountability, adaptability, care, participation, intergenerational equity, listening, and co-creation.

Conclusion

Ultimately, a reparative economy is about dignity. It is about restoring the capacity of communities to define their futures and making whole the communities whose lives have been affected by cycles of conflict. It is about repairing the social fabric torn by violence and exclusion. It is about transforming extractive systems into regenerative ones. In this vision, economic and political systems become sites of reparative justice. Through this framework we recognize that sustainable peace is not built solely through political agreements or security arrangements—but through the everyday governance of resources, the rebuilding of trust, and the restoration of power to those from whom it was taken.

Repair, then, is not a peripheral idea. It is the deliberate action of building toward collective wellbeing, sustainable peace, and shared prosperity.

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