Statement by Verene Shepherd
CHAIR OF THE WORKING GROUP OF EXPERTS ON PEOPLE OF AFRICAN DESCENT

68th session of the General Assembly
Third Committee
Item # 67

4th November 2013
New York

Mr. President
Distinguished representatives
Ladies and Gentlemen
It is an honour for me to address you this morning on behalf of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent, formed in 2002 in the wake of the historic World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance held in Durban, South Africa in 2001.

Since then, many individuals and groups have been lobbying for a more serious attention to the Durban Declaration & Programme of Action, because it is a roadmap that can guide those of us who are committed to the elimination of all forms of intolerance and injustice, including historic injustices like native genocide, slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. It was the combined efforts of Africans, Americans and Europeans of conscience who understood the immorality of slavery and the slave trade, that rid the world of these inhumane systems in the 19th Century.

It is the same partnership of human rights defenders that African Diasporic people are hoping for in this Century, as we seek support for the Decade for People of African Descent, and try to figure out how to kick racism off-side; as we try to figure out how to recover black pride and dignity and be treated with respect; as we try to figure out how to emancipate ourselves from mental slavery and free our minds, as Marcus Garvey, followed by Bob Marley directed us to do; as we make a greater effort to produce indigenous knowledge systems and educate our people to understand their past; as we try to figure out how to forward in this generation more triumphantly.

The Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent and many NGOs and Civil Society groups as well as some States believe that dedicated attention needs to be paid to rid our world and our societies of the negative legacies of the past that have disfigured all of us, victims and perpetrators alike. We make attempts with various days like Emancipation Day on August 1; 12 October; the UNESCO-declared August 23 date to focus on the victims of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade in honour of Haiti and so on all occasions on which we recall the injustices of the past and commit never to repeat them.

We made an attempt in 2011 with the International Year for People of African Descent and we are trying to make another attempt with the Decade for People of African Descent. We are used to the declaration and implementation of these Decades at the United Nations; so the WGPAD is not asking the UN to set a precedent. All previous Decades focus on cross-cutting issues for people of African descent; but we need a dedicated Decade to focus on the special concerns of people of African descent.

Mr President, it is no secret that people of African descent have for centuries been victims of racism, racial discrimination and enslavement and of the denial by history of many of their rights. Indeed, the coincidence of the 10th anniversary of the DDPA with the International Year for People of African Descent offered a unique opportunity to redouble our efforts to promote the fight against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance that affect African people and their descendants in all regions of the globe. But despite the efforts undertaken by the international community, governments and local authorities, the scourge of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance continues to result in violations of human rights, suffering, disadvantage and violence.

Even today, what Edward Linenthal calls the “indigestible fishbone of slavery” continues to stick in our throats because of the presence of its legacies over 500 years on. The impact of
slavery and colonialism is nowhere more obvious than in the Americas and in the African continent itself.

For these reasons the Working Group of Experts believes that a Decade for People of African Descent is essential to raise awareness of the historic and contemporary experiences of this group. This need has been reiterated by numerous States, members of civil society and human rights mechanisms as well as CERD and the Special Rapporteur against racism.

At the request of the GA, in 2012 the Working Group elaborated the Draft Programme of Action for the Decade. The draft programme is firmly anchored in the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action (DDPA), the Outcome document of the Durban Review Conference, the political declaration of the high-level meeting of the General Assembly to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the DDPA (General Assembly resolution 66/3) and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD). It is also based on contributions received from Member States and other stakeholders.

As decided by the General Assembly the International Decade should be centred on the theme of **Recognition, Justice and Development.** This theme responds to the very particular needs facing people of African descent that I have already mentioned. **Recognition**, of people of African descent as a distinct group is a key initial step to increase their visibility and respect for their culture, identity, history and heritage. **Justice** is fundamental for addressing the historical and continued violations of rights faced by people of African descent, including their equal access to justice and equal protection of the law. **Development** both highlights the role that people of African descent have played in global development and pushes for human rights-based approaches to development to address the socio-economic and political inequality they face.

During the Decade particular attention should be paid to **multiple forms of discrimination** based on related grounds, such as sex, language, religion, social origin, birth or other status that continue to affect the most vulnerable people of African descent.

The Decade will be an opportunity to bring together actors at the international, regional and national levels, including UN bodies, and agencies, Member States, civil society and people of African descent. Activities should reach a wide audience through campaigns, events, research, adoption of legislation and policies. Such activities will not only promote equality for people of African descent but will benefit societies as a whole, helping to contribute to greater economic and social development outcomes, social justice, inclusion and positive intercultural relations.

States could develop and implement national action plans, coordinate with regional and international bodies and report to the OHCHR on the progress of the Decade’s goals. They could establish/strengthen national human rights mechanisms, resource and research centres to raise awareness, conduct studies on the human rights situation of people of African descent.

We welcome the invaluable advances that many States have already made towards the realisation of rights for people of African descent and hope that the present Session will be an opportunity to advance the discussions on this important process. I believe we must maintain the momentum that has been gathering speed since the World Conference on Racism in
Durban in 2001, the 10th anniversary of the DDPA and the International Year for People of African Descent in 2011. We believe, together with the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination that one of the major outputs of the International Decade should be the elaboration of United Nations Declaration on the human rights of people of African descent.

The Decade will be an opportunity to ensure the effective implementation of the crucial provisions laid out in the ICERD and the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action, focusing at the national level and helping the joint efforts of States, civil society and the international community in this long path towards true equality.

On behalf of the WGEPAD and all States, NGOs and Civil Society Groups that support the idea of the Decade, I invite the General Assembly to declare the year 2014-2023 the Decade for People of African Descent, with the programme elaborated by the WGPAD and with full financial support from the Member of States. A Decade is not only for people of African descent. The Decade will be an opportunity for us to promote equality, non-discrimination, the rule of law and democracy.

Finally, Mr President, the Working Group notes with appreciation the numerous steps and measures to respect, protect, promote and fulfil the rights of people of African descent that States have already taken and the invaluable role that other actors including NGOs have played. But I know you will agree with me that we still have work to be done and that we must collectively work to rid our world of the scourge of racism, human rights violations and other acts of intolerance that are linked to ethnicity and skin colour. A Decade will move us further along the creation of our ideal world and the Working Group asks for your support and urges you to stand on the right side of history.

I thank you