

26th Session of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent

Regional meeting with civil society

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International Decade for People of African Descent Assembly – Guyana (IDPADA-G)

Oral Presentation

The commencement of the International Decade, in 2015, was heralded by an official launch, of the Decade, hosted by All African Council of Guyana. That launch was addressed by His Excellency, David Arthur Granger in his capacity as President. His involvement tacitly signaled the Government's commitment to the declaration of the Decade. The launch was followed by deafening silence until August 2016 when at a forum of Africa Guyanese organizations His Excellency noted the silence and urged the Forum to mobilize the African Guyanese community to embrace the Decade in a proactive and meaningful manner. Consequently, the organizations came together during 2017, and through a process of consultations, established IDPADA-G as Guyana's Country Coordinating Mechanism for the crafting and implementation of a Plan for the Decade.

A secretariat was established in 2018 and was granted a subvention by the Government of Guyana to facilitate the crafting and implementation of the Plan. The Plan was completed in 2019, in which year a further subvention was granted by the Government of Guyana and the organization (IDPADA-G) was registered as a not-for-profit company.

The Plan for the Decade provides for operations on three fronts: The State; IDPADA-G; its and constituent communities/groups, under three rubrics: Policies, Programmes and Projects. Since its formation, to this time of reporting, IDPADA-G has implemented a number of projects aimed at informing, educating, and enabling the African Guyanese community in their pursuit of Recognition, Justice and Development. IDPADA-G has also sourced and channeled funds to its constituents for the implementation of educational, social, cultural and economic

projects. There has been no articulation, by the Government, of any Policy, Programme or Project specific to the theme-Recognition, Justice and Development- and beneficiaries of the Decade; and the thematic areas (Economics, Employment, Expiation, Education and Equity), all of which have their origin in the United Nations Declaration.

The key human rights concerns of African Guyanese are encapsulated in the five thematic areas mentioned above. In the first instance, African Guyanese have suffered historic deficits in all of those areas, originally, based on the system of enslavement and the subsequent institutionalization of the stratified society which has relegated African Guyanese to the bottom of the ladder, particularly in the sphere of economic activities.

Since Emancipation and their singularly entrepreneurial purchase of abandoned plantations, lands inhabited by African Guyanese have never been given adequate infrastructural support (e.g. access roads, drainage) to make them viable farmlands. Post slavery, we Africans suffered the deliberate flooding of our village lands, while careful attention was paid to land settlements of other ethnic groups. We have been systematically denied the enabling environment necessary to achieve equality.

Not only are we deliberately marginalized in the agriculture sector, our businesses also do not have equal access to financing or contracts, relegating African Guyanese to often precarious employment and stifled micro enterprises. With the paucity of other options, we have been driven into the Public Service but confront great insecurity, even in those jobs, whenever the Indian dominated PPP is in Government. This is quite evident once again since the recent change of Government has put the PPP in office. Since August 2020, over 500 African Guyanese and counting have been the victims of unfounded termination of employment.

The Education System, among its woes, does not cater for any significant instruction on Guyanese History. This affects the issue of African Guyanese identity and Recognition given the pejorative historical narratives woven about the enslaved especially when juxtaposed with the current predicament as outlined hitherto.

The political will required to address these issues is patently absent hence the suffocation of African Guyanese in the economic sphere and consequently in every other sphere. In fact, the system does not accept the realities confronted by African Guyanese, therefore they are deliberately ignored and society, including African Guyanese, rely on negative narratives, prejudices, stereotypes and (self)blaming to explain our condition.

While the first five years of the Decade did not represent much material change for African Guyanese, the atmosphere was less oppressive and provided an opportunity for regrouping. No extrajudicial killings during those 5 years and a growing sense of fairness, gave African Guyanese some hope for the future. Unfortunately, the last five months have seen a reversal of our fortunes including increased police harassment and unlawful detainment of political activists; revocations of leases to agricultural land, and marginalization in the new and burgeoning, lucrative oil sector.

Even in the work of determining what history is taught, we have been excluded. Our advocacy since 2017, for the introduction of Guyanese History in our schools has been acknowledged, however, there has been no effort to involve the community in the curriculum reform process. What content will students be exposed to? Will our history be told accurately? Exclusion seems to be the order of the day.

Even worse has been the non-response and non-engagement on the question of the reintroduction of village councils which can provide a democratic framework for confronting critical heritage land and agricultural issues.

Against this background, a Truth and Reconciliation process is urgently required as the basis for exploration of the inequities of our society and to achieve broad acceptance of the need for fundamental change of the premise on which our Government and state institutions are established and function. A national soul-searching conversation to be followed by constitutional reform and a new model of Governance cognizant and responsive to our diversity and historical maladies is what is required.