



Kaneza Foundation
For Dialogue & Empowerment

Statement by Elisabeth Kaneza

For the Regional Meeting on the International Decade for
People of African Descent, 23 November 2017, in Geneva,
Switzerland

Panel 1: Recognition

Madame Chair,
Dear Delegates,

Let me introduce my topic by saying that as we meet to this regional meeting, we face challenges that put again into question the recognition of people of African descent and Africans in the world. Again our resolve and efforts for the protection of human rights are tested. My thoughts are with the countless victims of violence, persecution and those who find themselves enslaved in modern times.

It is a good thing that we're meeting in Geneva. For, no place could give greater expression to our message of recognition, justice and development than the United Nations and Geneva, the home of the international human rights architecture. Many before us have given all they had, their sweat and their lives in the struggle for global recognition and for creating a universal alliance of all members of the African family. Today, we stand in for them. Today, we pay tribute to them with our presence in the premises of the United Nations under the umbrella of the International Decade for People of African Descent!



During my presentation I wish to highlight three main points that we should consider under the pillar of recognition for the implementation of the Decade.

1. Expanding the definition of “People of African Descent” to match the complete experience of diasporisation

As an eager student of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action I dare to say that its definition of people of African descent is too narrow to depict the current reality of people of African descent, especially in Europe.

It is recommended hereby to give the definition a broader sense, in that explicit recognition is also given to people of African descent, that I refer to as people of African descent of the second and third diasporisation – African migrants and their descendants as well as refugees. By doing so the emphasis of Durban on the victims of enslavement and the transatlantic slave trade is not made weaker, as some may argue. Rather, it strengthens the argument that the main causes for the contemporary forms of racism and racial discrimination have continuities into the present day and put people of African descent at risk.

Studies show that it is dangerous to be a person of African descent regardless of your particular experience of diasporisation. Limiting the definition entirely to the experience of enslavement would make invisible those people of African descent in the diaspora whose ancestors were brought here under different conditions, often conditions that cannot be traced back. And it would leave out those people of African descent who came here as migrants or refugees, but who experience the same consequences in de-facto racial discrimination.

In its publication the United Nations Office for Human Rights has started to create awareness for the situation of migrants and refugees. We must devote stronger efforts for their recognition, for their human rights situation is alarming.



2. Implementing recognition at home

While international human rights were framed within the system of the United Nations, their implementation must be within national law at the national level. And it takes place through a lens of subjective perspective. And this means that we must add the missing perspective to enable the transformation needed to fully implement the Decade.

Hence, we can say that recognition starts at home and it must be implemented at home. It is in the streets of cities like Louisiana and Charlottesville, the banlieus in Paris, the schools in Toronto, community centres in Nova-Scotia or Leicester, police offices in Cologne that the change must arrive.

It is the legacy of Jim Crow laws, the legacy of the lynching of people of African descent, the legacy of colonising not only hectares of land, but the body, soul and mind of an entire people and making them believe that they are nothing and that they will forever be nothing. This is what we must fight.

In Germany, the statement that recognition starts at home and must be implemented at home is visible in a very practical way. For decades Germany would not make a mention of its Black population as a vulnerable group in official documents. The very existence of its Black population was completely invisible in most public discourse and policy papers. On a regular basis Black people would be attacked openly in public, with the consequence of death. No-go areas were mapped by civil society to protect them. Human rights violations such as racial profiling disproportionately affect Black people, but there were no measures, no plan against it.

It was after the German launch of the Decade that the government included the terms “people of African descent” and “Black People” in a new National Action Plan against Racism. The first edition from 2007 knew no Black people. And remember that National Action Plans against Racism go back to the Durban Declaration and



Programme of Action. So, in this case, Germany recognised universal human rights and even adopted a National Plan against Racism to enforce them. However, there was no recognition for people of African descent. We, the civil society, added the missing perspective. And we did so by reminding the state of its obligation under international law and its commitment to the Decade.

3. Strengthening the role of civil society under the Decade

The Programme of Activities of the Decade stresses the importance of a people-centred approach for the Decade: The active participation of people of African descent has to be ensured at all levels. Civil society organisations should be consulted and be actively involved in the formulation and implementation of measures for the Decade.

Civil Society has an important role under the Decade. And I came to Geneva to remind all of us here that we cannot delegate this role. As civil society we have a responsibility. We have a mandate. We too represent the people. We too must act in their best interest. We too are accountable. And we share these characteristics with member states, which is the reason why I strongly believe that during this Decade we must intensify the cooperation between state and civil society. In Germany, Netherlands and Switzerland we have successfully built bridges to our governments and are now seeing the positive results of these new partnerships. I am also very delighted that our colleagues in Canada made significant progress in cooperating with the government and it is my hope that this cooperation will lead to the implementation of the Decade in Canada.

To the people who ask “How can the Decade benefit me?” I ask back “How can you benefit the Decade?” Admittedly, this Decade is far from being perfect. Still I count myself to those who strongly support and defend it. There is a lot, a lot to be done, a lot to be improved before we can reach full implementation. Still, I want to ask all of you to do a first step in faith. I invite you to embrace this decade and look beyond its



shortcomings, reach beyond its limits. And I can speak for my country. When we started to advocate for the decade in Germany, we had nothing to offer than our voice and our belief in our human rights. And we succeeded in making this first step in faith and launched the decade together with the government last year.

I believe that our colleagues from the United Nations Office for Human Rights did something similar. For we wouldn't be here today if they wouldn't believe in the decade. We wouldn't be here if they had entertained the disappointment that many of us felt, when we learned that no member state would host this meeting. And I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the High Commissioner and to all staff members who made this regional meeting possible, even after it was declared impossible. To all of you we say Thank you!

In summary, it is recommended hereby to 1. have a broader scope for the definition of people of African descent and recognise fully the experiences of people of African descent with a recent migration experience, 2. Implement the recognition of people of African Descent at home, by putting international in practice and recognising people of African descent as vulnerable group, and 3. to strengthen the role of civil society and promote cooperation with governments. Without this cooperation the Decade cannot succeed.

It is a good thing that we're meeting in Geneva. This is history in the making. For, people of African descent have never been here before in the size and with the exposure they have today. Let us never forget that not so long ago a person who looked like me could not set foot in this building. Let us never forget that not long ago a person of my skin color and my descent could not speak up, was not allowed to speak to such a congregation.

Therefore, seeing all of us - member states, civil society, international organisations, communities - united here in Europe, a continent with a historical relevance for our struggle against racism, to discuss and find solutions for the pressing human rights concerns of people of African descent, regardless of our differences – fills me with an



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indescribable hope and it feels with me with great pride. And I am proud to close my statement by recognising each one of us by echoing the spirit of this Decade: I AM SOMEBODY. YOU ARE SOMEBODY. AND I AM BECAUSE YOU ARE.

Thank you for your attention.

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