

1<sup>st</sup> Session of the Permanent Forum of People of African Descent  
December 7, 2022  
Geneva

**Connecting the Past and the Future**  
***Equality for All People of African Descent***

Chairperson, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent (Working Group) welcomes the opportunity to share with you and all who will review these proceedings the urgency in addressing systematic racism, xenophobia, and discrimination against children of African descent. Among the many things that all of us here today have in common is that we were able to survive, develop and thrive beyond childhood. Regrettably, Ladies and Gentlemen, many children of African descent risk not reaching adulthood, and many more who reach adulthood have compromised futures. There is no inevitability in these latter outcomes. On the contrary, there is sufficient evidence to assure us that when children of African descent have equal opportunity with their peers, regardless of any demographic markers, they survive, develop and thrive, becoming global citizens who share their intellect and talents freely with the rest of the world. As its soccer season, one need only look at any World Cup soccer team for evidence in just this tiny slice of world culture, recognising that the same is true across all sectors of society.

In its 30<sup>th</sup> Session, the Working Group examined the causes and consequences of the racism, discrimination, and xenophobia children of African descent face across the globe. Through the first-person testimonies of diverse groups of young people and civil society organisation leaders who work assiduously to prevent and mitigate the impact of anti-black racism and related intolerances, the Working Group garnered comprehensive information and insights as to what racism looks like or sounds like or feels like among children of African descent. The Working Group analysed these experiences against the wealth of research evidence that has documented, analysed and characterised the causes and consequences of racial discrimination and concluded that racism, discrimination and xenophobia continue to compromise the childhood of many children of African descent, in many instances stealing their childhood and robbing them of their physical, emotional and psychosocial well-being, of opportunities to actualise their potential and to contribute to their own development and that of their families, communities and societies. Sadly, this situation is not limited to any geography.

I wish to pinpoint the areas in which children of African descent face considerable anti-black, anti-African racism, xenophobia and discrimination across the course of their young lives:

*Inter-generation and Gestation*

As a result of the disenfranchisement and disadvantage faced by their parents, many children of African descent are conceived and born into compromised social and

economic situations, facing poverty, food and nutrition insecurity, limited access to preventive health care and early detection of disabling factors. And this situation is in rich, developed countries not facing war, famine or endemic poverty, but where the cumulative effect of anti-black/anti-African discrimination has followed large segments of people of African descent after enslavement and through colonisation, various forms of social and physical segregation and into situations where racism is so systemic and structural that it often goes undetected. For example, when women of African descent are not given adequate health care, when their concerns are disregarded, when it is assumed that their pain threshold is elevated, their health and that of their unborn or new-born child is severely compromised.

### *Birth to Early Childhood*

One of the most egregious forms of discrimination facing children of African descent is low birth registration. Not only does not being registered deny the child's identity in psychological terms, but it eliminates the child from the consideration when governments plan, budget and programme for essential basic services. As a result, unregistered children are not able to fully access health services, particularly in more obscure areas as dental and eye clinics, their disabilities and special learning needs go undetected and unaddressed well into middle childhood by which time they are labelled as restless or slow or stupid or any number of inaccurate but pejorative terms. Children of African descent are decoding messages about their names, about their accent and syntax, about their hair and hairstyles, about their dress and cultural norms. The fact that many of these cultural identities are appropriated by other races and glorified as hip – braiding of the hair, twerking, hip hop, rap, hand gestures – is not mere irony but unmitigated racism.

### *Middle Childhood*

It is at this stage that negative stereotypes begin to form, and that children *learn* to subject children of African descent to racism and that children of African descent begin to internalise in too many instances such stereotypes. It is at this stage that bullying and xenophobia emerge. Children of African descent are seen as the 'other' and are objectified and/or projected as someone who should be feared. These tropes remain unchallenged in stories and legends and even various versions of history to which all children are subjected in school. Research has shown that children of African descent are often perceived as older than they are, and therefore treated accordingly, another way in which their childhood is compromised. It is also at this stage that the multiple deprivations that some children of African descent face intersect, and individual children's lives can become so compromised that individual intervention is urgently needed. For all the reasons that brings the child to this point, individual attention is often negative – punishment, sanctions, ostracization, exclusion from routine everyday life at home, school, or the community. Thus, instead of securing help and support, society often piles on the negative reactions which merely reinforce negative self-images in the child of African descent and/or pushes them further to the margins of family, community, and society,

leaving them vulnerable to the vagaries of life in the margins, essentially stealing their childhoods!

### *Adolescence into Young Adulthood*

Regrettably, by the time many children of African descent enter adolescence, their identity, self-image and reputation are so compromised that without urgent intervention at the level of the individual, family and community, the slide into a doubtful future is all but assured. It is at this age that many children, some earlier, become acquainted with an egregious justice system where racism, discrimination and xenophobia present a toxic context in which adolescents and young adults usually learn to identify, assess, and take risks, explore alternatives, and ultimately learn from their mistakes. With the cumulative, intersecting deprivations they face, our lived experience and research show that adolescents and young adults of African descent in some instances have few options. By then, they are aware that the odds are against them and few have the opportunity to break the cycle or the downward spiral. Research show that police profiling, illegal search and seizure, disproportionate arrests, poor representation, disproportionately harsh sentencing are all grounded in laws, policies, procedures and tactics that are designed to 'net' young people of African descent, particularly males. This is one track of disadvantage.

Another track is the poor schooling, poor health, poor housing, poor social skills that cause children to age out of school without basic knowledge, skills and attitudes needed for adulthood, work, further study or responsible citizenship. This 'track' affects males and females, but there is increasing evidence that males are disproportionately represented.

A third track is the poor schooling, poor health, poor housing, poor social skills that cause adolescents and young people to abandon compromised family situations or flee the restrictions of family, without the skills to make more rational choices for their future. With limited social safety nets, both males and females become dependent on social assistance, and the downward spiral accelerates.

### *Lessons Learned*

The lessons are clear. First, it is important to note the children of African descent are not monolithic or monochromatic. There is clear evidence that the intersection of geography, sex, gender, ethnicity, language, class, and religion require as many diversified responses as these individual demographic markers suggest. This means that education and health services have to be better tailored to meet the needs of children and young people of African descent in diverse ways where they are. It also means that housing, transportation, recreation and access to justice must be equally responsive to diverse needs of families and communities of people of African descent.

Second, the future of children of African descent requires careful consideration in the present to reverse intergenerational and cumulative deprivation and to anticipate future needs. An appreciation of the digital divide, of 21<sup>st</sup> skills and competencies, of the impact of climate change and changing economic markets, are all future issues that must influence current services for children of African descent to assure opportunities for decent work and a just utilisation of their intellectual and physical patrimony.

Third, resolving the causes and consequences of the impact of racial discrimination, xenophobia and discrimination is not a black issue. It is a human issue and a human rights issue. Those who engage in racial animus, discrimination and xenophobic behaviours are as equally important in resolving the issues as are those who are subjected to racism, discrimination and xenophobia.

### *Measures for Reversing (the Impact of) Racism, Xenophobia and Anti-Black Discrimination*

In its thematic report of 2022, the Working Group proffered several general strategies and approaches as foundational for reversing the causes and consequences of racism, xenophobia and anti-black racism. The most important of these are the following:

- The basis for action must be an appreciation of the human rights of children of African descent, already codified in every existing international covenant or convention, explicitly or implicitly.
- Beginning with birth registration through every census, and all routine data collection in every sector, should include data on race, as it already does on other markers.
- The agency, activism and advocacy of children and young people of African descent themselves is indispensable to their childhood and future wellbeing and development.
- Public education about racism, xenophobia and discrimination, their causes and consequences is necessary in every sector of society.
- Relevant and responsive education of children of African descent, including history and multiple literacies, is indispensable to their growth, development, and transition to adulthood.
- Careful attention to the mental, emotional and psychological health and hygiene of children and young people of African descent are as important as their physical health and wellbeing, and responsive health services are indispensable.
- Retooling of the justice system – the laws, policies, procedures and orientation/training of justice and law enforcement personnel – is fundamental for a society conducive to the wellbeing of children and young people of African descent.
- Balancing civil and political freedoms, with social development and safety nets, free cultural expression and economic/financial independence and empowerment

is the *sine qua non* of creating and sustaining a healthy environment for children and young people of African descent.

- And finally, given the root causes and antecedents of contemporary racism, xenophobia, and discrimination against children (and people) of African descent are the enslavement of peoples of African descent, colonialism, segregation and contemporary economic deprivations, reparatory justice, including reparations for past wrongs, is a human right.

In closing, I wish to cite two contemporary phenomena that have unmasked, to an alarming degree, existing racism and racial prejudice, and exacerbated the xenophobia and discrimination to which children and young people of African descent are subjected.

Emerging research has shown that COVID-19 has reversed, if not erased, substantive and substantial gains that were made by and for people of African descent over the last few decades. The evidence is clear in terms of the disproportionate morbidity and mortality among people of African descent in several developed countries, attributable in large part to the institutionalised racism referenced above. The pandemic exacerbated the high NCDs endemic in these populations on the one hand, and on the other shrunk their access to health, nutrition and housing care and services. In addition, the pandemic placed in sharp relief the fact that research in pharmaceuticals and nutraceuticals that meet the needs of people of African descent falls far below, relatively, the needs of other races.

At the same time, the explosion in the use and the penetration of digital devices, software and platforms have brought into sharp focus not just racial disparities, but racial prejudices, xenophobia and racial animus. The uncontrolled and uncensored nature of the internet has unleashed the worst expressions of these negative phenomena, in ways that seep into children's purview, often undetected until it is too late. Instances of suicide, self-harm, bullying, physical and psychological abuse, the child trafficking affecting children and young people of African descent have increased, all facilitated by easy and anonymous access to the internet. The internet, like the pandemic has exposed the chasms in our society. However, the internet has untapped potential to bring positive change, growth and development. These two phenomena underscore the urgency of the situation affecting children and young people of African descent, and the urgent need of intervention at the international, national, community and family levels. Your advocacy and your intervention matter! As Dr Martin Luther King said:

“We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history, there "is" such a thing as being too late. This is no time for apathy or complacency. This is a time for vigorous and positive action.” – **Martin Luther King Jr.**

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