



## Driving Change Towards Racial Justice and Equality:

### An Interview with Dr. Michael McEachrane<sup>1</sup>

August 31 marks the International Day for People of African Descent, now in its third year of observance. Created by the United Nations (UN), the International Day aims to celebrate the diversity and contributions of the Afro-descendant diaspora, end racial discrimination and exclusion around the world, and promote respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms for people of African descent.

On the occasion of the International Day for People of African Descent, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) New York Office interviewed Dr. [Michael McEachrane](#), Member and the Rapporteur of the United Nations Permanent Forum of People of African Descent (PFPAD). He sheds light on the persistent racial inequalities holding back this diaspora population and the UN's efforts to improve the well-being and advance human rights of people of African descent.

#### **1. Who are people of African descent? What disparities and obstacles are this population facing worldwide, for example, in terms of access to education, employment, health, and justice?**

*'People of African descent' is an expression that was first made popular by Pan-Africanists such as Marcus and Amy Garvey—which the International Day for People of African Descent commemorates—and basically refers to 'Black' people (broadly speaking) outside the continent of Africa and in North Africa. It is a population that worldwide is among the most discriminated against across areas of society such as those that you mention. For example, whereas people of African descent and Roma tend to be most discriminated against across Europe, in the Americas it tends to be people of African descent and indigenous people. These problems of racial discrimination and inequity in the enjoyment of rights across areas of society are so consistent that it is apt to describe them as 'systemic' and 'structural' problems in the social, institutional, and other organization of societies. Here it is critical to note too that racial discrimination, inequity, and stratification is not merely an issue at the domestic level, but also at the*

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*international level, and that the international and domestic levels often reflect each other. For example, whereas all so-called ‘developed countries’ (except for Japan) either are European or majority European-descendent, former settler colonial states, most so-called ‘least developed countries’ are in Africa.*

## **2. What was the genesis of the PFPAD’s formation, and what is its mandate?**

*The [Permanent Forum on People of African Descent](#) (PFPAD) was first mentioned in the programme of activities adopted by the General Assembly (GA) in 2014 for the International Decade for People of African Descent 2015-2024. It is one of the two most significant outcomes of this decade—the other one being the current drafting of the UN Declaration on the human rights of people of African descent. PFPAD is also among the outcomes of UN processes coming out of the 2001 World Conference Against Racism in Durban, South Africa.*

*PFPAD is a first-of-its-kind global platform and UN consultative mechanism for people of African descent and other relevant stakeholders to improve the safety, quality of life, and livelihoods of people of African descent. It consists of ten Expert Members elected by the GA and the Human Rights Council (HRC). PFPAD holds annual sessions for Member States, civil society representatives, and other stakeholders (every other year in Geneva and New York City), and reports annually to the HRC and GA.*

*PFPAD also offers advice, recommendations, and further support on people of African descent to other UN organs, programmes, funds, and agencies. Other aspects of PFPAD’s nine-point mandate are to contribute to the drafting of the above-mentioned declaration and examine the urgent need for disaggregated data collection for the better execution of public policies in relation to people of African descent.*

## **3. Although the PFPAD is quite a new platform, what would you consider some of its achievements to date? What does the PFPAD look to achieve in the coming year?**

*Although PFPAD is heavily underfunded with a minimal secretariat, and we the ten expert members receive no remuneration from the UN for our work, I am frankly amazed by PFPAD’s achievements to date. At the First Session in Geneva in December last year and our Second Session in New York in May-June this year, we had nearly 1,000 participants from across the world, most of them civil society representatives. Given that the UN has provided us with travel grants for merely 25 civil society representatives, the great turnout speaks to the hopes and expectations for the forum. The Second Session also had more than 60 side-events. It was beautiful to witness how people of African descent from across the world were using the space to congregate, exchange, and amplify their voices. The conversations at the first two sessions were vivid and on such key themes as the declaration, global reparatory justice, Pan-Africanism, sustainable development, an evidence-based approach to addressing systemic and structural racism, transnational migration, and health, well-being and intergenerational trauma. Perhaps more than anything else, the greatest achievement of the forum to date may be the extensive—and I*

*dare say, powerful—battery of recommendations that came out of the first two sessions. These recommendations are included in our first final report to the HRC and GA, which will be made public in September and presented in October to the HRC and GA by our Chair Epsy Campbell-Barr and Vice-Chair Alice Nkom.*

*In the coming year, we will focus on the implementation of the recommendations in the final report, regional consultations for the declaration (two of which will likely take place in Brazil and Brussels later this year), our first comprehensive submission for the declaration in March next year, and then the Third Session in Geneva in April next year. The declaration is a big deal, especially as the GA has already decided that it will be a first step towards a new binding agreement (i.e., a new piece of international law). PFPAD has already made some innovative recommendations for it, including a new human right to comprehensive recognition, monitoring, and address of systemic and structural racism. Apart from all this, we will be looking for some much-needed additional financial support and to grow the forum to become as institutionally sustainable, impactful, and empowering to people of African descent across the world as we can make it. As I like to say, PFPAD will only become as strong as we all make it.*

**4. How is the PFPAD addressing compound or intersecting forms of discrimination against people of African descent, for example, on account of age or gender?**

*Intersectionality is a critical point for PFPAD, both in terms of understanding various forms of racialized discrimination and inequities as they affect people of African descent and in terms of placing these within broader contexts of social and global justice. These perspectives have been reflected in the conversations coming out of the first two sessions, as well as in the recommendations of PFPAD, which are summarized in the first final report. We have Black Feminism and Critical Race Theory to thank for the profound insights of intersectionality, and we have the two waves of the Black Lives Matter movement to thank for popularizing intersectionality such that it has become common knowledge across the world. Today, it is hard to imagine any consequential understanding of the basic principles of justice, of equality and non-discrimination, racial or gender equality that is not intersectional. Several of my female colleagues on the forum—not least our Vice-Chair Alice Nkom, a pioneering lawyer and stalwart for LGBTQI+ rights in Cameroon—keep reminding us of this and the need to ensure the full inclusion in our work of women, the elderly, the disabled, gays, transsexuals, and others.*

**5. We are at the halfway point towards the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, and the outlook looks particularly grim. Progress on nearly one-third of SDG targets has stalled or reversed. As we near the SDG Summit in September, what can Member States do to ensure that Afro-descendants, as a discriminated group, are prioritized in SDG implementation?**

*Yes, the SDGs are beginning to look as much as a failure as the previous Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were. For example, SDG 10 on reducing inequality both within and among countries, which is the SDG most directly relevant to PFPAD, has*

*practically been ignored. Neither are people of African descent and indigenous people really included in the SDGs. The implementation of the SDGs is not living up to the truly urgent need to put caps on greenhouse emissions and unsustainable uses of natural resources. Nor is it living up to their promise of making global resource consumption and social, economic, and ecological development more equitable.*

*The world desperately needs humanity to come together, and work together, in a spirit of equality and non-discrimination. For this, recognizing, addressing, and eliminating racial discrimination, inequality, and stratification at both the domestic and international levels will be essential. Africans and people of African descent have historically been among the most victimized by racial injustices at the domestic and international levels, as well as at the forefront of struggles against them. This is no less true today. In this regard, I am hoping that the work of PFPAD will act as a clarion call.*

## **6. How has your own experience as a person of African descent shaped and informed your activism in this area?**

*My activism is informed by both a passion for justice, fairness, and viewing things from that perspective, as well as an embodied point of view as a person of African descent. I was born, grew up, and have spent most of my life in Sweden. My father is from Tobago and my mother from the Swedish Arctic in the very north of the country. During my childhood we lived in immigrant-dense public housing projects in Malmö in the south of Sweden. Sweden is very much an ethnoracial nation-state much like any other country in Europe, with its own share of ethnoracial exclusivity, contempt, and alienation. I have certainly experienced my share of that. My father passed on to me a certain fire around racial, colonial, and postcolonial injustices, the memory of our ancestors, and the nurturing strength of African diasporic historical, social, cultural, and intellectual resources. As someone who may be described as a light-skinned person of African descent who has spent most of his life in Sweden, nationalism and other forms of group-based chauvinism or narrow self-interest have never sat well with me. All this has shaped and informed my activism.*

### **About the Interviewee**

Dr. Michael McEachrane is a Member and the first Rapporteur of the UN Permanent Forum of People of African Descent and a Senior Visiting Researcher at the Raoul Wallenberg Institute of Human Rights. He has a PhD in Philosophy from Åbo Akademi University in Finland and has held positions at universities in the U.S., Canada, Trinidad & Tobago, Sweden, Germany, and the UK.

His current research focuses on postcolonial/decolonial perspectives on human rights, systemic and structural racial discrimination, and reparatory justice. He is a regular commentator on issues of race for international as well as Swedish media. He is also a seasoned universal human rights advocate who, among other things, has helped found several CSOs and served as an expert advisor to the UN around the International Decade for People of African Descent 2015-2024.