

**INTERNATIONAL DECADE FOR  
PEOPLE OF AFRICAN DESCENT**  
— 2015 ▶ 2024 —  
**RECOGNITION · JUSTICE · DEVELOPMENT**



# VOICES OF THE DECADE

FELLOWSHIP PROGRAMME FOR  
PEOPLE OF AFRICAN DESCENT

2011 - 2019





# CONTENTS

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- 4 **Introduction**
- 5 **Fellows of African descent in the world**
- 6 **A story from Panama** - Urenna Best Gayle
- 7 **A story from Barbados** - Chereda Grannum
- 8 **A story from Guyana** - Melissa Warswyk
- 9 **How has the fellowship impacted fellows' lives?**
- 10 **What do fellows do today?**
- 11 **A story from Costa Rica** - Laura Hall
- 12 **A story from Brazil** - Ana Barreto
- 13 **A story from Ireland** - Salome Mbugua
- 14 **A story from France** - Steve Irakoze
- 15 **Building networks across the world**
- 16 **A story from Germany** - Elizabeth Kaneza
- 17 **A story from Spain** - Isabelle Mamadou
- 18 **A story from Canada** - Vanessa Fells
- 19 **A story from Australia** - Pheobe Mwanza



The 2018 fellows of African descent joining hands together in the streets of Geneva, Switzerland

# INTRODUCTION

*“Racism violates everything we stand for and everything we do. And all of us have a responsibility to fight it”* Michele Bachelet, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights<sup>1</sup>

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In 2020, the international community marks the midterm of the United Nations International Decade for People of African Descent 2015-2020 (IDPAD), another footstep on the road towards a world free from racism. The IDPAD builds upon the 2011 Durban Declaration and Programme of Action and the International Year for People of African Descent in 2011, which have given momentum for further political commitment to the eradication of racism and discrimination against people of African descent.

Acknowledging that people of African descent continue to suffer the consequences of the trade in enslaved Africans and colonialism, the General Assembly of the United Nations proclaimed the IDPAD calling for recognition, justice and development for people of African descent across the world.

The Decade is a unique platform to emphasise the important contribution made by people of African descent to every society. And, its programme of activities provides a comprehensive roadmap and concrete measures to combat racism and racial discrimination and to promote the full inclusion of people of African descent in all parts of society. As the coordinator of the IDPAD, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and its Office (OHCHR) work towards the full and effective implementation of the important

objectives set for this Decade.

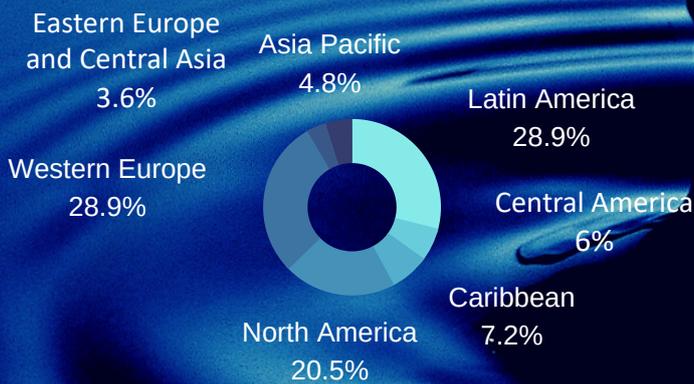
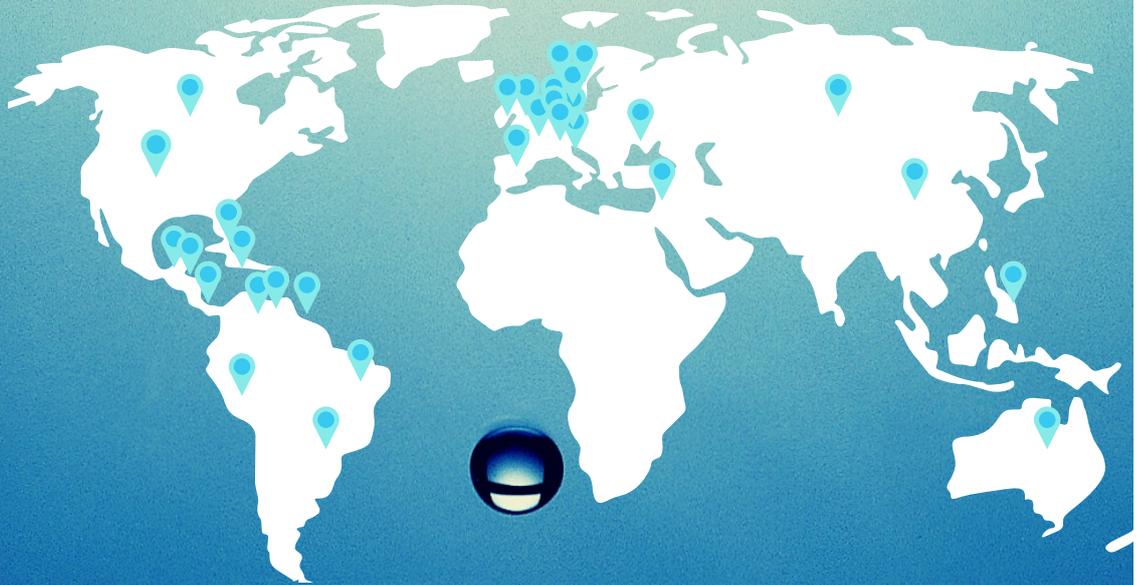
The Fellowship programme for people of African descent was created in 2011 by OHCHR to accompany and support these efforts. Since 2015, it is an integral part of the programme of activities of the IDPAD. The Fellowship programme is an intensive human rights training designed for people of African descent from the diaspora, who are engaged in promoting the rights of people of African descent. The aim is to strengthen and build the capacities of the participants to contribute to the protection and promotion of the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights of people of African descent in their respective countries.

It takes place every year at OHCHR's headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland. During three weeks, participants are equipped with the tools necessary to engage with the United Nations human rights system and to enhance the development of legislation, policies and programmes, to strengthen collaboration of civil society with governments and to undertake local awareness-raising activities.

The Fellowship programme has been instrumental in building up a global constituency to support and promote the implementation of the IDPAD. Since 2011, more than 80 fellows from 31 different countries have participated in the programme. Former fellows have made significant contributions to promote the Decade in their respective countries and engaged with United Nations mechanisms on issues related to racism and racial discrimination.

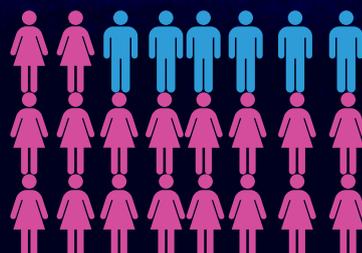
While the international community is conducting the midterm review of the IDPAD, *Voices of the Decade* features 11 stories of fellows of African descent, providing a snapshot of the important and inspiring work achieved to promote the human rights of people of African descent throughout the world. *Voices of the Decade* is a call, and a source of inspiration, for everyone to work together towards recognition, justice and development for people of African descent.

# FELLOWS OF AFRICAN DESCENT IN THE WORLD



**83**

Fellows of African descent since 2011



# URENNA BEST GAYLE

PANAMA, 2013



Since 2017, Urenna is the Director-General of the National Secretary for the Development of Afro-Panamas (SENADAP)



I was born in Colon, Panama, and since birth, I have a close relationship with Africa. My parents decided to give me two African names, both names from the Igbo culture. From my childhood, I was educated to love African culture and heritage through singing, gastronomy and everything related to the contributions of people of African descent in the construction of our societies.

My greatest inspiration comes from my mother, Elvia Gayle Best, who has fought all her life for the rights of the people of Colon, one of the cities with the largest population of African descent in Central America. Despite its rich resources, Colon is one of the provinces with the highest rates of poverty and inequality. That same poverty and lack of opportunities that forced my mother to sell food on the streets to raise and educate her children. This experience has marked me for life and nourished my determination to become a lawyer and political scientist and to pursue my Master's studies in Spain.

During my life, I had the chance to learn

from people who showed me different forms of leadership such as Mario Parnter, Cecilia Moreno, Egbert Wetherborne, Celeo Alvarez, Epsy Campbell, Romero Rodriguez, Gerardo Maloney, Mauricio Tolosa and others. My personal engagement started when I joined, along with Roberto Rojas Davila, Thais Zimbwe and other leaders, an initiative to articulate international networks that strengthen the youth-level leadership in all the Americas. Through this experience, I started to deliver training and build collaborations in more than twenty countries around the world.

I learnt about the Fellowship programme for people of African Descent while I was working as consultant for the Regional Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and had the chance to participate in the programme in 2013. My experience in the Fellowship programme has helped me grow personally and professionally. More importantly, it has allowed me to connect with professionals of African descendant around the world, who had similar visions and who continue working and

articulating actions in activism for people of African descent.

From that experience, I became a lecturer and started to deliver training and seminars to multiple international organizations. Since 2017, I am the Director-General of the National Secretary for the Development of Afro-Panamas (Secretaría Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Afropanameños, SENADAP) and, in 2019, I was selected as Government Expert of the San Salvador Protocol. I have been recognized and rewarded for my work, including through the Luiza Mahim Award in Youth and International Leadership (Sao Paulo, Brazil) and the Pioneer Award of the Afrolatino Festival (New York, United-States). I was also selected by Apolitical among the World's 100 Future Most Influential Young Leaders in government.

My greatest aspiration is to continue to contribute to the transformation of our societies into better places and ensuring social justice and equal opportunities for all, without any discrimination.



Chereda works in the Office of the Prime Minister of Barbados towards forging strong and mutually beneficial relationships with the African continent.

# CHEREDA GRANNUM

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**BARBADOS, 2016**

I was born and raised in Barbados. The last of four children for my mother and last of seven for my father, no great means to speak of but wanting for nothing. As I got older and more socially aware, I developed an ever-increasing interest in Caribbean history and the lingering impact of the experiences of Trans-Atlantic slavery and colonialism. I was able to recognise and appreciate privileges like having leaders and people in positions of power all around me who looked like me, sounded like me, came from similar backgrounds as me. I grew to understand the importance of representation and the symbolism of possibility, because simply put, if they could, then I could. This mattered, especially in a world where even today many people of African descent make up some of the poorest and most marginalised groups.

I became more curious and started asking questions that most people couldn't answer... Questions about race, class and identity. Questions about equality and social justice. Questions about what ought to be. I pursued my

studies in African and African Diaspora Studies in Jamaica and later returned to Barbados to work with the Commission for Pan-African Affairs, where I honed my skills and deepened my passion for the advancement of human rights, equality, justice and tolerance.

Fast-forward to 2016, I had successfully applied to the Fellowship programme for people of African descent, and joined 10 other fellows, incidentally all young black women. We were a sight to behold walking confidently through the streets of Geneva. We were fully aware of the fact that we each had earned our spot ahead of many other hundreds of well-qualified and accomplished human rights experts, policy makers and advocates around the globe. The fellowship programme was intense and the demands were many, but we left enriched with training, contacts and resources to carry on in defence of the rights of people of African descent.

I am now working in the Prime Minister's Office, emboldened and inspired by the leadership, actions and policies of an eminently qualified and accomplished woman of African Descent. My work contributes to programmes and policies that recognise the importance of forging strong and mutually beneficial relationships between the people of the Barbados and the wider Caribbean and the African continent. We are "reclaiming our Atlantic destiny", with Barbados about to open diplomatic offices in Accra, Ghana. Both countries have implemented mutual visa waivers and are negotiating a number of bilateral agreements, including for direct air services.

But while we celebrate the successes, I want us to remember the need to constantly demand more of ourselves, our peers and our leadership. The few precious gains we have fought so hard to secure are always under threat of reversal. Much has been accomplished, but so much more remains to be done. So at this mid-way point of the International Decade for People of African Descent, I am both optimistic and discontented. Cheers to more!

# MELISSA VARSWYK

GUYANA, 2017



In medical school the question so often asked was “why do you want to become a doctor?” The obvious answer given was “I want to help people.” For me, it was always a story to tell. Dating back to June of 1994, I watched the Rwanda crisis unfold on CNN with compassionate UN doctors providing aid to victims of the tribal war. I remember feeling how unfair life was to those victims and I wanted to be in a position to help. This experience was more than a call to save lives, it gave birth to my passion to just make lives better. And to investigate the pathology of the crisis facing people of African descent worldwide.

Growing up in a multi-racial community and being of African descent meant having to work ten times harder to achieve goals. At University, I had to fight for grades I deserved when professors used unfair grading systems to favor a specific group of students. As a young adult, I was introduced to some of the most profound human rights challenges faced by people of African descent worldwide. At this stage, I understood the need for a global collaborative effort to address these issues.

As a Fellow of African descent in 2017, I was given the opportunity to learn about the pathways available for civil society in exploring United Nations human rights systems and mechanisms. In addition, I was given an insight into the work being done by other fellows worldwide to overcome the challenges faced. I used this wealth of knowledge to successfully organize the first International Decade for People of African Descent Summit (IDPAD Summit) in Guyana, which attracted participants from over twenty countries. The aim of the summit was to audit “where we are, where we ought to be and how do we get there by 2024 and beyond.” The Summit produced several institutes, such as the Institute of Health that is currently working on creating a database of non-communicable disease data, the Institute of Business that has worked towards lobbying for visa wavering for nations with diaspora Africans to visit countries like Ghana.

As I reflect on the first half of the International Decade for People of African descent, I am proud of the achievements made in Guyana to recognize the Decade. Guyana is one of the few countries where the government recognized and funded an IDPAD Assembly. Nevertheless, I believe more is needed to achieve the goals of the Decade worldwide. It is my hope that more transformative changes can be made moving forward. I look forward to organizing another IDPAD Summit to audit these transformative changes achieved by grassroots organizations worldwide and to continue lobbying to improve the lives of people of African descent.

Upon her return from the Fellowship programme, Melissa organised the first IDPAD Summit in Guyana

# How has the Fellowship impacted Fellows' lives?

*"All the skills acquired during the fellowship were essential to my further professional development"*

*"I became a resource person for the human rights defenders who are not aware of the UN human rights mechanisms in my country"*

*"The Fellowship provided me with the tools and enhanced my commitment to advocate and work towards equality and justice for African-Americans"*

*"Enacting and promoting human rights is now embedded in everything I do professionally."*

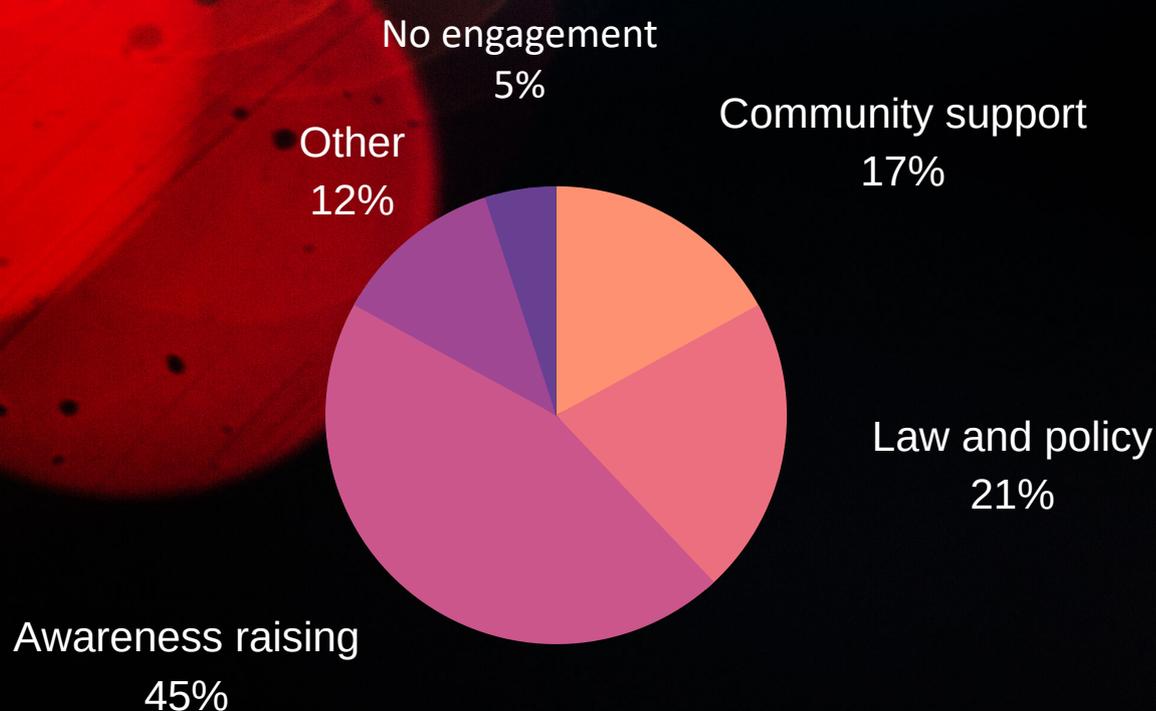


Source: The 2019 survey of former Fellows for the review of the Fellowship programme for people of African descent (with a response rate of 60%).

# What are Fellows of African descent doing ?

## More than 90%

of the former fellows work to promote the rights of people of African descent by supporting **communities**, lobbying for new **laws and policies**, **raising awareness** and by other means.



Source: The 2019 survey of former Fellows for the review of the Fellowship programme for people of African descent (with a response rate of 60%)



Laura is the Vice-President of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) Branch 300 Limon in Costa Rica

# LAURA HALL

## COSTA RICA, 2013



I remember being immersed in advocacy for peoples' right since my early childhood. Both my parents dedicated their careers to the protection of children, women empowerment and to providing assistance to refugees from Latin America and the Caribbean in Costa Rica. They were also co-founders of grassroots ethnic and cultural organizations and Afro-Caribbean study organizations, through which they worked towards creating safe spaces for identity discussion and improving the conditions for people of African descent in the community and for those who migrated from the Caribbean coast to the Metropolitan area. On weekends, we would attend activities where I was immersed in diverse groups of people with different backgrounds.

My first formal and conscious involvement in right issues faced by people of African descent was in 1998, when I decided to co-produce a weekly radio broadcast "Diaspora: An Encounter with the Afro Costa Rican Culture" as part of the Caribbean Project Association (Asociacion Proyecto Caribe). This radio broadcast has been

dedicated to shed light on oral tradition tales, music roots, history, covenants on African descent rights and news of the Afro Costa Rican population on national radio. This initiative was awarded the Central American Prize for its innovative approach, quality and the research delivered to the public. A year later, I cofounded and became chair of the Youth and Leadership Program of the Caribbean Project Association. I have also served as Vice-president for the Central American Black Organization between 2009 and 2014, a network of more than forty transborder Afro-descendant organizations and Caribbean universities from this region.

*"The Fellowship experience gave me the courage to stand for election in my country"*

I attended the Fellowship programme for people of African descent in 2013. This experience has been a true eye opening opportunity to understand better the dynamic of the United Nations and the human rights instruments that our countries have signed and ratified. It also gave me the necessary tools to improve the strategic impact of my initiatives and to obtain better and faster results when meeting decision-makers. I used the knowledge gained to train and raise awareness of public servants on international human rights obligations, as well as to teach youth and women about their cultural, political, social, economic and environmental rights.

The fellowship experience also gave me the courage to stand for election for the vice-presidency of my country in 2018. I used my personal experience with the Fellowship programme to bring hope to the youth, showing that it is possible and necessary to dare changing the reality in which we live. Currently, I am the Vice-President of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) Branch 300 in Port Limon, Costa Rica. I continue to produce and broadcast our radio programme, with a new additional focus on teaching human rights.

For the near future, I wish to see more youth and women of African descent getting involved in high decision-making positions because no one should be left behind.

# ANA BARRETO

BRAZIL/USA, 2018



Currently Program Director at AfroResistance, Ana works towards addressing the multiple barriers face by women and girls of African descent to the enjoyment of their human rights in the Americas.

I am an Afro-Brazilian woman from Jardim Angela, a low-income neighborhood in Sao Paulo considered the most dangerous place in the world in 1996 by the United Nations. Growing up I realized the structural violence and human rights violations faced by my community and communities like mine, and the lack of our right to live with dignity. This led me to become a leader addressing education and health issues. For the past 15 years, I have been working to strengthen the connections between the lived-experiences and voices of people of African descent and international decision-making spaces. In 2015, I co-founded Project 111 (projeto 111) to investigate how the media reports on Afro-Brazilians murdered by police in Brazil. This project, which works to promote justice and to humanize victims of police brutality in the country, taught me that state violence and structural racism and exclusion should be viewed as important factors in health analysis.

In 2018, I achieved one of my professional goals: to be a United Nations Fellow. The Fellowship programme for people of African descent was a key opportunity to learn how to use the international human rights system and to create the local and international

connections necessary to promote structural changes, promoting a collective understanding of the different realities faced by people of African descent around the world and creating networks with global impact.

After the fellowship, I united my experience on inequalities, racial discrimination, popular education, reproductive rights with international affairs analyses. I visited different places in the world to hear from communities about their realities on access to health services and started to develop a new community knowledge-based approach to health projects. For years, I heard stories from marginalized women and girls of African descent about the multiple barriers they face to access health services. However, the complexities of these experiences are rarely reflected in the measurement tools of local, national and international health statistics or health policies aiming to improve the lives of women and girls.

I currently serve as Director of Programs at AfroResistance. There, I work on transformative projects that address the realities and challenges faced by women and girls of African, and promote structural changes by centering

those realities in public policies. I am also one of the founders of Kilomba, the first collective of Black Brazilians in the United States whose goal is to promote and center Afro-Brazilian perspectives in the discussion of Brazilian issues in international spaces. This contributes to my mission to strengthen international solidarity of African descent communities in the Americas.

Building on this experience, I want to be a leader in shaping a world where an afro-epistemological approach to health will reflect local needs and improve the health outcomes of marginalized communities, achieving the fulfillment of all our human rights and our full humanization.

*“The COVID-19 global pandemic taught me that state violence and structural racism and exclusion should be viewed as important factors in health analysis”*

Salome is the first woman of African descent to serve as Commissioner at the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission

# SALOME MBUGUA

IRELAND, 2015

I was born and raised in Kenya where I learned and became aware at an early age of the richness of the African continent, including its natural resources, minerals and agriculture, thanks to education. I left Kenya for Ireland in 1994 for study. Unfortunately, it was during this period while abroad that I became aware of racism and discrimination through my own experience. I was victim of racial attack and abuse in the street of Dublin. These experiences led me to mobilise African women to meet and share their experiences of living in Ireland. After a series of regular meetings, we decided to create Akina Dada wa Africa (AkiDwa), the first African women's network in Ireland, with the aim to challenge racism and discrimination and to give African women a platform to speak for themselves.

The Fellowship programme for people of African descent offered me the opportunity to learn more about the human right framework and instruments. For the first time, I attended live sessions of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) at Palais des Nations (Geneva) where several



countries were presenting periodic reports under the International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. This, in addition to the inputs provided by OHCHR staff, contributed to my in-depth understanding of the human rights framework and key international instruments and initiatives, such as the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action and the International Decade for People of African Descent (IDPAD).

The wealth of knowledge and experience that I gained during the Fellowship programme has shaped my career and informed my engagement. It has added value to my work and nourished my interaction with policy makers and the wider community. Since I participated in the Fellowship programme in 2015, I have undertaken three pieces of research with the aim to build evidence for the discriminations faced by people of African descent in Ireland. I have later used the outcome of this research to lobby for support for people of African descent in Ireland. I have also served as Champion and Ambassador for the Africa Day and as Chair of the Working Group mandated to develop the Third National Action Plan on women peace

and security. In May 2018, I was appointed as one of the fifteen members of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission by the President of Ireland, making me the first African woman to serve as a Commissioner in this country. In this capacity, I led the delegation presenting the report to CERD during the review of Ireland in December 2019.

*“All different, all equal”*

Since 2016, I have been lobbying the Irish government to adopt and launch the IDPAD. In 2019, the Department of Justice and Equality committed to support this process. Since then, I co-chair the steering committee for people of African descent in Ireland and we have recently received funding to deliver some of the activities. I am keen that Ireland launches the IDPAD and implements the programme of activities to achieve recognition, justice and development.

# STEVE IRAKOZE

FRANCE, 2018



My name is Steve B. Irakoze, a human rights activist based in Paris, France. I am committed to championing the rights of migrants and refugees because I myself experienced exile and uprooting: I left Burundi when I was 18. After finding sanctuary in France, I began helping LGBTQ asylum seekers with a community centre while studying law and political science. In 2011, I volunteered in refugee camps in Calais. These experiences shaped my desire to work for the benefit of uprooted people.

The Fellowship programme for people of African descent remains one of my greatest professional and human experiences to date. Beyond the acquired knowledge on the United Nations human rights system and the networking opportunities with committed staff of the OHCHR, I was fortunate enough to meet the other 2018 Fellows - extraordinary people whom I would not have been able to meet otherwise. They share my convictions and I commend their fights, each in his and her field, to uphold people of African descent's rights all over the world.

My participation in the Fellowship programme certainly played a part in advancing my professional career. Selected when I was a legal advisor in a detention centre for migrants, I am now in charge of a national program on human rights and return policies. I was also able to share the knowledge acquired in Geneva with my French colleagues and volunteers, thus allowing my non-profit organization to interact with bodies of the United Nations by contributing to thematic reports to the General Assembly and the Human Rights Council, and mechanisms, in particular the Special Rapporteur on migrants, on trafficking and the Working Group of Experts on People African Descent, on behalf of migrants and refugees in France.

Moving forward, I will keep championing migrants and refugees' rights through strategic legal work, advocacy and capacity building, aiming to achieve systemic change in migration and asylum policy at both national and international levels. My focus will be on defending unaccompanied migrant children and LGBTQ asylum seekers, the immigration admission on humanitarian grounds such as health condition, availability of legal aid to all migrants and refugees in the French justice system, as well as on issues related to acts of intimidation against migrants, refugees and human rights defenders.

At La Cimade, Steve provides information to refugees about their rights and give them the necessary tools to better understand and claim their rights in the French immigration and refugee system.

Elizabeth speaking at the opening of the Second Anniversary of the launch of the IDPAD for Germany (Frankfurt, 5 October 2018)

# ELIZABETH KANEZA

GERMANY, 2015



My motivation for applying to the Fellowship Programme for people of African descent goes back to my human rights activism and my personal experience as a black professional in public administration in Germany. Not only did I come to realise that people of African descent were underrepresented in public office, I also observed that this was due to structural discrimination and a general lack of their recognition. As a result, the experiences of people of African descent with racism and racial discrimination were not dealt with in the political realm. This was something I wanted to change.

The Fellowship programme was a milestone for my engagement. In addition to the 3-weeks of trainings, during which I deepened my knowledge on the international human rights system and the framework for protection of the human rights of people of African descent, I learned a lot from my co-Fellows. It was a very valuable exchange around our different experiences and the challenges that people of African descent face around the world. We

understood that while we came from different regions and countries, the experience with daily racism was something we all shared and something we were resolved to overcome for our communities. Following the Fellowship programme, I implemented various capacity building initiatives for activists of African descent across Germany. In 2017, I assisted the first country visit of the United Nations Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent to Germany.

*“The Fellowship Programme taught me that I can make a difference”*

The main achievements I advocated for at the national level were the national launch of the International Decade for People of African Descent and the recognition of people of African descent in the National Action Plan against Racism. In cooperation with other actors from civil society and Germany’s Equality Body, I organised the launch of the IDPAD on 7 June 2016 in the Federal Ministry of Families, Senior Citizens, Women and Youths. Finally, the recognition of people of African descent as victims of racism and racial

discrimination was achieved in 2017 when the Government adopted a new National Action Plan against Racism.

Currently, I am a doctorate candidate at Potsdam University. My engagement has inspired me to research the human rights situation of people of African descent and to make recommendations at political and legal levels. Moreover, I continue to implement activities for the promotion of human rights education through my organisation, the Kaneza Foundation for Dialogue and Empowerment. In 2018, we were granted the OHCHR IDPAD grant thanks to which we implemented human rights trainings for women and study tours for young people of African descent to empower them.

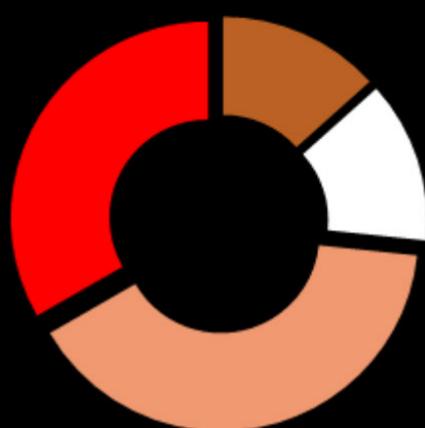
For the coming years, my goal is that we can achieve greater visibility and recognition for people of African descent in Germany. And personally, I will continue to educate people of African descent about their rights and demonstrate to them that they too can make a difference. This is the key lesson I took from the Fellowship programme.

Through the **alumni network**, fellows stay in touch after the Fellowship programme and develop joint initiatives

**The Fellowship is also about building networks...**

**2 out of 3** fellows maintain regular contacts with our Office

**More than half of them have engaged with UN human rights mechanisms**



■ Universal Periodic Review

■ Treaty bodies

■ Working Group of Experts for People of African Descent/GEPAD

■ Other special procedure mandate holders

Source: The 2019 survey of former Fellows for the review of the Fellowship programme for people of African descent (with a response rate of 60%)

# ISABELLE MAMADOU

SPAIN, 2016



Isabelle delivers human rights trainings to human rights defenders, advocates, legal professionals and students engaged in defending the rights of people of African descent

*“The Fellowship gave me a unique opportunity to generate positive changes for people of African descent in my country”*

I was born in Kinshasa, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, to a Central African father and a Spanish mother. Growing up in the Democratic Republic of Congo and living in Spain, a country characterised by the massive arrival of African migrants, had a direct impact on my career choice to support the defence of migrants’ rights, with special attention to people of African descent.

Therefore, I have been heading the office of the civil society organisation Movimiento por la Paz (Movement for Peace, MPDL) in Valencia, Spain, since 2013. Through this organisation, I’ve been coordinating different programs that aim to promote and protect the basic rights of migrants and refugees.

I participated in the Fellowship programme for people of African descent in 2016 and, in 2017, I was selected to be the Senior Fellow and act as mentor for the 2017 Fellows of African descent. This experience has enhanced my knowledge on human rights and enabled me to acquire practical skills in developing project proposals with a focus on human rights and people of African descent.

In 2017, my organization was awarded the OHCHR IDPAD grant for a project that aimed at building the capacities of migrants of African descent through trainings on fundamental rights and launching the International Day of women of African descent in Spain. The project also included activities to prevent gender-based violence and workshops on how to draft communications to the special procedures of the Human Rights Council. Thanks to the excellent results achieved through this project, the MPDL was able to secure funding from the regional government of Valencia for continuing project activities in 2018 and 2019.

Furthermore, as a member of the Implementation Team of the International Decade for People of African Descent in Spain, I collect information on any forms of discrimination faced by people of African descent and raise awareness on the many challenges faced by the African descent communities in Spain. The team includes members in different regions. Thanks to its efforts, 53 civil society organisations participated in the country visit by the United Nations Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent to Spain, in February 2018. The Implementation Team of the IDPAD in Spain is currently carrying out an advocacy campaign for the Spanish first coalition government to officially recognise the United Nations International Decade for People of African Descent.

Founding member of the African Nova Scotia Decade for People of African Descent Coalition, Vanessa fights for the recognition and the respect of the rights of African Nova Scotian in Canada.

# VANESSA FELLS

CANADA, 2015

In Canada, many people believe that racism is an American problem. To the world, Canada is seen as a happy, multicultural land of freedom. However, this is far from the reality I experienced growing up in Nova Scotia, the province with the oldest presence of Afro-descent in Canada. Canada, like all countries, has an unaddressed issue of racism. My struggle with finding a positive Black identity while growing up is what lead me to fight for the rights of people of African descent.

In 2015, when I attended the Fellowship programme for people of African descent, I knew very little about the International Decade for People of African Descent (IDPAD). The programme educated me about issues that negatively affect our community from an international perspective. It also taught me about how the United Nations operate and that we, as civil society, need to work collectively to engage with the United Nations on issues in our home countries and to push for change with our governments.

Since returning to Canada, I have worked



from my home province of Nova Scotia on the issues of systemic racism that affect people of African descent in the province. I subsequently met with provincial and federal government officials to lobby for Nova Scotia, and Canada, to officially recognize the IDPAD. I have also worked on addressing issues of racism in schools, creating spaces to hold courageous conversations about race and racism, and with communities to recognize and celebrate the African Heritage Month.

In October 2016, I, along with other African Nova Scotians, met with the United Nations Working Group of Experts for People of African Descent during their visit to Canada, providing them with information on the issues faced by our communities. As a follow up to this meeting, we created the African Nova Scotia Decade for People of African Descent Coalition (ANSDPAD).

The Coalition is an open group representing African Nova Scotians organizations and individuals that serve them, as well as their communities, interests and needs. The Coalition recognizes that the IDPAD provides

a unique opportunity to build provincial, national and international momentum for change that will benefit people of African descent in Nova Scotia and beyond. Since December 2018, I am the Director of Operations for the ANSDPAD Coalition. Through our working groups on justice, health and community services, we seek to strategically address anti-black racism and push for policy changes and action by working collectively and collaboratively with our community and government. Among our main achievements so far, is our collaboration in the campaign led by the Black community of Nova Scotia that successfully resulted in the banning of street checks in the province, the creation of Count Us In: Nova Scotia's Action Plan in Response to the IDPAD, as well as the support we provide to our communities. We partnered with the Michaëlle Jean Foundation for the organisation of the 2020 National Black Canadians Summit, which will be held in Halifax.

My future goals is to advance the work of the Coalition and strengthen my engagement with the UN on human rights issues faced by people of African descent worldwide.



Phoebe is a human rights lawyer. In 2019, she co-founded Hueman Equity Consulting to create workplaces, organisations and institutions that are more inclusive of Australia's diverse populations.

# PHOEBE MWANZA

AUSTRALIA, 2013

As a human rights lawyer with a focus on anti-discrimination law since 2007, I developed a specific interest in the rights of people of African descent when I realised that people of African descent were often left out of conversations about human rights. They were often not represented in the media; not included in the development of programs, services and laws, nor in conversations relating to their experiences and future. I decided to focus my legal practice in the area of human rights law and to use it as a tool to address the issues faced by people of African descent.

Participating in the Fellowship programme for people of African descent in 2013 was a unique opportunity to learn about how international human rights law works in practice through the United Nations human rights system and the international framework to combat racism and racial discrimination. I also gained first hand exposure to the workings of the Universal Periodic Review of the Human Rights Council and attended a meeting of the United Nations Working Group on People of African Descent.

After the Fellowship programme, I pursued my career as a human rights and anti-discrimination lawyer with the Australian Attorney General's Department and the Victorian Human Rights Commission. Over the years, I have supported the development and implementation of key strategies and programmes such as Australia's National Human Rights Action Plan, Diversity and Inclusion Strategies and Australia's National Anti-Racism Strategy. I have also developed and organised the African Youth Ambassadors Human Rights Training program to deepen the understanding of African youth about their rights and equip them with tools to share this knowledge with their communities, as well as the annual Government and NGO Forum on Human Rights.

*"Using law as a tool for effective change"*

All my endeavours are driven by my desire to build up a world that recognises and celebrates the richness in diversity of all members of our diverse society and communities. In 2019, I co-founded Hueman Equity Consulting in order to provide consulting and training for organisations relating to diversity and inclusion with a focus on cultural diversity and intersectionality. I strive for human rights and social justice through my podcast "The Griot Podcast" and my writings, as well as in my current roles as member of the Queensland Parliament Human Rights Advisory Expert Panel for 2020, member of the Victorian Multicultural Commission's Advisory Council for 2019-2021 and board member of Oz African TV.

# THE UNITED NATIONS FELLOWSHIP PROGRAMME FOR PEOPLE OF AFRICAN DESCENT

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