

INTERNATIONAL YEAR FOR PEOPLE OF AFRICAN DESCENT

A Year Dedicated to People of African Descent

“This International Year offers a unique opportunity to redouble our efforts to fight against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance that affect people of African descent everywhere.”
(Navi Pillay, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights)

An estimated 150 million people who identify themselves as being of African descent live in Latin America and the Caribbean. Many millions more live in other parts of the world, outside of the African continent. In proclaiming this International Year, the international community is recognising that people of African descent represent a distinct sector of society whose human rights must be promoted and protected.

People of African descent are acknowledged in the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action¹ as a specific victim group who continue to suffer discrimination as the historic legacy of the transatlantic slave trade. Even Afro-descendants who are not directly descended from slaves face the racism and discrimination that still persist today, generations after the slave trade ended.

Towards Righting Past Wrongs

“This is the year to recognise the role of people of African descent in global development and to discuss justice for current and past acts of discrimination that have lead to the situation today”
(Mirjana Najcevska, Chairperson, UN Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent)

The obscene racism which was the basis of the slave trade and colonisation still resonates today. It manifests itself in a variety of ways, sometimes subtly, sometimes unconsciously, as bias against people with darker skin.

To find ways to combat such racism, the former UN Commission on Human Rights created the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent which is tasked with recommending measures to foster equal rights and opportunities. It was created in 2001 to examine the situation and conditions of Africans and people of African descent in order to address the discrimination that they face.

The Working Group has found that some of the most important challenges facing people of African descent relate to the administration of justice and to their access to education, employment, health and housing.

In some countries, although they may be a minority, people of African descent constitute a disproportionately high percentage of the prison inmate population and receive harsher sentences than those of the predominant ethnicity. Racial profiling² - which results in the systematic targeting of persons of African descent by law enforcement officers – has created and perpetuated severe stigmatization and stereotyping of Afro-descendants as having a propensity to criminality.

In many countries with a large Afro-descendant population, this sector of society has the least access to, and lowest levels of, education. Evidence shows that when people of African descent have greater access to education they are better placed to participate more equally in all political, economic and cultural aspects of society, as well as in the advancement and economic development of their countries. Similarly, they are better positioned to defend their own interests.

The Working Group has also found that Afro-descendants suffer from unemployment at a higher level than other sectors of the societies in which they live and from restricted access to health and housing, often due to structural discrimination that is embedded within their societies.

¹ Adopted at the 2001 World Conference against Racism in Durban, South Africa, the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action is a comprehensive, action-oriented document that proposes concrete measures to combat racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance.

² The Durban Declaration and Programme of Action defines racial profiling as “the practice of police and other law enforcement officers relying, to any degree, on race, colour, descent or national or ethnic origin as the basis for subjecting persons to investigatory activities or for determining whether an individual is engaged in criminal activity.”

The Working Group emphasises that the collection of data disaggregated on the basis of ethnicity is an important aspect of addressing Afro-descendants' human rights issues. Government policy to address racism and discrimination can not be correctly formulated, much less implemented, if such information is not available. Nor can progress be measured.

A Global Campaign

"The International Year must become a milestone in the on-going campaign to advance the rights of people of African descent. It deserves to be accompanied by activities that fire the imagination, enhance our understanding of the situation of people of African descent and are a catalyst for real and positive change in the daily lives of the millions of people around the world."

(Navi Pillay, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights)

The UN General Assembly proclaimed 2011 as the International Year for People of African Descent³ citing the need to strengthen national actions and regional and international cooperation to ensure that people of African descent fully enjoy economic, cultural, social, civil and political rights. The Year further aims to advance the integration of people of African descent into all political, economic, social and cultural aspects of society, and to promote a greater knowledge of and respect for their diverse heritage and culture. The International Year for People of African Descent was launched on Human Rights Day, 10 December 2010, by the UN Secretary General.

The main objective of the Year is to raise awareness of the challenges facing people of African descent. It is hoped that the Year will foster multi-partner discussions that will arrive at proposals for solutions. Activities could help raise the capacity of people of African descent and those working on this human rights issue.

During 2011 a number of international events will be held. On 2 March in Geneva, a panel discussion with the participation of Member States and civil society will address the human rights concerns of people of African descent during the high level segment of the UN Human Rights Council. That same week, on 7 March, a full day's discussion will be held by the Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, also meeting in Geneva. This discussion will serve to raise awareness of the causes and consequences of discrimination against people of African descent, and to promote visibility of their diverse heritage and culture. Also in March, the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent will discuss ways to contextualize the International Year, illustrating why such a Year is necessary. This meeting will be held in Geneva from 28 March to 1 April. The International Year will close with the convening of a high-level debate on the achievements of the goals and objectives of the Year, to be held in New York in September during the regular session of the UN General Assembly.

A coalition of civil society organizations formed to promote the Year will hold memorials, seminars, cultural events and other activities around the world to raise awareness of the contribution of African descendants to our world heritage while recognising the obstacles that must still be overcome. Everyone, and in particular people of African descent themselves, are encouraged to undertake activities to contribute to the success of the Year.

The UN General Assembly resolution on the International Year encourages Member States and all relevant donors to contribute funds for activities during the Year.

Visit the webpage on the Working Group of Expert on People of African Descent:

<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/racism/groups/african/4african.htm>

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³ In resolution 64/169