

Human Rights, Dignity and Sustainable Development: Recognising Slave Trade as a Crime against Humanity

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Human Rights, Dignity and Sustainable Development: Recognising Slave Trade as a Crime against Humanity
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Abstract

This paper examines the need to recognise slave trade as a crime against humanity. It posits that slave trade represents one of the worst forms of human rights violations. The paper notes the impacts of slave trade are still present in the modern era as evidenced by the underdevelopment, racism, discrimination and intolerance faced by the people of African descent. Consequently, the paper argues that recognising slave trade as a crime against humanity is key towards acknowledging and redressing the human rights violations faced by people of African descent for Sustainable Development and human dignity.

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1.0 Introduction

The pursuit of Sustainable Development is intrinsically linked to upholding human rights and dignity. Human rights refer to standards that recognize and protect the dignity of all human beings¹. It has been correctly observed that human rights are inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status². Human rights are central towards achieving Sustainable Development agenda since they are a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world³. Further, it has been argued that without universal respect, implementation, and protection of human rights, it is impossible to build just, inclusive, and equal societies as envisaged under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development⁴.

The United Nations *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*⁵ envisages a world of *universal respect for human rights and human dignity*, the rule of law, justice, equality and non-discrimination; of respect for race, ethnicity and cultural diversity; and of equal opportunity permitting the full realization of human potential and contributing to shared prosperity⁶. The Agenda is grounded in key global human right instruments including the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)*⁷, the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)*⁸, and *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)*⁹. Upholding human rights for every person in the world is therefore a prerequisite for Sustainable Development. It has been pointed out that the ideal of human

¹ United Nations Children's Fund., 'What are Human Rights?' Available at <https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/what-are-human-rights> (Accessed on 26/03/2026)

² United Nations., 'Human Rights' Available at <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/human-rights> (Accessed on 26/03/2026)

³ United Nations Development Programme., 'Human Rights for Sustainable Development' Available at <https://www.undp.org/rollr/publications/human-rights-sustainable-development> (Accessed on 26/03/2026)

⁴ United Nations Development Programme., 'Human rights as a foundation for Sustainable Development' Available at <https://www.undp.org/kazakhstan/blog/human-rights-foundation-sustainable-development#:~:text=Human%20rights%20are%20the%20foundation,%2C%20inclusive%2C%20and%20equal%20society> (Accessed on 26/03/2026)

⁵ United Nations General Assembly., 'Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.' 21 October 2015, A/RES/70/1., Available at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf> (Accessed on 26/03/2026)

⁶ Ibid

⁷ United Nations General Assembly. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). New York: United Nations General Assembly, 1948

⁸ United Nations General Assembly, *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 999, p. 171, 16 December 1966

⁹ United Nations General Assembly, *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 993, p. 3, 16 December 1966

rights premised on internationally agreed norms and standards has a crucial bearing towards peace, democracy, development and justice¹⁰.

Upholding human rights for all human beings however remains a challenge all over the world. For example, discrimination, marginalisation, inequalities within and among nations, racism, sexism and intolerance continue to persist all over the world undermining the attainment of human rights¹¹. Further, the legacies of slavery and colonialism represent some of the gravest human right violations that have perpetuated historical injustices, discrimination, underdevelopment, marginalisation and racism against people of African descent¹². Consequently, it has been correctly noted that recognising and redressing the human right violations caused by the legacies of slavery and colonialism is crucial in unlocking Sustainable Development for people of African descent¹³.

This paper examines the need to recognise slave trade as a crime against humanity. It posits that slave trade represents one of the worst forms of human rights violations. The paper notes the impacts of slave trade are still present in the modern era as evidenced by the underdevelopment, racism, discrimination and intolerance faced by the people of African descent. Consequently, the paper argues that recognising slave trade as a crime against humanity is key towards acknowledging and redressing the human rights violations faced by people of African descent for Sustainable Development and human dignity.

2.0 Impact of Slave Trade on Human Rights and Dignity

The slave trade represents one of the darkest chapters in human history that occasioned grave human rights violations especially against people of African descent. It is estimated that between 25 million and 30 million people were violently uprooted from Africa for

¹⁰ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights., 'Africa: A Rights Based Approach to Development' Available at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2009/10/africa-rights-based-approach-development> (Accessed on 26/03/2026)

¹¹ United Nations Population Fund., 'Advancing Equity and Social Justice for People of African Descent' Available at <https://www.unfpa.org/advancing-equity-and-social-justice-people-african-descent> (Accessed on 26/03/2026)

¹² United Nations., 'People of African Descent', Available at <https://www.un.org/en/fight-racism/vulnerable-groups/people-of-african-descent#:~:text=Around%20200%20million%20people%20identifying,outside%20of%20the%20African%20continent> (Accessed on 26/03/2026)

¹³ United Nations., 'Strong Leadership and Political will Crucial to Ensure Reparatory Justice for People of African Descent - UN Report' Available at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/09/strong-leadership-and-political-will-crucial-ensure-reparatory-justice> (Accessed on 26/03/2026)

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enslavement throughout history¹⁴. This situation was especially severe during the transatlantic slave trade from the 16th century to the 19th century when approximately 12.5 million Africans were enslaved by Europeans and shipped to colonies in the Americas to work as slaves¹⁵. It has been observed that demand for cheap labour rose with the growth of sugar, coffee, cotton and tobacco plantations in the Americas¹⁶. This situation resulted in millions of Africans being shipped to work as slaves on these plantations¹⁷.

The transatlantic slave trade represents one of the most traumatizing and horrific eras in human history that was characterized by gross human rights violations¹⁸. During this period, millions of people from Africa were kidnapped, forced onto European and American ships, and trafficked across the Atlantic Ocean to be enslaved, abused, and forever separated from their homes, families, ancestors, and cultures¹⁹. It has been pointed out that during the Middle Passage across the Atlantic Ocean, enslaved Africans were mistreated and humiliated with women being subjected to rape²⁰. In addition, enslaved Africans were often denied food²¹. Due to poor conditions on slave ships, sickness spread quickly with many enslaved Africans willingly ending their lives by jumping into the ocean in order to escape the horrors of the Middle Passage²². It is estimated that close to 2 million Africans lost their lives during the Middle Passage across the Atlantic Ocean²³. Further, those who survived the Middle Passage were reduced to property in the Americas where they were subjected to forced labour, abuse and violence²⁴.

¹⁴ Amnesty International, 'Why do reparations for colonialism and slavery matter?' Available at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2025/10/why-do-reparations-for-colonialism-and-slavery-matter/> (Accessed on 26/03/2026)

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Transatlantic Slave Trade., Available at <https://www.britannica.com/topic/transatlantic-slave-trade> (Accessed on 26/03/2026)

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Equal Justice Initiative., 'The Transatlantic Slave Trade' Available at <https://eji.org/report/transatlantic-slave-trade/> (Accessed on 26/03/2026)

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ The Middle Passage- The Triangular Trade., Available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/z6bmn39/revision/8> (Accessed on 26/03/2026)

²¹ Ibid

²² Ibid

²³ Amnesty International., 'Why do reparations for colonialism and slavery matter?' Op Cit

²⁴ Chutel. L., 'What Reparations are owed to Africa?' Available at <https://qz.com/africa/1915182/what-reparations-are-owed-to-africa> (Accessed on 26/03/2026)

The transatlantic slave trade left deep and enduring scars on the African continent. Africa was deprived of manpower, income, creativity, innovation, and relationships, a situation that has undermined the continent's development agenda for many centuries²⁵. It has been observed that the transatlantic slave trade fuelled local wars during the capture of slaves, undermined closely-knit social structures in Africa, led to massive depopulation and affected the continent's economic growth²⁶. The slave trade established the history of exploitation, plunder and racism that continues to affect Africa's growth²⁷. It has been observed that as a result of the slave trade, Africa was left economically, socially and politically destabilized thus vulnerable to conquest and violence that has been witnessed in the continent for centuries²⁸.

The slave trade is therefore one the worst forms of human rights violations in history. The United Nations observed that the impact of slave trade was so profound and deep-seated and sustained over several generations²⁹. The slave trade has shaped race relations and the development of racism as a philosophy for social organization, where most societies where it has touched are now structured in such a way that people of African descent are considered the most marginalised people, and the descendants of the enslaved people still continue to suffer racism and human right abuses³⁰. Due to its deep and long-lasting impacts, it is imperative to recognise slave trade as a crime against humanity in order to uphold human rights for people of African descent towards Sustainable Development.

3.0 Recognising Slave Trade as a Crime against Humanity

There have calls to acknowledge and redress the human right violations faced by people of African descent during the slave trade. For example, the reparative justice agenda is being spearheaded to advocate for reparations for historical crimes, including slave trade, committed against Africans and people of African descent³¹. It has been observed that reparative justice highlights the intrinsic link between the legacies of colonialism and

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ M'baye. B., 'The Economic, Political, and Social Impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade on Africa' Available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10848770600918091> (Accessed on 26/03/2026)

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Equal Justice Initiative., 'The Transatlantic Slave Trade' Op Cit

²⁹ United Nations., 'Unravelling the Legacies of Slavery' Available at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/04/1148166> (Accessed on 26/03/2026)

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ United Nations., 'Beyond Compensation: Reparatory Justice as a Structural Economic Imperative for Africa' Available at <https://www.un.org/osaa/news/beyond-compensation-reparatory-justice-structural-economic-imperative-africa> (Accessed on 26/03/2026)

slave trade and contemporary forms of systemic racism and racial discrimination, intolerance and xenophobia faced by people of African descent³². The pursuit of reparative justice has become a key global ideal towards addressing the legacies of slave trade and colonialism and their role in perpetuating racism, injustices and human right violations being experienced by people of African descent all over the world³³. It has been argued that due to the deep and long-lasting impacts of slavery and colonialism, reparative justice for people of African descent is both a development priority and a moral imperative³⁴.

The need to acknowledge and redress the human right violations perpetuated against people of African descent recently received global attention when the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) adopted a landmark *Resolution*³⁵, on 25th March 2026, recognising slave trade as the '*gravest crime against humanity*'.(Emphasis added) According to the Resolution, the large-scale trafficking of enslaved Africans marked a profound rupture in human history whose consequences have extended across centuries and continents³⁶. It notes that enslavement of Africans during the transatlantic slave trade violated fundamental human rights and constituted a crime against humanity³⁷.

Adoption of the UNGA Resolution therefore marks a significant milestone in the pursuit of reparative justice for people of African descent. The Resolution which was spearheaded by Ghana and the African Union, acknowledges the grave human right violations faced by people of African descent during the slave trade³⁸. According to the Resolution, the consequences of slave trade still persist today as evidenced by the racism, racial disparities, inequalities, intolerance and discrimination faced by people of African

³² Reparations: Justice, Healing and a Fair Future for Africa and its Diaspora., Available at <https://ecosoc.au.int/en/blog/reparations-justice-healing-and-fair-future-africa-and-its-diaspora> (Accessed on 26/03/2026)

³³ McEachrane. M., 'Reparatory Justice and Sustainable Development: A Way Forward?' Available at <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/forums/forum-african-descent/sessions/session1/statements/2023-01-23/Michael-McEachrane-Reparatory-Justice.pdf> (Accessed on 26/03/2026)

³⁴ United Nations., 'Justice for Africans and People of African Descent Through Reparations' Available at https://www.un.org/osaa/sites/www.un.org.osaa/files/global_concept_note_final_15.05.25.pdf (Accessed n 26/03/2026)

³⁵ United Nations General Assembly., 'Declaration of the Trafficking of Enslaved Africans and Racialized Chattel Enslavement of Africans as the Gravest Crime against Humanity' A/80/L.48., Available at <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4106588?ln=en#files> (Accessed on 26/03/2026)

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Ibid

descent³⁹. The Resolution seeks to foster healing and reparative justice towards acknowledging and redressing the human right violations that happened during the slave trade and which still exist today⁴⁰. In particular, the Resolution emphasizes the importance of truth, remembrance, education and historical justice as essential components of reconciliation and sustainable peace⁴¹.

It has been observed that adoption the UNGA Resolution recognising slave trade as the gravest crime against humanity provides a framework for accountability for the human right violations faced by people of African descent during the slave trade⁴². In particular, the Resolution notes that crimes related to the trafficking of enslaved Africans and racialized chattel enslavement of Africans during the slave trade are not subject to statutory limitations⁴³. Consequently, these crimes can be prosecuted at the international level under the *Rome Statute*⁴⁴ of the International Criminal Court which codifies enslavement as a crime against humanity.

Further, it has been pointed out that adoption of the UNGA Resolution provides a framework that can strengthen the reparative justice agenda for people of African descent⁴⁵. For instance, the Resolution urges states to fast-track reparatory justice for people of African descent through measures which include full and formal apology, restitution, compensation, rehabilitation, satisfaction, guarantees of non-repetition and changes to laws, programs and services to address racism and systemic discrimination that still persists today⁴⁶. As a result, it has been argued that adoption of the Resolution will pave the way for healing and justice for people of African descent⁴⁷.

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² United Nations passes Resolution naming Slave Trade 'Gravest Crime against Humanity', Available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/3/25/un-passes-resolution-naming-slave-trade-gravest-crime-against-humanity#:~:text=Resolution%20on%20transatlantic%20slavery%20supported,Kingdom%20and%20European%20Union%20countries>. (Accessed on 26/03/2026)

⁴³ United Nations General Assembly., 'Declaration of the Trafficking of Enslaved Africans and Racialized Chattel Enslavement of Africans as the Gravest Crime against Humanity' Op Cit

⁴⁴ Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, July 17, 1998, 2187 U.N.T.S. 3

⁴⁵ United Nations passes Resolution naming Slave Trade 'Gravest Crime against Humanity', Op Cit

⁴⁶ United Nations General Assembly., 'Declaration of the Trafficking of Enslaved Africans and Racialized Chattel Enslavement of Africans as the Gravest Crime against Humanity' Op Cit

⁴⁷ United Nations votes to recognise enslavement of Africans as 'gravest crime against Humanity', Available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cvg06q36052o> (Accessed on 26/03/2026)

Despite recognising slave trade as the gravest crime against humanity, the UNGA Resolution is non-binding in nature. However, it has been argued that the Resolution still carries significant weight at the global level having been passed by 123 member states of the United Nations⁴⁸. The Resolution can therefore provide a guide and framework to implement reparative justice and reform global structures that still perpetuate racism, discrimination and inequalities faced by Africans and people of African descent⁴⁹. Adoption of the UNGA Resolution recognising slave trade as the '*gravest crime against humanity*' (*Emphasis added*) is therefore a significant milestone in the pursuit of human rights, dignity and Sustainable Development for people of African descent.

4.0 Conclusion

The attainment of Sustainable Development is intrinsically linked to upholding human rights and dignity. By fostering human rights, it is possible to ensure peaceful, just, equal, inclusive, fair and prosperous societies towards Sustainable Development⁵⁰. However, human rights violations exist all over the world undermining efforts towards Sustainable Development. In particular, the legacies of slave trade and colonialism represent some of the gravest human rights violations whose deep and long-lasting impacts have undermined Sustainable Development efforts for Africans and people of African descent⁵¹. Adoption of the UNGA Resolution recognising slave trade as the '*gravest crime against humanity*' is therefore a key step towards acknowledging and redressing the human rights violations committed against people of African descent during the transatlantic slave trade⁵². The Resolution can provide a Framework for accountability including through the possibility of prosecuting enslavement as a crime against humanity under the Rome Statute⁵³. Further, the UNGA Resolution can strengthen the

⁴⁸ UN designates slave trade as 'gravest crime against humanity' despite US opposition., Available at <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20260325-un-calls-for-reparations-to-remedy-african-slave-trade-despite-european-and-us-opposition> (26/03/2026)

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ United Nations Development Programme., 'Human Rights for Sustainable Development' Op Cit

⁵¹ United Nations., 'Strong Leadership and Political will Crucial to Ensure Reparatory Justice for People of African Descent - UN Report' Op Cit

⁵² United Nations General Assembly., 'Declaration of the Trafficking of Enslaved Africans and Racialized Chattel Enslavement of Africans as the Gravest Crime against Humanity' Op Cit

⁵³ Ibid

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reparative justice agenda by providing a basis for all states to collaborate and ensure prompt, adequate, effective reparations for people of African descent in form of apology, compensation, remembrance, restitution, rehabilitation and guarantees of non-repetition⁵⁴. The UNGA Resolution also provides a guide to reform global, regional and national economic, financial, political and social structures that continue to perpetuate inequalities, racism, intolerance, and discrimination against people of African descent⁵⁵.

Adoption of the Resolution recognising slave trade as the '*gravest crime against humanity*' by UNGA is therefore a major global event in the pursuit of human rights, dignity and Sustainable Development.

⁵⁴ United Nations passes Resolution naming Slave Trade '*Gravest Crime against Humanity*', Op Cit

⁵⁵ United Nations General Assembly., '*Declaration of the Trafficking of Enslaved Africans and Racialized Chattel Enslavement of Africans as the Gravest Crime against Humanity*' Op Cit

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