

BATTLING INEQUALITY FOR AFRO-LATINOS

A CHRONIC SCARCITY OF OPPORTUNITIES

by Diana Rutstein

Social exclusion, according to the Inter-American Development Bank, occurs when an individual, due to his or her membership in a particular social group, experiences a chronic scarcity of opportunities and lack of access to quality basic services, labor markets and credit, adequate physical infrastructure and the judicial system. The international development community has recently begun focusing more attention on structural factors that systematically exclude racial or ethnic groups, contributing to situations of chronic poverty and underdevelopment around the world. This theme ran through the deliberations of the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance that was held in 2001 in Durban, South Africa. The Conference drew specific attention to the plight of Afro-descendants in the Americas as an egregious example of social exclusion.

“We consider it essential for all countries in the region of the Americas...to recognize the existence of their population of African descent...,” the Conference declaration states, “and recognize that, in many countries, their long-standing inequality in terms of access to, *inter alia*, education, health care and housing has been a profound cause of the socio-economic disparities that affect them.”

In recent years, multilateral and bilateral development organizations have intensified their efforts to address the causes and effects of social exclusion. In June 2000, the World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank, the Ford Foundation, and the Inter-American Dialogue established an Inter-Agency Consultation on Race Relations in Latin America (IAC) to “address the special problems of the approximately 150 million Latin Americans of African descent—including extremely high rates of poverty, and limited access to education, health and other public services” (see www.thedialogue.org). In the United States, Congress recently called on the international community to increase funding for poverty initiatives in Latin America and the Caribbean, especially those that target Afro-Latino communities (H. Con. Res. 47, *A Resolution Commemorating African Descendants in the Americas*, February 25, 2003), and the United States Agency for International Development specifically included the Afro-Latino population under its

Objectives for Increased Participation of Historically Disenfranchised Groups.

According to the Inter-American Dialogue, Afro-descendants comprise about 30% of the population of Latin America (see map for detailed population figures). Demographic statistics on race are scarce and unreliable in Latin America, but recent studies suggest that Afro-descendants are a growing

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population that soon may surpass their most common counterpart minority group, the indigenous peoples. Yet despite their numerical strength, Afro-Latinos remain a semi-invisible population in Latin America. Many times mistakenly categorized within other racial groups, they have been a significant variable in the continent’s political and social equations. Throughout the continent, they are subject to racial discrimination and political, social and economic exclusion, contributing to the highest levels of poverty, the least political

recognition, and the worst health conditions of any group in the region.

The lack of political clout is reflected in the health and socio-economic sectors. The Garifuna in Honduras, a black/indigenous population, has one the highest rates of HIV/AIDS in the region. In any given country, approximately 5% to 15% of the Afro-Latino population is estimated to be physically disabled (The World Bank Group, *Overview of Afro-Latin Americans Issues at the World Bank*). The World Health Organization, in a report prepared for the World Conference Against Racism, found that health care facilities accessible to the Afro-Latino population are of poor quality, and even in the treatment offered, the “ideological biases of the staff” can come into play. Afro-Latinos have also suffered discriminatory treatment in the recognition of property rights and land ownership, on which much of their livelihood depends. Land reform measures in Latin America have often excluded Afro-Latinos and ignored their existing patterns of land ownership, contributing to growth in the numbers of internally displaced persons. There is anecdotal evidence of intervention by the military in Colombia to resolve disputes over land ownership that have ended with the dispossession of the Black owner.



dictatorship of the 1930s and '40s. Still, the Afro-Latino community of Brazil has made important political gains. Brazil is the only country in Latin America with a constitutional provision making racism a crime punishable by law. Brazil also issued a groundbreaking antiracism law in 1997 and is recognized for the high level of Afro-Latino participation in local government. In recent years, the struggle has continued over affirmative action programs.

These gains in Brazil are encouraging and ultimately will have a positive impact on the social and economic life of the entire region. A recent study commissioned by the Inter-American Development Bank found that the economies of Bolivia, Brazil, Guatemala and Peru would expand by 36.7, 12.8, 13.6 and 4.2 percent respectively if Afro-Latino and indigenous groups were fully integrated into the labor force (IDB, *Social Development*, July 2001). Such integration will require a systematic, long-term approach, which has been largely lacking to date. According to the Inter-American Dialogue (IAD, *Race Report*, January 2003), few Latin American governments and international aid organizations have accounted for race in designing and implementing programs, even though race is clearly a central factor in the distribution of income and social services in the region. Much research remains to be done to document the nature and extent of Afro-Latino exclusion, and beyond that, to incorporate perspectives of race and discrimination into development programs in the region. [E]

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The exclusion of Afro-Latinos was historically manifested even in geographic terms. Until the 1940s, Afro-Latinos were forbidden from traveling to the interior of several Central American countries and were confined to the Caribbean coastal regions. By and large, Afro-Latino populations continue to be segregated in specific areas of their countries, which has hampered their access to resources and impeded their participation in their countries' social, economic and political systems. In Nicaragua, for example, Afro-descendants populate the Atlantic coastal region with difficult access to the rest of the country including the capital, Managua. In the article *Crónica de Racismo Piurano*, Mónica Carillo Zegarra has documented her personal experience of being an Afro-descendant in her native city of Piura, Peru. She explains that this city was built by slaves, but after the abolishment of slavery, equality has never quite reached the people. To this day discrimination is very prevalent, as she experiences name-calling because of the color of her skin and restrictions on the areas where she is allowed to work and schools that she is able to attend.

Ever since their emancipation in the 19th century, Afro-descendants in many countries have attempted to organize politically within the prevailing political structures without much success. Indeed, such efforts were legally restricted in some countries. In Cuba, for example, a law forbade the organization of political parties based on race or color after 1911. In Brazil, the Frente Negra Brasileira party (Brazilian Black Front), founded in São Paulo in 1931, served as the national political voice of Afro-Brazilians, but the party faded along with other political parties during the Vargas

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