
RADICAL PATHWAYS BEYOND GDP

WHY AND HOW WE NEED TO PURSUE FEMINIST AND DECOLONIAL ALTERNATIVES URGENTLY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There is growing consensus among many policymakers, institutions and movements that gross domestic product (GDP) is not fit for purpose as the pre-eminent economic metric. Alternatives are urgently needed to facilitate the transition to a new economic model that supports a radically more equal, kinder, greener and feminist world in the present, while offering redress for historical damage and inequalities. However, despite growing experimentation, most efforts are insufficiently bold and remain mostly on paper, with only a few notable but relatively small-scale and still-developing exceptions. To dismantle GDP, different social movements will need to coalesce around key metrics that prioritize far greater equality, and align with feminist and decolonial values while challenging the systems of power and narratives that are holding GDP in its dominant place. Only in this way are alternatives likely to deliver the economic transformation needed to put people and planet first.

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SUMMARY

Our economies are broken. Inequality is rife; climate change and ecological destruction continue on a dangerous and untenable path; the undervaluing of the care economy pushes women deeper into time and income poverty; hunger and food insecurity are on the rise; and violent conflict is increasing. These crises are driven by an extractive, profit-driven and neocolonial economic system that delivers ever-greater profits and capital for the owners of wealth, while systematically exploiting workers and people living in poverty, particularly people in marginalized communities. It is also a system built on exploiting and neglecting nature and carers, making them invisible and ignoring their role in sustaining our economies.

A core feature of this economic system is its focus on gross domestic product (GDP) as the primary indicator of economic and social progress. GDP is the signifier for a pervasive narrative that unlimited, unquestioned GDP growth is the key to achieving other political goals, such as greater equality, wellbeing and an end to poverty. Through such myths, GDP has moved from being an instrument and indicator of some limited value to being a goal in itself. GDP growth *can* take place in a manner that is inclusive and that tackles inequality, but as a metric, GDP on its own has no way of examining what is being produced, how it is being produced, and who it benefits.

Moving beyond GDP is both a call to abandon a dysfunctional economic indicator as a guiding metric for policy and a broader invitation to think about living in an economy that focuses on social prosperity¹ – and on a liveable planet – rather than pursuing GDP growth for its own sake. This requires metrics that can serve as a compass to tell us where to go, how we are progressing, and how well different policies will serve us in getting there. Importantly, it requires centring Indigenous knowledge systems and values, and the voices, solutions, and perspectives of feminist² and decolonial³ thinkers from the Global South.

Movements and thinkers from the Global South have been calling for radical alternatives for years, and there is increasing public support in high-income countries to move beyond GDP. Polling carried out by the Women’s Budget Group found that almost 7 out of 10 people say that wellbeing should be used to measure the success of economic policy.⁴

WHAT’S WRONG WITH GDP?

GDP was created in the Global North in the 1930s as a measure of economic growth and activity, yet it has become the yardstick against which all economic progress is measured. Its limited focus reflects the narrow-minded, Eurocentric and outdated framing that shaped its creation. It is high time for a reboot that reflects the reality and the needs of society today.

While GDP per capita has been steadily rising globally, so has inequality. Between 1995 and 2021, the richest 1% captured 38% of all new wealth created in the world, and the poorest 50% just 2% of all new wealth created.⁵ This incredibly unequal and unfair distribution, and its negative effect on wellbeing, is not reflected in GDP and is often presented as an ‘inevitable’ stage of GDP growth.

The suggestion that the world can grow its way out of inequality is environmentally disastrous. Even just to lift the majority of humanity above the levels of extreme poverty, with inequality at its current level, would involve our global economy being many times the size it is today – something that would destroy our planet. But planetary boundaries are not taken into account: the global economy is overshooting six of nine boundaries identified by the Stockholm Resilience Centre,⁶ almost entirely driven by high-income countries where GDP growth has rapidly increased resource use to four times sustainable per capita levels.

At the same time, inequality drives the climate crisis: the world's richest 1% have a per-capita carbon footprint 30 times higher than the level compatible with the 1.5°C Paris Agreement goal.⁷ The poorest 50% have a far smaller footprint, while suffering the worst of the consequences of climate change.

Nevertheless, GDP ignores harm to the environment, such as the impacts of economic activity on climate change, land and biodiversity. After centuries of causing harm through colonialism, the excess emissions of high-income industrialized countries are continuing those harms, while vulnerable countries and communities bear the brunt of climate change.

GDP measures the value added of goods and services produced and traded in the marketplace, but it ignores crucial areas of our economies. It largely ignores unpaid care, and some elements of informal work,^{8,9} which is done disproportionately by women, especially those living in poverty and from groups that experience discrimination based on race, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality and caste.

Women and men do 16.4 billion hours of unpaid care work a day.¹⁰ Around 76% of this is undertaken by women,¹¹ with 606 million women of working age performing unpaid care on a full-time basis.¹² The invisibility of care work in the formal economy has led to it acting as a hidden subsidy to the market economy. Of the total number of hours worked weekly around the world, 45% are in unpaid care work,¹³ with its contributions excluded from GDP calculations. From a gender perspective, this means that 65% of women's working hours overall are unpaid and do not contribute towards GDP.

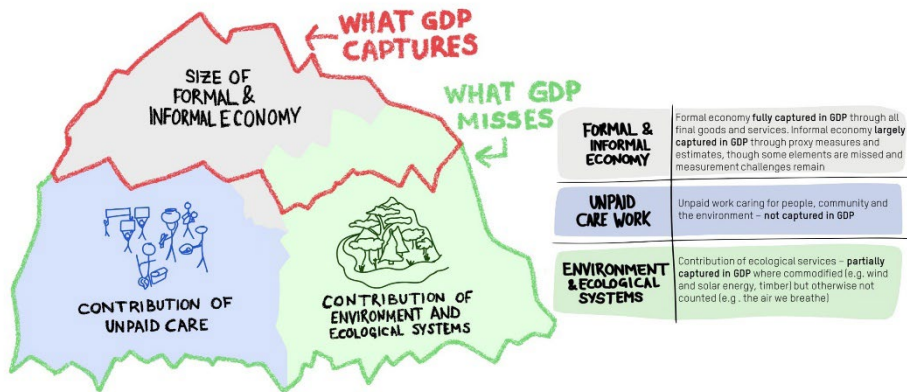
Care activities and ecosystems only become valuable (and counted in GDP) when they are resources that can be owned, controlled and sold; for example, both extractive and reparatory environmental activities are counted as positive contributions to GDP, but maintenance and preservation beyond the market economy do not count.

GDP also does not accurately capture whether what is being produced is done so legally or illegally, nor where growth takes place, as in the case of illicit financial flows to tax havens. In 2020, the Tax Justice Network calculated that the Netherlands and Luxembourg were responsible for more than US\$36bn and US\$27bn respectively of tax losses for countries around the world.¹⁴

GDP is anti-feminist and colonial because it sustains a framework of value creation and productivity that only counts what can be monetized. Market relations are given precedence over family and social relations, individualism over solidarity and interdependence, rational choice over wellbeing. Women are rendered to the 'private' sphere and their work is invisible. At the same time, GDP has helped erase Indigenous and alternative conceptions of what can and should be valued.

What's wrong with GDP?

AS A MEASURE OF THE ECONOMY,
THERE'S A LOT GDP MISSSES



AND FOR THE PART OF
THE ECONOMY GDP CAPTURES,
IT TELLS US NOTHING
ABOUT QUALITY



GDP ONLY FOCUSES ON SIZE,
WHICH MEANS IT DOESN'T LOOK AT HOW IT
HARMS OR BENEFITS PEOPLE & THE PLANET



DECISIONS ABOUT THE ECONOMY
SHOULD BE GUIDED BY A METRIC
THAT LOOKS AT THE WHOLE PICTURE
AND MEASURES WHAT MATTERS

Illustration by Alex Bush

WHO PAYS THE PRICE FOR OUR FIXATION ON GDP?

Economic policies based on the neoliberal,¹⁵ patriarchal¹⁶ logic of GDP growth have disproportionately harmed women, girls and non-binary people, especially those who experience intersecting inequalities, while benefiting the richest. Austerity measures, trade liberalization and the lack of universal care policy coverage are just three examples of GDP-growth focused policies that have had devastating consequences for women and marginalized groups.

The current neoliberal and neocolonial¹⁷ model is rooted in the colonial practices of resource extraction, export-oriented production systems, and the imposition of Western economic logic, which has destroyed ecosystems, undermined Indigenous knowledge systems, and displaced communities across the world. This has directly increased food and water insecurity, poverty and vulnerability to climate change.

For example, in Gambia and Ghana, which have a rich history of producing rice, yams and other staple foods, colonial era concentration on cash crops such as groundnuts and cocoa led to famine, chronic food shortages, malnourishment, and dependency on European colonizers for imports.¹⁸

REIMAGINING A METRIC THAT MATTERS AND WORKS FOR ALL

Many alternatives to GDP have been designed, but there is limited progress towards dislodging it as the dominant metric, in part due to its 'single indicator appeal'. Perhaps more significantly, governments and the private sector elites have a vested interest in GDP, as they benefit from an economy that is focused on its unquestioned growth.

Although many of the existing beyond GDP efforts are welcome signs of progress, they barely challenge the current focus on GDP, and do not have the scale, quality and ambition to forge a radical alternative. Very few GDP alternative frameworks are explicitly feminist or decolonial.

A feminist, decolonial approach and mindset to GDP alternatives would put much more emphasis on the importance of community, social relationships and the environment.¹⁹ This is vital to reverse the erasure of non-Western knowledge systems through the imposition of Western, patriarchal and neoliberal GDP logic.

Winning public and political acceptance for a metric, without it being another neocolonial imposition, depends on the inclusivity of the process through which it is developed. Indicators reflecting Indigenous knowledge and perspectives need to be centred in the design, implementation and review of the measure. These need to be rooted in a recognition and acceptance of – and commitment to repair – the damages caused by colonialism and economic imperialism.

Decolonial beyond GDP alternatives would factor in 'wellbeing elsewhere' – i.e. the positive or negative contribution of a country's decisions, policies and resource use on equality, social prosperity and sustainability in other countries. For example, a metric could include indicators that look at cumulative national carbon emissions to give a sense of a country's responsibility for historical emissions (in its own territories and elsewhere), along with losses and damages incurred globally. This information could be key for supporting calls for climate reparations.

GDP alternatives need to capture evidence from the entire economy, both paid and unpaid. Importantly, they need to measure unpaid care (which is disproportionately carried out by women), its distribution (within and between households, the state, the market and public sector), and how it is impacted by macroeconomic policies.

Whatever the measure that takes us beyond GDP, the distribution of national income would need to supersede any focus on simple averages, including at the household level. Inequality, and reducing the gap between the richest people and those living in poverty, should be hardwired into how we measure progress in our societies. The Palma ratio, for example, is an important indicator to highlight levels of inequality, by showing the differences between the highest and lowest income brackets.

Beyond GDP frameworks need to ensure that they support transformative work that radically shifts our economic model towards one that puts human and environmental prosperity first. This does not mean that growth is irrelevant; in fact, for most countries, there is an urgent need to grow the incomes of the majority of people and the revenues of governments to facilitate human and environmental prosperity. The key point is that narrowly defined growth is not an end in itself and should never be a government's primary objective or end goal.

WHAT IS HOLDING BACK PROGRESS?

A significant factor that holds GDP in place as the dominant global metric is its entrenchment in national, regional and global institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the European Commission (EC), as well as formal frameworks such as the System of National Accounts. GDP is seen as a measure of a country's economic power, with important consequences for: borrowing capacity; access to international markets and foreign aid; voting rights in multilateral institutions; leverage in trade negotiations; and the measurement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

As a result of its entrenchment, the objective of GDP growth is deeply engrained in narratives and culture around the globe that perpetuate the view that the monetized/market economy is what matters, and so the only activities that count are those that produce monetary value or can be priced. This is also an outdated reflection of what mattered or was valued by the original designers of GDP.

Additionally, many rich elites and corporations have reasons to prefer keeping GDP as the primary guiding metric for economic policy. Were it to be displaced by measures that take into account social prosperity, inequality and the environment, the resulting shift away from policies that prioritize growth at all costs, and towards a more just and sustainable economy, would limit their power and their profits.

Many organizations, experts and activists that have been at the forefront of the beyond GDP movement self-critically claim that the reason there has not been large-scale progress is the lack of a common language and shared ground on methodology. As previously noted, GDP also has a 'single indicator appeal'. Most multidimensional frameworks of wellbeing tend to have too many indicators, instead of a clear, smaller set of key indicators, which makes it difficult to get an overall picture.

Although many of the existing beyond GDP efforts are welcome signs of progress, they insufficiently challenge the current focus on GDP and fall short in integrating both a feminist and decolonial perspective. They do not measure up to what we need in terms of scale, quality and ambition to forge a radical alternative.

Why is GDP still the dominant guiding metric?

WHY IS GDP STILL THE DOMINANT GUIDING METRIC FOR ECONOMIC POLICY? WHAT IS HOLDING BACK PROGRESS?

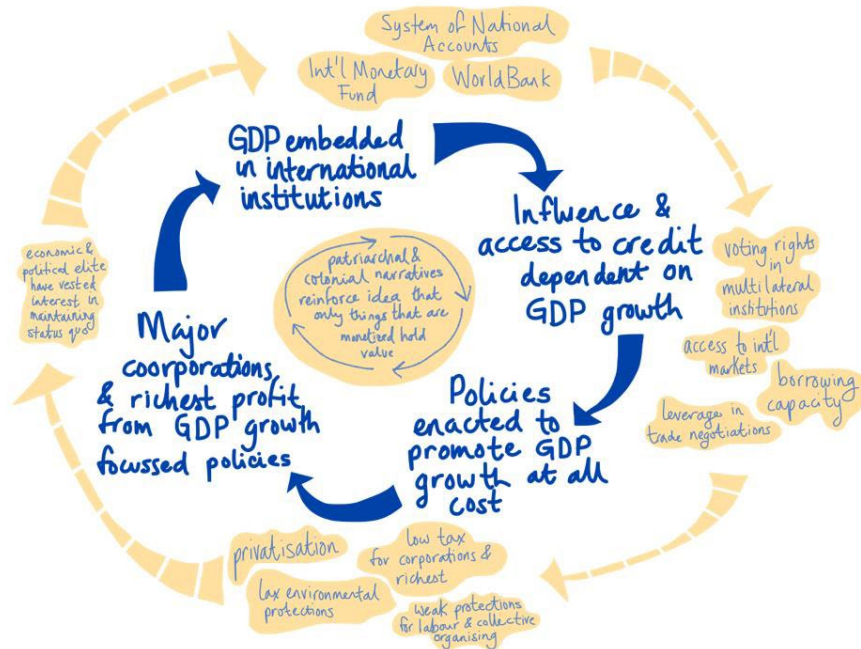


Illustration by Alex Bush

KEY PATHWAYS TOWARDS FEMINIST, DECOLONIAL ALTERNATIVES

Dislodging GDP from its dominant position would require transforming narratives in academic curriculums, political debate and popular media, challenging the perception that GDP growth is universally positive. Cross-discipline, cross-movement and cross-institutional consensus will be important to shape what radical alternatives look like, with feminist and decolonial critiques at the centre. This could include the identification of possible 'cornerstone' social prosperity indicators that are embedded in feminist and decolonial principles.

To ensure the alternatives reflect the priorities and values that are currently missing, a redesign process would need to meaningfully engage women, Indigenous people and those in positions of vulnerability. Likewise, efforts must be driven by globally diverse organizations and institutions, centring voices from the Global South, and with active public participation in the beyond GDP agendas to ensure broad inclusion throughout the policy cycle.

There is an opportunity for governments and institutions to invest in testing, piloting and scaling alternatives, working with cities, regions and countries to build alternative frameworks and supporting statistical infrastructure, drawing on the growing body of learning. This could include providing political and financial incentives for adopting alternatives as economic policy drivers, disentangling GDP from sustainable development indicator sets such as the SDGs, and creating an intergovernmental body to consolidate knowledge and drive convergence on methodologies and terminology.

GLOSSARY

| TERM | DEFINITION | REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING |
|-----------------------|--|---|
| <i>Decolonial</i> | Something that breaks from colonial and neocolonial structures of dominance and thought, disrupting racial, gender and geopolitical legacies of inequality and domination. | S. Tamale. (2020). <i>Decolonization and Afro-Feminism</i> . Daraja Press. Quebec: Daraja Press. W.D. Mignolo. (2011). <i>The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options</i> . London: Duke University Press. |
| <i>Decolonization</i> | The act of achieving independence from colonialism, both historical and modern, and undoing the harm caused. Part of an ongoing process of shifting decolonial power back to Black people, Indigenous peoples and People of Colour, who are calling for agency over their political and economic structures – as well as their culture, society, education, language and voice. | S. Tamale. (2020). <i>Decolonization and Afro-Feminism</i> . Daraja Press. Quebec: Daraja Press. Oxfam. (2023). <i>Inclusive Language Guide</i> . Retrieved 8 June 2023, from https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/inclusive-language-guide-621487/ D. Omanga. (2020). <i>Decolonization, Decoloniality, and the Future of African Studies: A Conversation with Dr. Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni</i> . Social Science Research Council. Retrieved 3 July 2023, from https://items.ssrc.org/from-our-programs/decolonization-decoloniality-and-the-future-of-african-studies-a-conversation-with-dr-sabelo-ndlovu-gatsheni/ |
| <i>Feminism</i> | A movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression. Feminism is a belief in social, political and economic equality for all genders, rooted in an understanding of how women and other marginalized genders face structural inequality and oppression due to existing norms, stereotypes and power dynamics. At Oxfam, our understanding of feminism is rooted in 11 principles: ²⁰ 1. I share power 2. I challenge my behaviour 3. I support the feminist movement 4. Nothing about us without us 5. Feminism is for everyone 6. There is no justice without gender justice 7. I champion diversity 8. I value safety 9. I want a supportive environment 10. I believe in freedom of expression 11. Eliminate gender-based violence | hooks, b. (1984). <i>Feminist Theory, from Margin to Center</i> . New York: Routledge. Oxfam. (2020). <i>Feminist Principles</i> . Retrieved 3 July 2023, from https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/feminist-principles-621064/ |

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|--------------------------|---|---|
| <i>Intersectionality</i> | A theory based on the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw, who highlighted the particular combination of oppressions faced by Black women in the United States. It draws attention to the ways that people can face multiple and intersecting oppressions based on race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, ability and age (among other social markers) – and that these do not operate individually or in isolation, but are mutually reinforcing, resulting in complex social inequalities. | P. Hill Collins. (2015). 'Intersectionality's Definitional Dilemmas'. <i>Annual Review of Sociology</i> , 41, 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-073014-112142 K. Crenshaw. (1991). 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color'. <i>Stanford Law Review</i> , 43(6), 1241–99. https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039 |
| <i>Neocolonialism</i> | A model in which, despite the end of formal colonial relationships, economic and political systems in countries that were colonized continue to be directed, shaped and influenced by unequal power relationships with the former colonizing countries. This is broadly understood to encompass the ways in which multilateral institutions and transnational corporations maintain colonial dynamics of exploitation and extraction in formerly colonized countries. | K. Nkrumah. (1965). <i>Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism</i> . London: Thomas Nelson and Sons. S. Halperin. (12 April 2023). <i>Neocolonialism</i> . Britannica. Accessed 8 June 2023, from https://www.britannica.com/topic/neocolonialism |
| <i>Neoliberalism</i> | The dominant economic model since the 1980s, centred around individualism and the expansion of 'free markets'. In this model, the state exists to maintain institutions that protect those practices. This approach has led to increased rights, mobility and freedoms for corporations, and a corresponding reduction in collective action, state regulation and government intervention in the economy. | D. Harvey. (2007). <i>A Brief History of Neoliberalism</i> . New York: Oxford University Press. E. Berkhout, N. Galasso, M. Lawson, P.A. Rivero Morales, A. Taneja and D.A. Vázquez Pimentel. (2021). <i>The Inequality Virus: Bringing together a world torn apart by coronavirus through a fair, just and sustainable economy</i> . Oxfam. Retrieved 3 July 2023, from https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/the-inequality-virus-bringing-together-a-world-torn-apart-by-coronavirus-through-621149/ |
| <i>Patriarchy</i> | A system built around male privilege and dominance, reinforcing masculinities that perpetuate sexist and hierarchical power relationships. Patriarchal systems legitimize the discrimination against and exclusion of women and gender non-conforming people through harmful social norms, policies and institutions. | M. French. (1985). <i>Beyond Power: On Women, Men and Morals</i> . New York: Summit Books. |

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| <p><i>Social prosperity</i></p> | <p>A concept that broadens our idea of prosperity beyond economic concerns to incorporate wellbeing, health, solidarity, social cohesion and agency.</p> | <p>K. Lima de Miranda and D.K. Snower. (2020). <i>Recoupling Economic and Social Prosperity</i>. Blavatnik School of Government. Working paper. Retrieved 3 July 2023, from https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/research/publications/recoupling-economic-and-social-prosperity</p> <p>K. Chika Urama and E. Nti Acheampong. (2013). 'Social Innovation Creates Prosperous Societies'. <i>Stanford Social Innovation Review</i>. Retrieved 3 July 2023, from https://ssir.org/articles/entry/social_innovation_creates_prosperous_societies</p> |
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NOTES

¹ See [Glossary](#)

² See [Glossary](#)

³ See [Glossary](#)

⁴ Women's Budget Group. (2020). *Creating a Caring Economy: A Call to Action*. Retrieved 3 July 2023, from <https://wbq.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/WBG-Report-v10.pdf>

⁵ L. Chancel, T. Piketty, E. Saez and G. Zucman. (2022) *World Inequality Report*. World Inequality Lab. Retrieved 19 June 2023, from https://wir2022.wid.world/www-site/uploads/2023/03/D_FINAL_WIL_RIM_RAPPORT_2303.pdf

⁶ Utrecht University. (26 April 2022). *Planetary Boundaries Update: Freshwater at Stake*. Retrieved 16 March 2023, from <https://www.uu.nl/en/news/planetary-boundaries-update-freshwater-at-stake>

⁷ T. Gore (2021) *Carbon Inequality in 2030: Per capita consumption emissions and the 1.5°C goal*. Institute for European Environmental Policy, Oxfam. Retrieved 19 June 2023, from <https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/10546/621305/1/bn-carbon-inequality-2030-051121-en.pdf>

⁸ Intersecretariat Working Group on National Accounts. (2008). System of National Accounts 2008. Retrieved 7 June 2023, from <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/nationalaccount/docs/SNA2008.pdf>

⁹ ILO. (2013). 'Measurement of the Informal Economy', in *The Informal Economy and Decent Work: A policy resource guide supporting transitions to formality*. Geneva: International Labour Organization.

¹⁰ ILO. (2018). *Care Work and Care Jobs for The Future of Decent Work*. Geneva: International Labour Organization. Retrieved 19 June 2023, from https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS_633135/lang--en/index.htm

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ [Methodological note \(stat 1\)](#)

¹⁴ M.B. Mansour. (20 November 2020). '*\$427bn lost to tax havens every year: landmark study reveals countries' losses and worst offenders*'. Tax Justice Network. Retrieved 24 March 2023, from <https://taxjustice.net/2020/11/20/427bn-lost-to-tax-havens-every-year-landmark-study-reveals-countries-losses-and-worst-offenders/>

¹⁵ See [Glossary](#)

¹⁶ See [Glossary](#)

¹⁷ See [Glossary](#)

¹⁸ K.S. Amanor. (2005). 'Night Harvesters, Forest Hooded and Saboteurs: Struggles over land and expropriation in Ghana' in S. Moyo and P. Yero (eds.). *Reclaiming the Land: The resurgence of rural movements in Africa, Asia and Latin America* (pp. 102–117). London: Zed Books.

¹⁹ M. Lugones. (2020). 'Toward a Decolonial Feminism'. *Hypatia*, 25(4), 742–59.

²⁰ Oxfam. (2020). *Feminist Principles*. Retrieved 8 June 2023, from <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/feminist-principles-621064/>

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