

The United Nations Civil Society Network for the Human Rights of People of African Descent

1. Purpose

The success of the UN Permanent Forum of People of African Descent (PFPAD) will largely depend on how broadly and effectively it engages civil society. The primary purpose of this project is to develop a civil society network around PFPAD to facilitate maximum effective civil society engagement in its work.

The secondary purpose is to—broader than the mandate of PFPAD—institutionalize an international civil society network, and develop information technology, for the promotion of the human rights of people of African descent, which may be among the lasting outcomes of the UN International Decade for People of African Descent 2015-2024.

The project will serve the recent ambitions of the General Assembly, Human Rights Council, Secretary General, High Commissioner for Human Rights and the OHCHR—as expressed, for instance, in the [2020 report on civil society](#) by the High Commissioner for Human Rights—to promote the right to participation in public life, expand civil society space and the global constituency for human rights at the UN, including through innovative use of information technology.

The network, and the project for its establishment, will be developed in collaboration with the UN OHCHR, UNESCO, UNFPA, the UN Permanent Forum of People of African Descent, the UN Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent, the Special Rapporteur on Racism and CERD.

Scaling up the use of various technological and digital mediums as organizing tools will enhance what CSOs are able to do on the ground. It would also ensure more robust and relevant civil society feedback to inform the work of the UN. The advocacy landscape around the world is changing and for the UN system to maintain its relevance, it needs to evolve too.

The network and its infrastructure of information technology will help create greater synergy, coherence, and involvement of civil society for the human rights of people of African descent—not only in the Forum and at the UN more broadly, but across the world.

2. Objectives

The network will consist of two categories of civil society members who will perform different, but overlapping and mutually supportive functions in the network:

1. *Civil society organizations (CSOs)*—including, grassroots and community-based organizations without a legal standing in their countries as well as national human rights institutions, universities, research departments, centers, and associations—and their representatives.
2. *Individual experts* such as individual researchers, independent scholars, professors, lecturers, and lawyers.

One can describe and think of these two kinds of members as aspects of the network or networks within the network.

The objective of the entire network is to promote, advocate for and otherwise serve the human rights of people of African descent at the PFPAD, UN in general, and across the world. Both CSOs and experts play critical roles, and can and should work together, in fulfilling this objective of the network. However, given the functions of CSOs and experts they will also serve different (albeit overlapping) objectives in the network.

Among the objectives of the *CSO aspect* of the network are:

- To mobilize around, engage in, consult, and otherwise contribute to the PFPAD—including, in organizing its sessions and side-events and raising funds for civil society participation.
- To mobilize around, engage in, consult, and otherwise contribute to other UN mechanisms.
- To mobilize, protect, promote, and advocate for the human rights of people of African descent across the world.

Among the objectives of the *expert aspect* of the network are:

- To produce research-based advice, recommendations and knowledge for the UN, its member states, and civil society concerning the human rights of people of African descent.
- To consult, collaborate with and otherwise support civil society in making recommendations and arguments for the rights of people of African descent—especially for the PFPAD.
- To be a research-based resource for PFPAD and the drafting of the UN Declaration on the promotion and full respect of the human rights of people of African descent.
- To encourage, nurture and promote socially engaged scholarship on the human rights of people of African descent—and especially the research of African descendant scholars who in their countries often struggle with issues of discrimination, marginalization, lack of opportunities, mentorship, and other resources.
- To organize annual or bi-annual international conferences on the human rights of people of African descent in collaboration with UNESCO, the OHCHR, the PFPAD and other UN mechanisms—and perhaps also in collaboration with the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and the African Union (AU)¹ as African and African descendant intergovernmental organizations (that both encourage civil society engagement).

These annual or bi-annual conferences could be held at UNESCO in Paris or other locales such as the UN HQ in NYC, in the Caribbean or Africa (hosted by CARICOM or the AU). The conferences should facilitate collaborative efforts among experts and CSO representatives. This will further promote socially engaged scholarship as well as enable CSOs to tap into research-based expertise in the full spectrum of their advocacy work. These conferences could also be organized as preparatory platforms for input into PFPAD and other UN mechanisms as well as other civil society advocacy for the human rights of people of African descent.

¹ With its Agenda 2063 and its ambitions to include the African Diaspora as the 6th region of the AU.

3. Organization

Central to the project will be to develop a civil society database with information technology that will enable civil society organizations (CSOs), their representatives, and individual experts across the world to connect, collaborate, be informed about the PFPAD and other UN mechanisms and how to engage them.

To achieve this goal, there should be a searchable database, online platform and smartphone app developed with information about CSOs and individual experts across the world that are doing work for the human rights of people of African descent—including, name of CSO or individual expert, description of work (with search terms), region, country, and contact details (which can be made public or kept anonymous upon request).

This database should both have an online platform and a smart phone app that will serve two functions:

1. The creation of an international network of civil society organizations and individual experts for the human rights of people of African descent—that will allow civil society organizations and individual experts in the network to be informed about and engaged in the work of the Permanent Forum and other UN mechanisms.
2. Allow civil society organizations and their representatives as well as individual experts across the world to form internal (public or private/anonymous) networks and collaborations with each other based, for example, on common interests or regions—and with built-in technology that enables members of the network to chat with each other, create joint message boards, listservs, and perhaps other functions (if possible, with built-in multilingual and translation functions).

These two functions will allow civil society to both organize itself as well as be organized by the OHCHR around the PFPAD (and other UN mechanisms). It will also allow civil society around the world to form their own networks and collaborations for the human rights of people of African descent.

Developing such information technology will require investments in new technological capacity as well as in maintenance with regular information sharing, database updates and secure data storage. To be universally and equitably relevant to people of African

descent across the world—special considerations need to be made to reach people of African descent in such regions as around the Indian Ocean and in the Middle East.

For the network a Civil Society Committee could be set up in collaboration with the OHCHR. This Committee could help coordinate the UN activities of the network—such as help plan the PFPAD Sessions (including, side-events), raise funds for civil society participation, enhance civil society engagement, and raise public awareness for the human rights of people of African descent.

For example, such a committee could consist of 5-10 regionally and otherwise demographically diverse members—with a majority of CSO representatives, but at least two individual experts.

It would probably make most sense that the infrastructure and administration of this network be based at the OHCHR, but that the committee and members of the network are empowered to lead it, and fully and equitably engage with the UN system.

Given the need for extensive fundraising for such a network, the OHCHR and other relevant UN offices should enable hybrid funding and fund raising in collaboration with both state and non-state funders.

The network may favorably be seen as a pilot project that if successful may be duplicated and developed for civil society engagement across the UN.