

African American Redress Network



A Toolkit for Allies in Racial Justice and Repair

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INTRODUCTION

AARN FRAMEWORK

In 2019, the African-American Redress Network (AARN) was founded as a collaboration between Howard University's Thurgood Marshall Civil Rights Center in the School of Law and Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs. AARN developed from the increased demand to remediate historical racial injustices in the United States and a recognition of the complex processes that are required to construct meaningful repair. In the last four years, AARN worked alongside Afro-descendant communities in their efforts to advance redress. While reparations were at the forefront of the work, the performance of this work was equally important to ensure that Afro-descendant communities were not retraumatized and reclaimed their power.

Uplifts its
resilience,
brilliance, and
triumph

Community

Reflects on and
reifies reparations

For reparations to result in meaningful repair, projects must be community-centered, responsive to multi-faceted harms, and sensitive to the changing complexity of Afro-descendant communities' oppression over time. External organizations and/or allies that aim to engage with Afro-descendant communities are often challenged by existing hierarchical structures. AARN developed a framework aimed to disrupt these hierarchical structures and to place Afro-descendant communities at the fore and core of redress projects.

- Decolonizing your positionality
- Decolonizing your organization
- Decolonizing your services
- Determining repair

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DECOLONIZING YOUR POSITIONALITY

CULTURAL HUMILITY

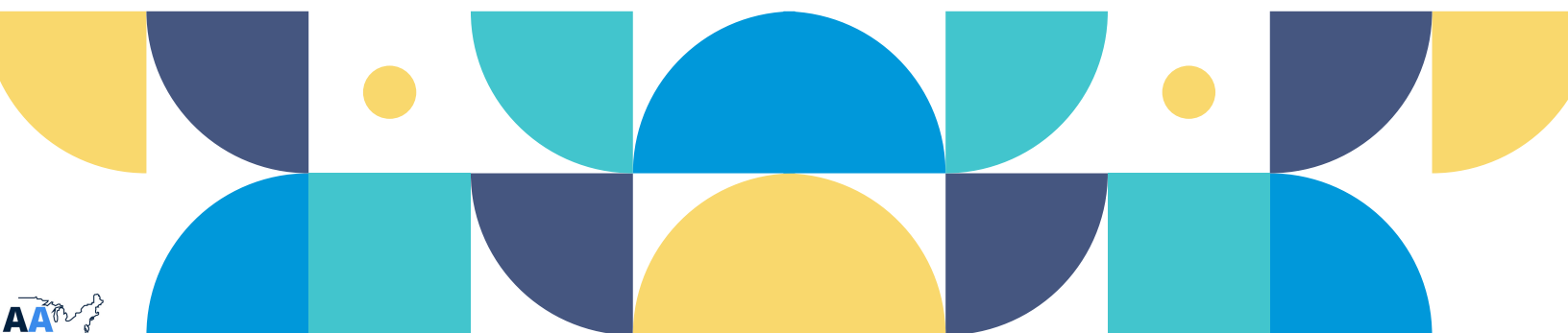
Cultural humility is a necessary practice for allies in the space of reparative justice work. Without the practice of cultural humility, allies run the risk of enacting harm due to internal biases and preconceived notions of culture (Samset, 2020, p. 601). The practice of cultural humility leads to understanding the layered underpinning of identities, both as individuals and as a collective. Cultural humility begins with the self. As a reflective practice, cultural humility requires individuals to assess their internal biases and preconceived notions of culture. Through personal exploration of lived experiences and perspectives, cultural humility disrupts personal frameworks of knowing. Biases and judgment are replaced with curiosity and a desire to learn from others.

The application of cultural humility must also be done collectively as an organization and is essential to community engagements. The practice of cultural humility allows for individuals to be receptive and open to other cultures through the practice of deep listening. Through cultural humility, individuals do not impose their culture but instead enter into a community with an openness and appreciation and an ongoing desire to listen and learn. Further, the practice of cultural humility disrupts hierarchies in relationships with others and provides the opportunity for differing cultures to recognize areas of intersectionality and areas of collaboration (Loue, 2022).

Decolonization from a positional and organizational level is a repeated and regular process that is rooted in constant learning.

Guiding questions to consider:

- What is the role of an ally?
- Who are allies? How do you know?
- What role do non-BIPOC allies play?
- Can outside agencies work alongside communities without contributing additional harms?
- What does it mean to be a white person in this space? What does it mean to engage without "othering" participants?



DESIRE-BASED RESEARCH

Cultural humility provides a sound foundation for the practice of desire-based research. This research methodology centers communities as the producers of knowledge and the experts of their own lives (Gahman et al., 2020).

Since Afro-descendant communities are already engaged in addressing historical harms and seeking repair, desire-based research aims to create spaces for co-creation that elevate Afro-descendant communities' agency. This means that Afro-descendant communities are both directing the work and deciding what a seat at the table looks like for ally engagement in racial justice and repair efforts.

While not reflective of all lived experience, allies in racial justice and repair must be mindful that historically harmed communities often carry generational trauma. This may take the form of internalized racial oppression. This happens when racist stereotypes and images negatively affect individuals' perception of themselves, making them feel self-doubt and dissatisfaction toward their own racial identity or group (Pyke, 2010, p. 533). Internalized racial oppression disempowers individuals and sustains colonial definitions of self.

INTERNALIZED RACIAL OPPRESSION

As allies, it is important to acknowledge the deeply interconnected systems of oppression that have effectively diminished capacity in Afro-descendant communities and limited perspectives of what is possible when seeking repair. The potential for internalized racial oppression further underscores the need for ally organizations to do the hard work of assessing their own colonized underpinnings. Not doing so may result in practices and policies that reinstitute harm.

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DECOLONIZING YOUR ORGANIZATION

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

Allies in racial justice and repair must intentionally design their organizations to respond to traditional hierarchical practices and structural racism. Organizations that are not Afro- descendant and/or Black-led must develop a structure that is deeply embedded in these communities to listen and to better respond to their needs.

It is recommended that organizations create a steering committee with a majority ratio of Afro-descendants and/or members of legacy Black organizations. This should be the cornerstone of ally organizations focused on racial justice and repair.

Because autonomous-led descendant groups often operate as voluntary organizations, many are faced with funding and capacity limitations. Therefore, it is important to discuss and to agree on responsibilities and to compensate Afro-descendants for their expertise and time.

As mentioned previously, AARN's decolonizing efforts included a purposeful collaboration between Howard University's Thurgood Marshall Civil Rights Center and Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs. This structure was essential for the latter as a predominantly white institute. Howard University's long standing engagement with the Black community helped to situate Black community voices at the forefront of AARN's work.

Members must have a pivotal advisory role & full voting power to direct the design and response

Steering
Committee

Lived experiences and local knowledge are essential to implementing culturally responsive & trauma-informed TJ mechanisms

Although AARN's steering committee was designed with member representation from academia and civil rights law, descendant-led coalitions and/or Black led organizations had a majority ratio of 6:4. The legacy members from the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America, National African American Reparations Commission, and Black Lives Matter as well as Afro-descendant members from FirstRepair, Africatown, Alabama, and the Georgetown University 272 were essential to providing knowledge but also validating the existence of AARN within the United States' reparations space. These representatives were asked to join the steering committee because of their exceptional leadership within the field of racial redress.

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DECOLONIZING YOUR ORGANIZATION

BUILDING COMMUNITY FROM WITHIN

Because the work of racial justice and repair can be simultaneously fulfilling and distressing, a culture of care within an ally organization is needed to prioritize team members' health and wellbeing. Frequent and conscious community-building can help team members feel safe and empowered to alleviate their own and other's suffering. By sharing concerns, setbacks, and progress with each other, the ally organization cultivates **clarity of purpose** and **love in the struggle for transformation**. To love one another in the work of justice, equity, and liberation is to "open ourselves to the deepest needs of the other...to recognize the pain of the other and to gather it onto ourselves...to offer accompaniment through the hard ways" (Ikeda Center, 2010). The human-centered and culturally responsive approaches that are used to engage with Afro-descendant communities must also form the basis of connection within the ally organization.



A network of care also encourages an appreciation for the unique but complementary roles of team members. Each is **valued in their wholeness**. Prioritizing each team member's autonomy and expertise honors strengths and capacities (Rossingol, 2023). For example, AARN student interns are not assigned to roles as "someone in training." Instead, AARN interns are seen as **equal contributors**, capable of self-management, and **led by a deep sense of purpose toward racial justice and repair** (Laloux, 2014). One team member may be skilled in genealogical research while another has a talent for oral history, but taken together, their efforts follow from direct engagement with community members. Each team member's interests and creativity add vibrant, layered textures. As teams diffuse authority among members (Rossingol, 2023), the work carries the potential to be more cross-disciplinary, inclusive, and holistic in its purpose and outcome.



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DECOLONIZING YOUR ORGANIZATION

TRANSFORMING PROCESSES

By prioritizing the voices of those wronged, ally engagement can further disrupt prescriptive approaches by weaving together people, places, and practices. Transitional justice and transformative justice provide useful frameworks for defining these shared activities and redress outcomes.

Transitional justice describes how communities respond to legacies of large-scale human rights atrocities and move closer toward an inclusive peace (ICTJ, n.d.). Transitional justice provides various pathways to acknowledgement, redress, and accountability for victims (ICTJ, n.d.). These may include legal and political reforms, truth and reconciliation commissions, criminal prosecutions, memorialization, and reparations to victims, among others.



Integrating transitional justice and transformative justice into partnerships with Afro-descendant communities can broaden possibilities, build power for reparative change, and advance a vision for community healing.

Transformative justice, however, expands transitional justice's priorities to include structural violence (Evans, 2018, p. 34) and socioeconomic inequalities (Demir, 2019). Recognizing that ongoing injustices are tied to history and structures, transformative justice aims for change that is both long-term and comprehensive in its scope (Evans, 2018, p. 41).

Transformative justice has long been shaped and led by communities who seek to "reduce harm, stay alive, and create safety and healing outside of state systems" (Mingus, 2022). Transformative justice policies focus on infrastructure, skill development, and capacity-building within communities to break generational cycles of harm and to cultivate desired interpersonal and communal relationships (Evans, 2018, p. 122). Accountability to each other, accompaniment through healing, effective communication, and de-escalation techniques are a few of these practices (Mingus, 2022).



DECOLONIZING YOUR SERVICES

INVITATION TO THE TABLE

Communities often create their own table and then invite allies to the table. Allies who are invited should have as their primary goal to listen and then act (Loue, 2022; Brearley, 2015).

This means dedicating significant time to center local voices and to listen for leadership roles that may exist outside of dominant hierarchies.

Ally organizations should ask: Who are the key organizers? What differentiates leaders from members and supporters?

A community-based approach ensures that (1) services address Afro-descendants' needs and interests and (2) the voices of Afro-descendant communities are at the forefront.

Allies should also consider local context in designing and implementing reparative measures. Webs of harm vary depending on each community. One community, for example, may value reparations in education while another has long struggled with housing equality. These differences change how Afro-descendant communities determine eligibility for reparations and propose solutions to assure that harms are not repeated.

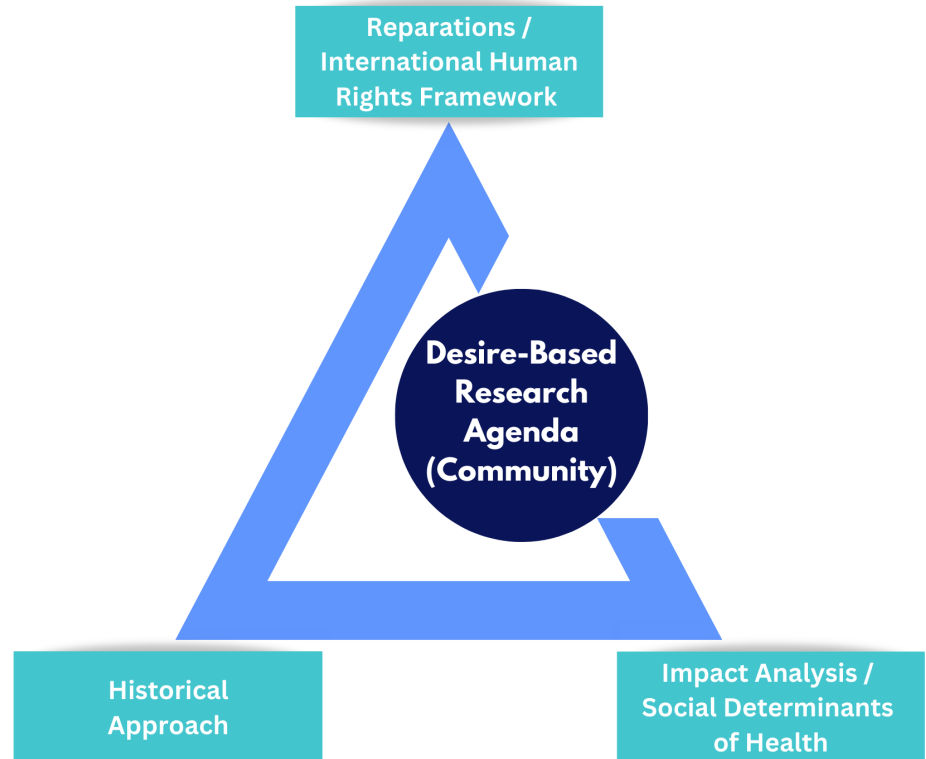
Allies in racial justice and repair must recognize that the knowledge and practices of local community partners provide valuable resources for filling in the gaps that institutions may overlook. Local knowledge networks should lead and guide step-by-step process mapping with allies. This includes defining the mission and vision of the Afro-descendant community's redress efforts and its theory of change (i.e., inputs, activities, outputs, short-term outcomes, intermediate outcomes, long-term outcomes, and impacts).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

A historical approach takes an expansive view of harms that traces the breadth and depth of structural racism throughout the foundation of the United States. This includes but is not limited to: enslavement, racial terror, segregation, displacement, and economic deprivation. Various forms of oppression should not be ranked but rather evaluated as historical injustices that change over time and are different in nature yet equally oppressive.



Historical analyses detail the dispossession and destruction of Afro-descendant communities and assist in understanding the impact of racially motivated harms. Historical analyses also respond to Afro-descendant communities' desire to locate families. Oral histories, title searches, land deeds, military, marriage, and census records, newspapers, magazine articles, books, and dissertations are a few of the many sources to consider.



The World Health Organization's social determinants of health (SDOH) analyze how social and economic factors affect individuals' and communities' overall wellbeing and quality of life. The SDOH include five pillars: (1) economic stability, (2) education access and stability, (3) healthcare access and stability, (4) neighborhood and built environment, and (5) social and community context (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, n.d.). Through this framework, ally organizations and Afro-descendant communities can examine how public policies benefit and harm specific areas. Understanding the potential long-term effects of historical trauma allows for the development of reparations that directly and more holistically remediate those harms.

INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS

A FRAMEWORK FOR REPARATIONS



The United Nations identifies rehabilitation, satisfaction, restitution, compensation, and guarantees of non-repetition as categories of reparation. Policies must address all five categories to provide “full and effective reparation” (International Commission of Jurists, 2018, p. xiii).



Restitution

Measures that restore survivors to their original situation prior to suffering violations of international human rights law.



Rehabilitation

Includes, but not limited to:

- Medical and psychological care
- Legal and social services



Compensation

A monetarily quantifiable award for any economically accessible damage.



Satisfaction

Includes, but not limited to:

- Cessation of violations
- Truth-seeking
- The search for the disappeared
- Recovery and reburial of remains
- Public apologies
- Judicial and administrative sanctions
- Commemoration and memorialization
- Human rights training



Guarantees of Non-repetition

Includes, but not limited to:

- Institutional reform
- Strengthening judicial independence
- The protection of human rights defenders
- The promotion of international human rights standards in public service, law enforcement, the media, and psychological and social services.

These five categories can equip Afro-descendant communities with several possibilities for redressing past harms, allowing for a customized and community-centered vision of reparative change.

These case studies recount AARN's work with Afro-descendant communities in Africatown, Alabama and Brown Grove, Virginia. Each case study reifies components of the framework discussed above. In Africatown, the rebirth of a cultural tradition came from applying desire-based research, practicing cultural humility, and being invited to the table. In Brown Grove, capacity-building rooted in transitional justice and transformative justice principles helped the Afro-descendant community determine repair and actualize multiple collaborative efforts.

AFRICATOWN, ALABAMA



PARTNERSHIPS FOR HEALING

African American Redress Network (AARN) and Birmingham Southern College (BSC) collaborate to build relationships centered on Africatown's community healing through the Lantern Walk.



DESIRE-BASED RESEARCH:

AARN and BSC adopt a research framework that respects the community as self-emancipatory, knowledge experts, ensuring all project deliverables are co-designed with the community's needs in mind.



UNITY WITH COMMUNITY AGENCIES

AARN and BSC collaborate with other agencies promoting environmental and racial justice: Alabama Coastal Foundation, Clean, Healthy, Educated, Safe, and Sustainable (C.H.E.S.S), Africatown Heritage Preservation Foundation, and Mobile Environmental Justice Action Coalition (MEJAC).



PROMOTING REPARATIONS

AARN and BSC establish a community of practice, bridging academic institutions and local groups to expand reparations efforts' impact.

BROWN GROVE, VIRGINIA



PARTNERSHIPS FOR HEALING

AARN and the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) join hands to organize a community-led, goal-setting retreat in Brown Grove. The Brown Grove Preservation Group (BGP) and other community-based organizations were in attendance.



DESIRE-BASED RESEARCH:

Throughout the retreat, Afro-descendants reflected on past organizing efforts, shared their desires for the community, and narrowed the scope of future collaborative efforts.



UNITY WITH COMMUNITY AGENCIES

On day two, members of AARN's Virginia Reparations Coalition, Resolutions Addressing Systemic Racism, the Chesapeake Climate Action Network, Sunrise Richmond Virginia, and the Virginia Environmental Justice Collaborative communicated what expertise and time they could dedicate to the work.



PROMOTING REPARATIONS

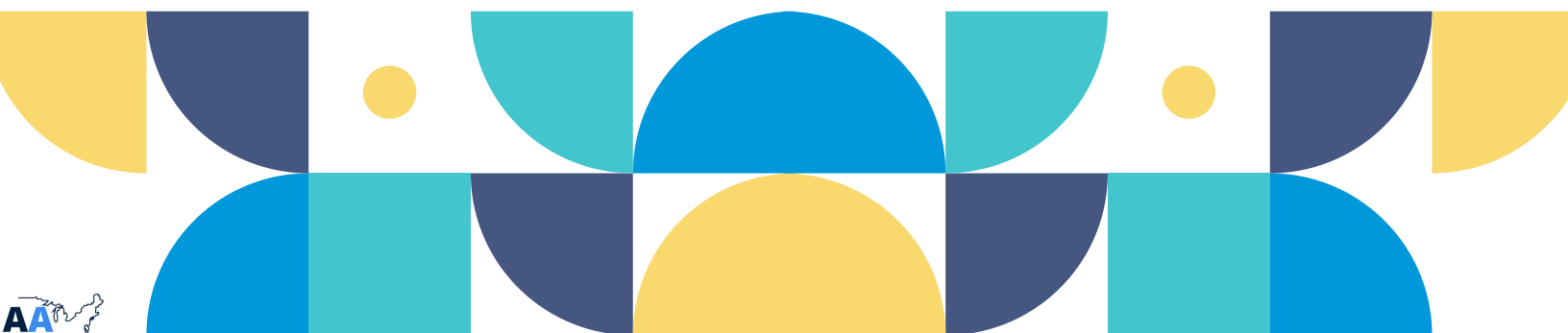
Brown Grove had several wins in 2021 and 2022:

- Designation as a Rural African American Historic District
- An Environmental Protection Agency visit
- Termination of commercial development on historic land

This toolkit has provided advice and best practices for initiatives advancing racial redress and repair across the United States. While there is immense potential for projects arising out of collaborations between institutions and Afro-descendant communities, many pitfalls also exist. The following considerations should be taken into account to mitigate these pitfalls and to enact a holistic, community-led process of repair:

1. **Decolonizing your positionality.** Community engagement should be done in a spirit of cultural humility, a perspective that centers the knowledge of Afro-descendant communities and inspires openness and an awareness of one's positionality.
2. **Decolonizing your organization.** Organizational goals should be set based on the desires of Afro-descendant communities. To do this, it is essential to establish an organizational structure in which Afro-descendant communities have a strong voice at the table and members of the organization interact in a spirit of non-hierarchical collaboration. Integrating the frameworks of transitional and transformative justice can broaden possibilities for collaborative racial repair and advance a powerful vision for community healing.
3. **Decolonizing your services.** Racial redress initiatives should be guided according to the wishes of Afro-descendant communities and sensitive to differing needs across various locales. Afro-descendant communities can often provide knowledge and experience that may be overlooked by a more top-down approach.
4. **Determining repair.** In establishing holistic initiatives for racial repair, importance should be given to tracing the impacts of historically discriminatory policies, the social determinants of health (SDOH), and the international human rights framework for reparations.

The processes by which racial repair is enacted are as important as the work itself, and must be taken into consideration if a racial redress initiative is to ensure that the wishes of Afro-descendant communities are met.



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