

DURBAN REVIEW CONFERENCE
SIDE EVENT

**DISCRIMINATION AND POVERTY:
EXCLUSION AND SOLUTIONS IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM**

Speech by Mr. Githu Muigai
UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination,
xenophobia and related intolerance

21 April 2009

Ambassador Alves,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to be amongst you today. I would like to thank the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, in particular its Research and Right to Development Division, for this invitation. The programme of side events in the Durban Review Conference is allowing us to carry out in-depth discussions on some of the challenges in the fight against racism worldwide and I am privileged to have the possibility of attending a number of such events.

I want to highlight that the question of poverty and racism is undoubtedly one of the central themes I want to explore in my role as Special Rapporteur. I am convinced that some of the key challenges we face in our efforts to eliminate racism are closely associated to the interplay of race and poverty. These links have to be further analyzed and better understood in order to allow for effective policymaking. In view of the centrality of this issue, I decided to dedicate my first thematic report to the Human Rights Council to carry out an in-depth assessment of poverty and racism. This report will be presented at the 11th session of the Council, in June. In this regard, I am particularly happy to participate in this discussion today, which is a timely opportunity for me to learn from the experts we have around the table and will allow me to reflect on how to really improve my forthcoming report and its follow-up.

Ladies and Gentleman,

Let us start by stating clearly the terms of the discussion. In my view, a central dimension of the fight against racism lies around the overlap between two key social indicators: class and race or ethnicity. In most, if not all countries in the world, those segments of the population that are more socio-economically vulnerable are disproportionate composed of racial or ethnic minorities. In other words, members of minorities are more likely to be poor than the rest of the population.

This situation is often a result of historical legacies, such as slavery, which served not only to de-humanize an entire people, but also created structural imbalances that remain today. However, the overlap of poverty and race is also a direct consequence of inaction of Governments in redressing these unjust imbalances. The main implication insofar as policy strategies are concerned is that specific measures need to

be adopted if we are to overcome these problems.

First, it is essential that poverty reduction strategies be based on non-discrimination provisions of human rights law. In this regard, the general comment on non-discrimination that is currently being drafted by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights will provide us with valuable guidelines as to how non-discrimination should inform public policy accordingly.

Second, while non-discrimination is essential to allow us not to repeat the mistakes of the past, specific actions may be needed to redress historical legacies in places where they still exist. The need for such special measures has already been affirmed by Article 1.4 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. As ICERD clearly states, these measures should not, as a consequence, lead to the maintenance of separate rights for different racial groups and shall not be continued after the objectives for which they were taken have been achieved

Ladies and gentleman,

I am convinced that by concentrating our actions along these two dimensions we will be able to develop innovative and effective public policies that will go to the heart of problems related to racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. Governments have the responsibility to develop a series of actions to take into account the double trap of poverty of racism. Furthermore, a constant evaluation of the racial impact of any public policy should be carried out, allowing us to correct at early stages problems that could lead to further structural disparities.

Let me conclude by reading an appropriate quote by Martin Luther King:

“Let us be dissatisfied until the tragic walls that separate the outer city of wealth and comfort and the inner city of poverty and despair shall be crushed by the battering rams of the forces of justice. [...] Let us be dissatisfied until integration is not seen as a problem but as an opportunity to participate in the beauty of diversity. Let us be dissatisfied until men and women, however black they may be, will be judged on the basis of the content of their character and not on the basis of the color of their skin. Let us be dissatisfied”

Thank you very much.