

**16th Session of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent  
Geneva, 30 March -2 April 2015**

Panel to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the adoption of the ICERD  
Wednesday 1 April 2015

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Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and I would like to thank the Working Group for having invited MRG to participate in this panel discussion.

MRG has been working for several decades on people of African descent and with people of African descent across the world, to document their situations and to advocate for their rights at the national, regional and international levels. We are currently working actively with Afro-descendants in the **Dominican Republic**, who face risks of statelessness; we work on issues of violence and discrimination against black communities in **Eastern Europe**, Afro-descendent communities in **India**, we support awareness-raising programmes undertaken by Nubian groups in **Egypt**, we document the situation of Black communities in **Iraq** and in **Yemen** to mention a few examples.

As we are celebrating today the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the adoption of the International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, I would like to start my presentation by briefly explaining how we engage with the Committee as a civil society organization, how we try to make a strategic use of this mechanism, and why we think it can be an instrument for change and progress, in particular when it comes to the situation of people of African descent. I will then draw from our work on people of African descent across the world, to highlight a few challenges standing in the way of development for Afro-descendent communities in different countries and regions.

**First, on the CERD as an instrument for change.**

Besides our work of documentation, we work with people of African descent and other minorities and indigenous communities to build their capacities to advocate for their rights. In this context, we facilitate the submission of information to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and we welcome minority rights defenders in Geneva so that they can inter-act with the Committee experts, share their experience and their recommendations. We consider the CERD committee as one of the key

mechanisms at our disposal to promote the right of minorities in general, and people of African descent in particular, for at least two reasons.

Firstly, because as other treaty bodies, the CERD offers unique opportunities to address specific issues in great detail, to issue detailed recommendations and to engage in a discussion with the state on the details of its legislation, its policies and practices.

Secondly, because, unlike other treaty bodies, the mandate of the CERD, springing from the Convention we are celebrating today, allows the Committee to focus on the most vulnerable segments of the society, even when they are small in number. And we know how much racial and ethnic minorities are often the segments of the society the most affected by poverty, social exclusion and discrimination.

People of African descent throughout the world face different situations, but are also marked by some common characteristics. The legacy of the past practice of slavery in mentalities, the common experience of racism, the complex interaction between stigmatization, social exclusion, economic disenfranchisement and political marginalization are common challenges faced by black communities throughout the world.

It is because people of African descent face these common patterns, and because their problems are so inter-related: historic heritage and social stigma, social stigma and discrimination, discrimination and poverty, poverty and political marginalization. It is because these challenges are inter-related that **General Recommendation number 34**, on discrimination against people of African descent, is so useful. Because it addresses this specific discrimination in all its complexity, with all its components, its complex causes and its multiple consequences. Most importantly, the General Recommendation provides a comprehensive blueprint for action, as it contains numerous recommendations.

Now, to illustrate this point, I would like to take the example of the CERD review of Iraq, which took place last year in August. Minority Rights Group has been working on Iraq for over 10 years, and we've been documenting inter alia the situation of Black Iraqis. Black Iraqis are in large part the descendants of East African migrants who came to Iraq after the birth of Islam. They constitute a significant part of the population in southern Iraq, and the largest community resides in Basra. Black Iraqis face systematic discrimination and marginalization in all aspects of economic, political and social life. They are continually referred to as *'abd* (slaves) and their communities suffer from disproportionately high illiteracy, poverty and unemployment rates. Neighborhoods inhabited by black Iraqis are also characterized by extreme poverty and neglect. Their houses often lack a clean water supply and proper sewage facilities, and are prone to electricity shortages.

The unemployment rate among black Iraqis is reportedly as high as 80 per cent. Due to discrimination, the community has not developed a professional class and not a single black Iraqi holds a high level position in government. In one district of Basra where black Iraqis comprise 70 per cent of the population, there are no black Iraqis in the police force or in the district council, and racially motivated hate crimes have been reported and met with impunity. Here again, we see the complex nexus between the

different aspects of discrimination, violence and marginalization faced by the Iraqi of African descent.

So MRG shared this information with the CERD, the Committee raised this issue with the state party, and finally issued detailed concluding observations, including a specific recommendation on black Iraqis, recommending specific actions and referring to the General comment number 34. While it is impossible in one single recommendation to embrace the numerous reforms and actions needed to address the situation of this community, in all its aspects (stigmatization, access to education, access to work, housing, sanitation, hate crimes...) the reference to the General comment in the recommendation brings in a whole set of issues, and an integrated approach necessary to tackle the situation of this population. It also indirectly brings in the recommendation a full set of measures to take in order to address the discrimination faced by people of African descent.

I must add, to conclude this part, that for us the concluding observations are not an end in themselves, but a tool for further advocacy. We work with our local partners to raise awareness about the concluding observations at the national and local levels, we advocate for their implementation at the domestic level, and we invite interested third states to take up key CERD recommendations in the framework of the UPR, to push states to implement them.

**I would now like to turn to the second part of my presentation. The topic of this session is development.**

I would like to touch upon 3 challenges which stand in the way of development for people of African descent.

- The first challenge is the lack of recognition that there is a problem, and – related to this point – the lack of data and statistics

- The second challenge is the systemic and structural nature of under-development, and the fact that poverty and exclusion are inter-related and part of a vicious circle

- The third challenge is the need for collective action by the rights-holders to claim their rights

**The first challenge** we often face is the denial of the mere fact that people of African descent are discriminated against and are largely excluded from the economic development.

Within Europe, for instance, the mainstream discourse ranges from ‘colour blindness’ in countries such as France, Spain, Portugal and Germany, where social issues and inequality are presented largely as matters of class and geography; to varying degrees of commitment to multi-culturalism, as in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands; to an emphasis primarily on civil rights and non-discrimination elsewhere, overlooking the issue of real equality in the social and economic spheres.

All across Europe, the terms of this discourse is complicated by a reluctance to employ concepts concerning race and ethnicity. This makes it difficult to formulate generalizations about the number, official status and living conditions of Blacks in the absence of related data, thus often rendering the black population invisible to the public.

In fact the single most challenging feature of the lives of Blacks in Europe is a constant confrontation with racial and color bias that affects almost every facet of daily life, including employment, access to education, health care and personal safety. Where statistics exist, data show that Blacks experience a considerably higher unemployment rate than that for whites, and that those highly educated often work in positions for which they are overqualified.

The absence of disaggregated data in many countries makes it difficult to identify the extent of the problem, and of the social and economic marginalization of people of African descent.

This Working Group, the CERD, the Special rapporteur on racism as well as other expert bodies in the UN system have repeatedly insisted not only on the need for disaggregated data, but also on the limits and safeguards to put in place while gathering this kind of data.

Gathering disaggregated data on racial discrimination would be a first step allowing states and monitors to quantify the problem, to identify the factors of vulnerability and to use indicators to assess the evolution of the situation and the impact of measures taken.

**The second challenge I would like to address** is fact that the barriers to development cannot easily be isolated from one another. Poverty and under-development spring from the same vicious circle, where different structural issues are in interaction. Breaking this circle requires a comprehensive approach, and simultaneous action on different fronts.

I would like to illustrate this aspect through the case of the Siddi community in India.

The Siddi are an Afro-descendent community consisting of tribes scattered across India, mainly concentrated in the South and in the West of the country. Many came over as migrants or slaves from East and Southeast Africa before establishing themselves as permanent diaspora communities within India. Socially, the Siddi are considered one of the most disadvantaged communities, marked by low rates of schooling and social indicators. While the caste principle of hierarchy is non-existent among the Siddi themselves, they are treated in the same way as the Dalits.

Their situation illustrates the complexity of the development problem they face. Similarly as what happens with the Dalits, the social stigma they suffer has a consequence on their access to education. We have observed that even if the trend of sending children to schools has increased, the rate of school dropout is also on the increase. Widespread ragging because of their distinct physical features is often one of the reasons given for discontinuation of their education. Additionally, girls are not

encouraged to pursue education after reaching puberty. As a consequence, the majority of Siddi are illiterate.

Low levels of education and low schooling have an impact on their economic situation. The Siddi work for low wages, particularly women, and child labour is also prevalent. Many men work as coolies or as bonded labourers, while women engage typically in domestic work.

This situation creates a cycle of poverty and social exclusion.

One of the central challenges has been the limited organization of the community as a whole, leaving them without a collective voice to articulate their shared grievances. Nevertheless, there have recently been renewed efforts to restore a shared sense of identity within the community, led in part by a new generation of young Siddi.

In this context, the educated youth within the Siddi community have begun to take steps to address these issues. Members of the Siddi community and allies have advocated successfully for the inclusion of Indians of African descent in the group of most disadvantaged communities who need special measures of affirmative action. As a result of their campaign, in 2003, the government of India accorded them the so-called “Scheduled Tribe status”, which facilitates access to certain benefits, including places in the university. The Siddi community is now focusing on how to build its identity, achieve its full development potential and promote greater access to education among its youth. They also develop plans to support families with enrolment and prevent dropout among school students through material support and awareness raising campaigns, a comprehensive development plan will also be developed to promote fuller integration of Siddi into mainstream society, and legal action taken to strengthen land and livelihood rights.

This idea underpinning these efforts from Siddi educated youth is that only a comprehensive approach to development can help break the cycle of poverty and exclusion, by articulating advocacy for legal and policy change in different fields, awareness-raising targeting the communities themselves and joint action to support change in practices.

**The example of the Siddi brings me to my third and final point:** there can be no improvement of the situation of people of African descent if there is no local movement, initiative and group of right-holders advocating for their rights.

While many legal, practical and cultural challenges still prevent Afro-descendent communities from organizing themselves to promote and defend their rights, we have seen some positive changes in the past few years, for a number of reasons.

A first reason is the opening of space for civil society in certain countries. In **Tunisia**, for example, while racism and discrimination against the black population, living mainly in the South of the country, was a taboo, the 2011 revolution gave a chance for this silent and repressed minority to be heard. The first organization in the country to fight for the rights of black Tunisians, ADAM for Equality and Development in Tunisia, was formed

shortly after, in 2012, to advocate for legal change to strengthen anti-discrimination provisions.

A second reason seems to be the emergence of a new generation of activists, more interconnected, more connected to the rest of the world and consequently more aware of other rights movements and other civil society initiatives. We've seen the case of the **Siddi youth** in India, and how they were instrumental in leading the fight for equality.

We could also mention **Yemen**, where a youth network of people of African descent was created in 2008. This network works on a local level for the elimination of caste discrimination. The organization notably tries to prompt the government into taking immediate steps to protect and implement the rights of the Black Yemeni (*Muhamasheen*), in line with the recommendations made by the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in 2011.

I will conclude on this optimistic note, and on this illustration of how the work of the Committee can be useful and bring concrete change in the field, when it is appropriated and used as an advocacy tool by local human rights defenders.