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Keynote Speech (10 min)

**Opening Ceremony of the Second Session of the
Permanent Forum on People of African Descent**

**Tuesday 30 May 202 at 10.00 am
United Nations Headquarters,
405 E 42nd St, New York, NY 10017**

**"Realizing the Dream: A UN Declaration on the Promotion,
Protection and Full Respect of the Human Rights of
People of African Descent"**

**Mister President of the United Nations General Assembly,
Madam Minister Franco,
H.E. Michael Stanley Regan,
Ms Epsy Campbell, Chair of the Permanent Forum,
Distinguished participants,**

**I am honored to join you today to open the second session
of the Permanent Forum on People of African Descent.**

UNESCO is proud to be here. We are proud to join efforts to ensure that we fight for all people to be recognized equal in dignity and rights. This has been our vision at UNESCO, which was the first international institution that, in the 1950's, proved scientifically, through the seminal work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, that there is one human race. We then adopted the Declaration on Race and Racial Prejudice.

Our efforts, like many of you, have been redoubled after the shocking recent evidence of the pervasive nature of racism during the pandemic, the killing of George Floyd, and the multiple crises we are living, that put Afro-descendants at much higher risk.

This led UNESCO Member States to launch a Global Call against Racism, to adopt a powerful Roadmap, and to establish the Global Forum Against Racism and Discrimination, a yearly event where all people fighting discrimination join forces, particularly the civil society.

We welcomed you in Mexico last year, and we will welcome you, with Minister Franco, in São Paulo this year.

In 2024, we will also commemorate the 30th anniversary of our Program on the Routes of Enslaved Peoples, and we are counting on your engagement.

We have also reached to thousands of young people worldwide with our Masterclass against racism and discrimination.

But no doubt we should re-double our efforts. The truth is that despite anti-discrimination legislation and policies, Afrophobia, or anti-Black racism, remains pervasive everywhere.

It is rooted in the vile history of colonialism, enslavement, and the transatlantic slave trade, justified by the so-called inferiority of Black people and the construction of racial hierarchies.

Now embedded in our institutions and mindsets, anti-Black racism influences, consciously and unconsciously, policies and practices.

It creates countless structural obstacles in access to equal and quality education, employment, health, well-being, and justice.

To address this, we need data, we need policies, and we need impact assessments. We need your leadership.

But data is where everything starts.

Ethnic data collection has sparked many a debate: Is it ethical? Is it racist? Is it useful? I believe it is about making the invisible visible. It is helpful to compare trends, and to evaluate the effectiveness of policy interventions.

One of the most noticeable pieces of evidence is the prevalence of poverty in Afro-descendants' communities, everywhere around the world.

In Brazil, that holds the largest Afro-descendant population in the world outside Africa, they are twice more likely to be poor as white Brazilians. This is why I commend the government of President Lula for having established a Ministry to fight racism, and to have appointed a powerful social activist like Minister Franco. This is walking the talk.

Poverty is interlinked with education and employment, where the numbers are just as awful.

In some European countries, up to 76% of young Black people are not in work, education, or training, compared to 8% of the general population.

These inequalities are compounded by gender, age, disability, and we can go on and on! It is even present in

situations where generous countries receiving refugees close the door to those that are non-White!

This world of inequalities and atrocities is being reproduced in the digital transformation and the world of artificial intelligence.

First, because probably Black population are misrepresented or non-represented in the data that is used to develop the AI tools.

Second, because there are no check ups on biases and discriminatory traits, and given that 85% of AI developments are done by White male-only teams, there is no surprise that the outcomes are being discriminatory and racists.

This is dangerous because thousands of decisions are being taken with the support of AI, and without ethical guardrails, this risks affecting massively Black

populations. This is why we are making a huge effort for the implementation of UNESCO's global standard on the ethics of AI, signed by 193 countries.

Discrimination by AI tools may reinforce another problem, that is when institutions and people in charge of justice can also show the same biases. In France, identity checks based on race or origin are illegal. Yet, Black people in Paris are checked six times more than White people.

Long-term effects of the history of enslavement and contemporary racism are blatantly obvious when looking at mental and physical health. This is something we will be reviewing in a parallel session.

- In the USA, suicide deaths of Afro-Americans have increased more than 45% between 2012 and 2019.**
- In Ecuador, the maternal mortality rate for Afro-descendant women is triple the overall maternal mortality rate.**

- **High level of stress of discriminated groups reduces their quality of life and leads to shorter lives.**

Fighting racism and discrimination needs to be a priority, not only in declarations but in the real actions. It is walking the talk, and this is why we produced the Antiracism toolkit, so we can ensure this receives the priority it merits.

But we should also learn from each other, and from the best practices. I want to commend, for example, that the current US administration has appointed the very first Special Representative for Racial Equity and Justice, and created a high level council of Afro descendants to advise President Biden and officials in charge of fighting racism in every institution at the government. This is the very same energy in which the Canadian government delivered a powerful antiracism strategy, and the Mexican government which, for the very first time, included a race question in the national census.

We are proud to partner with them, supporting their North American Partnership for Equity and Racial Justice. We will also hold a panel today to review progress.

I also salute the governments of Brazil and the USA for their Joint Action to Eliminate Racial and Ethnic Discrimination, released just a few days ago on May 23rd.

As I said, civil society is key, and I also want to salute our work with Guerrand-Hermes Foundation for Peace, with whom we have been able to implement intergenerational dialogues in 7 countries, valorizing the healing traditions of enslaved peoples and their descendants, and training young facilitators to address psychological trauma. I consider this as a best practice.

As I said, I am proud to be here. I see all of you, I see Epsy, and so many institutions, and I believe that we can change course. I am sure our joint contributions will help make this session of the Permanent Forum, and its goals, a success.

People of African descent deserve much better, and we should not stop until we can declare racism a thing of the past.

Thank you.