

Afro Descendants in the Hemisphere: Issues and Proposals for Action

Introduction

From September 19 through October 21, 2005, Partners of the Americas hosted an online forum on Afro-Descendant participation in the Inter-American System. The initiative was carried out in collaboration with the Centro de Mujeres Afrocostarricenses, Global Rights, the Inter-American Foundation, the Inter-Agency Consultation on Race in Latin America, and the Inter-American Democracy Network.

This virtual deliberative forum was an opportunity for citizens concerned about Afro-Descendant issues to work together on strategies designed to increase hemispheric awareness and visibility of Afro Descendants and to impact related policy. The forum complemented other civil society spaces supported by the Organization of American States and member governments. The results of these deliberations are being shared with hemispheric decision-makers.

The forum used a deliberative process. An expert moderator encouraged participants to reflect on the key issues facing Afro Descendants in the region and the benefits and commitments involved in the various options considered. This five-week virtual forum offered participants time to review the issues, get involved with each others' ideas, and pursue further knowledge.

Participation was open to members of civil society working on or concerned about Afro-Descendant issues in the hemisphere. Some 200 individuals from 28 countries took part. While the forum was conducted in English and Spanish, posts in Portuguese and French were also welcomed. English-, Spanish- and Portuguese-language summaries were provided twice weekly.

Below is a detailed description of the virtual forum process and results. For further information, please visit www.partners.net/forohemisferico or write Partners of the Americas at forohemisferico@partners.net.

Background

Through the course of five weeks participants engaged in online deliberation about the issues facing Afro Descendants throughout the hemisphere. Deliberation was chosen over other types of exchanges because it allows participants to engage in thoughtful discussion, build arguments based on consensus and shared views, and reflect on new points of views in search of the common good. The objectives of the forum were to promote a dialogue among diverse members of civil society from throughout the hemisphere who are working on or interested in Afro-Descendant issues in the Americas; foster networking, knowledge sharing, and the exchange of ideas among participating members of civil society; provide a public space (in this case, online) for deliberation and the construction of action plans to address issues of most concern for Afro Descendants; and share the results of the online forum with governments at the hemispheric level.

To achieve these objectives, the forum used a political and methodological process of identifying the issues, then collectively examining potential solutions and courses of action. Consequently, the initial part of the process was dedicated to identifying the most critical social exclusion issues facing the Afro-Descendant population. Then ways of addressing these issues from a variety of

points of view were examined. Lastly, proposals to implement the concrete solutions identified were reviewed.

To begin to address the issues, a common starting point was needed. Therefore, time was devoted to considering the status of Afro Descendants in the hemisphere. As a group, this population—variously estimated to number from 88 to 197 million—has the single-largest number of members living in extreme poverty in the hemisphere. This is indicative of inequality and exclusion, but also of the discrimination and marginalization to which Afro Descendants have been subjected since Africans first arrived in the Americas. While most constitutions in the hemisphere recognize the right of all to live free from discrimination and xenophobia, this has not prevented these practices from persisting and leading to human rights violations in the region.

For these and other reasons, exchanges and dialogue on these issues were clearly necessary, particularly in the context of the leadup to the Summit of the Americas, to be held in November. A participant from Uruguay put it best: “Participating here is daring to break free from our daily prison. To change the plight of Afro Descendants in the Americas and the Caribbean, we must dare to dream. To dream is to break free; dreaming is subversive.” A youth from Colombia added: “This virtual space has helped us become aware of the need for unity and thoughtful debate about the steps required to empower Afro Descendants throughout Latin America.”

Identifying the Issue

Throughout the hemisphere, Afro-Descendants experience marginalization for a host of reasons. One factor is the lack of unity within the Afro-Descendant community in standing up against racism and discrimination. One of the consequences of racism has been to weaken the sense of shared identity, making it hard to act from a common ethnic standpoint. As a result, there is a significant divide between Afro-Descendant awareness as a political emblem and process, on the one hand, and the daily lives of the Afro-Descendant population, on the other. In addition, pervasive stereotypes often present Afro Descendants in ways that may be commercially attractive—as idle and oversexed, for example—but are offensive to the Afro-Descendant culture. Worse, such stereotypes often find their way into the very policies designed to address Afro-Descendant issues.

Most Afro Descendants live in harsh conditions, often far from the seats of political, economic, and social power. Life in isolation places them at a disadvantage in terms of access to the national and regional economies. “Marginalization and lack of opportunity are the norm wherever Afro Descendants live,” a participant noted. Geographical isolation often goes hand in hand with social isolation, as reflected in a general unawareness of the Afro-Descendant contribution to a country’s history.

A U.S. participant warned about the dangers of lumping issues together under the perspective of identity and inclusion. This might lead to narrow cultural definitions based on myth and idealistic preconceptions removed from reality; help consolidate the tendency to restrict the Afro-Descendant discourse to issues of race, identity, and policies of inclusion or exclusion; and leave key political, social, economic, and environmental issues in the hands of dominant groups.

Based on these thoughts and other contributions, participants concluded that the issues would be best addressed from a structural economic approach. This approach considers the crux of the issues to be the failure of local, national, and regional policy on the economic, political, and social development problems facing Afro-Descendant communities throughout the hemisphere. These policies have failed because they have imposed constructs of little relevance to the cultural, ethnic, and historical circumstances of Afro Descendants in the hemisphere, and because they have excluded Afro Descendants from policymaking and implementation. The real issue, then, is the lack of opportunities for participation in the setting and implementation of structural economic, political, social, and cultural policy at the local, national, and hemispheric levels.

Potential Solutions and Courses of Action

Having identified the issue considered by most to underlie all other issues, participants moved on to consider ways of addressing the issue and proposing concrete solutions. The options developed during five weeks of deliberation are summarized below. The four options complement each other, making for a comprehensive approach to the issues. They are as follows:

- Option 1: Strengthen and improve access to education
- Option 2: Create new economic development opportunities
- Option 3: Strengthen structural development using existing democratic spaces or creating new spaces for participation
- Option 4: Recognize and value diversity in order to foster identity and inclusion

Option 1. Strengthen and improve Access to Education

This option holds that education is a crucial requirement if developing countries are to compete with the developed world on a level playing field. Raising overall educational standards requires clear policies increasing both coverage and quality. In addition, Afro Descendants with post-secondary training should place their skills and training at the service of their local, national, or international communities. Education is the engine of change and must be improved. Education can also give new meaning to democratic practices throughout the hemisphere.

A Colombian participant wrote that schools in majority Afro-Descendant areas often lack resources, equipment, and staff. Poor material conditions and a curriculum that is alien to the Afro-Descendant reality are directly linked to the rising dropout rate. The school system must therefore be made more attractive to the Afro-Descendant population, and one way to do it is to push for ethnic-based curricula that recognize the Afro-Descendant presence, culture, and contribution to society.

Concrete proposals advanced in this respect:

- Approach education as social policy, using extracurricular initiatives to make learning interesting, *i.e.*, mentoring, internships, opportunities for further study, and fieldwork.
- Encourage universities to introduce African studies into the curriculum and use affirmative action to increase Afro-Descendant enrollment. Increased enrollment would help breed a new generation of university-trained leaders.
- Implement exchange programs encouraging Afro-Descendant university students to share experiences and knowledge.

- Convene a hemispheric network of university students and teachers to discuss ways of improving Afro-Descendant training and research.
- Organize formal associations to lobby for educational opportunities. Legal, administrative, financial, and other support from more consolidated groups is crucial.
- Use the new organizations to solicit modest help, such as donations of computer hardware.
- Encourage research into the Afro-Descendant contribution as part of efforts to change prevailing misconceptions.
- Encourage and disseminate black literature—not just for Afro-Descendant consumption, but also to raise awareness of Afro Descendants in society at large.
- Reclaim the ancestral knowledge and skills of generations past, which—as a Guatemalan participant noted—were highly productive, self-sufficient farmers, fishers, craftmakers, and natural healers. This participant related the experience of Guatemala’s Garifuna fishers, weavers, and craftmakers who have organized to leverage new business opportunities created by globalization.

Experiences such as these underscore that education is a crucial aspect of economic development.

Option 2. Create New Economic Development Opportunities

This option holds that a structural economic approach, with history as a starting point, is crucial. It begins with a recognition that strong vested interests determine the nature of economic policy in the region, so that racial discrimination and poverty often compound each other. “Racial discrimination and economic exclusion don’t always go hand in hand, but if they coexist for long periods of time, exclusion takes root and reform becomes harder,” said a participant from Uruguay. Creating new economic development opportunities requires sustained intervention with short-, medium-, and long-term goals.

Afro Descendants seeking credit face discrimination. How can Afro Descendants possibly set up competitive businesses if they are refused access to financial resources? To create new opportunities for economic development, the notion of Afro Descendants as a minority within a political system designed for the majority must be discarded. Participants also pointed to the importance of differences between developing and developed countries. The latter tend to imitate the former, without always realizing that Afro-Descendant policies in industrialized nations are often structurally flawed.

A Colombian participant remarked that the qualitative changes involved in this option require a paradigm shift in national economies. For social development to move forward on a par with economic growth, innovation, education, and technology are needed. “We require better schools and education, better health care and standards of living, improved life expectancy and infant mortality rates, more access to technology, equal opportunity in the labor market, access to direct and indirect investment, and improved income levels.”

Concrete proposals advanced in this respect:

- Support new research into region-wide minority development issues and formulate alternative growth options based on a human development perspective.

- Provide training opportunities for black professionals and entrepreneurs working in the informal economy in order to increase the quality of the goods and services they provide.
- Provide training and support to black professionals wishing to start new businesses. By creating jobs and generating new income, these initiatives help improve living standards.
- Nurture, reinforce, and expand economic cooperation within Afro-Descendant communities as a staging ground for local and regional transformation. This task should engage educators, researchers, social workers, financial experts, and the young and old alike.
- Revalorize the productive capacity of Afro-Descendant communities, train young people to manage and modernize operations, and set up new chains of supply to bring our products to regional and national markets, including the hemisphere's vast Afro-Descendant market.
- Implement experimental affirmative action plans, with emphasis on the social responsibility of the private sector.
- Conduct a massive education and information drive on government programs and assistance for Afro-Descendant communities.
- Insist on government compensation for Afro Descendants, notably affirmative action and other policies that help Afro Descendants. The Afro-Descendant community should participate, with government officials, in the design of such policies.

Most participants agreed that securing financial support requires good organizational skills. Organized communities can identify individuals possessing special skills (*i.e.*, in craftmaking, farming, food preparation, sewing, clerical work, etc.). Several participants gave concrete examples of this idea at work, including a participant from Brazil who wrote about an experimental affirmative action plan implemented in his country with support from corporate social responsibility programs. Participating businesses regard such plans as win-win propositions that help reduce racial inequality in the workplace and redistribute income and wealth.

In short, the issues facing Afro Descendants should be addressed from a structural development perspective that leverages available spaces for democratic participation. However, to be truly effective, communities must organize socially and politically and lobby governments to adopt and support these action proposals. This is discussed in Option 3 below.

Option 3. Strengthen Structural Development Using Existing Democratic Outlets or Creating New Opportunities for Participation

This option holds that fighting discrimination effectively requires greater involvement in politics, as mobilized communities are better equipped to place their grievances on the agenda. Minority reparations, for example, should become part of the national debate and not be left to small groups of concerned intellectuals. Attaining these goals requires building and strengthening an Afro-Descendant political culture—not an easy proposition considering current education levels and general political apathy. A participant remarked that in Brazil most poor people, blacks included, are largely unaware or uninterested in political and economic issues: “Getting people interested in the issues facing their own country is an uphill battle.”

Concrete proposals advanced in this respect:

- Identify mechanisms to increase the visibility and participation of the Afro-Descendant movement in civil society.
- Lobby for a permanent hemispheric forum on African Diaspora issues within organizations such as the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).
- Increase the participation and visibility of Afro-Descendant communities in national census processes and in the wording of census questions.
- Demand concrete economic and social action from government to combat the structural racism reflected in high black poverty rates.
- Address issues of discrimination and lack of opportunity as they impact Afro-Descendant women and youth.
- Encourage regulations reflecting the legal advances made in the recognition and appreciation of Afro Descendants; create and support new venues for political, social, and economic participation.
- Engage civil society, governments, and multilateral organizations in a dialogue on the need for new strategies on armed conflicts and violations of international humanitarian law.
- Combat racism by encouraging the emergence of independent Afro-Descendant organizations and re-creating the African Diaspora throughout the hemisphere.
- Form an Afro-Descendant political party to represent the interests of the community, channel efforts to get governments to recognize the Afro-Descendant agenda, provide Afro-centric leadership training, and educate the community.

A Colombian participant shared concrete examples of the role young Afro Descendants can play in community organization efforts—in Colombia, the National Youth Network is a strong player in efforts to expose human rights violations against young people.

The following action proposals emphasize the importance of addressing the issues by recognizing and appreciating the ethnic and cultural diversity that is the hallmark of the region. These ideas are discussed in Option 4 below.

Option 4: Recognize and Value Diversity in Order to Foster Identity and Inclusion

This option focuses on Afro-Descendant organization and involvement in efforts to assert rights and promote social transformation. Culture is a key form of organization. While some of the content of Afro Descendant cultural practices and rites may have been lost over time, they have not lost their appeal. Afro-Descendant awareness has been on the rise for some time, and it is time for Afro Descendants to be proud of their background. Most do not know the history of Afro Descendants or the role of Afro Descendants in the consolidation of many industrialized economies.

The general absence of black self-representation should also be noted. Most images of blacks offered today are based on the views of others and dispensed through the dominant media, which often eschew all mention of ethnic issues—let alone acknowledge the existence of racism.

Addressing questions of black culture necessitates official recognition as an ethnic group that has made a significant contribution to individual countries and to the hemisphere as a whole. Rather than be seen as a mere component of the majority culture, these contributions must be framed as helping to preserve the Afro-Descendant identity in a context of equality. A good example is provided by Afro-Descendant music and rhythms. Now that Afro-Descendant music has been co-opted into the majority culture, it often ceases to be regarded as part of the black cultural heritage. In the words of one participant, “Identity is an issue of ethnic heritage and ownership rights.”

Addressing the issues in this option requires a thorough reappraisal of the status of Afro Descendants, especially through ethnic-based social and demographic research. Such studies should involve governments, multilateral organizations, and civil society in efforts to educate the public and improve accountability and assessment of specific initiatives. A Mexican participant added that sexism should also be considered when evaluating possible courses of action: “The economic, social, and political status of Afro Descendants in the region is certainly a result of prevailing racism. We must recognize, however, that males and females face different types of discrimination.”

Concrete proposals advanced in this respect:

- Acknowledge racial discrimination in the region and openly confront it. Formal recognition of discriminatory practices adds weight to victim complaints.
- Encourage adoption of effective anti-discrimination legislation.
- Ensure compliance with anti-discrimination legislation by educating law enforcement and the justice system.
- Encourage oversight by human rights organizations and adopt interim affirmative action measures designed to create the conditions required for historically-disadvantaged communities to start enjoying the same opportunities as the rest of society.
- Encourage the media to start using its power to reinforce the Afro-Descendant image of self and steer clear of worn-out stereotypes.
- Find mechanisms to give Afro-Descendants equal access to information.
- Establish Africa House, an institution concerned with researching, examining, and promoting black culture.
- Foster a strong cultural movement based around community facilities capable of providing space for exhibits on distinguished Afro Descendants and black music, literature, theater, cinema, and other art forms.
- Build bridges of friendship and cultural recognition with communities and intellectuals in the nations that have historically been the leading sources of the Afro-Descendant community; establish joint working groups with them.
- Publish magazines disseminating the work of the above cultural centers and the legal provisions that uphold Afro-Descendant rights.

- Raise the profile of Afro-Descendants in the news media. Access to the media, while admittedly a difficult proposition, is nevertheless a crucial part of rallying public support for government action addressing Afro-Descendant needs.
- While Internet access remains rare among the disadvantaged, find mechanisms to use the Internet to increase the strength of Afro Descendants as an interest group.

Interaction With Key Players

In addition to the above action proposals, building and implementing solutions requires the involvement of and fruitful interaction with key political, economic, and social players at the local, national, and regional levels. A participant recounted how the Afro-Descendant Affirmative Action Ministry of the Brazilian Methodist Church fosters inclusion through regular meetings highlighting the black presence in the Church and official celebrations.

A recurring theme was the need to work with organizations such as the Inter-American Development Bank, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, the International Labor Organization, the World Bank, and the United Nations. These and other institutions could provide funding, technical assistance, and other resources for the development and implementation of action proposals addressing the status of Afro Descendants, as well as help through specific grant programs and initiatives monitoring Afro-Descendant issues.

A Venezuelan participant proposed three options to spark such exchanges between multilateral agencies and national governments. First, as governments are the local counterparts in most multilateral aid projects, Afro-Descendant issues will receive support if they are part of the national agenda. Second, the IDB, the World Bank and the OAS, among other institutions, have Afro-Descendant specialists on staff willing to work for the improvement of Afro-Descendant communities. Afro-Descendant NGOs throughout Latin America would do well to identify these specialists and enlist their assistance in setting up a dialogue with multilateral organizations. Third, NGOs interested in implementing proposals for action should ensure they have the project planning and fundraising background required to obtain assistance for their initiatives. NGOs should identify the key issues facing beneficiary Afro-Descendant populations and set measurable goals. This is essential for NGOs to be considered reliable, sustainable partners by potential funders.

Creation of a Network

As a cross-cutting theme of relevance to all action proposals, a participant from Colombia remarked on the importance of establishing a network so that participants can continue to be in communication after the online forum. Other participants concurred that tools such as this forum are fundamental for continuing to share perspectives and information on the issues and find ways of helping Afro-Descendant communities. To do this requires a formal regional network capable of engaging a broad range of concerned individuals in a deliberative effort to collectively discuss, disseminate, and formulate an economic, political, and social mobilization platform. As access to the Internet—and thus to forums such as this—remains an impossibility for the vast majority of the Afro-Descendant population, network members would ensure that relevant information is passed to those without Internet access.

Online Forum: Afro-Descendant Participation in the Inter-American System

- A healthy, effective network should be organized as a working group where all are conscious of the issues and willing to work together to find solutions.
- The network should identify sources of funding and job-creation assistance, sponsor independent work projects, and engage NGOs and other groups in providing consultancy and supervisory support.
- A participant proposed that such a network should leverage the individual and collective strengths of member organizations. One participant cited the case of Bolivia, where a network of Afro Descendants receives help and information from other groups as part of a peer-to-peer assistance arrangement.
- The network should have a fixed virtual headquarters that acts as a repository for information, policy papers, conference and research documents, and organizational contacts (systematized by area of concern, country, competencies, success stories, etc.). The idea is to have both a database and a virtual meeting place.
- To facilitate contact, it was proposed that country directories of volunteers and organizations be compiled. A note was circulated asking forum participants to provide personal and contact information toward such a directory.
- A concrete suggestion for further debate was the creation of a *Diaspora Economic Community* and work toward holding Latin America's first Afro-Descendant business roundtable. In this regard, a participant proposed to open a bank account, have each participant contribute at least US\$10, and set up a fund to organize an international meeting for all online forum participants to discuss the creation of a network. Monthly contributions would be received until the event. The fund would have legal standing, with contributors as initial partners. The goal is financial self-reliance. To paraphrase a participant, "What we won't do for ourselves no one else will do for us—and it is easier to raise a million dollars from a million people than from two or three."

Partners of the Americas believes that an involved citizenry is essential to a strong society and healthy communities. The Partners of the Americas Center for Civil Society brings citizens together across sectors to identify common concerns and formulate solutions. It promotes broader participation in the social, economic and political issues that affect the region and the daily lives of its citizens.