

**ADDRESS OF THE PATRON OF THE TMF AND THE AFRICA AND AFRICAN
DIASPORA CONFERENCE, THABO MBEKI, AT THE AFRICA AND AFRICAN
DIASPORA CONFERENCE: 24 OCTOBER 2021.**

Co-Conveners of Conference, Rev Dr Angelique Walker-Smith and Rev Frank Chikane;

Prof Achille Mbembe,

Minister Nathi Mthethwa,

Distinguished delegates,

Friends, ladies and gentlemen:

I am honoured to join our eminent Co-Conveners to welcome you to this important Conference. I must also thank everybody who was involved in conceiving of the very idea that all of us people of African descent should get together as we have done since yesterday.

I am certain that all of us are familiar with the objectives of Conference as explained in one of the documents circulated to all of us by the Co-Conveners.

Here I am referring specifically to this statement:

“The AAD Conference aims to be a working session and platform for open discussion to inform and develop strategies that will radically change the conditions in which Africa and the African Diaspora find themselves in. Key to this discussion is the return of Africa and people of African descent back to a competitive leadership position in science and technology, socio-economic, spiritual and political developments in the world.”

In addition, we will recall that we have also been challenged to adopt as our starting point the famous 1945 Fifth Pan African Conference, and therefore ask ourselves the question – what progress have we made towards achieving the objectives set by that Conference?

Specifically, the document I have cited says:

“Although there have been huge achievements in changing the conditions of Africans and Africans in the Diaspora since the 1945 Manchester Pan-African Conference, political developments affecting Africans and people of African descent globally in the last few years suggests that we are not winning the battle against underdevelopment, poverty and the old demon of racism.”

The statements I have just quoted make two vitally important points.

One of these is that people of African descent share socio-economic deprivation because of racist discrimination which affects them wherever they are.

The second is implied in the reference to the 1945 Pan African Conference. What is implied is that the fact of that shared burden must encourage us to unite in action, and thus use our collective strength to achieve our socio-economic upliftment as well as the competitive leadership position which has been mentioned.

I believe that as we discuss among ourselves what we could and should do in this regard, we must take on board the important work being done within the United Nations system on the very issue of people of African descent.

I know that as used by the UN system, the designation 'people of African descent' refers to those outside of Africa. However, I suggest that for our purposes we should include within this designation people within Africa. This is because in many instances what are identified as ills affecting the African Diaspora apply with equal force with the continental Africans.

Thus, for purposes of comparison, the situation of the continental African should be weighed against that of people elsewhere in the world. With this qualification in mind, bringing together Africans and the African Diaspora, I will then discuss what the UN says about people of African descent.

In 2013 the UN General Assembly proclaimed the period 2015 – 2024 as the International Decade for People of African Descent. It said that the theme of the decade would be - "People of African descent: recognition, justice and development".

Naturally, the objectives of the Decade must be of special interest to us. One of these for instance is:

'To strengthen national, regional and international action and cooperation in relation to the full enjoyment of economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights by people of African descent and their full and equal participation in all aspects of society...'

Further to this, all of us will recall that the 2001 'World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance', held in Durban in South Africa, took important decisions directly relevant to the purposes of our Conference. These are contained in its 'Durban Declaration and Programme of Action'.

One of these decisions led to the establishment of the 'Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent' (WGEPAD), which remains very active to this day.

As recently as December last year, the Working Group issued an important document entitled 'Operational Guidelines on the Inclusion of People of African Descent in the 2030 Agenda' – that is, the Sustainable Development Goals.

Consistent with the general thrust of what we have said in our own preparatory Conference documents, the Working Group says in these Guidelines:

'The Working Group provides compelling human rights arguments as to why there should be a specific focus on people of African descent as one of the population groups who face multiple and compounded forms of discrimination and should be prioritized to end inequalities and discrimination, "leave no one behind" and "reach the furthest behind first". They refer to international human rights law and available official and unofficial data...'

The Guideline goes on to say:

'The UN Working Group believes that the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda) and its Sustainable Developments Goals (SDGs) adopted by Heads of State and Government at the United Nations Summit in September 2015 (A/RES/70/1), provides a vehicle to address the racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, Afrophobia and related intolerance that people of African descent face every day around the world.'

The Guideline proceeds to deal with each of the 17 SDGs. Here, as an example, I would like to cite part of what the Guideline says with regard to the 1st and 3rd of the SDGs.

As Conference knows, SDG 1 says: END POVERTY IN ALL ITS FORMS EVERYWHERE.

In this regard the Guideline says, inter alia:

'States should disaggregate data about poverty and people of African Descent where data does not exist. Disaggregated data can inform on the extent of possible inequality and discrimination faced by people of African descent according to a Human Rights Based Approach to Data (HRBAD)² and in accordance with States' human rights obligations. Where data exists, baseline studies should be conducted to evaluate the disparities, understand the root causes and develop remedies to ensure the right to an adequate standard of living is realized for all.'

SDG 3 says: ENSURE HEALTHY LIFE AND PROMOTE WELL-BEING FOR ALL AT ALL AGES.

In this instance the Guideline says in part:

'States should provide reliable data regarding maternal mortality and proportion of births attended by skilled health personnel, within the Afro-descendant population. States should ensure that efforts aimed at decreasing maternal mortality are effective within the Afro-descendant population. Specific programmes to this effect should be implemented. States should support participatory qualitative data collection and analysis that allows communities to play a role in designing and implementing culturally sensitive health programs focused on decreasing maternal mortality.'

Beyond this, I must also cite another United Nations initiative. In August this year, the General Assembly adopted a Resolution which formally operationalised a body called the 'Permanent Forum on People of African Descent'.

The General assembly said the Forum was "a consultative mechanism for people of African descent and other relevant stakeholders as a platform for improving the safety and quality of life and livelihoods of people of African descent, as well as an advisory body to the Human Rights Council, in line with the programme of activities for the implementation of the International Decade for People of African Descent and in close coordination with existing mechanisms".

It went on to say, in part, that the mandate of the Forum is:

"to contribute to the full political, economic and social inclusion of people of African descent in the societies in which they live as equal citizens without discrimination of any kind and contribute to ensuring equal enjoyment of all human rights..."

I have quoted the relevant United Nations documents at some length because they provide important guidelines about some of what our Conference must do as "a working session and platform for open discussion to inform and develop strategies that will radically change the conditions in which Africa and the African Diaspora find themselves in."

One of the strengths of these documents is that they emanate from a very inclusive inter-governmental body, the United Nations Organisation. In principle, therefore, what they say constitutes a common commitment by all the UN Member States, and consequently all the countries which are home to people of African descent.

Another of these strengths is that the documents go beyond making general statements, important as these are. They go further to spell out the detailed programmes required to give practical effect to the general statements.

All this means that each of the specific contingents which together make up our Conference participants, and every fragment of the great humanity which constitutes the segment –

people of African descent – has the very legitimate possibility to intervene with our respective governments to encourage them to implement the action plans they have approved through the UN.

In this context I would suggest that our Conference should formally endorse Agenda 2030 – the SDG Programme of Action – as the common platform which unites us as a formation seeking the upliftment of people of African descent, globally.

Conference should also answer the important question – what should we do further to strengthen the institutions in the UN system dedicated to promoting the interest of people of African descent?

In addition we should recognise the reality that the fact that quite understandably the global community has had to focus on the fight to defeat the Covid-19 pandemic has reduced the focus on Agenda 2030.

We, people of African descent, would be among the greatest beneficiaries of a successful achievement of Agenda 2030. It therefore stands to reason that we owe it to ourselves to be among the most passionate activists for the sustained pursuit of the SDGs.

Our Conference should discuss what we should do in this regard.

As all of us know, the 17 SDGs constitute a truly ambitious programme which, as the Working Group of Experts on People of Africa Descent has said 'provides a vehicle to address the racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, Afrophobia and related intolerance that people of African descent face every day around the world.'

This is confirmed by the statement made in the Preamble of the UN document 'Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development', that:

'All countries and all stakeholders, acting in collaborative partnership, will implement this plan. We are resolved to free the human race from the tyranny of poverty and want and to heal and secure our planet. We are determined to take the bold and transformative steps which are urgently needed to shift the world on to a sustainable and resilient path. As we embark on this collective journey, we pledge that no one will be left behind.'

This solemn commitment both makes perfect sense and is very inspiring to all people of African descent everywhere, especially as it pledges that – no one will be left behind!

I would like to suggest that our Conference is faced with a particular strategic challenge with regard to all the matters I have mentioned relating to the UN programme which addresses

the needs of people of African descent. The challenge is to consider in what ways this defining programme can be extended to apply to the African continent as well.

In this regard we should recall the 2000 Millennium Declaration which made specific provisions for Africa in the context of the Millennium Development Goals under the heading – ‘Meeting the special needs of Africa’.

You will remember that the Declaration said: ‘We will support the consolidation of democracy in Africa and assist Africans in their struggle for lasting peace, poverty eradication and sustainable development, thereby bringing Africa into the mainstream of the world economy’ and therefore resolved:

- ‘to take special measures to address the challenges of poverty eradication and sustainable development in Africa...’

The imperative to meet the special needs of Africa, like those of the African Diaspora, remains to this day.

At this point we should perhaps step back in time to return to the question posed in the preparatory documents of our Conference – what progress have we as people of African descent achieved since the 1945 Pan African Conference?

But I believe that to answer this question properly, we must go further back to 1900 to an event with which you are very familiar. I am talking here about what, in my view, was in fact the very first Pan African Conference. The Conference closed with an Address ‘To the Nations of the World’ delivered by that outstanding African American Pan Africanist, W.E.B. du Bois.

As you know, this is how the Address began:

‘In the metropolis of the modern world, in this the closing year of the nineteenth century, there has been assembled a congress of men and women of African blood, to deliberate solemnly upon the present situation and outlook of the darker races of mankind. The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the colour line, the question as to how far differences of race-which show themselves chiefly in the colour of the skin and the texture of the hair-will hereafter be made the basis of denying to over half the world the right of sharing to utmost ability the opportunities and privileges of modern civilisation.’

We are now in the third decade of the twenty first century. The assessments by the United Nations of the socio-economic condition of people of African descent globally suggest that

we should repeat, after W.E.B. du Bois – the problem of the twenty first century is the problem of the colour line!

Like its predecessors during the twentieth century, the 5th Pan African Conference met in Manchester, England in 1945 precisely to address the problem of the colour line. One of the outstanding outcomes of the Conference was the adoption of the important document – ‘The Challenge to the Colonial Powers’ – which said, among others:

‘We are determined to be free. We want education. We want the right to earn a decent living; the right to express our thoughts and emotions, to adopt and create forms of beauty. We demand for Black Africa autonomy and independence, so far and no further than it is possible in this “One World” for groups and peoples to rule themselves subject to inevitable world unity and federation...

‘We condemn the monopoly of capital and the rule of private wealth and industry for private profit alone. We welcome economic democracy as the only real democracy. Therefore, we shall complain, appeal and arraign. We will make the world listen to the facts of our condition. We will fight in every way we can for freedom, democracy and social betterment.’

A companion document adopted by the same Conference was the ‘Declaration to the Colonial Workers, Farmers and Intellectuals’ which added:

‘The delegates of the Fifth Pan-African Congress believe in the right of all peoples to govern themselves. We affirm the right of all Colonial peoples to control their own destiny. All Colonies must be free from foreign imperialist control, whether political or economic. The peoples of the Colonies must have the right to elect their own governments, without restrictions from foreign powers. We say to the peoples of the Colonies that they must fight for these ends by all the means at their disposal.’

We must also recall that another important matter was raised at the Congress. This is the matter of the place of women in society.

One of the organisers of the Congress was a leading Pan Africanist in her day, Amy Ashwood Garvey. She chaired the very first session of the Congress, and on a later day opened a session by addressing the gender question. During this session she said:

“Very much has been written and spoken on the Negro, but for some reason very little has been said about the black woman. She has been shunted to the background to be a child-bearer. This has principally been her lot. ...”

Born in Jamaica, she together with another woman delegate also from Jamaica, Alma La Badie, ensured that the Congress Resolution on the West Indies addressed this matter specifically. Accordingly the Resolution included demands for:

- equal pay for equal work regardless of nationality, creed or race;
- removal of all disabilities affecting the employment of women, for example the removal of the bar on married women in the government services; and,
- modernisation of existing (laws on children born out of wedlock), with legal provisions for the registration of fathers, with adequate safeguards.

Unfortunately it was only the Resolution on the West Indies which included the important matter of the emancipation of women. However, this was a beginning we must follow.

The South African, Peter Abrahams, was one of leading delegates at the Fifth Pan African Conference and was chosen as its Publicity Secretary. In that capacity he wrote a document which he entitled 'The Congress in Perspective', and in which he said, inter alia:

'The Fifth Pan-African Congress was held in the Chorlton Town Hall, Manchester, from October 13th-21st, 1945. Some two hundred delegates holding mandates from political, social and trade union organisations, attended...This Congress, therefore, was the most representative yet assembled by African and peoples of African descent to plan and work for the liquidation of Imperialism....[It was attended by delegates from Africa, the Caribbean, the US and the UK.]

'We see, then, that the Colonial struggle has entered a new phase, a militant phase. It is important that the Left in Britain and other Imperialist countries should recognise this and aid it. But while militant, this phase is not chauvinistic, narrow or racial. It is positive and constructive. This is evident in the declarations made at the Fifth Pan-African Congress and the resolutions adopted by it, which are recorded in this report. It is a synthesis of experience and deliberate opinion that clearly reflects the political economic and social aspirations of Africans and peoples of African descent. Indeed it constitutes the programme upon which the struggle for national liberation and social emancipation of the Colonial and Coloured peoples will be based, a struggle which must be fought and won before we can establish the Century of the Common Man.'

As Peter Abrahams said, the decisions of the 1945 Pan African Conference reflected 'the political, economic and social aspirations of Africans and peoples of African descent.'

The question therefore is – what progress have we made in the struggle to realise these aspirations and thus respond effectively to the challenge of the problem of the colour-line?

Needless to say, the most outstanding outcome of the Fifth Pan African Congress was and is the independence of all the colonised countries in Africa and the Caribbean, except Western Sahara, and therefore the creation of the possibility for all the Africans concerned to enjoy and exercise their right to self-determination.

The reality, however, is that, to date, the exercise of that right has not succeeded to address all the political, economic and social aspirations which, according to Peter Abrahams, were expressed in the decisions of the Fifth Pan African Congress.

We must also add that in the period after 1945, the people of African descent in the United States, the African Americans, conducted a mighty struggle to end the pervasive racial discrimination which continued to persist. However, as is the case in Africa and the Caribbean, much remains to be done in the US to realise the 1945 aspirations. This also holds true with regard to the situation of people of African descent in Latin America, Europe and elsewhere in the world.

And thus do we, people of African descent, have an obligation to rally around and unite in action to achieve what the UN General Assembly described as 'full enjoyment of economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights by people of African descent and their full and equal participation in all aspects of society...'

To achieve our cohesion in this regard we must attach to ourselves the proud and common identity – the Pan Africanists! After all, the African American poet and scholar, Robert Chrisman has said:

'The Pan-African vision has as its basic premise that we the people of African descent throughout the globe constitute a common cultural and political community by virtue of our origin in Africa and common racial, social and economic oppression. It further maintains that political, economic and cultural unity is essential among all Africans, to bring about effective action for the liberation and progress of the African peoples and nations.'

Thank you for your attention and best wishes for the success of this Pan African Congress.