UNIQUE OPPORTUNITIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE INTERNATIONAL DECADE

The Honourable Dr Jean Augustine is a Grenadian-Canadian educational administrator, advocate for social justice, and politician. She was one of the first two Black Canadian women elected to the House of Commons. She served as a member of Cabinet, as Minister of State for multiculturalism (and the status of women) from 2002 to 2004.

Over the years, the United Nations has been an important forum for the recognition of the debilitating history of systemic challenge and on-going consequences that Black people around the world have had to endure as victims of the slave trade and the legacy of colonialism. Notably, the UN's 2006 Durban Declaration and Programme of Action (DDPA) provides a concrete framework of measures to combat racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. Its underlying thesis is that no country can claim to be free of racism. This is a global concern that requires universal effort and advocacy efforts worldwide.

Building on the DDPA, the International Decade for People of African Descent (IDPAD) which spans 2014 to 2024 recognizes that people of African descent represent a distinct group whose human rights must be promoted and protected. IDPAD provides a means through which communities around the world can broker dialogue and collaboration on promoting respect, protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms of people of African descent. It is also a vessel through which a valuable understanding of the rich heritage and significant contributions of African people to global society can be recognized.

Over the years, eminent thinkers have put forward constructive ideas about how best to address the breadth of systemic challenges towards evening the playing field for Black people. Drawing from the best approaches, a two-pronged path forward would yield best outcomes.

First, global coordination on a matter of such scope and magnitude is essential. It involves agreement along a set of global ideals and goals. Among these overarching tenets should be:

- an emphasis on persons of African descent achieving the best possible education;
- economic empowerment of the individual and the community; and
- the active inclusion and participation of women.

Along these core tenets, effective advocacy should involve collaboration among individuals, organizations and governments in Africa and African Diaspora countries. Through grassroots efforts, approaches in various countries could be further distilled along domestic policy posts.

Secondly, these ideals must first begin to take hold at the familial, community and local level. This is where influence can be best exerted – and where immediate impact and results can be gleaned. This means parents, teachers and other frontline community stakeholders taking ownership for change within their purview. In practice it involves ensuring the best educational opportunities and outcomes for Black children; teaching and instilling an appreciation of economic self-empowerment, wealth creation, and charitable reinvestment back into the community; and ensuring equal opportunity

for women and girls who face many intersecting forms of discrimination and exclusion. Around the world, it includes inequalities in access to health, invisibility in data collection, and disproportionate violence against them – all of which robs them and society of their inherent capacity to contribute to building functional societies.

In 2018, the Government of Canada formally promulgated IDPAD as a means to highlight and celebrate the important history of contributions of people of African descent to Canadian society; as well as a framework for recognition, justice, and development to fight racism, discrimination, and the ongoing inequalities that Canadians of African descent face. Black Canadians have contributed to Canada's heritage since the arrival of Mathieu Da Costa who led Samuel de Champlain along the St. Lawrence River in the early 1600s. Since then, Black people have contributed in many ways to the growth, diversity and development of the country.

Significantly, IDPAD was presented as part of a larger commitment to building a stronger, more inclusive Canada. Modest funds were announced to improve research and gather data which would also help policy-makers gain a better understanding of the particular challenges that Canada's 1.3 million self-identified Black Canadians face.

But existing data already underscores a bleak reality. Black Canadians are hampered by a 12% unemployment rate, while the average for non-Black citizens is 5%. Further, while Black Canadians only represent 3.5% of the overall Canadian population, 18% are living in poverty. These and a host of other negative socio-economic indicators are tied to the legacy of slavery. It is also not surprising that mental health challenges and overrepresentation in the corrections system were also cited by community leaders as barriers to Black Canadians' full and equal participation across society. By improving research and data collection, the expectation is that sound, unbiased data would aid the formulation of better policy solutions.

Meanwhile, across the country, IDPAD initiatives underway include the National Black Canadians Summit to coordinate and optimize the advocacy efforts of organizations from communities across the country to enhance government and private sector collaboration.

In Quebec, the International Black Economic Forum is promoting entrepreneurship and investment as a driver of wealth in black communities; and the importance of building and sustaining relationships with government to better influence policy-making.

In Ontario, the Black Health Alliance is pursuing innovative solutions to improve the health and well-being of Black communities including children. This involves addressing systemic issues linked to physical and mental health; including impact on new immigrants and refugees. At the Jean Augustine Centre for Young Women's Empowerment in Toronto, work is on-going to instill girls and young women with the tools and skills for success and leadership.

In Nova Scotia, Dalhousie University is taking action to strengthen its relationship with the African Nova Scotian community through the development of a strategy to specifically address structural challenges individuals continue to face because of what happened in the past.

Around the world, a host of notable IDPAD initiatives are also underway. From North and South America, to Europe, Africa and African Diaspora communities around the world, most activities are tied to the decade's themes of recognition, justice and development.

But despite best intentions, the question must shift to what can be considered realistic outcomes of IDPAD? Will we see any improvements in 2024? Or at least a path towards improvement? Will policy-makers really be able to agree on what needs to be done? Or how it should be done?

When pondering the condition of Persons of African Descent, one must be mindful of the rich diversity of Black people around the world, but even more vigilant about our shared history of persecution on the basis of race and skin colour. For example, disproportionate incarceration and economic disadvantage may be major indicators for African descendent communities in Western nations. Anti-Black racism may be less prevalent in continental Africa or Caribbean countries where Black people hold and control formal and informal power.

However we consider the path towards a fairer, more equitable and just landscape, perhaps the words of African American author, Carter G. Woodson may be illuminating.

> "History shows that it does not matter who is in power.. those who have not learned to do for themselves... never obtain any more rights or privileges in the end than they did in the beginning".

Education and economics are an important part of the solution for people of African descent no matter where they live. There is also value in fostering a sense of international solidarity based on our shared history. But it is also important to take active ownership in the future of the community. Hence, the struggle against the systemic challenge faced by Black people anywhere in the world should be an important consideration for Black people everywhere.

Former African Union (AU) Ambassador to the United States, Arikana Chihombori-Quao, who reportedly lost her job because she spoke out against neo-colonialism exhorted that, "...we need to take time to sincerely inventory who we are and

how we were colonized... We must educate our youth... to lead and build independent communities".

Black children and youth should be made aware of the unique history of oppression and their own responsibility in pursuit of a just society. It is very important that they know the past to ensure that darkest era of humanity is never repeated for any group of people. They should also be taught about viable solutions early on.

Yes, the last several decades have brought some improvements. But IDPAD is an opportunity to ask hard questions about the path forward. How do we combat discrimination and the root causes of exclusion? How do we address poverty reduction? How do we remove persistent barriers to full social and economic inclusion?

We must take ownership of our problems, while building relationships with the power structures that help to push social equity throughout society. In the words of Marcus Mosiah Garvey, "Up, you mighty race, accomplish what you will". I will add, this is our Decade to do so!