

# 200 Years On: The legacies of enslavement and abolition



*Rebel slaves in Trelawney, Jamaica by J. Bourgoin (1798). One of few illustrations recording the active resistance of enslaved Africans against the slave regime.* NATIONAL LIBRARY OF JAMAICA

**2007** marks the bicentenary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in the British colonies. In 1807 legislation was passed to end four centuries of a trade which saw millions of Africans forcibly removed from their homelands, shipped in appalling conditions and brutally treated as the property of European plantation owners. Millions of African lives were destroyed and generations of children were born and died as slaves.

Britain became heavily involved in the slave trade in the late 1600s and by the 1700s was the biggest slave trading nation. Although the trade was outlawed in 1807, it took another 26 years for slavery itself to be abolished in Britain in 1833.

The effects of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade are still felt in Africa, the Americas and Europe. The bicentenary presents an opportunity to reflect on our past and learn lessons for the present and the future.

## **This briefing explores:**

- ✦ **The untold story of resistance and grassroots pressure**
- ✦ **Today's injustice built on past abuses of power**
- ✦ **Campaigning for global justice – then and now**

*“We can't  
make poverty history  
without understanding the  
history of poverty”*

Kofi Mawuli Klu, Rendezvous of Victory,  
March 2006



**World  
Development  
Movement**

# Heroes, villains and victims

The way in which historical accounts are handed down often presents a partial and distorted story. In the case of the transatlantic slave trade and its abolition, attention is mainly given to the efforts of British 'abolitionists', hiding the crucial part enslaved Africans played in winning their own freedom. Even within the abolitionist campaign, the focus is on a few white leaders rather than the role of former enslaved Africans and the grassroots of the campaign. An insidious and long lasting result is to establish the image of identifiable white heroes defeating the interests of the anonymous villainous white slave-traders and slave-masters, with black people as an amorphous mass of victims.

## Resistance and rebellion

Records show that from the start of the trade Africans were resisting enslavement: resisting capture, revolting at, and on the way to, the coastal slave forts, threatening or carrying out mutiny on the slave ships and fomenting insurrections on plantations.

Armed resistance by enslaved Africans played an important role in the eventual abolition. A revolt in the French colony of San Domingue (now Haiti) in 1791, led by Toussaint L'Ouverture, was crucial to France's decision in 1794 to abolish slavery in the French empire. The overthrow of the slave regime to create the first black republic, and the defeat of French and British armies sent shock waves through



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*Toussaint L'Ouverture led the slave rebellion which established Haiti as the first free, black republic, built on the same principles that drove the French and American revolutions. The role of Haiti is rarely remembered in the story of how our democracy developed.*

the institution of slavery. Although the French were eventually able to restore slavery by using massive military force, it showed that neither the French nor the British with all their economic and military power were ultimately able to resist such concerted opposition.

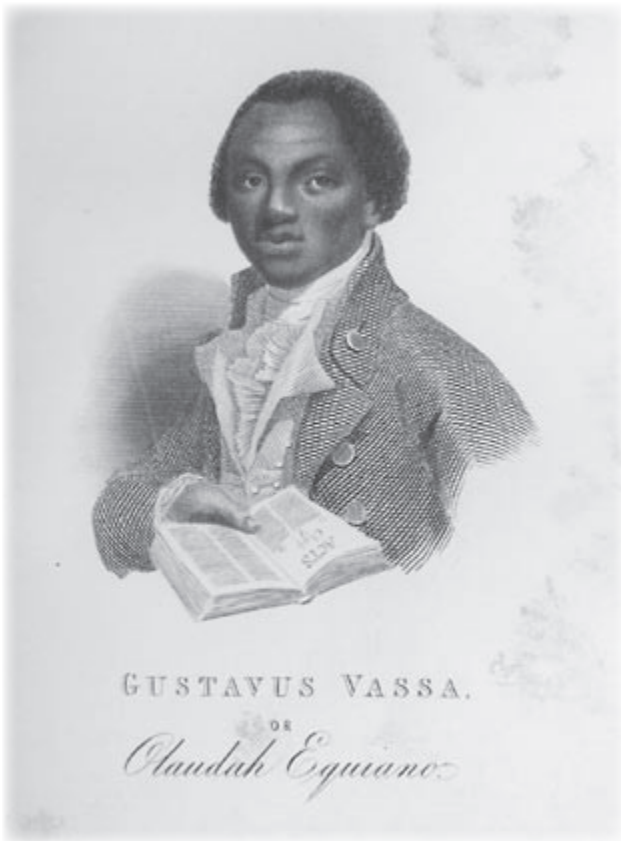
Similarly, a revolt in 1831 by enslaved Africans in Jamaica, led by Samuel Sharpe, has been credited as instrumental in the passing of legislation just two years later which finally abolished slavery in Britain.

## Heroes and villains – an even more complex story

Records show that some Africans benefited politically or economically from the slave trade. Slave traders exploited divisions within African society to limit resistance and guarantee supply.

The Anti-Slavery Society (ASS), while calling for an end to the trade, did not call for the immediate end of slavery. There are two conflicting analyses of this. One is that many members of the ASS were also members of

the land owning classes and therefore did not want to threaten a system that was the foundation of their own and many others' wealth. The alternative analysis is that the ASS adopted a 'politics of the possible' approach, deciding that to campaign for the abolition of slavery would lose them support from those who were not ready to join any demands for a total ban.



Olaudah Equiano travelled around Britain talking about the brutality of the trade and worked closely with members of the Anti-Slavery Society.

## The UK campaign

The names of William Wilberforce and to a lesser extent Thomas Clarkson and John Newton and the work of the Anti-Slavery Society are synonymous with the campaign to abolish the transatlantic slave trade.

However, enslaved Africans in the UK also played an important role in the campaign. Quobna Ottobah Cugoana and Olaudah Equiano published works detailing the atrocities of the slave trade. Following abolition of the trade Mary Prince, a freed Bermudian slave, wrote an influential book about her experiences which helped mobilise support for the abolition of slavery.

Behind these more celebrated names (both black and white) were often overlooked armies of dedicated supporters, organisations and grassroots activists from all classes throughout the world without which the visionaries would not have been able to achieve their goals.



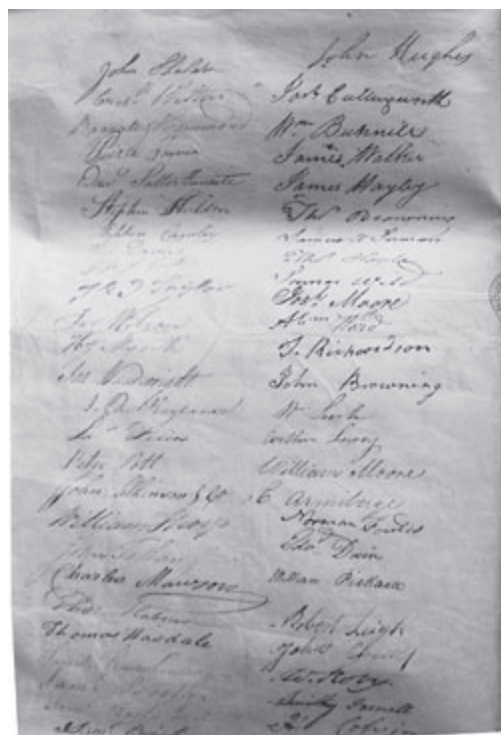
An early example of fair trade and consumer power (circa 1820 – 1849).

Abolitionists used a variety of techniques that are familiar to campaigners today, even if they lacked the mass communication methods now available. They educated the public about the atrocities of the slave trade, led sugar boycotts, developed a fair trade brand of sugar, published articles, circulated petitions, held public meetings and lobbied the government. Combined, these tactics shifted public and government opinion.

There is another striking similarity between the time of the abolition campaign and today's climate: the grassroots activists and social movements continue to get overlooked in popular understanding of campaigning. Today, as then, it is usually a few faces, and usually white European faces, at the

supposed forefront of a movement who receive most of the publicity. At the end of the slave trade Wilberforce was hailed as the hero of the abolitionist movement, even though it involved countless people, including many on the ground who took great personal risk.

Today, in the fight to end poverty, once again the focus is often on rich white campaigners while poor people in the global south tend to be portrayed as powerless victims. This ignores the range and depth of resistance against the



Petitions were an important tool in the campaign. This one called for an end to apprenticeship slavery.

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NORFOLK MUSEUMS AND ARCHAEOLOGY SERVICE

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policies and institutions that disempower people and keep them poor. For example, between late 1999 and the end of 2002, in its three 'States of Unrest' reports the World Development Movement documented widespread and continuing resistance to World Bank and International Monetary Fund imposed economic policies all over the developing world. This research provided examples of 238 separate incidents of civil unrest involving millions of people across 34 countries. Many of these incidents ended with the deployment of riot police or the army, resulting in almost 100 documented fatalities, with arrests and injuries running into thousands. Resistance is widespread; it is just that we don't often hear about it.

When the leaders of the world's most powerful countries met for their G8 summit in Scotland in 2005, millions of people around the world called on them to play their part in ending world poverty. However the media focus was on celebrities and the Live 8 concert while hundreds of thousands of campaigners who travelled to Scotland from all over the UK and other parts of the world to call on the G8 leaders to make poverty history were barely mentioned. It was even more difficult for grassroots activists from the global south to get air-time.



July 2005 – over 225,000 people gather in Edinburgh calling on the G8 to 'make poverty history'.

## Portrayal of Africans

Although many white abolitionists worked in solidarity with Africans and helped to publicise their testimony, the imagery and materials used by the abolition campaign often – consistent with the mainstream perception of Africans in Britain at the time – portrayed them as passive victims. For example the campaign's emblem was an African begging for mercy with the slogan 'Am I not a man and a brother?' or the female equivalent (right).

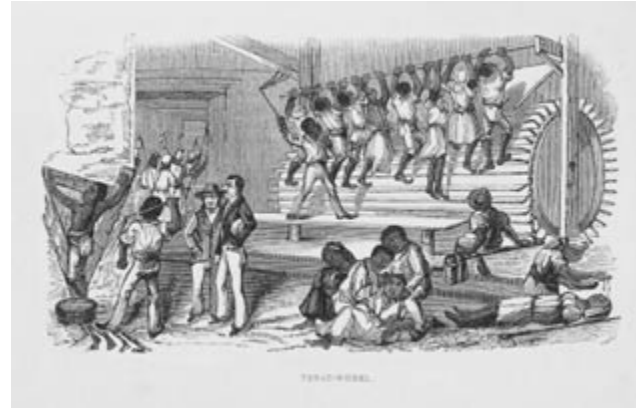
And the tendency to portray Africans as passive victims has continued to exist: for example WDM criticised the negative and inaccurate lyrics of the Band Aid II re-release of the song 'Do they know it's Christmas?' which implied poverty in Africa is an unfortunate accident.



# Economics and the exercise of power

The transatlantic slave trade was an exercise in political, economic and military power. The 'need' for slavery was based on a small number of wealthy individuals and companies attempting to maximise profits by keeping labour costs to a minimum. They could only achieve this by being part of an elite with intimate ties to one of the most powerful governments in the world at the time. And this could only be deemed 'acceptable' through a mythology being created concerning the superiority of the enslavers over the enslaved.

Economics is crucial to understanding both the transatlantic slave trade and modern forms of slavery and exploitation of power. The growth of the transatlantic slave trade went hand in hand with the growth of commercial capitalism. Sugar production in the Caribbean involved extremely tough work. Following the rapid and massive decline in the indigenous population brought about by harsh working conditions and introduced diseases, Europeans chose not to improve working conditions



*Exploiting human labour: slaves on a treadwheel, Jamaica (1843).*

to attract settlers but to look elsewhere for a cheap source of labour.

The Portuguese, the first to engage in the transatlantic slave trade, set the pattern for the next 400 years by pillaging Central and Western Africa. Britain became heavily involved in the slave trade in the late 1600s and by the 1700s it was the biggest slave trading nation.

## Racism and economics

The degree to which racism or economics drove slavery is the subject of a range of theories.

Some historians point to Britons' and Europeans' racist view of Africans as inferior to themselves, even to the extent of endowing them with bestial characteristics, as the key factor that enabled the inhumane treatment of African people. Viewing Africans as lesser beings made it easier for slave traders and owners to justify the trade (to themselves and others) and enabled exploitation of the workforce to a degree unseen in the treatment of European workers.

Other historians point to an economic system that put profit before people and needed a low waged (or even better unpaid) workforce to supply labour to and/or generate wealth for the ruling classes. Thus any group of workers would suffice, as can be seen in examples of

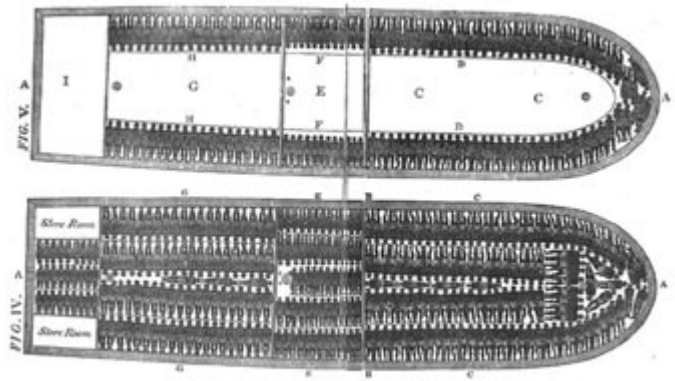
feudal and latterly industrial Britain. White people were also exploited during this time although obviously not to the systematic degree that the slaves had to endure. Skin colour, it has been argued, was only a secondary issue; the lives and welfare of poor people – wherever they were from – were less important than making profits.

Academics and activists point to the complex and intertwined nature of the two issues. It seems therefore that it was a combination of both the economic system and the prevalence of racism at the time that made it acceptable for such a barbaric trade to continue.

Whatever the driving factors at the time, many people feel that the racism which still exists in our society today is part of the legacy of the slave trade and of the way it has been presented in our history books.

The economic impact of the trade permeated far deeper than the more obvious beneficiaries such as sugar company Tate and Lyle and ports like Bristol and Liverpool. Many of Britain's most well known institutions and most prosperous cities were built on the profits of the transatlantic slave trade. London would not exist in its current form today without it. Banks such as Lloyds and Barclays, insurance companies, hospitals such as Guy's, listed buildings, schools, museums, libraries and universities are in part the legacy of the wealth generated by the slave trade.

The brutal and inhumane system of chattel slavery involved the removal of individual freedom and rights and the allocation of enslaved Africans as property; the transition of human beings into economic units. Enslaved Africans were their owner's property to do with as they liked. This was upheld in English law. When a captain of a ship was involved in a legal dispute following an order to throw 133 slaves overboard, the then Solicitor General stated the case was the same as if horses had been thrown overboard; any talk of murder was therefore irrelevant.



*This picture helped the campaign by showing the cramped and appalling conditions endured on a slave ship; even so this picture could not convey the true horror and as one writer of the time wrote 'No place on earth, concentrated so much misery as the hold of a slave ship.'* ANTI-SLAVERY INTERNATIONAL

## Slavery and the abuse of power: still with us today

Today's world seems to have changed massively since the early nineteenth century. Slavery is prohibited in most national laws and is also prohibited in international law.

Yet various forms of slavery are still prevalent around the world. Chattel slavery and debt bondage are the more traditional types of slavery. Although not as common as it was, chattel slavery still exists. Debt bondage is a practice that began in the nineteenth century and is the most common form of slavery today. It involves exchanging labour (that of the debtor or members of his or her family) for a loan, which quickly develops into bondage as interest is added to the original deal.

## New forms of slavery

The types of slavery that have grown during the twentieth century are more subtle, less visible and becoming globalised. This means it is harder to judge the scale of contemporary slavery, but the International Labour Organisation estimates 12.3 million victims of forced labour alone.

Examples of contemporary slavery include the worst forms of child labour which might include kidnap or prostitution; the sale of children; people trafficking involving the transport and/or trade of people (including children) from one area or country to another forcing them into slavery conditions, often in the sex trade; servile marriage where women and girls are forced into marriages and lives of servitude; slavery by descent where people are either born into a slave class or are from a 'group' that society views as



*Lloyds of London – Britain's prosperity today builds on the profits created through trading in slaves.*

slaves; forced labour imposed by the state; and forced recruitment for armed conflict.

## Political and economic domination

The dominant players in today's global economy – powerful countries and companies – continue to use political and economic power to pursue their own interests at the expense of weaker countries, communities and individuals.

Labour conditions are one example of this. Although companies today do not necessarily have a government-backed slave trade as a means to secure cheap labour, they are able to use their own economic clout, individually or collectively, to keep wages and labour standards to the bare minimum.

In October 2006, it was reported that US companies were lobbying the Chinese government in an attempt to prevent the creation of improved workers' rights in a country where exploitation of labour is rife. China is just the latest example where companies have used the threat of moving their operations to another country as a means to put pressure on governments to keep labour and environmental standards low. Inevitably, it is the poor who suffer most from these actions.

## Power and politics

Countries are unable to enact policies to benefit their own people because of interference from the rich world. At best, rich country governments justify their attempts to dictate the policies of poor countries with a 'we know what's best for you attitude'. At worst, rich countries have abused their power and influence in a way that is simply about pursuing their perceived national and corporate interests.

The decision-making processes in the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) are biased towards rich countries. Through the conditions attached to their loans and grants and their dominance in the field of economic advice, these institutions are able to exert a massive influence on the policies of poor countries. For over two decades, the free market policies imposed on them have benefited western corporate profit at the expense of poor people.

In contrast, the developing countries that have been most successful have been those which have freed themselves from western dominated economic policies and pursued their own path to development. Most obvious are those in South East Asia which have ignored the conventional wisdom of the World Bank and IMF and used, amongst other things, targeted

## Ghana

As one of the main holding forts for slaves, people from the area known as 'the gold coast' (now known as Ghana) suffered horrifically under the slave trade.

Today, rich countries and the institutions they control still usurp the rights of Ghana and its people to determine their own future, although by more subtle means than chattel slavery. For example, after having agreed in parliament a perfectly legal import duty of 40% on foreign chicken to protect domestic farmers from subsidised imports, the Ghanaian government was told by the International Monetary Fund to withdraw the tariff increase. The Ghanaian government had little choice but to oblige.

The result was the continued import of subsidised poultry from the EU and US undermining demand for local poultry threatening the livelihoods of 400,000 farmers. Their share of the market has dropped from 95% to 11% in less than ten years. Campaigners in Ghana have united with anti-poverty activists from around the world in demanding poor countries be able to use import taxes to protect small farmers and fledgling industries.



*Local communities in Ghana demand a better deal.*

trade restrictions, foreign investment regulations and state subsidies to promote domestic businesses and employment.

In the World Trade Organisation, although the negotiating process is theoretically fairer, the practical reality is that developing countries have been consistently sidelined, ignored and/or pressured into accepting bad deals. The deal currently on the table at the WTO could leave many developing countries worse rather than better off.

Despite the independence from colonialism many developing countries achieved in the mid 20th century, continuing forms of control persist. The practical results are poverty, exploitation and misery.

● **Commodity dependence** – the policies imposed on poor countries by the rich country dominated World Bank and IMF have made it more difficult for poor countries to diversify away from selling raw materials and to develop manufacturing industries. Many are still trapped in commodity export dependence with the erratic boom and bust cycles this tends to generate. Rich countries have opposed moves to regulate commodity markets to provide a fair price to poor producers.

● **Net financial resource flows from south to north** – although popular perception is that, through aid budgets, more finance is flowing from rich countries to poor countries, the opposite is the case. Every year hundreds of billions of dollars flow out of developing countries in debt repayments, corporate tax avoidance and big business profit, dwarfing the aid coming in.

● **Human resource flows from south to north** – the UN Economic Commission for Africa has suggested that Africa lost 60,000 professionals (doctors, university lecturers, engineers etc.), between 1985 and 1990. This trend has continued. For example, the number of doctors trained in Ghana but now registered in the UK has more than doubled between 1999 and 2004.

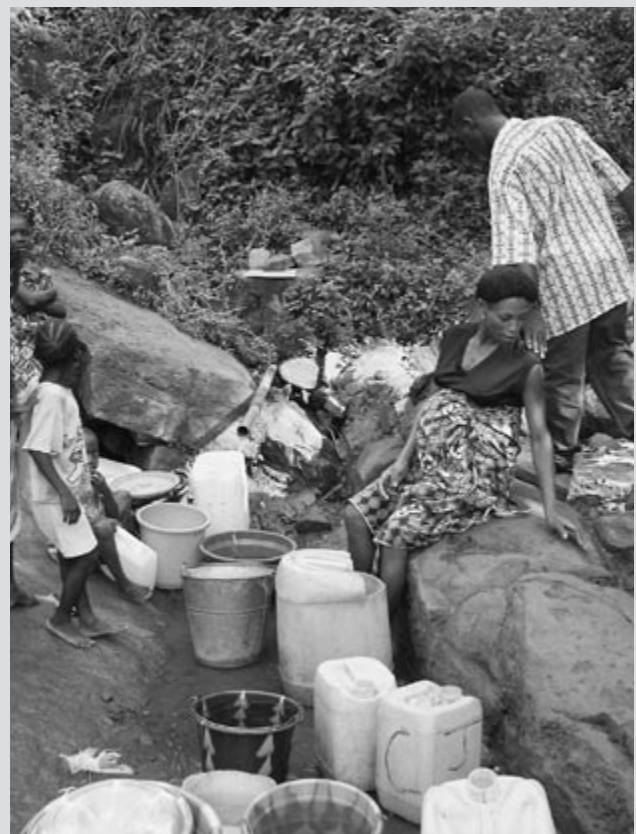
● **Conflict** – the causes of conflict are often varied and complex but a contributing factor has been the focus of rich country economic and foreign policy on securing the commercial interests of their multinationals (especially in natural resource sectors). Rich country governments are happy to turn a blind eye to repression and war as their

## Sierra Leone

During the 1700s the country now known as Sierra Leone was an important centre of the slave trade, losing many of its people. However, founded in 1792 by the Sierra Leone Company – which was owned by British anti-slavery activists – the city Freetown was established as home to former slaves who had fought for the British in the American War of Independence.

Although rich in minerals, particularly diamonds, today Sierra Leone is ranked as the second poorest country in the world. It has been blighted by corruption and civil war and now faces the imposition of free market economic policies by the IMF and the World Bank.

The country's 'Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper', the content of which is heavily influenced by the Bank and is used to determine policy conditionality, contains the usual suite of privatisation (including water), trade liberalisation and clamping down on public spending. These are policies which have undermined development in other parts of Africa. WDM highlighted the way UK aid money is being used to support water privatisation in Sierra Leone.



*Freetown residents need a better water service. Privatisation won't help.*



own corporations reap the benefits of cheap no-questions-asked raw materials. The United Nations has named 85 companies who have illegally exploited the Democratic Republic of Congo's resources; none of the British companies involved have been properly investigated.

🕒 **Refugees** – extreme poverty and conflict are leading to displacement on a massive scale. In 2001 there were over 35 million refugees. Although hard to define and measure, 'environmental refugees' are also of growing concern. It has been estimated that rising sea levels, desertification and shrinking freshwater supplies – all associated with the climate change caused principally by rich countries – will create up to 50 million environmental refugees by the end of the decade.

## Corruption

There is a continuing tendency to ignore the complexities of our history and seek simple explanations for the plight of the poor. The recent increasing focus on corruption is a case in point; attention is given to corruption in African countries while the spotlight rarely shines on the role of western companies or the kinds of corruption that can equally undermine democracy in the industrialised world.

If a major company in a developing country bribes or influences a government official to create policies favourable to that company it is seen as a corrupt government pandering to special interests. If a company, or group of companies, provides massive donations to US political parties in order to influence policy on, for example, climate change, it is seen as a natural part of the democratic process.

In December 2006, on instruction from the Prime Minister and the Foreign and Defence Secretaries, the UK Attorney General decided to terminate an investigation into corruption in deals between British arms company BAE Systems and the Saudi Arabian government. After weeks of lobbying by both the company and the Saudi embassy, the Attorney General claimed that the case should be dropped for national security and foreign policy reasons. According to the Guardian newspaper, the Attorney General stated that, in this case, "the wider public interest" "outweighed the need to maintain the rule of law".

## Nigeria

Looking at a map of western Africa drawn in 1729 reveals an area chillingly called 'the slave coast'. Part of this area is now Nigeria and, as its former title suggests, was the original home of many transatlantic slaves. Today the rich world still has a stranglehold on many areas of Nigerian life, whether through governments or institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the World Bank. In 2006 Nigeria paid the UK government \$3 billion (£1.7 billion) in debt repayments as part of a debt cancellation deal, twice as much as the UK government gave in aid to the whole of Africa in 2005. Along with debt repayments that are diverting much needed funds away from areas like health and education, come IMF imposed economic conditions forcing Nigeria to open up its markets and privatise its industries. The hardship that these policies caused Nigerians has led to several anti-IMF demonstrations around the country involving thousands of people.

## Liberia

Liberia was founded as an independent nation for free-born and freed slaves in the early 1800s but the legacy of slavery left its mark as the newly arrived ex-slaves began to rule over the indigenous population leading to tensions between the two groups. Two civil wars and decades of authoritarian rule in the late 20th century (during which time the west continued to lend to Liberia) left over two hundred thousand dead and an economy in tatters – more than three quarters of the population lives on less than \$1 a day.

In spite of all these problems, as Liberia attempts to rebuild after the end of the civil war, the debt burden remains. The country owes nearly \$1.5 billion to the IMF, World Bank and African Development Bank and a further \$833 million to bilateral lenders. With much of this bilateral debt racked-up by Liberia's previous autocratic rulers and with current central government revenue only being in the region of \$100 million, requiring repayment is morally reprehensible.

Civil society organisations in Liberia are joining with activists around the world to demand immediate cancellation of unpayable and illegitimate debts, without economic policy strings attached.

# Campaigning for global justice: learning from the past to inform the future

The UK campaign for abolition of the slave trade was a brilliant example of how ordinary individuals can join forces to create massive public pressure and help to achieve political change. But as UK government and institutions commemorate the bicentenary there will be challenges from many African communities in Britain and elsewhere who will argue that other aspects of the history of that era have been ignored.

Marking the achievement of abolition shouldn't take precedence over acknowledging the extent of Britain's involvement in, endorsement of and benefit from the slave trade. The role of Africans in resisting enslavement should be duly recognised and celebrated. And we should remember that 1807 did not put a final end to slavery and injustice, which still persist in many different forms today.

There will be major debates on whether apologies and reparations should be made and what form they should take, to address the huge historical debt incurred through the transatlantic slave trade and its legacies. There are clearly practical difficulties in how financial reparations could be implemented, but it is important that the debates are taking place, because

they focus people's attention on the injustice and inequality which exist today and how they are a by-product of that history.

As well as taking forward our campaigns on these global economic justice issues, in the World Development Movement we are trying ourselves to explore and understand the legacies of enslavement, and make connections between the historical injustices committed by Britain and the global injustices we campaign against today. WDM is working with Anti-Slavery International and the African-led group Rendezvous of Victory in a Cross Community Forum to promote dialogue and learning on these issues.

We can also learn lessons from the abolition of the slave trade – remembering that it took black and white, the oppressed and the free, rich and poor, the south and the north to work together in solidarity to bring about its end. This is one of the greatest legacies of the slave trade – that, against all odds, this brutal system was abolished. It is this legacy we need to carry forward to 2007 and beyond, as we continue to campaign against global injustice.

## WDM and the Global South

The World Development Movement has a unique relationship with the global south. WDM does not have its own offices in other countries and does not have direct funding relationships with groups in the global south.

WDM works in solidarity with likeminded activists, campaigners and organisations from across the world. Our relationships with southern campaigners are built on trust and common cause, not on funding.

WDM is involved in campaigning networks that

provide a means to communicate, share information, develop strategy and identify opportunities to work together. In some cases, this results in long-term working relationships.

WDM works to promote alternative opinions from the grassroots in the global south. We link southern campaigners with the UK media, organise speakers' tours, public conferences and lobbying meetings, to ensure voices from the south are heard here in the UK.

# WDM Campaigns

The World Development Movement campaigns to tackle the policies that perpetuate poverty. We have a long history of hard-hitting and successful campaigns. We contributed to stopping a global agreement on investment which would have given more power to multinational companies. We played a major role in securing a commitment

from the UK government to stop imposing policies like privatisation and trade liberalisation on poor countries in return for UK bilateral aid. And we have been at the forefront of getting major initiatives on debt cancellation and challenging the damaging economic conditions attached to debt relief. But the struggle continues:

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## Dirty Aid, Dirty Water

Around the world private sector provision has, time and again, failed to deliver water and sanitation to those who most desperately need it, yet the UK government is still using our aid money to back this discredited approach. WDM is calling on the government to support public water services instead.



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## End climate injustice

Rich countries like the UK are responsible for climate change. It is our excessive carbon emissions that are driving it. But it is poor countries that will bear the brunt of the impact. WDM is campaigning for urgent action by the UK government to tackle climate change – for example by curbing aviation growth – to address this injustice.



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## Trade justice, not free trade

Trade rules should put people before profit. The UK and European Union must stop pushing poor countries to open up their economies, and respect their right to decide on trade policies that would help end poverty and protect the environment.



# Further reading

*The Black Jacobins* CLR James, 1938

*How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* W Rodney, 1972

*Slaves Who Abolished Slavery* R Hart, 1985

*Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, The African. Written by Himself*  
O Equiano, 1789

*1807-2007: Over 200 years of campaigning against slavery* M Kaye, Anti-Slavery International, 2005

All WDM's reports can be downloaded from  
[www.wdm.org.uk/resources](http://www.wdm.org.uk/resources)



*The campaigning continues... Banner for a petition against apprenticeship, pictured in 1807-2007: Over 200 years of campaigning against slavery*



## Take action

Join WDM to take part in our campaigns for global justice.

 call 020 7820 4900

 visit [www.wdm.org.uk](http://www.wdm.org.uk)

 email [wdm@wdm.org.uk](mailto:wdm@wdm.org.uk)



**Acknowledgements** WDM is grateful for support from Anti-Slavery International and Rendezvous of Victory in compiling this briefing.

The World Development Movement (WDM) campaigns to tackle the root causes of poverty. Joining movements around the world, we win justice for the world's poorest people.

World Development Movement, 66 Offley Road, London SW9 0LS  
020 7820 4900 [wdm@wdm.org.uk](mailto:wdm@wdm.org.uk) [www.wdm.org.uk](http://www.wdm.org.uk)



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