**Intergovernmental Working Group on the Effective Implementation of the Durban**

**Declaration and Programme of Action (16th Session)**

**Consideration of the elaboration of a draft United Nations Declaration on the**

**promotion and full respect of human rights of people of African descent**

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**Introduction**

Thank you for the opportunity to join this esteemed panel and for allowing me the opportunity to share why a Declaration for People of African Descent is so critical - especially in the political moment we find ourselves in here, and around the world.

I am a co-founder of an organization in the United States called Blackbird and a leader within the Movement for Black Lives, a united front that includes a hundred organizations across the country who are collectively rooted in a common vision and agenda centered on achieving true justice, real democracy and lasting freedom for people of African descent in the U.S. In 2015, the Movement for Black Lives released a national platform, Vision For Black Lives, Policy Demands for Black Power, Freedom & Justice.[[1]](#footnote-1)

My remarks today will cover why a Declaration for People of African Descent is important as a framework for the international community, and the United Nations in particular, as well as why our world, with all it’s changes and all of the suffering that will ensue as a result - need acts of moral courage and an international community committed to providing the tools necessary to protect the rights of our world’s most vulnerable. No one can deny that people of African descent are among them.

**Why A Declaration for People of African Descent**

While there have been important strides made in order for existing instruments and mechanisms to speak to the needs of people of African descent — an example being ICERD’s recommendation 34 — what remains true is that existing instruments, mechanisms and frameworks are not sufficient and do not make all the necessary distinctions that are required when addressing the human rights of people of African descent. This is not merely an issue of implementation of existing mechanisms and frameworks; rather, we must interrogate whether or not what currently exists is adequately applied to people of African Descent. People of African descent are a distinct group whose rights’ must be protected, respected and restored in a manner that honors that distinction. Therefore a Declaration born out of a meaningful, rigorous and honest dialogue with civil society is both essential and a moral imperative.

ICERD through provisions like recommendation 34 and statements of recognition, justice and development for people of African descent made by the Durban Declaration and Program of Action are important efforts from which the international community have recognized that people of African descent experience a particular type of discrimination, racism and xenophobia. We have an important opportunity to use these as building blocks and create something that is even richer, more comprehensive and born out of a process that will help ensure it’s impact. I believe this can happen by examining existing rights and identifying how those rights can be adequately applied to people of African descent. Relying solely on what we currently have will not suffice; it will continue the long tradition of not adequately meeting the needs and addressing the suffering of those who are on the frontlines of poverty, state repression, violence and inequality. A Declaration can help to fill this void and meet this need.

I believe a Declaration can be a tool used by civil society to sharpen advocacy efforts, call for accountability at various levels of government (at the national level) and put in place protections for people of African descent. Frameworks born out of U.N. mechanisms have for years provided a body of standards for how to protect and respect the rights of human beings and has created avenues to hold states/governments accountable. Where there is no jurisdiction and where state’s have not ratified or acknowledged specific treaties or frameworks, we have seen social movements use these frameworks and standards to not just help sharpen their advocacy, but we have seen ordinances and resolutions passed at the local level to increase protections of vulnerable groups. I believe that if a Declaration for People of African descent were created and a subsequent forum was established - many people of African descent, including Black people in the United States, would be able to use it as a way to pass needed ordinances and resolutions at the local level. As the violence inflicted on Black People in the U.S. becomes more visible to the world, many are realizing just how much our communities are either caged in a life of poverty or one behind prison bars. This threat to our community and our people continues to intensify under a federal government that through both rhetoric and actual policy articulates an unwillingness to value Black life. A Declaration for Black people in the U.S. can provide an opportunity for civil society and our social movements to make possible at the local level, what is at the moment not possible to make happen at the federal level. This can in turn help us to mitigate harm, experiment with alternatives — which are under the threat of austerity measures — and hold our local governments accountable for respecting and protecting the rights of our communities.

**Current Global Political Climate**

From the election of Donald Trump, to Brexit, to the rise of far right hyper-nationalism across Europe and the increased use of force and aggression in various parts of the world - we have unwillingly entered into a moment that many have described as a *tightening of the grip globally.* For this reason, as well as a myriad of others, it is critical that the international community — through the United Nations, take bold, unwavering positions to demonstrate its commitment to protect the world’s most vulnerable and the planet they need to survive. People of African descent are and will continue to be a population that is hit particularly hard by shifting political conditions around the world, and will require special measures to ensure that our rights are protected.

As we see an intensification of conservatism and wealth accumulation around the world amongst a small few, we have also seen governments take measures that intensify the criminalization of poverty, dissent and social movements. For People of African descent we are facing the most extreme of these processes and our children will likely inherit a world that surveilles their activity, polices their communities, incarcerates many from their families, and denies basic rights through austerity measures and a rejection of self-determination. Decisions made by those in positions of great power around the world have and will worsen the environment, escalate climate change, force migration, deepen economic instability, diminish the rights of workers, worsen conditions for the rural and the poor and increase the level of threat and harms for many of the world’s people. People of African descent will be amongst the most to suffer directly from these shifts, and for that reason: we need strong measures taken by the United Nations to protect people of African descent.

Speaking specifically of climate change, the **Sustainable Development Goals** and the U.S.G.s recent withdrawal from Paris Agreements talks signifies that the wellbeing of people of African decent and our African family still on the continent and/or migrating for survival have never been more threatened. According to the Report of the Secretary-General, *Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals[[2]](#footnote-2),* the World Meteorological Organization states that the planet will continue to increase in temperature, setting a new record of 1.1 degrees Centigrade above the preindustrial period. Around the world from Cape Town, S.A. to California, U.S. drought conditions are persisting, global sea ice has fallen to the second lowest extent in history and carbon dioxide in our atmosphere has and continues to reach record highs. Millions of people are affected around the world, whether because of natural disasters (which took the lives of 1.6 million people from 1990 to 2015) or an inability to protect agriculture, many more will continue to suffer and lives will be lost. Many of these people are and will be people of African descent. We need a Declaration that acknowledges that reality and will include special measures that take into account how to use existing frameworks in away to better protect the rights of people of African descent who are suffering disproportionately from natural disasters, failing infrastructure and additional harms produced by rising temperatures.[[3]](#footnote-3)

As what has been made clear from recent reports including Oxfam’s latest report which was published ahead of the World Economic Forum which was held not too far from here in Davos, Switzerland[[4]](#footnote-4) earlier this year - 4 billion people who make up the world’s poorest saw no increase or substantial change in their wealth while the vast majority of wealth accumulated last year went to the world’s one percent. A significant amount of the poor in our world are people of African descent. Our communities continue to be one of the hardest hit by economic inequality and economic systems that privilege the few and destroy the lives of many. We need a Declaration that can make clear how we can apply existing frameworks and mechanisms to protect the economic rights of people of African descent globally.

With the various changes happening in our world and a consistent tendency to prioritize profit and property over people and the planet, people of African descent are in need of a declaration that can be a blueprint for how the international community can protect our rights while also providing tools for us to achieve transformative change so that we can move from a conversation of surviving to one of thriving.

**Conclusion**

As I close, I want to ensure the following points are clear. 1) We, civil society representing organizations and people of African Descent around the world want and need a Declaration for people of African Descent and are ready and willing to organize people globally around not only the Decade by the Declaration. 2) We want a Declaration before the end of the Decade. We have learned from those who took part in the creation of the Declaration for Indigenous People that putting efforts towards a Declaration does not mean we redirect focus from the decade, it means we have committed to a clear outcome for it. 3) We need support and resources in order to support civil society engagement in the process. We urge those who will meet in the weeks to come to consider a U.N. Voluntary Fund for People of African Descent where by states as well as other private and public entities can donate to ensuring that People of African descent can take part in this process. 4) Lastly, we believe that there are a significant number of rights, frameworks and mechanisms that exist from DDPA, to ICERD, to ICCPR to IESCR and we believe we do not just need these mechanisms and frameworks to be better implemented in order to meet the needs of people of African Descent. Based on observations through the years, it is clear that we need a Declaration that takes from all of what already exists and creates a blueprint to how they must be applied when it comes to our communities across the Diaspora.

We have before us a historic opportunity to demonstrate a commitment to some of the world's most marginalized people in a time where our lives have never been more vulnerable. This Declaration is not just necessary for those of us of African descent living now, but for future generations of people of African descent. This Declaration if agreed to and strong can lay the necessary groundwork for those coming after us to defend themselves as they navigate a world very different than the one that currently exists.

Thank you chairperson for the time.

1. https://policy.m4bl.org/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.un.org/development/desa/publications/the-sustainable-development-goals-report-2018.html [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg13 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.oxfam.org/en/pressroom/pressreleases/2018-01-22/richest-1-percent-bagged-82-percent-wealth-created-last-year> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)