

## 32<sup>nd</sup> Session of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent

### Economic Empowerment of People of African Descent

Geneva, Switzerland, May 1-5, 2023

#### Concept Note

##### **Introduction**

The Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent is pleased to announce its upcoming public 32<sup>nd</sup> session on *Economic Empowerment of People of African Descent*<sup>i</sup>, which will be held at Palais des Nations, UN Headquarters, Geneva, May 1 – 5, 2023.

This session will examine, inter alia, how systemic racism and global economic structures and financial mechanisms affect the economic and financial empowerment of people of African descent, tracing the trajectories and impacts of enslavement, colonisation, segregation, and apartheid over the centuries, and providing an analysis of anticipated future trends to draw conclusions and make recommendations. The Working Group further intends to draw attention to the agency of people of African descent as one of, if not the, strongest forces in their own economic empowerment. It will also address reparations for people of African descent. The session will address the racial and economic inequalities and approaches to fulfilling the right to development by people of African descent across the globe. It will include in-depth discussions on racial inequality and racial discrimination in multiple and diverse forms that fuel poverty, economic inequality, and violations of the inalienable human rights of people of African descent across the globe. Participants will interrogate the manifestations of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance in various sectors. They will discuss the impact of racial discrimination on people of African descent's right to development whereby every human person and all peoples are entitled to participate in, contribute to, and enjoy economic, social, cultural and political development, in which all human rights and fundamental freedoms can be fully realized. They will further consider their implications for the achievement of racial justice and reparatory justice for all peoples of African descent. All interested Member States and stakeholders are warmly invited to participate in the session.

##### **Background**

The Working Group's concern for the economic empowerment of people of African descent is an integral part of its mandate and runs through its entire body of work. In its most recent report on Children of African Descent (A/HRC/51/54), the Working Group concluded, inter alia, that "In order to meaningfully achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, a racialized analysis must acknowledge the historical underpinnings of economic deprivation, loss of present-day value of assets due to enslavement, intergenerational loss of opportunity, present-day exploitation and the inability to self-emancipate due to structures and systems that create negative and deleterious effects on health, education, development and opportunity." The Working Group has also documented how the COVID-19 pandemic, environmental racism and the current global economic crisis has disproportionately affected the human rights of people of African descent and other marginalized groups.

The Working Group has recognised and examined the extensive effects of racial discrimination, extreme poverty and economic disenfranchisement, on the full enjoyment of human rights by people of African descent. Racial discrimination inhibits access by people of African descent to fundamental rights. The evidence shows that people of African descent continue to suffer from many multiple, aggravated and intersecting forms of discrimination. In its reports the Working Group has documented the underlying and widespread poverty that undermines the development of people of African descent, constrains the creation of intergenerational wealth,<sup>1</sup> or drives migration whether by Haitians across the Americas, by diverse populations risking their lives to reach Europe or those trapped in sub-human conditions in many parts of the Middle East. The extensive effect of economic marginalization as a driver of inadequate legal representation, has contributed to the disproportionate imprisonment of people of African descent.

The focus of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Session on the economic empowerment of people of African descent is timely, drawing attention to the complex nexus between race and economic empowerment, and its implications for the full enjoyment of all human rights by people of African descent.

### **Legal and Policy Context**

In 2023, we mark the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). We would like to recall that Article 22 of this Declaration states “**Everyone**, as a member of society, (...) is entitled to realisation, through national effort and international cooperation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the **economic**, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality”. Economic development is a foundational pillar of the Charter of the United Nations and likewise, of the Declaration on the Right to Development, the Johannesburg Declaration and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Such development must lead to the constant improvement of the well-being of all People of African Descent individually and collectively, on the basis of their active, free and meaningful participation in development and in the fair distribution of the benefits resulting therefrom. Economic empowerment is enshrined in various international covenants, most notably the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Convention on People with Disabilities (CRPD), and the International Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD).

The Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in its General Recommendation No. 34 recalled 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.

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/wg-african-descent/annual-reports>

The role of economic empowerment in the realisation of the civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights of people of African descent will be interrogated and analysed during the Session.

### **Organisation of the Session**

The session will be organized into six panel discussions on the following topics:

Topic 1	Trade and Trafficking Routes: Then and Now
Topic 2	The World's 600 years Black Debt: from Exploitation to Economic Emancipation
Topic 3	Economic Empowerment and the Realisation of Human Rights
Topic 4	The Role of the Global Economic and Financial Architecture and Mechanisms
Topic 5	Education and Enterprise: Black Agency and Achievements
Topic 6	From Rhetoric to Reality: Reparatory Justice for people of African Descent

Through the thematic panels, the linkages between the economic empowerment of people of African descent, i.e., the freedom and means of people of African descent to fully explore and exploit their capacities in productive sectors, and the enjoyment of their civil, political rights, social and cultural rights as well as their right to development will be examined. Panellists will explore the underlying systemic and structural causes of Black disempowerment and proffer human rights approaches that have worked in various contexts, throughout the centuries and more recently.

Through the side events, organised by civil society, the role and impact of religious autocracy in maintaining the status quo; the role and impact of multinational corporations in primary industries; the potential of coops, credit unions and 'circles' for people of African descent to save, finance projects, and maintain a safety net for kith and kin; the contributions of artists, artisans and athletes to the economic wellbeing of people of African descent; and emerging trends in technology that can enhance or detract from economic empowerment of people of African descent will be explored. Thus, the session will focus not only on the inherent economic value of the labour of people of African descent, but of the value of their intellect, talents and innovations, particularly within the context of their traditions and ways of life.

### **Objectives of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Session**

The principal objectives of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Session of the Working Group are to:

- Examine the issues and challenges affecting the realisation of economic empowerment of people of African descent;
- Identify opportunities, pathways and proven approaches that promote economic development for and by people of African descent; and,
- Promote proven and potential viable strategies for consideration by people of African descent, their governments, civil society and private sector partners, and the international development community.
- Make recommendations and suggest language for the draft UN Declaration on the promotion, protection and the full respect of the human rights of people of African descent on economic empowerment

In pursuing these objectives, the Working Group will pay careful consideration to

- Building on the Human Rights 75 initiative and the 20-year milestone of the Working Group and the body of knowledge it has generated, and the utility and impact of this knowledge.
- Ensuring that people of African descent have free, active and meaningful participation to contribute to the elaboration of the UN Declaration on the promotion, protection and the full respect of the human rights of people of African descent
- Enabling a fuller integration of all and in particular less visible representatives of people of African descent, particularly from Eastern Europe, Asia and some parts of Latin America and the Caribbean, in all their diversity; and,
- Emphasizing the centrality of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action to implementing its mandate for the promotion of and respect for the rights of people of African descent.

At the end of the session, the Working Group will adopt conclusions and recommendations. A report on the session will be presented to the 54<sup>th</sup> session of the United Nations Human Rights Council in September 2023 and to the Third Committee of the General Assembly in November 2023. The report will be available on the website of the Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights ([www.ohchr.org](http://www.ohchr.org)).

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<sup>i</sup> The following are useful statements on economic empowerment.

Economic empowerment is the capacity of women and men to participate in, contribute to and benefit from growth processes in ways that recognise the value of their contributions, respect their dignity and make it possible to negotiate a fairer distribution of the benefits of growth.

Source: OECD (2018). <https://www.oecd.org/social/gender-development/womenseconomicempowerment.htm#:~:text=Economic%20empowerment%20is%20the%20capacity,of%20the%20benefits%20of%20growth>

The capacity of young women and men to participate in, contribute to and benefit from inclusive growth and development processes.

Source: UNDP (2021). Evaluation of UNDP Support for Youth Economic Empowerment.

Economic empowerment is the ownership of finances, investments, property, and gaining education (Dalal, 2011).

Source: <https://www.igi-global.com/dictionary/economic-empowerment/62179>