

DEVELOPMENT: Opportunities and challenges in access to development and economic and social rights

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Excellencies,

Distinguished Delegates,

Members of Civil Society,

Fellow Members,

Colleagues,

An intersectional and wholistic approach to Development

Development is one of the three pillars under the International Decade for People of African Descent. We, the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent, have highlighted in our multiple reports and through country visits how people of African descent continue to suffer from many multiple, aggravated, and intersecting forms of discrimination that lead to adverse outcomes in health, housing, education, employment, intergenerational wealth transfer, and other areas. Therefore, our approach to Development must be wholistic and intersectional in nature. Without recognition of people and justice in the delivery of programs, including special measures, there can be no meaningful and transformative development for people of African descent that get at the root cause of disparities and adverse outcomes.

Our report to the UN Human Rights Council of *Leaving no one behind: people of African descent and the Sustainable Development Goals*, has drawn a clear connection between poverty and structural racism. We concluded that inequalities are deeply entrenched in structural barriers that intersect and reinforce each other. We also draw a connection between race, gender, class, and other identities with poverty. And our report *on COVID 19, systemic racism and global protests* further highlighted how structural racism exacerbated inequality in access to

health care and treatment, thereby leading to further racial disparities in health outcomes. And our most recent report on *Children of African descent* discussed racial discrimination and inequality faced by children of African descent in all areas of life, especially when it comes to a child's development and ability to access opportunities. In all these thematic dimensions, a racialized analysis is therefore central when looking at the historical underpinnings of economic deprivation and under development.

The pillars of Development, Recognition, and Justice taken together are therefore central features in our approach of correcting the historical wrongs and ongoing systemic discrimination, as well as securing the future for the next generation. Moreover, development cannot be meaningful if it is not grounded in the principle of self-determination whereby people of African descent have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinct political, legal, economic, social, and cultural institutions, as they retain their right to participate fully, in the political, economic, social, and cultural life of the State. Self-determined development can apply to the design of programs and policies that affect people of African descent.

Challenges in access to economic and social rights in the region which impede development

As we direct our attention to the Middle East region, the geographic focus of this meeting, we can see in concrete terms what challenges look like without recognition, development, and justice. Some common characteristics to the region are the absence of disaggregated data on people of African descent; segregation in living, housing, access to health and public services; sexual abuse and exploitation of women and girls of African descent; institutional racism; and forced labor or denial of fair and equitable work conditions and the right to association.

Take for example the Al-Muhamashin (marginalized ones; previously called Al-Akhdam meaning "Servants") community of Yemen where the intersections of race, color, and identity present a history of marginalization, discrimination, and oppression. They are a minority group often relegated to "impure" or "impious" tasks. Both racial, and work and descent-based discrimination play out in their lives. Due to an absence of disaggregated data, we are unable to

recognize the exact magnitude of the problem that the Al-Muhamashin community faces. Estimates of the population vary between 500,000 to 3 million. Many live in houses made of tin and cardboard, or car tires and plastic drums which can be subject to demolition at any time. This affects their right to health with a paucity of health care services in their surroundings, and a high disease burden in the community.

In Iraq we also do not have official statistics on Black Iraqis, however, estimates range between 1.5 to 2 million. The community is linked to an era of slavery between the 9th and 19th century with Basra as one of the centers. Various reports mention that Black Iraqis face systemic discrimination in all areas of economic, social, and political life. With the constant stigma of being called “slaves” or a “piece of coal” entrenched anti-Black racism and racial discrimination affects their ability to develop a professional class, hold high level positions, and represent themselves in national discussions that could improve their situation.

The movement of people of African descent from Africa into the Middle East and Gulf countries also raises serious concerns as we look at their development. Many make the dangerous journey through areas of conflict, frequently facing inhumane conditions, exploitation, and forced transfers, along with gender-based violations, sexual exploitation, and abuse at the hands of smugglers. As they reach some of the Gulf countries, many may face exploitation and abuse under the Kafala system, which is often akin to forms of modern-day slavery. Moreover, there are online markets buying and selling domestic workers which recently have come under scrutiny with efforts by social media giants like Meta/Facebook to address this in their platforms.

Solutions and good practices

The examples are not exhaustive to these countries alone but are emblematic of the challenges faced by people of African descent in the region. These challenges severely impede development because there is insufficient recognition, and very little justice. The good news is that we already have the solutions and some Member States from the region are taking steps

to address the human rights of people of African descent by looking at their legal frameworks.

Here is what can be done:

- States in the region who have not done so, can ratify international human rights treaties and work on national law's compliance with international human rights standards.
- The Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination has recommended that the Kafala system be ended, and residency permits be regulated through government ministries with policies and measures to protect foreign workers. Labor codes can be developed to include specific provisions prohibiting forced labor and special protections for women and children of African descent with strict punishment of employers who violate them. The State of Qatar abolished the Kafala system which can serve as an example in the region. Strict monitoring, involvement of companies, individual employers, and appropriate penalties are essential to the success of this initiative.
- Our Working Group has made numerous recommendations on data disaggregation as a first and essential step in recognizing people of African descent in a country to understand the various dimensions of systemic discrimination, the frequency of occurrence, and to help design policies and programs in countries.
- We believe that the Sustainable Development Goals provide a solid framework to address the many dimensions of poverty, exclusion, and discrimination faced by people of African descent and in this regard have developed an operational guide on the SDGs for Member States, the UN system, international financial institutions, and other stakeholders.
- The Program of Work of the International Decade for People of African Descent lays out many precise and constructive suggestions for Member States to advance the rights of people of African descent in the region. Among them are strengthening legal frameworks and equality bodies for protection and developing national action plans. Member States and financial institutions can also set up grant mechanisms to fund national and local organizations working on social equality and provide psycho-social support that can address the trauma of anti-Black racism which impedes development

- National and local campaigns that highlight the contributions of people of African descent in the societies where they live can play an important role in changing perceptions and the conversation.
- Developing diversity and anti-racism initiatives in school curricula, and other initiatives can create the conditions for self-determined development for people of African descent.
- Special measures through affirmative action and other forms of positive discrimination that create opportunities in education, government employment, and political representation can be designed to advance the rights of people of African descent in the region.

Our Working Group has made requests for official country visits to a number of states in the region, and we would welcome the opportunity to support them on these issues at their invitation. We also maintain the facility of conducting technical assistance visits through the UN system, International Financial Institutions, and equality bodies. We stand ready to provide assistance to Member States of the region in addressing racism against people of African descent and furthering the goals of the International Decade.