***COMMITTEE ON THE ELIMINATION OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION (CERD) –Consultation with the Committee***

***‘Joining Hands to End Racial Discrimination’***

***91st Session***

***VENEZUELA (Civil Society)***

**Key facts: explore innovative ways to work with civil society organisations.**

**Guiding Questions:**

1. **What are the key challenges and issues of racial discrimination in your country today and how do you work to address them?**

**Overview**

At present, Venezuela is facing complex issues in regards to structural racial discrimination:

* *Poor transportation system deprives equal opportunities:* Afro-descendants in Venezuelans rural areas, inhabit areas which are former plantations that are isolated from urban centres. Similarly, Afro-descendants also constitute a large segment of the urban population concentrated in shanty towns (known in Venezuela as barrios) of the main cities. In both cases, ill-planned, deteriorated, high priced bus routes mean that Afro-Venezuelan communities spend a large part of their incomes on transportation fares. Poor transportation networks result in the unequal ability to access basic human needs. This is crucial for understanding the lack of access to high-quality education, employment, healthcare, food, and other necessities.
* *Access to clean, drinkable water is a pressing issue in Afro-Venezuelan communities:* The elderly and children are especially vulnerable to health-related conditions. This issue is acute in some Afro-Venezuelan villages of the northern part of the country which lack sewage systems. Additionally, the lack of water also affects households that rely on agricultural activities for their livelihoods, such as the case of Afro-Venezuelan populations located in Venezuela’s coastal areas.
* *School dropouts due to racism and low performance at academic institutions.*School teachers fail to acknowledge and address racism and colourism in the classroom. There are instances that show the discriminatory practices of some teachers and their lack of training as they misidentify Afro-Venezuelan children’s colorist practices as banal acts of ‘bullying’. This conceals complex issues of internalised negative ideas of blackness within the coastal part of the country. This conceals one aspect of the nature of racism as a lived experience from an early age. Additionally, Afro-Venezuelan students of darker complexions face harsher punishments –from suspensions to expulsion- for defending themselves against racial discrimination.
* *Criminalisation of urban poverty targets Afro-Venezuelans:* The outskirts of the urban cities are largely marginalised, violent and inhabited by Afro-descendants. Since July 2015, the State has launched a controversial programme called ‘Operation to Liberate and Protect the People’ that targets shanty towns and low-income areas to curb the high levels of criminal, gun-related violence in the country. The current anti-crime raids involve arbitrary detentions and extrajudicial killings. The latter, are presented as the deaths of alleged criminals who have been gunned down in confrontations with police officers, although the reports fail to mention police casualties. These military and police operations expose the troubling racialization of criminality which is interlinked with poverty and are happening within a context of impunity within which police officers are acting. The high rates of detentions and killings also exposes the perception that the lives of the Afro-descendent marginalised youth are ‘disposable’.
* *Disproportionate incarceration of Afro-Venezuelan males.* The judiciary system in the country is overrepresented by young Afro-Venezuelan males. As explained above, they are more likely to be stopped, searched, imprisoned by petty offences and killed by police forces in higher proportions than their white/mestizo counterparts.

*How do we work to address this?*

My most recent experience involved working on awareness campaigns about racism and violence alongside grassroots Afro-Venezuelan organisations: Cimarrones de Osma (Osma’s Marrons), Afro-Cumbes Todasana and Hip-Hop in Movement. We organised mini-concerts and workshops for the Osma community in Vargas State, Venezuela. For instance, in October 2015, police forces executed 2 Afrodescendent males who were involved in drug trafficking in Caruao and Todasana villages. The testimony of locals contradicted the police version, which reported that they were killed in ‘confrontation’. These killings raised alarms among people of this Afro-descendant area. And some young Afro-descendant males in Osma were stopped and searched and received death threats. In an effort to encourage young males to stay out of violence and drugs, we organised and managed a mini-concert and workshops about hip-hop. Hip-hop is popular among the youth in this area, and thus the workshop targeted the local youth to express their creativity and lived experiences, and also to reflect on the negative representation of afro-descendent males in the media.

**2. What has been your experience, as civil society, of engaging with the Committee on the elimination of racial discrimination for greater impact on the ground?**

The ways in which grassroots movements engage the ideas espoused by the CERD has been through translating abstract concepts such as human rights into a meaningful language for Afro-Venezuelans to know their rights. Informal gatherings, workshops with teachers and parents in public schools, and the use community media are platforms are spaces which people have used to identify their personal experiences in connection to racial discrimination. However, by listening to people’s past life experiences and understanding their personal process, many cases are considered as trivial, dismissed and go unreported by the very people who experience them, due to the fear of mockery. Mostly due to the normalisation of racial discrimination in Venezuela by the victims and those who practice it.

Therefore, participating in grassroots movements on the coastal part of Venezuela has provided me with the opportunity to create awareness about rights to self-identification and raise awareness about how systemic racial discrimination works. The main objective has been to ensure that each person who participates understands what it is, how they are discriminated and what his or her rights are.

**3. How can the Committee on the elimination of racial discrimination improve and enhance its engagement with civil society and its work on racial discrimination for greater impact on the ground?**

Is important that any effort to address racial discrimination in Venezuela considers the following:

**In 2011 in the National census conducted by the National Institute of Statistics, determined that 95.2% of the population self-identified with either whiteness or racial intermediate categories. [49.1% as Blanco (white) and 51.1% *Moreno* (brown) INE, 2014].** **Less than 4% of the population self–identified with blackness**.

The negative representation of blackness in the national history, the narratives of race-mixture which undervalued black/African identity, and the lack of ethnic/racial data, among other factors, complicate how to accurately identify the Afro-Venezuelan population. This is mainly because past distortions still have a personal impact on how people [dis]associate from black identities in public surveys, and also on policy implications. It is not only difficult to prove (with data) the ongoing racial disparities, but also to design policies that specifically address the realities of Afro-Venezuelans.

Therefore, the initial efforts should prioritise educational tools for understanding race and Afrodescendencia as an uplifting, positive project, which in the long term have an effect in addressing racial discrimination:

* *Understanding of race and what race does*

In Venezuela, race is seen as a biologically invalid category and a highly negative word due to its historic relation with racism and segregation. Additionally, race is often seen as dangerous and socially divisive when it is used by activists and grassroots organisations who want to interrogate the racial logics within the structures of power/privilege in the country. However, there is little initiative to discuss the question ‘what does race do?’ On the one hand, a large portion of the population enforces and normalises discriminatory practices and anti-blackness which are transmitted through trivial interactions. On the other hand, a high number of the population have learned and interiorised –since colonial times- negative ideas of blackness and African origins. As a result, most of the blame is put onto the victim and commonly labelled as ‘self-hate’ among Afro-descendants. However, what is often overlooked is the greater context of social, political and historical conditions that produced the ways in which a racialized Afro-descendant person can self-identify in Venezuela.

*2. Fostering and embracing a black/ Afro descendent consciousness.*

As discussed above, some issues of disengaging from categories of black identity in official surveys are tied to self-image. Therefore, treating and overcoming the interiorised negative self-image amongst Afro-Venezuelans should include spaces for self-discovery.

Circulating knowledge about our black/African roots, our history and our ethnic heritage, will encourage more Afro-Venezuelans to embrace a positive racial identity and can express such views in public surveys. Venezuela, as in the case of most Latin American countries, purported the hegemonic ideology of mestizaje (racial mixture between Africans, Amerindians and Europeans) and imposed one single view about how people can think and how people should see themselves in terms of race -‘we are all mixed-race’. This ideology had the effect of ‘whitening away’ the African contributions and black identity and inhibited racialized populations’ consciousness about race and who they are.

Therefore, it is important to develop participatory methodologies within spaces in which Afro-Venezuelans can come together and engage in a process of understanding ‘who one is’ and reinforce a positive black/African descent consciousness from an early age. My own research in rural coastal Venezuela reveals that Afro-Venezuelans in coastal areas use the street as a site of learning. This means that people are more receptive and willing to critically discuss topics in large informal gatherings in the streets of their area of residence, when this sometimes involves screen viewings.

These informal projects have involved teaching the community how to use media equipment, record and organise public screenings about the material in which they appear. Therefore, the message is created by the community and delivered to the community. This has been an effective way of getting the message across when compared with formal workshops designed with top-down approaches and abstract definitions.