INTRODUCTION

In collaboration with the Alberta Black Advisory Council (ABAC), the Partnership for Research with African Newcomers (PRAN) hosted Moving Forward: Canada and the **United Nations' International Decade for People of African Descent (UNPAD)**, a two-day conference on October 2 and 3, 2024, held at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta.

Declared in 2014 by the UN General Assembly, UNPAD 2015-2024 addressed the themes of recognition, justice, and development. The *Moving Forward* conference provided a platform to critically reflect on Canada's and Alberta's progress on key UNPAD commitments, identify gaps and priorities, and discuss concrete actions to further these efforts.

Day one featured six panels composed of experts from academic and community-based organizations. Each panel focused on a specific UNPAD-related theme: the criminal justice system, economic empowerment, health, anti-Black racism, or immigrant integration. Panelists assessed progress, gaps, and future priorities. **Day two** facilitated small group activities and explored next steps.

Moving Forward participants included community and thought leaders from government, academia, and community organizations from across Alberta and Canada.

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DAY ONE PANELS

Panel 1: Overrepresentation of Black Canadians in the Justice System

Increased pressure related to the 2020 murder of George Floyd propelled concerns about systemic issues in the criminal justice system into the mainstream. Panelists highlighted policing-related progress, including apologies for past harms, efforts to work with marginalized communities, and cooperative data sharing with researchers.

Identified gaps included a lack of cultural responsiveness and support for racialized victims-survivors and their families, minimal representation of racialized people in positions of power, and limited data from courts and the correctional system. Black individuals are disproportionately impacted by police actions, for example, unwarranted traffic stops, use of force, and use of deadly force.

Panelists identified several potential actions to continue with progress: increased transparency in judicial appointments, programming to decrease school dropout rates, hiring more diverse educators, stricter accountability for officers who cause harm, raising police recruitment standards, and police education reform.

Panel 2: Economic Empowerment I (Poverty Reduction)

Panelists note several examples of recent, economic-related progress for Black Canadians. For example, an increase in resources to advance capacity building and housing initiatives, institutional commitments to hiring Black

professionals, and the use of systems thinking to address systemic problems.

Key outstanding gaps include the overrepresentation of Black Canadians in precarious forms of work, low rates of homeownership, and Black immigrants' experiences of deskilling and underemployment.

Pathways to moving forward should promote employment equity and unionization in sectors where Black people are overrepresented, address disparities in retirement income, and support Black children in school.

Panel 3: Economic Empowerment II (Investing in Entrepreneurship)

Recent progress observed by panelists included an increase in entrepreneur funding and capital-raising opportunities, provincially and federally.

Persistent systemic barriers continue to hinder new Black entrepreneurs. These barriers include financial literacy, a deficit of mentorship, limited social and economic capital, insufficient collaboration between Black entrepreneurs and researchers, and limited network leveraging.

Panelists identified several positive actions to further advance progress: entrepreneur training and development, youth initiatives to foster entrepreneurial skills, and increased mentorship opportunities. Panelists also addressed the need to remove institutional barriers and facilitate pathways to success for improved access and support for entrepreneurs.

DAY ONE PANELS

Panel 4: Addressing Anti-Black Racism & Promoting ABR Frameworks

Recent initiatives to address anti-Black racism have gained momentum, with many institutions incorporating anti-racism into their EDI policies. Examples include the City of Toronto's Confronting Anti-Black Racism Unit and NorQuest's Anti-Racism toolkit and new formal reporting mechanism.

Racism continues to be systemic and permeates even those institutions and policies designed to redress it. Panelists highlighted the lack of inclusive, intersectional frameworks, the burden of labour on racialized women, and the potential for frameworks to become performative.

Panelists underlined the importance of practicing reflexivity, dismantling oppression, and combating the vestiges of colonialism. They emphasized the use of critical and reflexive lenses to address lateral violence and examine relationships between Black and other racialized communities. Pathways moving forward require a shift from thinking of anti-Black racism as something to do to being a way of life.

Panel 5: Health and Mental Health issues among people of African descent

Awareness of the mental health needs of Black Canadians and funding to support health equity has grown, alongside recognition of linkages between mental health and racism. Organizations like the Alberta Network for Black Therapists contribute to decreasing stigma in Black/African communities, leading to increased service access.

Many Black Canadians remain underserved, including the elderly, neurodiverse/disabled people, young children, and members of the Black queer community. Medical training in diseases that disproportionally impact Black patients is inadequate; Black/African descent people have a lower life expectancy, higher pregnancy mortality rate, and are more likely to die from COVID-19.

Panelists identified several pathways forward, including disaggregated health data, increased

screening for racialized patients, targeted public health campaigns, normalization of mental health interventions for children, and support for community-based approaches for healing. Overall, successful mental health and health interventions require a systemic approach that resolves institutionalized racism and issues in the justice and education systems.

Panel 6: Supporting Immigrant Transition and Integration

Recently, Canada has experienced an organizational and cultural shift. Municipalities and organizations have implemented EDI policies or frameworks, negative narratives of Black people appear to be decreasing, hiring of Black professionals has increased, and funding for immigrant-serving organizations has increased.

Discrimination against Black people and African immigrants remains significant, especially in the areas of education, employment, healthcare, and housing/renting, further compounded by the deficit of culturally relevant and adaptive services in these areas. Income inequality, wage equity, and underrepresentation in decision-making remain critical issues.

Panelists identified several next steps to improve conditions and integration for newcomers, including expanded service provision upon arrival, especially in education, mental health, housing, and programs for men.

DAY TWO

Facilitated by Wayne Thomas and supported by 14 trained graduate students from the University of Alberta, the second day utilized human-centered design methods to foster meaningful discussion and brainstorming via roundtable discussions. Each of the six roundtables focused on one key theme with support from facilitators and notetakers. Using the panel discussions from day one and lived experiences, the roundtables identified priority areas and strategies to address ongoing inequities experienced by Black Albertans and Black Canadians. This collaborative approach fostered a sense of shared responsibility in addressing the challenges within their communities.

Participants received an overview of the Iceberg Model, a systemic design framework comprising four layers: events, patterns, systemic structures, and mental models. The first phase illuminated common barriers and obstacles to meaningful change, while the Systemic Structures Phase identified potential causes of the patterns observed. In the final phase, participants examined mental models—the attitudes, mindsets, beliefs, morals, and values—that prevent meaningful change and uphold the status quo.

Participants reflected on how these models influence perceptions and behaviours, shaping responses to the challenges discussed. During a "gallery walk", participants visited other groups, shared ideas, and discussed observations. Next, groups generated "How Might We" (HMW) questions to prompt creative brainstorming, focusing on key aspects and leverage points of the challenge. In the final brainstorming stage, participants focused on ideation. They generated responses to their HMW questions to identify potential solutions to the challenges identified.

DAY TWO ROUNDTABLES

Overrepresentation in the Justice System

Inequities in the criminal justice system affecting Black individuals include higher arrest rates, harsher sentencing, racial profiling, and recidivism. Participants connected overrepresentation to negative stereotypes and dehumanization, a product of colonialism and the trans-Atlantic slave trade. They highlighted reintegration challenges, worsened by economic barriers and lack of culturally responsive support, alongside prioritizing punishment over rehabilitation. Other issues discussed included police accountability, limited Black representation in decision-making positions, and insufficient justice system data.

Economic Empowerment I (Poverty Reduction)

The roundtable on poverty reduction examined the barriers that hinder access to quality employment, financial literacy, and entrepreneurship opportunities. Participants highlighted systemic inequalities that perpetuate poverty, including discrimination in hiring practices and limited access to capital for Black entrepreneurs. Targeted initiatives, such as job training programs, financial education, and community investment, were emphasized as essential for breaking the cycle of poverty and promoting sustainable economic growth.

Economic Empowerment II (Investing in Entrepreneurship)

Minimal representation in decision-making and limited access to capital, intergenerational wealth, and government support hinder Black entrepreneurship. These challenges, compounded with "employee mindsets", decreased networking opportunities, and balancing family responsibilities, contribute to rising business failure rates within the Black community, particularly among women. The roundtable highlighted key strategies to address these issues, including mentorship, community support, and policy advocacy to improve capital access and empower women entrepreneurs.

Addressing Anti-Black Racism and Promoting ABR Frameworks

The roundtable discussed overt racial discrimination, their experiences of repeated microaggressions, and how the mistake of one individual becomes a collective failure. Participants noted that white fragility makes conversations about racism awkward. Simultaneously, resistance to the implementation of anti-Black racism frameworks persists as some people continue to deny the very existence of racism. Real change relies on political will, while pushback from whiteness remains a significant challenge. Inclusion is often framed within a white-centric system, addressing only superficial issues and maintaining the status quo.

### Immigrant Transition and Integration

The roundtable discussed challenges newcomers face in adapting to Canada, including limited access to migration information, deskilling, underemployment, and systemic barriers like Canadian work experience requirements. Participants stressed the need for a more inclusive environment that reduces social isolation, combats discrimination, and supports newcomers in finding employment. Recommendations included targeted transition programs, improved access to resources, and increased awareness of immigrants' contributions to society.

Health and Mental Health

Systemic racialized perceptions (i.e. pain thresholds of Black patients), communication barriers, limited culturally sensitive and representative health practitioners, and the prioritization of Western approaches to healing contribute to poor health outcomes and reluctance to access services among Black individuals. Participants emphasized the need for culturally competent care, increased mental health funding, and a holistic approach to health that incorporates physical and mental well-being.

PANELISTS
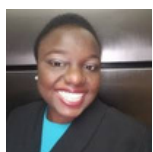
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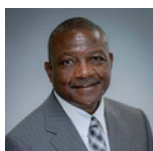**Dr. Linda Kongnetiman-Pansa**
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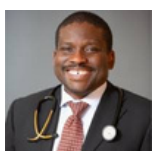*Bow Valley College*

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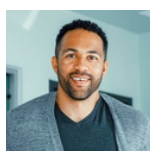Professor
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Mr. Enyinnah Okere
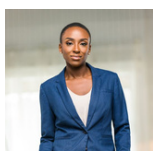COO/Chief of Staf
Edmonton Police Services

Dr. Temitope Oriola
Associate Dean (Undergrad)
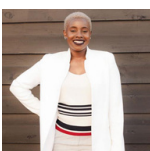*Faculty of Arts, University of Alberta*

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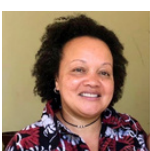CEO and Founder
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