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PEOPLE OF AFRICAN DESCENT: PROGRESS AND CHALLENGES

For centuries, people of African descent living in the African Diaspora, were marginalized as part of the legacy of slavery and colonialism. There is a growing consensus that racism and racial discrimination have caused people of African descent to be relegated in many aspects of public life, they have suffered exclusion and poverty and are often “invisible” in official statistics. There has been progress but the situation persists, to varying degrees, in many parts of the world.

The factors that lead to poverty among people of African descent are mainly structural. Discrimination is apparent in the unequal access these groups have to basic services. People of African descent are often disadvantaged, for example, in access to education, health-care, markets, loans and technology.

Enjoyment of human rights interlinked

The full exercise of human rights by people of African descent depends significantly on their access to education which is fundamental to human development. A combination of greater access to education, completion of each phase of education and higher-quality teaching is not only necessary to guarantee basic social rights, but also has a positive effect on economic growth and equity, by building up human capital, improving the health of the population and strengthening society in general.

Social investment in childhood and youth as a strategy to combat poverty, has been proposed as an approach that could help prevent the continued exclusion of a new generation of people of African descent from the benefits of economic, social and human development.

The discrimination faced by people of African descent is now receiving greater attention and as a result, Afro-descendant groups have increasingly made their voices heard in the policy process.

The impact of the 2001 World Conference against Racism on people of African descent, particularly in the Latin American and Caribbean region, was substantial. The World Conference created a momentum that helped people of African descent articulate their concerns and rally support. Furthermore, it generated a movement advocating for the promotion and protection of their human rights that has helped strengthen grassroots campaigns around the world.

On an inter-governmental level, the former United Nations Commission on Human Rights created the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent and the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, the Independent Expert on minority issues and the Committee on the Elimination of racial discrimination, which have consistently taken up Afro-descendant issues.



A family of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Rio Sucio, Colombia

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Empowerment policies

At the national level, many countries have amended their constitutions to include clearer references to their multicultural characters. Some States have created national institutions to promote racial equality. In some countries, legislation has been adopted, which includes affirmative action policies for education, targeted health programs and other initiatives of interest to people of African descent.

Although these processes have resulted in more visibility for people of African descent and to some extent have increased their empowerment, there are still problems ensuring they are not excluded from fully exercising their human rights. The current global economic crisis which threatens to undermine access to work, affordable food and housing, health care and education is a serious risk to the situation of people of African descent, as well as that of all marginalized and vulnerable groups.

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