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Pedagogies of Inclusion: A redefinition of curriculum for the Recognition of People of African Descent

Distinguished ladies and gentleman

Colleagues,

Friends,

Pleasant good morning.

The most important outcome from the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (held in Durban, South Africa, in 2001), was the Durban Declaration and Program of Action (DDPA). The Program of Action outlined the source and contemporary consequences of racism; it defined the victims of racism; and, more importantly, it laid out strategies to achieve racial equality.

The Declaration acknowledged *“slavery and the slave trade, including the transatlantic slave trade, [as] appalling tragedies in the history of humanity, not only because of their abhorrent barbarism but also in terms of their magnitude, organized nature and especially their negation of the essence of the victims.”*…

It further acknowledged “*Slavery and the slave trade [as] crime against humanity and should always have been so, especially the transatlantic slave trade ...”* and that “... *these crimes are among the major sources and manifestations of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, and ... Africans and people of African descent, Asians and people of Asian descent and indigenous peoples were victims of these acts and continue to be victims of their consequences.”*

Facing or even accepting these difficult truths is “always hard, especially if they have been ignored, willed away or relegated to an historical backwater.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Catherine Hall, in a recent article in England’s Guardian Newspaper, stated “…Forgetting the violence, pain and shame that is an inevitable part of any country’s historical record is a crucial aspect of a nation’s history.….Forgetting Britain’s role in the slave trade began as soon as the trade was abolished in 1807”. This, she said, was done ‘deliberately by occluding the archival record’. “The disavowal of the past is an active process”, Hall said. [[2]](#footnote-2) Federico Mayor, then Director General of UNESCO, stated at the launch of UNESCO’s Slave Routes Project in 1994 that the TTA has ‘been passed over in silence”. He defines silence as “**the failure to acknowledge the specific character of the slave trade.**”[[3]](#footnote-3)

The silence that surrounds the trade therefore either suggests it is too painful to remember or was accorded little or no significance. Either case a denial of its existence and impact is not an appropriate response nor is the highly selective narrative which continues to deny people of African descent the recognition they deserve.

This was an acknowledgement of the lingering impact slavery and colonialism have had on people of African descent. For over 400 years, laws classified Africans and their descendants as non-human, chattel, property, and real estate. Subsequently, millions of Africans lost the basic human right to their legal identity and as such remained invisible in laws, legislation and policies. By extension, they were denied recognition and subjected to the ideology of racism that demonized and denigrated all things African. The cumulative result is that racial inequality, systemic discrimination and invisibility, remain a debilitating challenge in many countries.

The Durban Conference was a significant achievement in comprehensively outlining a strategy to address historical wrongs, injustices, and their current manifestations. This strategy is embodied in the Declaration which reasserted the principles of equality and non-discrimination as core human rights, and assigned primary responsibility to States, as duty bearers, for combating racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance while also calling for the active involvement of international and non-governmental organizations, political parties, national human rights institutions, the private sector, the media and civil society in the process.

As a mechanism to address discrimination in all its manifestations, the Declaration called upon States to develop comprehensive National Action Plans to tackle racism including through reinforcing national institutions, legislation, the administration of justice, as well as by creating competent national bodies to adequately investigate allegations of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance.

In an acknowledgment of the realities of racism, systemic discrimination and invisibility faced by People of African Descent, the international community declared the promotion and protection of the human rights of People of African Descent to be a matter of prioritized concern. Specifically, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed January 1, 2015 to December 31, 2024 to be commemorated as the International Decade for People of African Descent.[[4]](#footnote-4) The Program of Activities for the Decade outlines several impact-oriented actions for States to undertake in three areas – recognition, justice and development – to improve the overall human rights situation of People of African Descent around the world.

In order to attain results from actions taken to ensure **recognition** for People of African Descent, States are called upon to *“promote full and accurate inclusion of the history and contribution of people of African descent in educational curricula.”* Additionally, States must ensure *“that textbooks and other educational materials reflect historical facts accurately as they relate to past tragedies and atrocities, in particular slavery, the slave trade, the transatlantic slave trade and colonialism, so as to avoid stereotypes and the distortion or falsification of these historic facts, which may lead to racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance”*.

In keeping with the broad theme of the Decade, and its clearly articulated aim of bringing recognition to People of African Descent, I hereby remind Member States and members of civil society represented here of the tremendous responsibility that you each bear in ensuring that future generations live in a world free of the scourge of racial discrimination and its manifestation. Achieving this objective is paramount to securing peace and justice. I further urge Member States to follow the enlightened path taken by Brazil in 2003 when it implemented Law 10.639, known widely as "guidelines for national curriculum for teaching ethno-racial relations and Afro-Brazilian and African history and culture." The purpose of Law 10.639 is to promote knowledge of Africa, and the recognition and appreciation of Afro-Brazilian and indigenous identity, culture and history within the Brazilian education curriculum.

1. **Make History Mandatory in Curricula**

As an educator, I have increasingly witnessed a concentrated focus and an earmarking of investments to improve “how” we teach. What is rarely considered or reevaluated, however, is “what” we teach. Subsequently, the first strategy I put forward is **the mandatory teaching of history that is culturally relevant and responsive to the experiences of People of African Descent**. This, however, is not new, as many scholars have been advocating for such pedagogy to be central in curricula at all levels of the education system globally. Today, I renew this call.

As part of preparing for this talk, my research led to noteworthy data from the Caribbean, which I will use to substantiate this point going forward. I will draw on statistics from the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC), which administers the Caribbean Secondary Examination Certificate (CSEC) and the Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examination (CAPE). In 2013, 28,428 Jamaican students sat Unit 1 of the Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examination, but only 3% of that number (or 968 students) sat Caribbean History. Results from Unit 2 of the same exam did not fare any better in that of the 12,710 students sitting, only 597, or a mere 4.59%, of them sat Caribbean History. At the regional level, the estimates were equally unimpressive with only about 6% of students taking Caribbean History at the Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examination level.

This disheartening statistic can be attributed to the absence of history as a mandatory course of study for all students irrespective of their declared major. Not making history mandatory has far-reaching implications for cultural, social and community empowerment and national development. In other words, the school system is shaping leaders, politicians, academicians, lawyers, teachers, policy makers and citizens who do not have a comprehensive knowledge of the rich heritage which places them at the center of their own history, and thereby lacking the competencies to work and live in ways that reinforce their own historical experiences.

1. **Implement Afro-centric Pedagogy**

In 2016, more than 60 years since the anti-colonialist movements led to the independence of former colonies, colonial-based education materials and perspectives continue to influence the societies of People of African Descent, and are being reinforced through visible aspects of globalization such as the internet and cable television. One experience that strongly reinforces this reality and which continues to amaze me is this – when the Africa Cup of Nations is being played, it is not aired live on any television station in any of the Caribbean countries. On the contrary, since my early teens, I was able to watch the English FA Cup live on national television in Jamaica. Many in our society still believe that Africa is backward, and as such continue to distance themselves from Africa and all things African. This is further reinforced by the constant bombardment of negative images of Africa proliferated through the internet and cable television.

The history syllabus used at the advanced and university level in the Caribbean is still taught through textbooks that contain racial biases, sexism, and Eurocentricity.[[5]](#footnote-5) In Lowell Ragatz’s widely used text in Caribbean history courses, *The Fall of the Planter Class*, readers are confronted with the claim that: *“The West Indian Negro had all the characteristics of his race. He stole, he lied, he was simple, suspicious, inefficient, irresponsible, lazy, superstitious and loose in his sexual relations*.”

The imperative today is to identify and use strategies to counter such texts. How do we counter publications like the children’s book, *A Birthday Cake for George Washington,* where the enslaved Africans of George Washington are depicted as “happy and joyful”?

How do we counter publications like McGraw-Hill’s *World Geography* text where the brutality of enslavement is sanitized so that enslaved Africans are referred to as “workers”?

How do we counter publications like *Creative English* *Caribbean Primary Schools: Level 2*  which promotes a European and Eurocentric standard of beauty to children at an impressionnable stage of their development. The text states: *“Nita has brown eyes and neatly trimmed eyelashes. Her hair is long and black and is always neatly combed. A round face with slender nose and brown complexion make her pretty and likable.”*

I bring to your attention to the need for an **Afro-centric pedagogy**. The need for an Afrocentric pedagogy and educational materials is primarily to ensure that the history of People of African Descent is preserved. Borrowing from the work of Molefi Asante, Afrocentricity studies ideas, concepts, events, personalities, and political and economic processes from a standpoint of black people as subjects. Therefore, Africans, and people of African ancestry should be viewed as agents and actors in human history, rather than bystanders on the margins/periphery of civilization.

If we are to achieve the goals of the Durban Programme of Action and the Decade; and if we are to adhere to the principles of the 2030 Development Agenda of universality and leaving no one behind, then every effort must be made to ensure cultural relevance is part of Sustainable Development Goal 4 – inclusive and equitable quality education for all. We therefore cannot continue to nurture generations that remain ignorant of the traditions and culture of Africa and equally ignorant of the global impact Africans and people of African ancestry have made on civilization.

So, while making history mandatory is vitally important, we must ensure that the content is aligned with indigenous knowledge. The textbooks must contain the information, for example, that Africans were human rights activists and among the first to resist enslavement. Empowering accounts of activism and anti-slavery ideology should be part of curricula. Enslaved people resisted oppression at every step of the way on the road to emancipation: from the moment they were captured, to their long march to the coast, and while housed in holding forts or barracoons. They resisted while crossing the Atlantic. In fact, many chose to take their lives as an act of resistance rather than allow themselves to be subjugated to the brutality associated with their enslavement.

Think for a minute of the potential impact this can have on young girls growing up in the diaspora. Think what this can do to the psyche of people of African descent in their quest for justice and social equality. Think of how empowering this could be.

People of African Descent worldwide will continue to face systemic discrimination and invisibility if our history and contributions to the development of modern civilization is not properly documented and made known to all concerned. People of African Descent will not gain recognition if States and civil society actors continue to nurture education systems which teach that certain groups did not have as large a role as others, and in some cases completely non-existent and by extension irrelevant, in history.

If we are to truly move toward making black lives matter, let us begin today to give serious meaning to the Decade. Together we can, together we must leave no one behind.

I thank you.

1. Baroness Howells of St Davids (British House of Lords Debate on the Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 10 May 2007) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Catherine Hall, ‘Britain’s massive debt to slavery’. *Guardian*, Tuesday February 26, 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Federico Mayor, Director-General, UNESCO, Conference to launch the ‘Slave Route’ project, Ouidah (Benin), 1 September 1994 DG/94/26. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. A/Res/68/237. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See William Green *British Slave Colonies and the Great Experiment, 1830-1865, Oxford University Press, 1991*) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)