# TOWARDS RECOGNITION, JUSTICE AND DEVELOPMENT

**Mireille Apollon** is Vice-President of the Canadian Commission for UNESCO. Ms. Apollon was a city councillor for the City of Gatineau from 2009 to 2017. She chaired the *Commission des arts, de la culture, des lettres et du patrimoine de la Ville de Gatineau* from 2013 to 2017. She is also a former Canadian Consul in Senegal and a manager at the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA).

**On behalf of the Canadian Commission for UNESCO, it's a real honour to provide an introduction to this special edition of *Canadian Diversity*, which focuses on the UN International Decade for People of African Descent.**

The special days, years, and decades that the UN proclaims are indeed intended to highlight concerns and raise awareness about major global challenges. They are a call to concerted and individual action around the world, from governments, civil society, activists, academics, and citizens. They are also an acknowledgement that the concerns they raise defy quick fixes; they require long term efforts to drive systemic change.

This hope is not misplaced. With broad participation and commitment, International Decades can lead to real change. Three consecutive International Decades dedicated to fighting racism preceded the 2001 Durban Declaration and Programme of Action. Here in Canada, we can see the impact of the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which came after three international decades for Indigenous People, and which helped set the stage for the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

The International Decade for People of African Descent, whose theme is Recognition, Justice and Development, is borne out of serious concern about anti-black racism and discrimination. UNESCO has three goals for the decade. First, it seeks to promote a better understanding and recognition of the culture, history and heritage of people of African descent. Second, it encourages the world to recognize the memory of the victims of the slave trade, slavery, and colonialism – and their descendants – through the establishment of sites of memory testifying to this past, and to encourage the international community to honor this memory in different forms. Finally, it will continue to work with member states to fight discrimination against people of African descent.

Canada officially recognized the International Decade in 2018, and in September 2019 Nova Scotia became the first legal jurisdiction in the world to officially implement an action plan related to the International Decade. An article from Wayn Hamilton, Executive Director of African Nova Scotian Affairs in the Government of Nova Scotia, describes this historic initiative.

This special edition presents a variety of viewpoints on the International Decade and these themes, and include contributions from prominent leaders, thinkers, and activists. Its theme is drawn from the famous quote from James Baldwin, from his 1962 article 'As much truth as one can bear': "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."

The challenge with this special edition is the impossibility of doing justice to the many perspectives on the experience of people of African descent in Canada. Our experiences are as diverse as our identities. From Mathieu da Costa, the navigator who helped guide Samuel de Champlain to Canada, to Olivier Le Jeune, the young enslaved boy brought forcibly to New France in the 1600s. From those escaping slavery in the United States and finding new life in southwestern Ontario, to Black Loyalists settling in Nova Scotia. From resisters like Viola Desmond to leaders like Jean Augustine and Lincoln Alexander. From those migrating from the West Indies and the Caribbean, to those migrating from African countries.

This special edition is one of several initiatives that has been undertaken by the Canadian Commission for UNESCO, which is working tirelessly alongside its members, networks and partners to advance UNESCO ideals and priorities, including in relation to fighting racism and all forms of discrimination. This includes bringing forward Canadian experiences and expertise to inform global discussions in the UNESCO context. For example, CCUNESCO has provided patronage and support for the work of exceptional artists such as the very creative Rhodnie Désir and celebrated hip-hop historian Webster. Indeed, Webster has written a short history of slavery in Canada which we will publish soon. The Commission coordinates the initiatives of the Coalition of Inclusive Municipalities, which brings together cities to create policies and undertake initiatives to fight racism and discrimination. It is also supporting efforts being deployed by the Michaëlle Jean Foundation and the Federation of Black Canadians to provide safe spaces to advance much needed discussions on what is required on the legislative, policy and program front to ensure inclusion and full participation of Canadians of African descent, especially youth and those most marginalized, in all aspects of life in our country.

It's been wonderful and inspiring to see diverse organizations in Canada mark the International Decade with special initiatives. These include Vancouver's African Descent Festival, the African Canadian Resource Network, the City of Toronto, the United Church of Canada, Dalhousie University, the Canadian Union of Public Employees, and many more. I wish to salute all of those working tirelessly to advance the spirit of the Decade.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank our partners in the Canadian Institute for Identities and Migration, publishers of *Canadian Diversity*, and to thank all contributors for their thoughtful articles. I would also like to thank Yaovi Hoyi and Dr. Christine Lwanga for their advice and feedback on this issue. 2020 marks the mid-point of the International Decade, and it is our hope that this special edition encourages all Canadians to act together to build a fair and inclusive society.