

Video Statement by the US Human Rights Network
Civil Society Meeting

20th Session of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent

April 3 – 7, 2017

The US Human Rights Network thanks the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent and the Secretariat of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights for this opportunity to engage directly with the Working Group during its 20th session. We believe strongly in the principle that human rights advocacy must be led by those who are most directly affected by human rights violations. Civil society consultations that include multiple ways to engage for community-based organizations and directly impacted individuals are always welcomed and appreciated, and we hope to participate in more of these events in the future.

The US Human Rights Network was honored to coordinate civil society engagement with the Working Group's official U.S. country visit in 2016, and we welcomed its report on the US and its recommendations.

We want to once again reiterate with urgency the human rights crisis in the criminal justice system in our country, resulting from continued discrimination and gross disparities in both the enforcement and application of the law, which has resulted in racial profiling, the use of excessive force by law enforcement officials perpetrated with impunity, over-representation of African Americans in prison along with disproportionate penalties, and the disproportionate rates at which immigrants of African descent in the U.S. are detained and deported.

In addition to these more direct forms of state violence, a broader culture of discrimination and exclusion against transgender and gender-non-conforming people coupled with anti-Black racism, has led to a state of emergency for Black transgender women in the U.S, who continue to be murdered at alarming rates. As people of African descent in this country are forced to defend their communities against a constant barrage of attacks on human rights, existing barriers to economic, social, and cultural rights become more entrenched, blocking access to such basic human needs as healthcare, education, housing, water and sanitation. And the continued and accelerated erosion of civil and political rights in our country, including attacks on voting rights and freedom of assembly, has left people of African descent more vulnerable than ever, especially in the U.S. South. The current political environment in the U.S. has inflamed individual prejudices, strengthened oppressive institutions, and emboldened those who would perpetrate acts of hate. We need clear action against the intersecting systems of racism, misogyny, homophobia and violence from our political leaders and movements.

Along with these ongoing attacks and persistent discrimination against people of African descent in nearly every aspect of social and civil life in the United States, the lack of recognition and reparations for the centuries of harm to people of African descent must be addressed as a human rights imperative. Reparatory justice must be achieved for victims of the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade and the state-sanctioned system of chattel slavery whose legacy impacts people of African descent still today. We support community demands for an end to “broken-windows” policing practices

that harass and intimidate, community control of police, immediate closure of all family immigrant detention centers and a suspension of deportations; and an immediate moratorium on extractive and agricultural industry operations that contaminate current or potential drinking water resources. We welcome the attention of the global human rights community on the US in these times more than ever.

In this vein, we would like to ask that the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent improve and enhance its engagement with civil society in the following ways:

1. Produce educational materials, including child-friendly learning materials, that explicitly link the themes of the International Decade for People of African Descent to existing human rights standards such as the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action (DDPA) and International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD).
2. Provide opportunities for the international community of civil society organizations and human rights defenders working to combat racism against people of African descent to connect across their different countries and regions. Some examples for ways to do this are to consistently monitor human rights news concerning people of African descent, and to share news stories that highlight the work of civil society. In addition, Experts who are in touch with members of civil society that are engaged in similar work can facilitate those direct connections.
3. Increase the accessibility of the Working Group to people who are directly impacted by human rights violations through improved use of available communications technology. Create and consistently update and maintain social media accounts; host webinars, video conferences and opportunities for civil society to immediately and directly engage with the Working Group; and remain responsive via e-mail and other forms of correspondence.

These three steps would make a great difference to those of us working on the ground to resist attacks, defend existing rights, and work toward the full realization of human rights for people of African descent, equipping us with concrete tools to continue our work as well as the support and attention of the international community.

Over the next three years, we hope that the WGEPAD will take steps to implement these suggestions. In addition to the human rights concerns and suggestions already named, we ask that the Working Group make the demand for reparatory justice for people of African descent a central part of its work over the coming years.

Thank you for this invitation to offer our perspective into this important conversation, and we look forward to being a continued partner to help the Working Group connect to grassroots organizations and individuals directly impacted by human rights violations in the United States.