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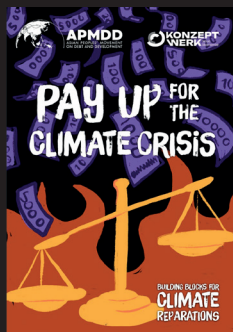
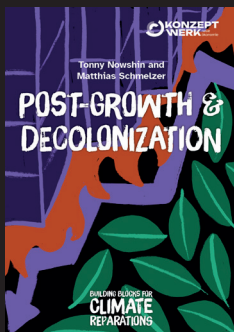
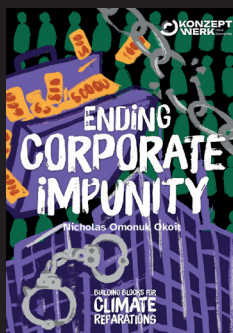
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HOW (NOT) TO APOLOGIZE

BUILDING BLOCKS FOR
CLIMATE REPARATIONS



BUILDING BLOCKS FOR CLIMATE REPARATIONS



All fact sheets at www.knoe.org/bbfc

IMPRESSUM

Published by
Konzeptwerk Neue Ökonomie
Klingenstr. 22, 04229 Leipzig
www.knoe.org

February 2026

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Photos

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Julia Runge

Nama / OvaHerero Memorial Day 2023

Shark Island, Namibia



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CLIMATE REPARATIONS

WHY DO WE NEED CLIMATE REPARATIONS?

The climate crisis is profoundly unjust. It is not a crisis that affects everyone equally, nor one that everyone has caused.

4 On one side are those historically and structurally responsible for it: countries, corporations and individuals that have benefited – and continue to benefit – from greenhouse gas-intensive production, consumption and economic growth. Germany, for example is responsible for around 3% of global historic emissions¹, despite making up 1% of the world's population. It has built immense wealth and technological capacity through centuries of industrialization and colonial exploitation, and it possesses the financial means to adapt to the consequences of climate change.

On the other side are those who bear the brunt of the crisis: communities, countries, and ecosystems in the Global South that have contributed least to the problem. Cameroon, for instance has produced only about 0,2% of historic global emissions², yet faces devastating impacts – from floods and droughts to the loss of livelihoods and biodiversity – without the sufficient resources to respond or recover.



When we talk about Climate Reparations it is essential to recognize that the injustice is not limited to unequal emissions. Germany's wealth, stability and high standard of living are inseparable from the historic and ongoing exploitation of countries like Cameroon* - through colonialism, extractivism, unfair trade relations and neocolonial economic structures. The raw materials, labour and resources extracted from colonial regions have directly fuelled Europe's industrialization and accumulation of wealth, while leaving formerly colonized nations structurally disadvantaged, indebted and dependent.

Cameroon's vulnerability to the climate crisis is, therefore, in turn, not merely the result of natural conditions. It is the outcome of historically produced inequalities - the result of centuries of dispossession, resource extraction and deliberate underdevelopment. The same systems that caused the climate crisis continues to shape who suffers from it and who profits from it.

The line between those who suffer from the climate crisis does not run only between rich and poor countries. It also runs within societies, along class divisions, gender hierarchies, racialized structures and other intersecting forms of oppression. Marginalized groups - including women, Indigenous peoples, Black and other racialized communities, people with disabilities, and low income households - are often both the least responsible for emissions and the most exposed to climate harms. ⁵

* In this case there is even a direct connection since Cameroon used to be a German Colony. For more information on the relationship of the two countries through a climate justice lens see: www.knoe.org/thedamagedone

BUILDING BLOCKS FOR CLIMATE REPARATIONS

Climate reparations are therefore neither charity nor aid, they are

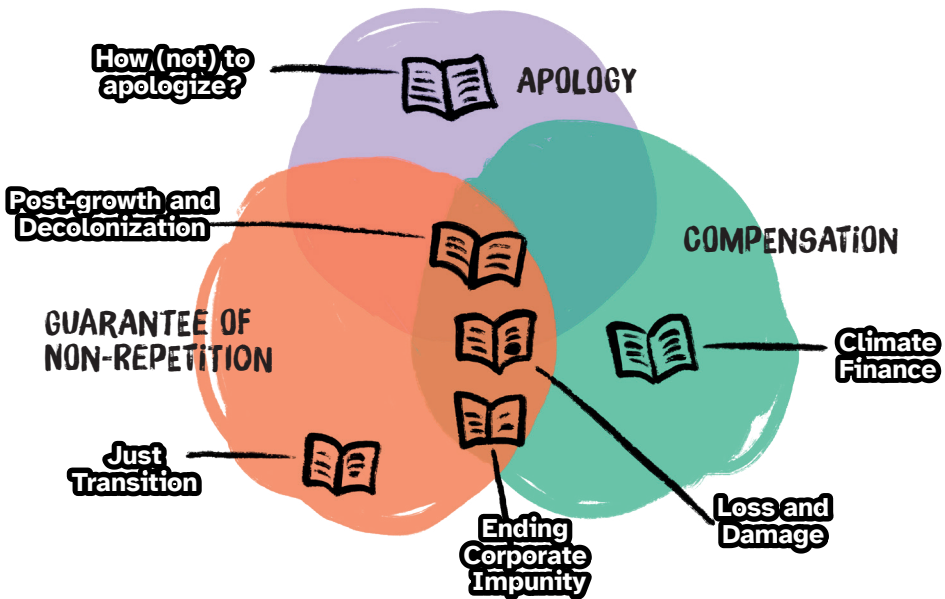
- necessary to stop further injustices and ensure accountability and repair by redistributing resources, power and decision making to those most affected,
- a tool to address the root causes of the crisis – historical responsibility, structural inequality and systemic exploitation,
- the centrepiece of climate and global justice, a prerequisite for a healing process between the Global South and North.

According to Maxine Burkett,³ climate reparations must at least include three core elements: “an apology, compensation and a guarantee of non-repetition”.

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An apology acknowledges the harm done and accepts responsibility for it. Compensation - whether monetary or through other forms of material redress - gives tangible or symbolic weight to that acknowledgement. The guarantee of non-repetition, perhaps the most transformative element, commits the perpetrating parties to structural changes that prevent the continuation or repetition of the injustice.

To make these elements more concrete, we identified 6 building blocks for climate reparations that explain how these could look like in practice, in Germany and beyond (see figure).



ABOUT THE PROJECT

Looking at the current state of civil society, we believe that climate reparations are the missing link in a comprehensive understanding of climate justice. Despite growing awareness of the connection between the climate crisis, colonialism and racism, the concept of climate reparations remains underexplored and often misunderstood. One major reason is the lack of accessible materials on the topic - particularly in German-speaking contexts.

With our project “Building Blocks for Climate Reparations” we aim to close this gap - by providing accessible, grounded knowledge that links climate reparations to justice, responsibility and systemic change.

ABOUT THIS FACTSHEET

This factsheet explores the topic of apologies and symbolic measures as an additional, necessary part of reparations. It does so by drawing conclusions from the failed German attempts to apologize for the genocide of the Ovaherero and Nama peoples.

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“REPARATION PROGRAMS THAT FAIL TO ACKNOWLEDGE RESPONSIBILITY IN EFFECT ATTEMPT TO DO THE IMPOSSIBLE. JUST AS AN APOLOGY IS INEFFECTIVE UNLESS IT INVOLVES AN ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR WRONGDOING (AN APOLOGY DEPENDS ON SUCH RECOGNITION, EVERYTHING ELSE BEING AN EXCUSE OR AN EXPRESSION OF REGRET), REPARATION PROGRAMS THAT FAIL TO ACKNOWLEDGE RESPONSIBILITY DO NOT PROVIDE REPARATION[...].”

Report of the UN-Special Rapporteur
on truth, justice and reparation⁴

INTRODUCTION

IT'S ABOUT JUSTICE

One element of **reparations**, including climate reparations, is an apology for the damage caused. Climate reparations are a relatively new field with limited practical examples or theoretical sources to draw from. Thus, in this discussion paper, we examine the process of coming to terms with Germany's colonial past, using the example of **the genocide of the Ovaherero and Nama peoples** committed by the German Empire between 1904 and 1908 in what was then the colony of **German South West Africa** (now Namibia) (see Info Box 1).

The largely unsuccessful efforts to address the genocide to date can serve as an example of which forms of **apology** are **appropriate**—and which are not—and in which **overall political framework** apologies must be embedded. If colonial crimes are dealt with seriously, this could also serve as a benchmark for how Germany could and should respond to international demands for reparations for the climate crisis.



Our discussion paper begins with a preliminary thought: We initially had reservations about drafting a paper focused solely on “apology and symbolic forms of reparations.” However, this was the explicit task requested of us.

Therefore, we want to make it clear: it is not an apology but justice that matters. And appropriate reparations always consist of several inseparably linked forms, including **material compensation**. Even emotionally or symbolically charged gestures of apologizing remain **worthless** if they are not part of an appropriate overall context that also includes **concrete material measures**. In view of the enormous, ongoing consequences of the genocide in Namibia (see Info Box 2) and the climate crisis, limiting oneself to symbolic acts would in both cases be **insufficient** because words alone cannot provide justice.

It is in the deeds—including returning what you have stolen, including repairing what you have broken—where real language is found, where the apology can be deemed sincere and faithful, or merely a token gesture.

INSIGHTS FROM THE GERMAN-NAMIBIAN RECONCILIATION PROCESS

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To date, the German government has not apologized for the genocide of the Ovaherero and Nama peoples. Should an apology be made one day, the burden of the failed process of coming to terms with the past will weigh heavily. The genocide has been denied for too long, and the German government's political approach has been and continues to be too strongly influenced by its own strategic interests,⁵ as the following examples show.

"LET THE BLOOD OF OUR
ANCESTORS,
FUEL OUR RESOLVE FOR
RESTORATIVE JUSTICE"

12 April 1893

22 April 1906

02 October 1904

Annual Genocide
Remembrance Day

THE RETRACTED APOLOGY IN 2004— RESPONSIBILITY WITHOUT SUPPORT

In 2004, on the 100th anniversary of the “Battle of Waterberg,” Heidemarie **Wieczorek-Zeul**, then Federal Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development, apologized for the crimes committed by Germans. She said:

14 “The atrocities committed at that time were what would today be called genocide—for which General von Trotha would be brought to justice and convicted today. We Germans acknowledge our historical-political, moral-ethical responsibility and the guilt that Germans incurred at that time. I ask you, in the spirit of the common ‘Our Father,’ for forgiveness for our guilt.”

Her words caused a great stir, especially in Namibia. Many descendants of those affected saw it as a sign of hope: Finally, Germany seemed ready to end its denial. For decades, the German government had insisted on **avoiding the term “genocide” at all costs.**

The argument was that the term “genocide” was legally invalid because the acts had taken place before the 1948 UN Genocide Convention. Instead, it spoke vaguely of a “special responsibility” for Namibia or called the period a “particularly dark chapter.” In 1998, former German President Roman Herzog even described the events as a “dispute between the German colonial administration and the Hereros” that had been “not okay”⁶. Strangely enough, the same logic would also apply to the Holocaust—a position Germany has (rightly) never advanced. Why, then, is it invoked in the case of the Ovaherero and Nama?

Although Wieczorek-Zeul also uses the problematic wording of “genocide from today’s perspective” (critique see below), nonetheless her speech was perceived as a **novelty.**

For the first time, a German government representative had pronounced the word “genocide” and apologized.

Therefore, her move was received with cautious respect in Namibia. But from the German government's point of view, it was an affront: the apology had **not been coordinated**, and Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer immediately distanced himself from it. He simply declared the speech to be the minister's "personal opinion"⁷ (Melber 2025: 200). A year earlier, Fischer had made his own position on this issue clear, which was in line with that of the government:

"We are aware of our historical responsibility in every respect, but we are not hostages to history. Therefore, there will be no apology relevant to reparations."⁸

By shifting the speech into the private sphere, he effectively withdrew the apology—a move that was met with deep disappointment and anger in Namibia.⁹ After Wieczorek-Zeul's speech, it took more than ten years for the issue of the term "genocide" to gain momentum again.

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The example from 2004 shows that an appropriate apology must be made **by the highest state authority**. Such a gesture should be based on a **Bundestag resolution** and declared by the **Federal President or Federal Chancellor** in the presence of the **self-elected representatives of those affected** in Namibia. Only in this way can it be democratically legitimate, credible and, above all, binding. Yet—as mentioned above—authority alone is insufficient: without genuine sincerity and the activation of the legal instruments that translate acknowledgment into enforceable state obligations, even a high-level apology remains devoid of meaning. None of these elements have been present in Germany's engagements with the Ovaherero and Nama to date, highlighting that, unlike in its commitments to Jewish communities¹⁰ after 1945, Germany has yet to demonstrate the political will and faithfulness required for meaningful redress.

Nama & Ovaherero
Genocide Monument,
Shark Island, Namibia

Werkstatt Ökonomie/
Simone Knapp

**NAMA & OVAHERERO
GENOCIDE MONUMENT
1904 - 1908**



**SHARK ISLAND
LUDERITZ, 22 APRIL 2023
IN MEMORY OF THE
NAMA AND OVAHERERO GENOCIDES**

HERE STOOD THE SHARK ISLAND CONCENTRATION CAMP
INITIALLY ESTABLISHED IN EARLY 1866 AS A CONCENTRATION
CAMP FOR THE OVAHERERO SLAVE LABOURERS FOR THE CONSTRUCTION
OF THE LÜDERITZ - HUIS BAILIARY. THE FIRST IMPERIAL GOVERNOR
FRIEDRICH VON LÜDERVIST CONTINUED WITH WHAT WAS STARTED
BY CURT VON FRANKLIS AND LUTHRAR VON TROTTHA AS THE
EXTERMINATION ORDER OF THE WITBOOI NAMA (12 FEBRUARY 1904)
OVAHERERO EXTERMINATION ORDER (10 OCTOBER 1904)
AND THE NAMA EXTERMINATION ORDER (22 APRIL 1908)
BY MILITARY OPERATIONS, BUT NOW EXTERMINATION METED
OUT THROUGH SLAVE LABOUR, STARVATION, RAPE, EXPOSURE
TO ADVERSE CONDITIONS AND KILLING.

MORE SO, THIS CONCENTRATION CAMP BECAME THE SLAUGHTER CAMP
AND FINAL EXECUTION OF THE EXTERMINATION OF THE NAMA AND OVAHERERO
PEOPLE WHO COULD NOT OTHERWISE BE USED AND WILLED BY SLAVE LABOUR
AND EMBARATION. IT IS HERE WHERE MOST NAMA LEADERS MET
THEIR FATE, INCLUDING GABRIEL CORNELIUS FREDERICK.

WE COMMEMORATE THE LIVES AND SOULS OF OVER
4000 NAMA AND OVAHERERO PEOPLES WHO DIED HERE AT THE HANDS
OF GERMANY IN DEFEANCE OF THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GREAT
NAMALAND AND HERERLAND.

INAUGURATED BY COORDINATOR ISABACK
(CHAIRPERSON OF THE NAMA TRADITIONAL LEADERS ASSOCIATION)
AND PARAMOUNT CHIEF OF THE OVAHERERO PROP. NUTTINGE RATHUWA
ON 22 APRIL 2023

**HISTORY OF THE
NAMAS & OVAHERERO**

**BRUTALITY
RAPE
SLAVERY**

**LABOURERS
STARVATION
LAND DISPOSSESSION**

**SHOOTING
SHARK FOOD
DE-HUMANIZED**

**DECAPITATED
KILLED BY HANGING
DEATH**

THE RETURN OF ANCESTORS— SYMBOLISM WITHOUT RESPONSIBILITY

For the first time, in September 2011, **20 ancestors of Ovaherero and Nama** were returned to Namibia from Berlin's Charité hospital. The remains had been brought to Germany at the beginning of the 20th century for **racist research purposes**.

A **high-ranking Namibian delegation** of more than 70 members, led by Namibian Minister of Culture Kazenambo Kazenambo, traveled to Berlin—but they were not received in accordance with diplomatic protocol.

Not a single German minister took the time for an official meeting. The German government remained conspicuously silent throughout the trip and avoided making any clear statements.

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Only **Secretary of State Cornelia Pieper** was sent to attend the handover, consistently avoiding the word “genocide” in her speech. When **protests and calls for an apology** broke out in the hall, she left the ceremony—even before the representatives of the Namibian delegation had had their say.¹¹ What was planned as a solemn act of restitution ended in a **political scandal**.

Although Pieper can be accused of lacking sensitivity and integrity, her behavior ultimately only reflected the **fundamental attitude of the German government**: the attempt to make gestures of reparation without first finding the **language of apology** was bound to fail.

This event shows that symbolic **gestures** cannot have a healing effect **without genuine responsibility** and **without the involvement of those affected**. They remain mere management of shame, **rather than a form of apology or reparation**. Secondly, restitutions must be well planned and prepared with sensitivity, and the regret associated with them must be taken seriously. Furthermore, restitution should be accompanied by commitment to non-repetition in the form of education and commemoration.

THE “RECONCILIATION AGREEMENT”— APOLOGY UNDER CONDITIONS



Probably the most prominent example of how not to apologize is the so-called German-Namibian Reconciliation Agreement—officially called the “Joint Declaration”—which was negotiated between 2015 and 2021 by the German and Namibian governments with the aim of addressing the genocide committed by the German Empire against the Ovaherero and Nama as well as the Damara and San.

To date, the agreement has **not been signed**. The reason for this is **the massive resistance of the associations representing those affected**, which strongly reject the agreement. A look at the history of its development and the outcome of the negotiations shows why. The first two arguments relate to the process, and the following four to the outcome of the negotiations.

NO VOLUNTARY BEGINNING

Germany did not come to the negotiating table of its own accord, but due to sustained political pressure, above all from the Ovaherero and Nama communities themselves. Decades of advocacy, political lobbying, and landmark litigation—most notably the 2006 Genocide Motion by the Namibian Parliament initiated by Ovaherero Paramount Chief Kuaima Riruako and two U.S. lawsuits in 2001 and 2017¹²—brought the genocide to global attention. Furthermore Afro-German, migrant-diaspora and postcolonial civil society activism in Germany reinforced this pressure.

The final acceleration towards an apology came through a diplomatic dilemma of Germany's own making: in 2015, Berlin officially recognized the Armenian genocide by the Ottoman Empire, breaking with its previous policy of avoiding the term for pre-1948 events. This inconsistency drew international scrutiny, including Erdoğan's public call for Germany to confront its own history first.¹³

One fundamental flaw of the negotiations thus becomes clear: Germany acted not out of insight, but because it had been pressured—persistently, publicly, and for decades—by those very communities whose suffering it still struggles to acknowledge.

EXCLUSION OF THOSE AFFECTED

Instead of conducting **an open, participatory** dialogue with the direct and equal participation of the descendants of the victims, the governments opted for **bilateral talks behind closed doors**. This exclusion was by design and not by accident. Genuine reconciliation, however, **cannot** be achieved **without the involvement of those affected**. If those who should be at the center of such a process are **effectively excluded**, any apology loses its moral and political legitimacy.

A purely bilateral approach is also structurally inadequate: many Ovaherero and Nama now live in the diaspora, for example in Botswana or South Africa, and are therefore not represented by the Namibian government. When confronted with this critique, the German government repeatedly claimed that it could only negotiate with a sovereign state and not directly with the affected communities—a claim that is not only politically constructed, but also

historically inconsistent, as Germany's agreement with the Jewish Claims Conference shows.¹⁴ Ovaherero and Nama, as equally transnational communities, can and must be recognized as direct negotiating partners rather than being subsumed under a purely bilateral model.

Furthermore, both governments are violating their **human rights obligations** with this approach. The ILO and UN conventions on the rights of indigenous people confirm that any matters affecting these groups must involve their directly appointed legitimate representatives. Any treaties must be based on prior and informed consent of the indigenous communities.¹⁵

Against this backdrop, it is hardly surprising that many of those affected perceive the “Joint Declaration” as **an insult and a form of disenfranchisement**. Their motto sums it up: “Everything about us without us is against us.”



NO FULL RECOGNITION OF THE GENOCIDE

Chapter 1 of the Joint Declaration lists the crimes committed. Crucially, however, the German government insists on a restrictive formulation, referring to genocide only “from today’s perspective.” Since genocide is the central crime, this qualifier strips the acknowledgment of legal and moral force. This linguistic relativization significantly weakens the recognition of injustice and signals that the federal government seeks to avoid full responsibility, shielding itself with legal caution for fear of setting a precedent.

To avoid legal consequences at any cost, the German Government has repeatedly stuck to racist interpretations of the principle of intertemporality¹⁶ and other evasive arguments.

In its legal brief seeking dismissal of the New York court case,¹⁷ Germany effectively justified its actions by arguing: ²¹
“The inner dealings of the German Reich in one of its colonies is not governed by international law. Namibia was at the time a German colony and the Nama and Herero were German subjects. The German Reich’s regulating and taking of its nationals’ property within its own territory does not constitute a violation of international law.”¹⁸

Such an approach betrays a **strategic attitude** governed by fear of consequences and **self-interest**, not insight. This means that the statement lacks precisely what every sincere apology needs: **humility, clarity in naming the injustice and the full assumption of responsibility.**

Protest by representatives and activists
of the OvaHerero and Nama in Berlin,
16 October 2016

Berlin Postkolonial / Joachim Zeller
<https://flic.kr/p/NmLhiR>

CONDITIONAL RECONCILIATION “FROM ABOVE”

For an apology to be meaningful, the injured party must retain the power to reject it. When acceptance is structurally pre-inscribed, what appears as an apology functions instead as a controlled political arrangement.

However, a major flaw in the “Joint Declaration” is that it codifies a “package solution.” In a single act, it simultaneously establishes Germany’s acknowledgment of guilt and responsibility (with the qualification “from today’s perspective”), the acceptance of this acknowledgment by the Namibian government and population, while at the same time implying forgiveness for this in the form of a fixed sum of money described as “final”.¹⁹

Findings from transitional justice and human rights work show how important a survivor and victim-centered approach is.²⁰ Furthermore, the Joint Declaration is not a request. The German federal government is not asking for forgiveness but rather declaring forgiveness to be given.

22

An apology must not be part of negotiations. Rather, the perpetrator should unilaterally acknowledge what they have done and ask (!) for forgiveness. This is because including an apology in a negotiated solution runs the risk of it becoming conditional, as the following example shows.



CONDITIONS ON THE PART OF THE PERPETRATOR

An appropriate apology **does not** impose **conditions**. The fact that the “Joint Declaration” does not meet this criterion is most evident in its handling of the question of **reparations**.

From the outset, the German government not only ruled out any form of direct redress for those affected, but it also even insisted that the words “reparation” and “compensation” should not appear anywhere in the negotiations—despite repeated calls to do so from both the associations representing those affected and Namibian government representatives. By excluding these terms, the German side effectively removed the entire spectrum of possible reparative measures, material and non-material alike, from the outset. Ruprecht Polenz, the German government’s special envoy in the negotiations with Namibia, justified

the exclusion of the term reparations by saying that the aim was to prevent “misunderstandings” and to speak instead of “healing wounds.”²¹

In reality, however, the aim was to avoid **legitimate legal claims** for redress and the terms used served as a linguistic substitute to avoid legal responsibility without having to relinquish the moral high ground. This use of “healing wounds” has little to do with what genuine healing would require. Real healing wounds should provide for restoring relationships and rehabilitation of those who may have suffered losses and were traumatized in the process.

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The question in the Namibian case is: how do you restore relationships without any clear commitment to policies and strategy that bring justice and equity? Sensitivity in personal interaction between perpetrator and victim must be the first step in paving the way for genuine process for reconciliation to begin. How else do we want to build community-led peace agendas when the very communities are denied the space to do so? How do we mitigate the disastrous effects of the deep-seated socio-economic and political tensions which have embittered our relationships with the perpetrator?

The unmasked truth of the German government's stance on reparations was summed up in 2019 by Christian Schlaga, the German ambassador to Namibia at the time:

“In Tanzania, we are experiencing the opposite of what we saw in Namibia. No reparations are being demanded there. The country wants to forget its colonial history (sic!) and build a healthy relationship. They want to see Germany continue to support them (sic!). We are one step further ahead (sic!) there.”²²

Instead of paying reparations, Germany is offering is offering to the Namibian state 1.1 billion euros spread over 30 years to be used for development projects.

No matter what happens with this money, development projects of any amount are never a substitute for reparations. They are based on the generosity of the donor. This turns the descendants of the victims into objects of charity instead of recognizing them as independent actors with legitimate rights.

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THE LONG-DESIRED CLOSURE

Paragraph 20 of the “Joint Declaration”²³ states that the agreement means to “settle all financial aspects of the issues relating to the past addressed in this Joint Declaration.”

By reducing redress for genocide to a single monetary transaction, the Declaration treats a profound historical injustice, with legacies that continue to reverberate today, as if it could be conclusively closed, revealing the deeply inadequate mindset underpinning the agreement.

Even though representatives of the German government have repeatedly emphasized that this should not be a final line drawn under the past,²⁴ the wording is very much in keeping with the notion to “settle once and for all.” It is an attempt to finally end the debate about the colonial past and to limit responsibility both legally and morally. This achieves exactly the opposite of what a process of apologizing should achieve: Instead of enabling healing, it gives the impression that Germany wants to manage its colonial guilt, and then move on with the agenda.

Additionally, this infringes on the principle of sovereignty, as it seeks to restrict Ovaherero and Nama communities—and their representatives—from ever addressing these issues again. It exposes a racial double standard: Germany does not impose similar constraints in its ongoing negotiations with the Jewish Claims Conference or Israel.

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Genocide Memorial March 2023,
Shark Island, Namibia

WHAT CONSTITUTES A GOOD APOLOGY?

Although the German approach to addressing genocide cannot serve as a model,²⁵ examining its shortcomings offers valuable insights into the criteria for a meaningful apology.



Whether an apology is considered appropriate is decided solely by those to whom it is addressed. It can be perceived as sincere—or as an empty gesture. A variety of factors determine whether an apology can foster trust and healing or deepen mistrust and hurt.

Ten key elements of an appropriate apology are:

SELF-INITIATIVE

The apology is made of one's own accord, not only under pressure or at the request of those affected.

IDENTIFICATION OF THE ACTIONS AND VICTIMS

It clearly names the actions, crimes and corresponding victims that are the subject of the request for forgiveness.

RECOGNITION OF WRONGDOING

It describes these actions unambiguously as morally wrong and/or unlawful.

ASSUMPTION OF RESPONSIBILITY

The person or institution speaking assumes full responsibility for the wrongdoing committed—without relativization, deflection or distancing. They act from a position of legitimate authority, for example as a political representative of the perpetrators.

EXPRESSION OF SINCERE REGRET

The apology expresses genuine compassion, shame and remorse for what has happened.

REQUEST FOR FORGIVENESS

It is accompanied by a genuine, not strategically motivated, request for forgiveness.

UNCONDITIONALITY

The apology is not linked to any quid pro quo or conditions. It must be made in the knowledge that it may not be accepted.

REPARATIONS

This includes material and symbolic measures to compensate for the damage caused. These reparations should be motivated by a sincere desire to undo what has happened as far as possible, in the knowledge that this can never be fully achieved in reality.

NO CLOSURE

An apology should be the start of an open process of reparation. It must never draw a line under the past. An apology is therefore not a one-off symbolic act, but a process.

ENSURING NON-REPETITION

Finally, the person apologizing commits to actively ensuring that the injustice is not repeated—for example, through institutional, political or social changes.

WHAT SYMBOLIC MEASURES WOULD BE APPROPRIATE?

Having outlined how (not) to apologize, we will now consider possible further symbolic²⁶ measures of reparation that can and should reinforce and underline an apology:

PUBLIC STATEMENT

The Federal President or Federal Chancellor should address the German public with an official statement.

NATIONAL DAY OF REMEMBRANCE

In consultation with those affected, a day of remembrance should be introduced, to be observed in both Germany and Namibia.

MEMORIAL SITES

28 Establishment of a central memorial site in Berlin with sufficient funds for historical education. In addition, decentralized memorial sites in public spaces should be created and places (such as streets, cemeteries, institutions, etc.) be renamed in a decolonial manner. Germany must also support and fund equivalent commemoration efforts in Namibia, including the protection and preservation of sites that are currently being systematically neglected, desecrated or erased.

EDUCATION

The topics of colonialism and genocide must be made compulsory in school curricula, and teachers must be trained. A binational textbook commission with the participation of those affected should prepare historical research findings for teaching purposes. Germany must also support and fund equivalent curriculum development in Namibia, where this history is largely absent from school materials; producing, revising and disseminating such educational resources requires dedicated financial commitment from the perpetrator state.

EDUCATION AND TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER

Scholarship programs for young Ova-herero and Nama, youth and cultural exchange programs as well as the promotion of research and education in Namibia and Germany should be initiated. These measures must be complemented by residencies and training at institutions currently holding relevant collections, so that communities acquire the specialized skills and know-how needed to care for and conserve materials once repatriated, thus ensuring the transfer of the “soft infrastructure” required for long-term safeguarding.

RETURN OF ARTIFACTS

For Ovaherero and Nama communities, the return of all items and the repatriation of ancestors (human remains) is a paramount demand. All objects and remains taken to Germany during colonialism should be presumed unlawfully acquired, applying the principle of reversal of the burden of proof. By recognizing colonialism as a context of overall injustice, it assumes that even items misleadingly classified as “sold” were unlawfully obtained unless proven otherwise. Provenance research must be adequately funded, bureaucratic obstacles removed, and the trade in human remains banned immediately. To ensure timely and community-led restitution, provenance research must prioritize and fund Ovaherero and Nama researchers, enabling them to lead the clarification and recovery of their heritage.

TRAUMA AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Financial support for projects aimed at active conflict transformation and broad-based trauma resolution should be provided by Germany.

RESEARCH LOSS OF CULTURE AND PROMOTE INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE CREATION:

Systematic research should document the cultural, social and spiritual losses suffered by the Ovaherero and Nama during and after colonialism. This includes preserving endangered languages, traditional practices, oral histories and other intangible cultural heritage. Efforts should also support the creation and revitalization of indigenous knowledge systems, enabling communities to lead research, transmit cultural memory and integrate these insights into education, cultural institutions and public discourse. These efforts must be funded by Germany.

29

This culture of remembrance must not limit itself to the genocide but also look at the German colonialism as a whole. It would be wrong to frame the genocide as the personal misconduct of individual actors or an “outlier” in an otherwise supposedly “civilizing” colonialism. This would mean an unacceptable discharge of the system that produced it. Rather, it was the logical consequence of colonial rule, which was based on racism, expropriation, exploitation and violence.

CONCLUSION AND OUT-LOOK

Germany's handling of the genocide of the Ovaherero and Nama illustrates how apologies and reparations **do not** work. Credible apologies, on the other hand, require **full recognition of the injustice, active involvement of those affected, responsibility on the part of authorized representatives, symbolic and material measures and a guarantee that the injustice will not be repeated.** A just and commensurate reparations package can only be defined and accepted by those directly wronged, in direct consultation with them rather than through third parties.

Symbolic gestures alone are not enough. However, when they are authentic, voluntary and embedded in a comprehensive process of taking responsibility and a willingness to make amends, they can have an impact.

30

The lessons learned from this process extend beyond the reappraisal of colonialism. In the context of global climate justice, too, **only the combination of recognition, responsibility and concrete material and symbolic measures can create genuine, credible justice.**

Without recognition, there can be no responsibility—without responsibility, no justice—and without justice, there can be no reconciliation.



INFOBOXES

1) WHAT HAPPENED IN THE COLONY OF GERMAN SOUTH WEST AFRICA?

The genocide of the Ovaherero and Nama took place mainly between 1904 and 1908 in what was then the German colony of German South West Africa (now Namibia). Following uprisings against expropriation, oppression and violence, the German Empire under General Lothar von Trotha responded with extreme brutality. Extermination orders led to the deaths of tens of thousands through starvation, thirst, shootings and imprisonment in concentration camps where atrocities such as forced labor and racist medical experiments took place. According to estimates, up

to 80% of the Ovaherero and 50% of the Nama as well as many Damara and San lost their lives. The genocide is considered the first of the 20th century and is a central chapter of colonial violence in German history.



2) WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE GENOCIDE TODAY?

Many Ovaherero and Nama have lived in institutionalized poverty for generations because they were robbed of their fertile land, livestock and much of their (cultural) heritage by the Germans. Both groups remain minorities in Namibia, with many living in the diaspora. The diaspora communities face not only loss of culture and language but also the denial of the right of return. The inequality is particularly visible in the land issue: over 70% of commercially used farmland remains in the hands of

white, often German-speaking settlers—often on land that was stolen from the communities during the genocide. The mass murder of Nama and Ovaherero people has diminished their political power and undermined their ability to influence decision making.

3) GREEN HYDROGEN FROM NAMIBIA

The German government's handling of the Hyphen Hydrogen Project in Namibia is a prime example of how superficial and symbolic its efforts to come to terms with German colonialism remain.



In one of her first speeches as development minister on Africa Day, Reem Alabali-Radovan emphasized that “only those who acknowledge Africa’s experiences with colonialism, slavery, imperialism [...] who take responsibility for their own history [...] will find true partners on the continent”²⁷ citing, of all things, the planned mega-project

for the production of green hydrogen in Namibia as a positive example of such a partnership.

From a German perspective, Namibia is considered a supposedly favorable location for green hydrogen and has therefore become the focus of Germany’s hydrogen strategy. However, the Hyphen project, which is supported by the German government and involves the German company Enertrag, among others, is highly problematic for historical, ecological and economic reasons. It is planned on land from which Nama communities were forcibly expelled during German colonialism.

Production there is primarily intended for export to Europe, while Namibia bears the ecological risks and is being pushed into a resource-based dependency with potential debt—a classic pattern of colonial division of labor. Massive interventions in highly sensitive ecosystems and infrastructure projects in the vicinity of !Nami#nūs (Lüderitz), including the former Shark Island concentration camp, also threaten biodiversity and key sites of remembrance of colonial crimes.

33

Rhetorically, the German government presents itself as sensitive to colonial conditions. In material matters, however—especially when it comes to securing Germany’s energy needs—colonial structures are perpetuated.

ENDNOTEN

- 1** <https://climatechangetracker.org/nations/greenhouse-gas-emissions>
(This excludes emissions caused by goods imported to Germany.)
- 2** Ibid
- 3** Burkett, M. (2009) Climate reparations. *Melbourne Journal of International Law*, 10(2), 509–542.
- 4** UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence (2014): Report A/69/518. <https://docs.un.org/en/A/69/518>
- 5** A further example is the support and push for a neo-colonial green-hydrogen project “Hyphen” on stolen land (see Infobox 3).
- 34 **6** GfbV / Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker (2005): 100 Jahre Völkermord an Herero und Nama. www.gfbv.de/de/news/100-jahre-voelkermord-an-herero-und-nama-7/
- 7** Melber, Henning (2025): Der lange Schatten des deutschen Kolonialismus. Verdrängung, Verleugnung, Umdeutung. Unrast-Verlag.
- 8** Brehl, Medardus (2022): Namibia im Deutschen Bundestag und in der Außenpolitik. In: Melber, Henning / Platt, Kristin. *Koloniale Vergangenheit - Postkoloniale Zukunft. Die deutsch-namibischen Beziehungen neu denken*. Brandes & Apsel. S.
- 9** Melber, Henning (2025): Der lange Schatten des deutschen Kolonialismus. Verdrängung, Verleugnung, Umdeutung. Unrast-Verlag.
- 10** As Howard Rechavia-Taylor and Dirk Moses point out: “The Herero and Nama genocide and its aftermath are by no means identical to the Holocaust, but that does not rule out comparisons about the seriousness with which the question of reparations has been dealt.” Rechavia-Taylor, Howard / Moses, Dirk (2021): *The Herero and Nama Genocide, the Holocaust, and the Question of German Reparations*. <https://www.e-ir.info/pdf/93732>
- 11** Melber, Henning (2025): *Der lange Schatten des deutschen Kolonialismus. Verdrängung, Verleugnung, Umdeutung*. Unrast-Verlag.
- 12** Buser, Andreas (2017): German Genocide in Namibia before U.S. Courts: Ovaherero and Nama sue Germany over Colonial Injustices – Again. <https://voelkerrechtsblog.org/de/german-genocide-in-namibia-before-u-s-courts/>
- 13** www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/erdogan-tells-germany-to-look-at-own-genocide-history/584776?
- 14** After 1945, not all Jewish victims were represented by the State of Israel; the majority in the diaspora chose the Claims Conference—an umbrella body of dozens of Jewish organizations—as their legitimate negotiating agent. Germany ultimately concluded two separate agreements: one with Israel and another with the Conference. This example demonstrates that negotiations need not—and in the case of transnational victim communities cannot—be confined to state-to-state frameworks. Germany’s position today is therefore inconsistent with its own historical practice.

15 UN 2007: 61/295. United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf

16 Theurer, Karina (2023): Minimum Legal Standards in Reparation processes for Colonial Crimes: The Case of Namibia and Germany. In: Theurer, Karina, Minimum Legal Standards in Reparation processes for Colonial Crimes: The Case of Namibia and Germany (June 23, 2023). German Law Journal. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4488872

17 The 2017 class action filed by Ovaherero and Nama leaders in a U.S. federal court sought reparations for the 1904–08 genocide and demanded that Germany include their communities—through their own chosen representatives—in ongoing negotiations with Namibia. More information here: <https://genocide-namibia.net/2017/03/16-03-2017-sammelklage-der-ovaherero-und-nama-gegen-deutschland/#page-content>

18 <https://www.namibiansun.com/news/germany-claims-immunity2018-05-21> (09.12.2025)

19 Kössler, Reinhart / Meckel, Markus / Mickley, Angela (2022): Namibia und Deutschland - Versöhnung nach dem Völkermord? Wie kommen wir aus der Blockade? Eckpunkte zu ihrer Auflösung.

20 ECCHR / European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (2020): Tackling impunity: Self-empowerment of survivors of international crimes. https://www.ecchr.eu/fileadmin/Publikationen/ECCHR_BOSCH_Self-empowerment_of_survivors.pdf

21 <https://www.dw.com/de/v%C3%B6lker-mord-an-den-herero-reparationen-oder-heilung-der-wunden/a-54545972>

22 <https://www.az.com.na/nachrichten/verlangter-betrag-ist-stolperstein2019-06-05> (09.12.2025)

23 Joint Declaration (2021): Joint Declaration by the Federal Republic of Germany and the Republic of Namibia. United in Remembrance of our Colonial Past, United in our Will to Reconcile, United in our Vision of the Future. <https://www.deutsche-afrika-stiftung.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/deutsche-afrika-stiftung-joint-declaration-by-the-federal-republic-of-germany-and-the-republic-of-namibia.pdf>

24 <https://de.euronews.com/2021/05/28/koloniale-vergangenheit-deutschland-bekannt-sich-zu-volkermord-in-namibia?>

25 There are positive examples in German history of sincere, humble apologies—most impressively Willy Brandt’s kneeling in front of the monument to the victims of the Warsaw ghettos in Poland in 1970. His gesture was perceived nationally and internationally as authentic and sincere because it was “voluntarily offered with humility”. Gouaffo, Albert (2022): Eine kritische Betrachtung der deutschen kolonialen Geschichtsaufarbeitung. In: Melber, Henning / Platt, Kristin. Koloniale Vergangenheit - Postkoloniale Zukunft. Die deutsch-namibischen Beziehungen neu denken. Brandes & Apsel. S.

26 Due to the focus of this paper, the most important material forms (such as giving back stolen land etc.) are not part of this list here. We repeat ourselves by stating again that no justice is possible without such measures. This list is by no means complete or exhaustive.

27 <https://www.bmz.de/de/aktuelles/reden/rede-ministerin-afrika-tag-253984> (16.01.2026)

ORGANISE REPAIR TRANSFORM

Germany's handling of the genocide of the Ovaherero and Nama illustrates how apologies and reparations do not work. Credible apologies, on the other hand, require full recognition of the injustice, active involvement of those affected, responsibility on the part of authorized representatives, symbolic and material measures and a guarantee that the injustice will not be repeated. A just and commensurate reparations package can only be defined and accepted by those directly wronged, in direct consultation with them rather than through third parties.

Symbolic gestures alone are not enough. However, when they are authentic, voluntary and embedded in a comprehensive process of taking responsibility and a willingness to make amends, they can have an impact.

SINCE WITHOUT RECOGNITION, THERE CAN BE NO RESPONSIBILITY—WITHOUT RESPONSIBILITY, NO JUSTICE—AND WITHOUT JUSTICE, THERE CAN BE NO RECONCILIATION.

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