



16th Session of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent

COMMEMORATION PANEL FOR THE 50th ANNIVERSARY OF THE ADOPTION OF THE ICERD

Palais de Nations, Geneva, Switzerland, April 1st 2015

The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD,) and its contributions to the Prevention of Ethnic-racial Conflicts, linked to Myths about Economic Development

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**Madam President:
High Commissioner:
Ladies and Gentlemen:**

The commemoration of ICERD's 50th anniversary, at the request of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent, just a few days after the commemoration of the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination held by the United Nations General Assembly, and three months after the start of the International Decade for People of African Descent, happens to be a happy coincidence.

As you may recall, on the 21st of March, the UN invited States Parties and the international community as a whole, to ask itself the following question -

Have we learned from historical tragedies in order to combat racial discrimination today?

Without doubt, with regards to people of African descent, this question remains of the utmost importance since it concerns millions of descendants for whom, along with the Jewish and Gypsy holocaust, it represents one of the greatest tragedies in the history of humanity, and one whose repercussions are still felt. *That is, the transatlantic slave trade and slavery itself.*

In terms of development, which is the central pillar of the Panel which brings us here today, this subject is of great importance, given that many of the "theories", in fact *myths*, which allowed the construction of an economic enterprise the size of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery in the Americas, which led to triangular trade, the foundation of the industrial revolution and the original accumulation of wealth, in one way or another, are still alive in many societies and have tangible consequences with regards to racism and racial discrimination, they discernibly limit development opportunities for social groups such as those of African descent, and even for entire regions and countries and frequently produce tensions and conflicts which undermine international peace and security. In essence, it's all about economic interests, disguised as cultural debates.

In this arena, and in a somewhat silent manner, *the Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, CERD*, in accordance with the *International Convention for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, ICERD*, has been exerting itself as a *catalyst for current and potential tensions*, by periodically enabling a kind of inter-cultural dialog within

Countries which often examines their adherence to ICERD, especially with respect to the state of their ethnic groups, people of African descent being among these.

The special importance of the subject of development and diversity came to light with the Human Development Report 2004. "*Cultural liberty in today's diverse world*¹", in which the United Nations Development Program, identified and *debunked 5 myths* about human development and ethnic diversity and 3 myths about cultural freedom and development, which are frequently used in order to justify the *false dichotomy of development or diversity*.

Allow me to highlight some of these myths:

Myth 3. Cultural liberty requires defending traditional practices, so there could be a trade-off between recognizing cultural diversity and other human development priorities such as progress in development, democracy and human rights. People's and social groups' right to exist, to have a place to exist and exercise their right to follow their personal world view is in no way contrary to human rights and much less to development.

Different ethnic groups have the legitimate right to autonomous development, of their ethnic development, understood as "*The exercise of a people's social capacity to build its own future, drawing upon the real and potential resources of its culture, in accordance with a project based on its own values and aspirations*". This is not about extolling ethnocultural purity. It doesn't

¹ Taken from http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/reports/265/hdr_2004_complete.pdf. march 27th 2015.

exist. It's about respecting the right to autonomy, ultimately, the combination of proprietary and appropriated values.

Madam President:

The CERD congratulates itself on the fact that many countries, which have signed the ILO's Convention 169 on Indigenous Peoples, have been progressively incorporating the extensive implementation of said Convention into their legislation and their jurisprudence for people of African descent, thus favoring, via prior consultation, the participation of said people in debates on the direction of their country's development.

In article 57 of Law 70 of 1993, regarding the ethnic rights of people of African descent in Colombia, which decrees the establishment of a multi-annual National Development Plan so that the National Development Plan for all Colombians includes the Afro-Colombian dimension and world view, is a significant example of this spirit. The same must be said of the Plurinational Plan for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and Ethnic and Cultural Exclusion, adopted by the Ecuadorian Government, in favor of that country's people of African descent, to quote just two examples.

Myth 4. Ethnically diverse countries are less able to develop, so there is a trade-off between respecting diversity and promoting development. This is false. You need only examine the ethnic composition of the world's largest economy in recent decades. The United States. As said country rightly points out with pride in its Basic document which forms part of the reports to treaty

bodies, including the CERD², "*The United States is a multi-racial, multi-ethnic, and multi-cultural society in which racial and ethnic diversity is ever increasing.*

(...) Virtually every national, racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious group in the world is represented in the U.S. population ... Population projections indicate that, by mid-century, the United States is projected to be even more racially and ethnically diverse ... Minorities, now roughly one-third of the U.S. population, are expected to become the majority in 2042, with the nation projected to be 54 % minority in 2050", indicates the State Party in the mentioned report.

Amongst many other countries, Malaysia is another eloquent example of the symbiosis between development and diversity. In 2004, UNDP data indicated that 62% of the population was of Malaysian or of other indigenous origins, 30% was Chinese and 8% was Indian, the country was 10th in the world in terms of economic growth between 1970 and 1990, a period during which it also implemented affirmative action policies.

Myth 5. Some cultures are more likely to make developmental progress than others, and some cultures have inherent democratic values while others do not, so there is a trade-off between accommodating certain cultures and promoting development and democracy. Unfortunately, there are still those who believe in cultural determinism and promote the idea that a group's culture explains its economic performance and its democratic progress - as a

² Common Basic Document which forms part of the reports of States Parties. United States of America HRI/CORE/USA/ 2011.

hindrance or an advantage, which clashes resoundingly with any scientific analysis. Examination of how power relationships affect cultural dynamics would shed more rational explanations.

From the perspective of cultural liberty specifically, it is also false that: *Myth 1: some cultures are more likely to make development progress than others. Myth 2: cultural diversity inevitably leads to clashes over values, and that Myth 3: cultural diversity is an obstacle to development.* No, these are cultural stereotypes with which some people seek to justify the enormous social injustices reflected in the conditions of poverty that affect the vast majority of the world's population, amongst which, in the Americas for example, people of African descent along with indigenous peoples are often the poorest.

To attempt to associate the efficiency of a State with the predominance of a social order with a single cultural identity is completely irrational.

The quoted UNDP report concludes that "*The way to overall economic growth, and to high levels of health and education, is to formulate policies for the country, not for interest groups. Interest group politics are a problem in all countries, not just the culturally diverse. Indeed, the purpose of democracies is to manage conflicting interests through a transparent political system and open dialogue. Many established and prosperous democracies are constantly balancing the interests of powerful groups and those of the country. In culturally diverse countries that are performing poorly, how much can diversity be blamed?*". The UNDP asks itself.

In this context, the ICERD adherence examination, has allowed the Committee to provide States Parties, as well as with specific recommendations, with general comments that summarize rights and favor the systematic comprehension of legal standards that must be implemented in order to guarantee, on equal and non-discriminated terms, the development of forgotten groups such as people of African descent.

In fact, CERD General Recommendation No. 34 is an example of those contributions. It highlights that "*Racism and structural discrimination against people of African descent, rooted in the infamous regime of slavery, are evident in the situations of inequality affecting them and reflected, inter alia, in the following domains: their grouping, together with indigenous peoples, among the poorest of the poor; their low rate of participation and representation in political and institutional decision-making processes; additional difficulties they face in access to and completion and quality of education, which results in the transmission of poverty from generation to generation; inequality in access to the labour market; limited social recognition and valuation of their ethnic and cultural diversity; and a disproportionate presence in prison populations.*"³

Madam President:

The recognition of the structural nature of racism and racial discrimination that affects people of African descent, has led to many countries echoing CERD's recommendations and Social Movements' demands, towards special

³ CERD/C/GC/34

measures or affirmative action in order to eliminate the enormous economic and social gap that separates people of African descent from the average level of their compatriots.

In regulatory terms, it's worth highlighting quota laws for access to employment and higher education, as well as measures for guaranteeing National Congress seats, and land and natural resources' ownership and administration for people of African descent via special regimes which, although still incipient, are forging the path of development for millions of people in Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Uruguay, Nicaragua and Bolivia, amongst others.

From the instrumental perspective, it's important to highlight the Inter-American Development Bank's efforts to promote progress amongst excluded populations with programs " ... *to promote economic development in geographic areas with high concentrations of targeted ethnic or racial populations; provide excluded populations with greater access to credit and business development services and greater support in their utilization; support land reform and property rights; and provide access to quality infrastructure, transport, and markets.*"⁴

In this spectrum, an experience that promises to be emblematic is underway in Colombia. It is the Development Fund for the Plan Todos Somos PAZífico, with which the government seeks to address the most urgent needs of the

⁴ <http://54.209.110.9/bitstream/handle/11319/405/¿Los%20de%20afuera%3f%20Patrones%20cambiantes%20de%20exclusión%20en%20América%20Latina%20y%20el%20Caribe.pdf?jsessionid=CF7DA89F7448E99E4A0E6DA59029CD9B?sequence=1>. March 28th 2015.

Colombian Pacific Region, the vast majority of its inhabitants being of African descent and, to a lesser degree, indigenous peoples, and who fall under the lowest development statistics of the country. The Fund is being built as autonomous capital, with public and private funds and is inspired in national actions adopted in times of great national disasters, with an ethnic focus.

Many of the efforts described above have been encouraged or applauded by the Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. The call for development with identity for people of African descent and indigenous peoples has been at the center of the CERD's periodic dialog, while conducting its duties as guardian of the ICERD.

Madam President:

Allow me to refer to a subject that produced controversy here at the beginning of these sessions. I'm talking about the issue of *development assistance*. It is right to emphasize the responsibility that falls upon those States who's inhabitants include underrepresented groups such as people of African descent. Despite this, it's worth pointing out that this debate has other dimensions.

That is. The challenges faced by countries with populations that have a significant number of people of African descent, including many African

countries that even today suffer the consequences of slavery and colonialism, are so great that they go beyond national borders.

We need only remember the recent Ebola epidemic that affected several West African countries and which further weakened their already fragile economies to the point that, for example, the President of Liberia has requested a kind of Marshall Plan for the country.

It is obvious that, in the socioeconomic conditions of affected countries, the Ebola virus found an environment conducive for its expansion.

Madam President:

Ebola reminded the whole world that nobody is safe from the consequences of the inequalities of social exclusion.

From another perspective, the serious Ebola epidemic also proved the advantages of solidarity and international cooperation beyond ideological or geopolitical considerations and that everyone, every single country and person, independent of their greater or inferior economic capacity has much to contribute. Cuba, for example, demonstrated once again that its motto "*Cuba shares what it has. Not what it has left.*" is not a rhetorical statement. The world, in turn, watched in wonder as Cuba, the United States, China and others, worked hand in hand to deal with the Ebola epidemic.

The international community must not become complacent. The Ebola epidemic may have been but a warning bell. The living conditions of millions of people of African descent and indigenous peoples in many countries of the Americas, for example, are no different from those of communities recently affected by Ebola. In fact, the fact that the majority of the region's countries were unable to meet the minimum requirements set out by the international community upon adopting the Millennium Development Goals can be explained, in part, by the negative impact upon development indicators of indigenous peoples and people of African descent, even in many countries now considered of middle-income.

The Colombian delegation was right when it pointed out, within the framework of the Decade's launch in New York, that "*Meeting the challenges that the Decade imposes upon us require urgent review of the standards that govern international cooperation. Being labeled a middle-income country leads to a discontinuation of international cooperation, but this does not take into account the fact that in these countries there are millions of people which, as is the case with people of African descent, fall within economic and social conditions that still justify international cooperation.*"

Madam President:
Fellow Delegates:

Development for people of African descent requires equal access to education, employment and social protection with a differential approach, that is, in keeping with its world vision. The consequences of slavery and of the transatlantic slave trade, which is reflected in the persistent link between

poverty and racism, as recognized by the States in Santiago and in Durban, demand that we do not forget that *global problems require global solutions*.

Thank you.