

INTERNATIONAL DECADE FOR
People
of African Descent

Brief review of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in Latin America and the Caribbean



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International Decade for People of African Descent

Brief review of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic
in Latin America and the Caribbean



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Presentation

Structural, institutional and systematic discrimination and racial segregation —the legacies of the transatlantic slave trade— function as modern-day mechanisms that determine the distribution of material and symbolic resources and expose people of African descent to persistent obstacles to the enjoyment of their civil, political, economic, social, cultural and environmental rights. These historical gaps have widened and become even more pronounced in the wake of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. The lack of national efforts to address the pre-existing structural causes of inequality, racism and the inadequacy of efforts to meet the basic needs of a significant proportion of the population have exacerbated many of the negative effects of the pandemic. Against this backdrop, the links between ethnicity, socioeconomic status and the impact of COVID-19 are unmistakable.

According to the study “Afrodescendientes y la matriz de la desigualdad social en América Latina: retos para la inclusión,” prepared by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), people of African descent represent about 20.9% of the total regional population, comprising approximately 134 million people. Their socioeconomic and demographic characteristics reflect substantial inequalities and equity gaps that shape their development (ECLAC/UNFPA, 2020). This situation amplifies the vulnerability of people of African descent to poverty and results in diminished well-being and limited access to basic services, decent housing conditions, employment and income in urban areas, and in some cases, impedes the effective enjoyment of their territories and collective rights, culturally appropriate development and the exercise of self-government in rural areas. A number of socioeconomic indicators reveal that this situation is often even more complex for people of African descent living in rural areas. Similarly, children, youth, women, older persons, persons with disabilities, migrants, refugees and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI) persons of African descent face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, which further impede access to public services and lead to increased stigmatization and exclusion. For women of African descent, the lack of opportunities and economic autonomy is reflected in high rates of school dropout, unemployment and poverty and overrepresentation in domestic work (United Nations, 2020a).

People of African descent also face considerable inequality gaps that limit the exercise of their right to health and include, among other challenges, a lack of infrastructure and access to health services, undermining of their ancestral knowledge and traditional medical practices as a result of the deterioration and loss of their natural habitat. This results in higher rates of maternal and infant mortality, adult mortality

from preventable and treatable diseases and sexual and reproductive health deficiencies, particularly among young girls, adolescents and women, and can aggravate the poverty and inequalities to which they are vulnerable.

Given the pre-existing precariousness affecting people of African descent in all areas related to well-being, both in rural and urban areas, the spread of COVID-19, lockdown measures and forced isolation had a negative and often disproportionate impact on their social and economic life, especially among people living in poverty and those working in informal or precarious jobs.

Systemic and structural racial discrimination also lead to the dispossession of land and resources by armed individuals establishing illegal economies in rural areas that lack State protection and have a larger population of African descent, and the excessive use of force, racial profiling and pretrial detention applied with greater frequency and intensity by State security officials on people, particularly youth, of African descent. There has also been a significant increase in gender-based violence against women, adolescents and young girls of African descent, a situation that requires immediate attention through actions aimed at ensuring protection and access to comprehensive services.

The global mass protests triggered by the murder of George Floyd on 25 May 2020 at the hands of United States police officers marked a watershed moment in the fight against racism and highlighted the need to recognize the systemic nature of racism and to confront the past to guarantee living conditions that preserve the dignity and rights of all in the future. It is our collective duty to address these issues, immediately and universally.

Thus, in the framework of the governmental agreements concluded under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Montevideo Consensus on Population and Development and the International Decade for People of African Descent, it is even more urgent that we dismantle the obstacles that limit the full exercise of the human rights of people of African descent and move jointly towards implementing actions that promote concrete tools to reduce the impacts of COVID-19 and guarantee the advancement of their rights.

This publication seeks to capture the perspectives of people of African descent during the pandemic, which were addressed during the day of dialogue on Promotion and Protection of the Rights of People of African Descent and their Communities in Latin America and the Caribbean Region in the Context of COVID-19: Building Back Better. It also presents a series of findings from the dialogue and offers recommendations for governments to promote racial equality policies that put an end to racial discrimination in their countries and, as they gain control of the pandemic, seize the opportunity for more equitable reconstruction.

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Introduction

The coronavirus disease pandemic (COVID-19) has triggered a major global crisis with a marked impact not only on people's health, but also on the economy and social development and, thus, has worsened and highlighted the structural problems and historical inequalities plaguing Latin America and the Caribbean. In the region, the pandemic has had a greater impact on people living in poverty, who do not have sufficient access to basic health and infrastructure services (drinking water, basic sanitation and adequate housing). This increases the incidence of disease as well as the risks of contracting COVID-19 and suffering complications and succumbing to the disease.

On account of its productive structure and the historical and structural levels of inequality, Latin America and the Caribbean is one of the regions hardest hit by the pandemic. This situation is reflected in the indicators for infections and deaths. In this region, which is home to 8.4% of the world's population (Worldometer, n/d), 26.8% of deaths have been attributed to COVID-19,¹ as well as more than triple the number of deaths per 100,000 inhabitants compared to the global rate.² Despite the emergency measures implemented, the region's social protection systems have proven inadequate to cope with a health crisis of this magnitude and with these characteristics.

Compounding the challenges facing poorer people, including people of African descent, is their overrepresentation in the sectors associated with essential services that cannot be performed remotely (e.g., cleaning, transport, courier services, storage and care). As it is not possible to implement physical distancing measures or mobility restrictions in this type of work, there is a higher incidence of virus transmission. A significant portion of the Afrodescendent population works in the informal sector, lacks savings and has limited access to social protection. The broader challenges of poverty, inequality and precarious employment predate the pandemic; COVID-19 only highlighted and exacerbated them. Several organizations have pointed out that people of African descent are among the most vulnerable to COVID-19 and have emphasized the importance of implementing participatory and culturally appropriate policies to combat racism and promote equality and the rights of people of African descent (ECLAC, 2021b).

The Secretary-General of the United Nations, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the Executive Director of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the Executive

¹ On 24 June 2022, there were 7,139 cases per 100,000 inhabitants worldwide, compared to 11,008 in Latin America, and 83 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants worldwide, compared to 268 in Latin America and the Caribbean (IDB, n/d).

² Deaths per 100,000 inhabitants totaled 243 in Latin America, compared to 69 worldwide (IDB, n/d).

Secretary of the Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), the heads of several international and regional bodies (e.g., the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR)) and special procedures experts, including the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent, have issued statements addressing the heightened vulnerability of people of African descent to COVID-19 and the importance of continuing to combat ethnic and racial discrimination.

The Secretary-General has issued several statements condemning discriminatory practices, especially racially motivated ones. In 2020, he stressed that human rights principles can and should guide the COVID-19 response and recovery, that the pandemic highlights structural inequalities and fuels the rise of hate speech and attacks on vulnerable groups, and that all emergency measures must be legal and non-discriminatory (United Nations, 2020b). He also issued a global call for efforts to confront and counter COVID-19-related hate speech with solidarity, for the media to eliminate racist content and for people to treat each other with dignity and kindness (United Nations, 2020c).³ In 2021, he exhorted young people, educators and leaders to teach the world that all people are born equal, that racial supremacy is an evil lie and that racism kills (United Nations, 2021a). He also released the document *Our Common Agenda* (United Nations, 2021b), which notes that the pandemic revealed our inability to make decisions together and that the health crisis, coupled with the climate crisis and the swift rise of inequality, seems to leave us without protection mechanisms.

Our Common Agenda serves as a roadmap to hasten the implementation of existing international agreements (United Nations, n/d) and as a call to restore solidarity and the social contract with peoples and new generations, predicated on human rights and a new global pact among nations to provide public goods and confront serious threats. On the subject of race, the document examines the need to implement measures to address racial discrimination and to ensure the protection of the human rights of all people (including the rights to food,⁴ drinking water, sanitation, education, health and decent work) without discrimination of any kind. It also affirms that no one should be left behind as this could engender disharmony “both within and between communities, ethnicities and religions, and of instability nationally, as well as in the international order” and, finally, that all countries should have laws against racial discrimination (United Nations, 2021b, pp. 27–28).

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) issued a note (OHCHR, 2020b) recognizing that the COVID-19 crisis disproportionately affects certain marginalized groups and communities on the basis of race, nationality or ethnicity and highlights structural inequalities in various spheres of life. These groups include people of African descent, who endure prejudice, hate speech and violence, arbitrary denial of services, worsening exclusion and other negative repercussions of the COVID-19 crisis. OHCHR is of the view that the pandemic has worsened existing racism and racial discrimination and has resulted in a significant increase in racially motivated violence in public spaces. In this context, OHCHR makes a number of recommendations to prevent discrimination in several spheres and recommends a number of promising practices.

Furthermore, OHCHR stressed that “Emergency measures taken by countries around the world in an attempt to check the spread of the virus, sometimes involving restrictions on the free movement of persons, goods and services, have had serious consequences for human rights at times disproportionate to any of the public health gains made. Loss of life and livelihoods, disruption of education and health services, and increased violence—particularly violence against women and other vulnerable persons—have undermined the human rights and dignity of millions of people around the world” (United Nations, 2021c, p. 2).

³ The Secretary-General also urged people on the move who experience xenophobia (United Nations, 2020d) and religious leaders to speak out against hate speech directed at minority communities around the world (United Nations, 2020e). OHCHR (2020a) has encouraged networking between governments and faith groups to develop common goals in education, health and employment, and other areas.

⁴ It is worth highlighting the endorsement of a document (PARLATINO, 2021) focused on post-COVID-19 recovery through rural transformation and climate action together with Indigenous Peoples and persons of African descent in Latin America and the Caribbean. The document covers issues such as territorial rights, the protection of collective tenure systems, rural tourism, traditional medicine, self-sustaining management of natural resources, access to finance, legislative updates and specific budget allocations.

The report by the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent entitled *COVID-19, systemic racism and global protests* (United Nations, 2020f) points out that structural racial discrimination deepens inequality in access to treatment for illness, resulting in higher mortality and morbidity rates for people of African descent, because most States have not considered the social determinants of health and the additional risks faced by people of African descent. The above-mentioned report notes that, prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, based on the experience with Influenza A (H1N1), scientists had already advised that a pandemic could unequally affect people of African descent. At that time, the impact of ethnic and racial inequality on exposure to Influenza A (H1N1) and the propensity to contract it, difficulties in accessing health care and perceptions of ethnic and racial discrimination were already evident.⁵ Hence, the propensity to contract COVID-19 and its severity cannot be attributed entirely to the health of each individual but also to the social determinants of health, since not everyone can follow the recommended protocol for avoiding infection.⁶ Many people cannot temporarily stop working (or telecommuting), adopt safe health practices and maintain physical distance. It must be stressed that States are forbidden from using people of African descent for scientific innovation in COVID-19 research, as has been done in the past.⁷ The Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent concludes that racial origin is a major factor in the inequitable response to COVID-19 as States have failed to acknowledge and rectify the effects of the social determinants of health, which results in greater risks to people of African descent.⁸ Finally, recent research clearly indicates that frontline workers of African descent must be protected (United Nations, 2020f).

The Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance analyses the increase in racially motivated incidents and conspiracy theories spread during the pandemic, identifies several practices implemented to address these phenomena and describes how the widespread and uncoordinated acceleration of digital inclusion led to an increase in cybercrime, which further exacerbated contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination and xenophobia (United Nations, 2021d). Since the onset of the pandemic, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) have also pointed out that the health crisis disproportionately affected people of African descent owing to their living conditions prior to the pandemic, which the health crisis only accentuated, revealing multiple examples of social and racial inequality in various sectors (economic, social and environmental) (ECLAC, 2021b; UNFPA, 2020b).

As noted previously, since the beginning of the pandemic, there have been ongoing attempts to analyse its impact on people of African descent in the region, resulting in several publications that explicitly address this population group, which is considered to have been one of the most vulnerable during the health crisis. The vulnerability of other groups in which people of African descent are overrepresented (women, people from lower-income households, informal workers, paid domestic workers, children, adolescents, youth, older people, the rural population, people with disabilities, migrants and unhoused people) demonstrates that the various types of intersectionality further worsen their living conditions.⁹

Finally, in terms of current efforts to enhance the visibility of people of African descent during the pandemic, it is worth highlighting the day of dialogue Promotion and Protection of the Rights of People of African Descent and their Communities in Latin America and the Caribbean Region in the Context of

⁵ Doctors' racial prejudices influence their decisions. There is a tendency to underdiagnose people of African descent and to believe that they experience less pain and suffer less than other people. In many countries, the social determinants of health perpetuate institutional racism, and the lack of protocols can jeopardize racial equity in the COVID-19 response (United Nations, 2020f).

⁶ This refers to the circumstances in which people are born, grow up, work, live and age, and the forces that influence their living conditions. These circumstances include economic, social, regulatory and policy-related factors that determine the risk of becoming ill and the likelihood of receiving appropriate treatment. People's economic and social standing influences the conditions in which they grow up, learn, work and age, and their vulnerability to illness. Thus, sectors such as education, housing, employment and transport, for example, which are affected by States' actions and by economic development, have an impact on health and health equity (PAHO, 2017).

⁷ Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, people of African descent were often subjected to legalized exploitation in the name of scientific innovation and progress. There are examples of Black bodies being put on display for public entertainment, the development of surgical techniques, dissections, and infections and reinfections in order to study diseases, using the bodies of people of African descent (United Nations, 2020f).

⁸ The situation in Haiti is stark. The virus is spreading in a country already devastated by an earthquake and a cholera outbreak caused by United Nations peacekeepers, which resulted in the infection of 1 million people and the deaths of 10,000 (United Nations, 2020f).

⁹ See especially UNFPA (2020b), ECLAC (2020a), ECLAC/UNICEF (2020), ECLAC/PAHO (2020) and ECLAC (2021c).

COVID-19: Building Back Better, which, against the backdrop of the pandemic, sought to create a virtual space for dialogue with leaders and defenders of the rights of people of African descent, as well as human rights experts, to assess actions undertaken under the International Decade for People of African Descent, the Montevideo Consensus on Population and Development and the 2030 Agenda. The conference, which was promoted by OHCHR, UNFPA and the Government of Costa Rica, was held in December 2020. One of its main objectives was to gather testimonials from people of African descent themselves on how the pandemic affected them in their countries.

This paper now builds on the above-mentioned background information and aims to show the progress made and identify the challenges facing States regarding people of African descent, at the midpoint of the International Decade for People of African Descent and in the current COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the challenges it poses for building back better and without discrimination of any kind. It is based on secondary information (statistical data and qualitative information from published studies) and official documents from the United Nations and other international agencies. Since one of its main purposes is to give space and a voice to people of African descent, the document includes several quotes collected during the days of dialogue. The other purpose of the document is to develop concrete recommendations, specifically targeting States, for a post-pandemic reconstruction process that guarantees effective equality for people of African descent and their communities.

I. Overview of the programme of activities for the implementation of the International Decade for People of African Descent amid the COVID-19 pandemic

A. Recognition

The core elements of recognition, the first pillar of the International Decade for People of African Descent, are the right to non-discrimination and equality, which are fundamental human rights principles, and the promotion of greater knowledge, recognition and respect for the culture, history and heritage of people of African descent. Recognition entails seeing and treating others as equals, a mindset that could prevent discriminatory practices from taking root. Under this pillar, the main objective of the International Decade for People of African Descent is to promote the respect, protection and fulfilment of all the rights of people of African descent with full equality, as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 2014).

1. The right to equality and non-discrimination

To guarantee this right, the programme of activities for the implementation of the International Decade for People of African Descent recommends, among other actions, that States remove all obstacles that prevent people of African descent from enjoying the right to equality, through a comprehensive review of national legislation, the adoption or strengthening of all legislative provisions to this effect, the implementation of policies that promote diversity and equality and the establishment of national mechanisms or institutions that promote equality, with the participation of civil society representatives (United Nations, 2014).

The Government of Argentina affirmed that during the pandemic, it supported measures to advance the equality, inclusion and promotion of the human rights of people of African descent, in addition to other groups affected by racism. It provided emergency support to those who had been living in the country legally for at least two years and facilitated cooperation between different levels of government, international organizations and non-governmental organizations. The Government of Mexico affirmed that it had prioritized

human rights and care for vulnerable groups in all its pandemic response measures and that the legislation implemented helped combat all forms of xenophobia associated with COVID-19. It also issued guidelines, informed by a human rights perspective, for dealing with the pandemic. For example, one guideline prohibits the denial of health care on the basis of discriminatory criteria (such as economic or migratory status, sexual orientation or nationality, among other factors) (United Nations, 2020g).

Although prior to the pandemic, the Chilean State had enacted Law No. 21151 granting legal recognition to Chilean tribal peoples of African descent (8 April 2019), this recognition proved insufficient to enable their effective inclusion in the development of differentiated public policies during the health crisis.

In Costa Rica, COVID-19 testing is freely available to all individuals, and those in quarantine receive the appropriate care in health facilities or through regular follow-up at their homes (OHCHR, 2020a).

According to Sabine Manigat (Quisqueya University, Haiti), people of African descent in Latin America and the Caribbean do not have one single culture or monolithic identity. On the contrary, the word “diversity” is central to defining the mosaic of peoples, communities and States. Thus, it is important to promote the issues that unite people of African descent in the region to identify their common interests and aspirations: the struggles against social and political scourges such as racism and sexism, the defence of knowledge and skills historically anchored in Afrodescendent communities (spiritual and medicinal knowledge, among others): in short, the discriminatory practices that besiege these communities (UNFPA, n/da).¹⁰

2. Education on equality and awareness-raising

The programme of activities for the implementation of the International Decade for People of African Descent proposes a number of initiatives that States should undertake: (i) celebrate the International Decade for People of African Descent with programmes and an open discussion on efforts to combat racism, with the participation of all stakeholders; (ii) promote greater awareness and recognition of and respect for people of African descent through research, education and the inclusion of their contributions in educational curricula; (iii) engage in advocacy aimed at restoring the dignity of these persons; (iv) support education and training initiatives on human rights issues associated with racism; (v) recognize the victims and their descendants with monuments in countries that profited from slavery and at the sites of departure, arrival and relocation of victims; and (vi) protect relevant cultural sites (United Nations, 2014).

Regarding this last point, the fallout of the murder of George Floyd at the hands of American police officers is instructive. Immediately after this tragic event there was a wave of protests in various countries around the world, culminating in the destruction of several statues of colonizers and slaveholders. Anti-racist movements wielded their power, questioning the colonial past and denouncing the presence of statues of slaveholders that remain standing while the rights and historical role of people of African descent, the primary victims of the slave trade, remain unrecognized. These actions highlight the urgent need for awareness-raising and the recovery of historical memory.

One final, crucial point to be addressed, which was discussed at the days of dialogue, is the relationship between education and ideology and the importance of psychological decolonization through education and rewriting history. Verene Shepherd (Vice-Chair of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination) illustrates this connection as follows: in order to guarantee equity and non-discrimination in Latin America and the Caribbean, there must be greater knowledge and recognition of the history of African peoples and people of African descent, with books that reflect their contributions, which had been made invisible. The ideology that exists in our minds, in the minds of our children, must be explored and historical education must be revised to be used as a tool for liberation from the yokes of the past. This requires that historians become activists, intellectual revolutionaries. We must also recognize all the women who participated in these struggles; they must also appear in our books. This is our responsibility. As people of African descent, we have to take these demands to the State. We must take on the task of rewriting the books. We hope that over the next decade, history texts will reflect the diversity of our history (UNFPA, n/da).

¹⁰ At the same event, Mirtha Colon (President of the Central American Black Organization (Organización Negra Centroamericana, CABO)) also spoke of the importance of educating young people about the struggles of our communities (UNFPA, n/d).

3. Information-gathering

The programme of activities for the implementation of the International Decade for People of African Descent urges States to collect, analyse and disseminate statistical data at the national and local levels and to regularly monitor the living conditions of people of African descent. Such data should be disaggregated to better detect and identify social disparities, while upholding the right to privacy and the principle of self-identification. This information should also be used to assess and guide the definition of policies and measures to prevent, combat and eradicate racism and racial discrimination (United Nations, 2014).

Similarly, under the 2030 Agenda and with the goal of leaving no one behind, it is important to identify and enhance the visibility of the people lagging the furthest behind and to further disaggregate the data (by sex, ethnicity, race, age and migratory status, among other characteristics). Only in this way will it be possible to design specific policies to eliminate inequality gaps, monitor such policies or use the information as a tool for political advocacy. Disaggregation also makes it possible to carry out intersectional analyses and to address cases in which various forms of discrimination are combined.

Since the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (Durban, 2001), organizations for people of African descent have intensified their work and raised awareness of the right to information disaggregated by ethnic and racial status, based on the notion that statistical invisibility is yet another manifestation of structural discrimination. Thus, although the vast majority of demographic censuses in Latin American countries include racial self-identification for people of African descent (17 of 20 countries), the same is not true of other data sources, such as demographic and health surveys (10 of 20 countries), household surveys (6 of 20 countries) and vital statistics records (births and deaths) (7 of 20 countries) (ECLAC/UNFPA, 2020).

Progress in this area, although slow, has gained some momentum since the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (2001) owing to the influence of organizations for people of African descent in implementing international agreements. It is also worth mentioning that the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for and insufficiency of data disaggregated by race to measure the differentiated effects of the disease among people of African descent and non-Afrodescendent populations.

At the days of dialogue, Carlos Humberto Álvarez Nazareno, from the Dirección Nacional de Equidad Racial, Personas Migrantes y Refugiadas of the Government of Argentina, stated that in Durban, because of the requirement to include ethnic and racial considerations in national population censuses, the picture began to change. In 2010, in Argentina, a question relating to people of African descent was included in the census for the first time. While the inclusion of this variable in national censuses is important, it must be extended to all statistical instruments in every country (UNFPA, n/da).

More work is needed to make progress on including and improving self-identification in the national statistical systems of all countries in the region (using comparable criteria and questions) and in the production of reliable, timely and accessible information. Here again, the pandemic underscored this need. To this end, the Secretary-General of the United Nations has highlighted the importance of disaggregated information in assessing the effects of the pandemic on people of African descent, including children, adolescents and young people, thus facilitating the adoption of specific policies to reduce racial inequalities and structural discrimination (United Nations, 2020h).

Peru offers a telling example in terms of the disaggregation of pandemic data. The State has included Afro-Peruvian identity as a category of COVID-19 data in Supreme Decree No. 005-2020-MC (29 May 2020), which approved guidelines for incorporating the ethnic variable in the administrative records of public entities, in the context of the health emergency declared because of COVID-19.¹¹

¹¹ See [online] www.gob.pe/institucion/cultura/normas-legales/633316-005-2020-mc.

In Honduras, monitoring by OHCHR found that the lack of disaggregated official data on the number of infections and deaths from COVID-19 and the effects of hurricanes Eta and Iota (November 2020) on Indigenous Peoples and the Afro-Honduran population complicated the State's efforts to mount an effective response. A report prepared by the Resident Coordinator Office (RCO) and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in January 2021 on the situation in Honduras in the wake of the hurricanes noted the need for disaggregated information to determine the disproportionate and differential impact on the affected population based on gender, age, ethnicity, disability and other characteristics (RCO/OCHA, 2021).

4. Participation and inclusion

The programme of activities for the implementation of the International Decade for People of African Descent posits that States should take measures to facilitate the full, equal and effective participation of people of African descent in public and political affairs without discrimination of any kind and in accordance with international human rights law (United Nations, 2014).

In this regard, Latin American organizations for people of African descent, in many cases without support from the States, have gained visibility and played a key role in upholding international and regional standards for the promotion of ethnic and racial equality. This process gained ground with the Regional Conference held in Santiago de Chile (2000), in preparation for the Conference in Durban, which triggered a substantial increase in the mobilization of people of African descent, and consensus was reached on a regional agenda for the promotion of racial equality and the protection of the rights of people of African descent. The key strategies promoted by the movement include the permanent participation of organizations for people of African descent and the implementation of policies, including affirmative actions, to close ethnic and racial gaps (ECLAC, 2017a).¹² Although few systematic studies have been conducted at the regional level, there are a significant number of organizations for people of African descent,¹³ which are quite heterogeneous (representing both the African diaspora and the demands of the new waves of African migration), focus on a wide variety of issues and face several challenges, including limited financial resources, poor coordination and use of information and communications technology (ICTs), the lack of change in leadership, management weaknesses and the lack of coordination with the private sector (ECLAC, 2017a).¹⁴

An important phenomenon in the mobilization of Afrodescendent civil society organizations that should be highlighted is the participation of young people, whose increasingly prominent role has resulted in the creation of numerous youth organizations in recent years. UNFPA has mapped these organizations in Latin America and the Caribbean to showcase them as key actors in the eradication of ethnic and racial, generational, gender-based and other forms of inequality. The study shows that the majority of the members of most of these organizations are women, persons with disabilities and non-binary persons, which contributes significantly to strengthening inclusion. While most organizations for young people of African descent focus on local systems, there are also many that are engaged in national and regional work (UNFPA, 2020a).

Organizations for youth of African descent have taken an interest in COVID-19 and see themselves as playing an important role in the pandemic response. They have undertaken volunteer work carried out by tertiary education students and engaged mainly in psychosocial support initiatives, food packaging, document preparation, and cultural and entertainment activities, among other initiatives (Working Group on Youth of the Regional Collaboration Platform for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2021). Young people of African descent have also shown interest in the rise in youth unemployment, the widening digital divide

¹² For more details on this movement and its main stages, meetings and milestones, see ECLAC, 2017a.

¹³ In 2016, there were at least 869 organizations, and half of them were led by women (García Savino, 2016).

¹⁴ The issues they address include cultural recognition, the defence and promotion of human rights, women's empowerment, land recovery, political advocacy, leadership training, combating exclusion and racism, local development, and LGBTQI rights advocacy (García Savino, 2016).

and the increase in domestic violence. Many organizations for young people of African descent created opportunities for virtual dialogue to debate and reflect on the issues that affect them, understanding that young people of African descent play a crucial role in overcoming inequality and racism to achieve their full development (UNFPA, 2020a).

Access to information on COVID-19 has been restricted in several countries, limiting people's ability to participate in decisions about health measures and eroding their confidence in governmental responses to the pandemic. Furthermore, dissemination of misinformation about COVID-19 has undermined the health response, with deadly consequences (United Nations, 2021c).

In his annual report on the International Decade for People of African Descent, the Secretary-General of the United Nations stressed the need to empower young people of African descent and protect them from threats by ensuring the participation of all people in decisions that affect them, especially in light of the current crisis. He views young people of African descent as a key ally in the fight against structural discrimination, and even more so during this health crisis, because they can offer important perspectives to achieve inclusive and rights-based development as the programme of activities for the International Decade for People of African Descent unfolds (United Nations, 2020h).

B. Justice

Justice is a key pillar of the International Decade for People of African Descent as, too often, this population group is discriminated against in the administration of justice and falls victim to police violence and racial profiling. For these and other reasons, the programme of activities for the implementation of the International Decade for People of African Descent recommends that States undertake initiatives such as the following: take measures to ensure the equality of all persons before the law and the right to fair trials; adopt measures to eliminate racial profiling; ensure that people of African descent have full access to protection before the courts against any form of racial discrimination; adopt legal measures to combat all racist acts, in particular the dissemination of ideas based on racial superiority or hatred or incitement to racial violence; acknowledge and vehemently denounce the suffering and evils inflicted as a result of the transatlantic slave trade and genocide and seek to restore the dignity of the victims (United Nations, 2014).

As part of a declaration on access to justice during the pandemic, the IACHR called on States to ensure the broadest possible access to justice as a core mechanism for protecting and promoting human rights and fundamental freedoms. Law enforcement entities have adopted measures regarding the functioning of the criminal justice system and access to justice to curb the spread of COVID-19, including the suspension of judicial activity and the use of teleworking. The IACHR believes the first measure should be used with caution as the judiciary is a fundamental pillar for the protection and promotion of human rights, and that "States must ensure the functioning of independent and impartial courts and guarantee effective compliance with judicial decisions issued by judicial bodies" (OAS, 2021b). With respect to the second measure, it notes that the use of technological tools has occasionally had a negative impact on access to justice for some segments of the population because of the current digital divide and the lack of Internet coverage in various areas (OAS, 2021b).

1. Violence and stigmatization

Violence is a key aspect of the justice pillar and has a significant impact on countries' development, entailing high economic costs.¹⁵ Latin America is currently the most violent region in the world (UNODC, 2019, cited in Nun and Sembler, 2020). This violence affects people and communities of African descent in particular because of the various forms of inequality, racism and structural discrimination they already suffer, which result from the prevailing exclusionary development model in the region.

¹⁵ For more on these costs, see, for example, UNODC (2019) and World Bank (2009), cited in Nun and Sembler (2020).

Racial profiling in police stops means that people of African descent are more likely to be searched on the street and are at greater risk of violence and death in encounters with police officers. Moreover, men of African descent are more frequently arrested, detained and sentenced to harsher penalties (United Nations, 2014). The history of discrimination and racism leaves persons and communities of African descent more susceptible to violence in the most vulnerable areas of large cities. In Colombia, for example, young people of African descent are now the primary victims of homicides. In Cali, some 80% of males aged 15 to 19 who suffer violent deaths are of African descent (Murillo, 2020).

Although data on violence against women is scarce, the violence suffered by Afro-Colombian women during the ongoing armed conflict in the country includes sexual violence, torture, enforced disappearance, death threats and intimidation.¹⁶ Of the 563,000 Afrodescendent victims of violence recorded in 2014, 52.2% were women, and 58.7% were under 26 years of age (Articulación Regional Feminista de Derechos Humanos y Justicia de Género, 2015, cited in ECLAC, 2017a, p. 100).

Among Colombian and Honduran women who reported having been victims of physical violence in the past 12 months, young women of African descent were the most frequent victims of this type of violence in both countries (around 50%) (UNFPA/ECLAC, 2022). On this issue, which was also addressed in the days of dialogue, Waldistrudis Hurtado Minotta (UN-Women's Civil Society Advisory Group in Latin America and the Caribbean) stated that in Colombia, women of African descent have been held captive by the pandemic and by the loss of all their employment opportunities. They are subjected to physical, psychological and sexual violence, and their children also suffer from sexual violence, sexual harassment and pregnancies that are often unwanted (UNFPA, n/db).

In Brazil, in 2017, young women of African descent aged 15 to 29 years were 2.19 times more likely to be murdered than white women in the same age group (Brazil, Office of the President, 2017). Violence against women is also depicted in stereotypical images and through the hypersexualization of their bodies in the media.

With respect to racially motivated violence, in the days of dialogue, Santiago Arboleda Quiñonez (Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar de Quito) noted that in Latin America, dispossession is normalized, and in many of our countries, violence manifests as femicides, infanticides, disappearances, exile, displacements, sanctuaries and the selective assassination of politicians. Iniquity is rampant. We must take steps towards instilling intercultural understanding and an intercultural justice system (UNFPA, n/db).

Raull Santiago (Coletivo Papo Reto del Brasil) then pointed out that public policy in Brazil for youth of African descent is conceptualized almost exclusively based on the perspective of the Secretariats of Public Security and the criminalization of these young people. We are the Black youth from the margins of society. We are the ones most frequently executed and incarcerated in the country. We must devise policies for and in collaboration with the marginalized Afrodescendent youth population from the favelas (UNFPA, n/db).

During the pandemic, the *Favelas en Lucha* Movement, formed by collectives promoting the implementation of public policies in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, denounced the militarization of these slums and the fact that, under the pretext of the "war on drugs," young residents, mostly of African descent, end up dead. It also decried the fact that since the beginning of the pandemic, the movement had been distributing food, hygiene products and health information to the residents, and that law enforcement operations take place precisely at the times when these goods are being distributed (Pires Neto, 2020).

The OHCHR has emphasized that many of the measures adopted to address the health crisis have had negative human rights implications. In some cases, the restrictions have included efforts to limit

¹⁶ According to official data from 19 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, a total of 2,559 victims of femicide or femicide were recorded in 2017 (that figure rises to 2,795 when data from four other countries in which only femicides committed by the victim's partner or ex-partner is added). In most countries in the region, two of every three femicides occur in intimate partner or ex-partner relationships (ECLAC, n/d).

freedom of expression, threats to and the detention of media workers and health professionals, among other individuals. Users of social media have been arrested for posting COVID-19-related videos or criticizing the authorities. On some occasions, the right to peaceful assembly has been overridden by the pandemic, and criminal charges have been brought against participants and organizers of demonstrations. Similarly, COVID-19-related restrictions have been used in electoral processes to weaken or silence opposition voices and stifle dissent (United Nations, 2021c). Lockdowns have increased the risk of isolation for the most vulnerable groups (women, children and persons with disabilities, for example) with repercussions for their mental health¹⁷ and physical well-being and have redoubled the risk of physical or psychological violence. They have also limited children's access to trusted adults to whom they might typically report violence.¹⁸

2. Systematic discrimination in the administration of justice and excessive use of force

The programme of activities for the International Decade for People of African Descent maintains that States must facilitate access to justice for people of African descent who are victims of racism, which includes ensuring a fair trial and the right to the presumption of innocence. It also stresses the need to prevent all forms of violence against these persons, including by State officials (United Nations, 2014).

However, police violence and discrimination against people of African descent in the administration of justice are widespread in the region. The arbitrary use of force by law enforcement officials, police brutality and racial profiling have often been compounded by impunity and discrimination in the administration of justice. This has placed a disproportionate burden on people of African descent, including young people, and has often led to a presumption of guilt against them (United Nations, 2018). Owing to persistent patterns of structural discrimination, the justice sector contributes to the tendency to associate skin colour with criminality and cultivates the belief that people of African descent are guilty (United Nations, 2019). Law enforcement officials often target, stigmatize, stereotype and profile people of African descent based on race (OAS, 2019 and 2012).

In 2011, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination called on States to take measures to prevent the unlawful use of force, torture, inhumane or degrading treatment and discrimination against people of African descent by the police or other agencies and to ensure that they are not subjected to racial or ethnic profiling in its general recommendation No. 34, which was adopted by the Committee, (United Nations, 2011).

In 2020, following the murder of George Floyd by police officers (25 May 2020 in Minnesota, United States), the Human Rights Council held an emergency debate on racially motivated human rights violations, systemic racism, police brutality and violence against peaceful protests. In this debate, the Council adopted Resolution 43/1, in which it strongly condemned the persistence of racially motivated violent and discriminatory practices against Africans and people of African descent by law enforcement officials and the structural racism of the criminal justice system (United Nations, 2020i). In the same resolution, the Council called on the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to prepare a report to be submitted at its forty-seventh session on systemic racism and violations of international human rights law committed by law enforcement officials against Africans and people of African descent.

In his update on the implementation of Resolution 43/1, provided at the forty-sixth session of the Human Rights Council, the High Commissioner called for an end to police violence, pointing out that despite the increased visibility of this problem, instances of police brutality and racial discrimination against people of African descent continue to occur. He added that this goal cannot be achieved until

¹⁷ During the workshops conducted to analyse the impact of the pandemic on Afrodescendent youth in the Colombian Pacific, various contributing factors to the increase in mental health problems were discussed, namely sudden changes in routine; the lack of emotional resources to adapt to changes; poor treatment of these problems from a holistic standpoint; the perception of forsaken future aspirations; problems at home associated with the lack of employment and, finally, violence (Figuerola and Valencia, 2022).

¹⁸ In Antigua and Barbuda, for example, telecommunications companies agreed not to charge for calls made to domestic violence hotlines (United Nations, 2021c).

there is a realization that the impunity enjoyed by the police and other law enforcement officials who commit violent acts against people of African descent is not an isolated occurrence. Law enforcement and judicial authorities are a reflection of our societies, and unless we address systemic racism within our institutions, we can never “correct” police behaviour. He also stressed that responding to systemic racism requires an examination of the structures that reinforce inequality in all aspects of life, contributing to police violence. He concluded by noting that ending racially motivated injustice in law enforcement requires confronting the legacy of slavery and the transatlantic African slave trade and that the existence of the racially discriminatory systems and policies that followed the formal abolition of slavery must be acknowledged (United Nations, 2021e).

At the forty-seventh session of the Human Rights Council, the High Commissioner acknowledged the unprecedented opportunity to advance a transformative agenda for racial justice and equality. The agenda aims to dismantle the culture of denial and systemic racism and increase the pace of actions taken; end impunity for human rights violations by police officers and reduce the resulting lack of trust; ensure that the voices of people of African descent and those who stand up to racism are heard and their grievances are addressed and to recognize and confront legacies, including through accountability and reparation. The High Commissioner urges States to implement the transformative agenda through concrete measures, such as the promotion of national dialogues, with meaningful participation by people of African descent, to address the specific history, experiences and current reality in each State (United Nations, 2021f, annex). The transformative agenda can be summarized in four points: (i) move forward by ceasing to deny the existence of racism and taking action to dismantle it; (ii) pursue justice, ending impunity and building trust in the system; (iii) listen to people of African descent; (iv) make reparations by rectifying the vestiges of the past, adopting special measures and ensuring restorative justice (OHCHR, 2021).

The Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent noted that inadequate measures have been taken to mitigate racial bias in decisions relating to the COVID-19 pandemic and that, in some cases, the restrictions imposed to curb transmission are being used as a pretext for disproportionate law enforcement and violence against people of African descent. In many States, people of African descent have condemned the increase in police violence disguised as compliance with physical distancing rules. In Brazil, for example, the enhanced presence of the army in favelas resulted in a steep increase in deaths and violence (a 36% increase in the number of people killed by the police in three months, including numerous children). Police violence against people of African descent has also increased in Colombia, where COVID-19-related restrictions have been disproportionately applied to them. According to the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent, the abuses of authority that occurred during the pandemic set the stage for protests against racism (United Nations, 2020f).

It is difficult to obtain police data disaggregated by ethnic and racial status in Latin America; however, in Brazil, which does have this type of information, it had been found that the rights of people of African descent are violated to a greater extent compared to the non-Afrodescendent population. In 2018, the homicide rate for people of African descent was 37.8 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, compared to 13.9 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants for the non-Afrodescendent population (Cerqueira and others, 2019). Of those who died as a result of police interventions, 78.9% were of African descent, although this group represented only 56.3% of the country’s total population. Moreover, although people of African descent represented only 34.5% of the police force, 62.7% of the police officers killed were of African descent (Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública, 2021). This last statistic illustrates not only the disproportionate mortality rate for police officers of African descent, but also their underrepresentation in the police force, which mirrors the racial inequality that exists in the country in terms of access to this occupation for people of African descent.

Recording police information disaggregated by race can be a sensitive issue because it can reveal classist and racist police behaviour, given that harsher treatment is doled out to poor people living in lower-income districts, in which people of African descent are overrepresented in many countries in the region.

Racially motivated abuse of people of African descent at the hands of police officers should be monitored using data on lethal violence and official police statistics for internal monitoring; however, external monitoring by other State bodies and civil society is also needed. The study by ILEX Acción Jurídica (2022), which conducted semi-structured interviews, organized focus groups and observed police activity on public transport in two locations in Bogotá, offers a good example of external civilian monitoring. The study found that Black people are victims of racial profiling in searches and the application of punitive measures, verbal and physical violence and harassment, among other forms of abuse.

Finally, facial recognition technology can be used to profile individuals on the basis of ethnicity or race, national origin, gender and other characteristics (United Nations, 2020j). In Brazil, for example, a study conducted by the Public Defender's Office of the State of Rio de Janeiro (Defensoria Pública do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, 2022) on cases tried in the State Court of Justice between January and June 2021 showed that 80% of the defendants acquitted because of errors in the use of facial recognition technology had been detained for more than a year and that over 60% of the accused were of African descent.

3. Persons deprived of their liberty

In a pandemic, persons deprived of their liberty are particularly vulnerable to the virus. The United Nations has, therefore, highlighted the need for a special initiative to free children and young people, including those of African descent (United Nations, 2020h).

The OHCHR also pointed out that the pandemic-driven postponement of legal and judicial proceedings leads to prolonged pretrial detention and, consequently, to the delayed release of prisoners eligible for parole. This situation may be disproportionately affecting persons belonging to ethnic or racial minorities, who are often overrepresented among persons deprived of their liberty. Racial discrimination is also evident in the fines issued for non-compliance with restrictions imposed during the pandemic, which weigh more heavily on persons belonging to ethnic or racial minorities (OHCHR, 2020a).

Finally, it is worth noting that Brazil's prisons are grappling with high rates of infection and inadequate measures to contain or prevent infection, and that people of African descent are overrepresented in the Brazilian prison population (United Nations, 2020f).

4. Special measures

The programme of activities for the International Decade for People of African Descent provides for the adoption of special measures, such as affirmative actions, to alleviate and remedy disparities in the enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms affecting people of African descent, to protect them from discrimination and surmount disparities caused largely by historical circumstances. As such, States are urged to develop national action plans to promote diversity, equality, equity, social justice, equality of opportunity and the participation of all. It is expected that through affirmative or positive measures and strategies, the necessary conditions will be created for all to participate in decision-making and to realize civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights in all spheres of life, based on the principle of non-discrimination (United Nations, 2014).

In the days of dialogue, Edna Santos Roland (Independent Eminent Expert on the Implementation of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action) affirmed the importance of implementing these types of policies, including those that aim to close the gaps in infrastructure services, recalling that the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action presents affirmative actions as overarching policies that target not just the individual beneficiaries of certain programmes, but also the structural conditions that produce inequity. For this reason, the concept of affirmative actions incorporates measures to improve access to water, sanitation and electricity in the communities or districts where people of African descent live, which often lack these public services (UNFPA, n/da).

C. Development

The development pillar of the programme of activities for the International Decade for People of African Descent refers broadly to economic and social rights and mainly addresses efforts to combat poverty and issues of social inclusion and racial equality in areas such as education, employment, health and housing.

1. Right to development and measures to eliminate poverty

The programme of activities for the International Decade for People of African Descent emphasizes that, in accordance with the Declaration on the Right to Development, States should take measures to ensure the participation of all people—including people of African descent—in development and the fair distribution of all its benefits. Moreover, recognizing that poverty is both a cause and a consequence of discrimination, States should implement national programmes or strengthen existing ones to eradicate poverty, taking into account the needs and experiences of people of African descent (United Nations, 2014).

Latin America and the Caribbean is one of the regions hardest hit by the crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the emergency measures adopted in most of the countries, the inadequacy of social protection systems was unmistakable as they struggled to counteract the adverse effects of the crisis.

Given the high levels of inequality in the region, which create yawning gaps between the various population groups, some groups are more severely affected than others. For example, poverty is greater in rural areas, among children and adolescents, among Indigenous Peoples and persons of African descent, and among people with lower education levels. According to data from five countries where self-identification of people of African descent is included in household surveys conducted by ECLAC (Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Uruguay), the poverty rate among people of African descent in 2020 exceeded that of the non-Afrodescendent population in all countries. The highest poverty rates were recorded in Colombia and Ecuador, where 48% and 44% of people of African descent, respectively, were living in poverty (compared with 35% and 22%, respectively, of the non-Afrodescendent population). In terms of gaps associated with ethnicity and race, the highest poverty rates were recorded in Uruguay (12% for people of African descent compared with 5% for the non-Afrodescendent population) and Brazil (24% against 11%, respectively), with the proportion of people of African descent living in poverty more than double that of their non-Afrodescendent counterparts. In Peru, the racial gap for this indicator was smaller, with a poverty rate of 28% for people of African descent compared with 22% for non-Afrodescendants (ECLAC, 2022b).

According to a study by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), of 328 territories in 23 Latin American and Caribbean countries, one in five of these territories demonstrated high levels of malnutrition and child stunting. In rural territories with high poverty levels and a strong presence of people of African descent, the proportion of that population affected by malnutrition was double that of non-Afrodescendants (FAO and others, 2021). Moreover, obesity—a disease closely tied to poor nutrition, which is a co-morbidity that can worsen the consequences of COVID-19—is on the rise among the most vulnerable population. In Brazil, a 2013 nationwide study showed that the incidence of obesity was higher among poorly educated people and women of African descent (Ferreira, Szwarcwald and Damascena, 2019).

In Ecuador, the government declared a state of emergency and quarantine for the entire country as of 17 March 2020. The measures adopted included mobility restrictions, a moratorium on some productive activities and the implementation of curfews. Because they were unable to market their products and lacked money to buy medicines, people of African descent in the north of Esmeraldas experienced food shortages, which resulted in the current food and health emergency. Despite the restrictions imposed by the government, mining has ramped up. Conditions have worsened for communities that lack drinking water and depend on rivers for cooking, cleaning and social, cultural and spiritual activities as many rivers have been polluted by mining activity. In some communities, the challenges have been compounded by a shortage of medicines and the closure of health centres (United Nations, 2020k).

Some data indicate that the increase in poverty rates would be even steeper if measures such as providing emergency income had not been taken. During the pandemic, governments in the region implemented almost 300 emergency social protection measures that benefited 49.4% of the population in 2020, equivalent to about 84 million households, or 326 million people (ECLAC, 2021c).

The United Nations Secretary-General warned that rising poverty would affect children, adolescents and youth more severely, especially those of African descent, and recommended paying special attention to this group, which has limited access to information and the Internet. He stressed the importance of an integrated, rights-based approach to empower people living in poverty (United Nations, 2020h).

Finally, the IACHR has deplored the increase in poverty caused by the pandemic and the fact that the impact of the crisis falls disproportionately on the poorest, most vulnerable groups. In the absence of State policies and measures to adequately protect them, these groups are struggling to survive in dire conditions. This situation is likely to worsen if States do not adopt policies to guarantee the rights of the most vulnerable as the high levels of inequality, coupled with the pandemic-driven increase in poverty, threaten to sever the social fabric, weakening democracy and the rule of law (OAS, 2020a).

2. Education

The programme of activities for the International Decade for People of African Descent calls on States to take all necessary measures to respect the right of people of African descent, particularly young girls, adolescents and young people, to free primary education and access to all levels and forms of quality public education without discrimination. States must ensure accessible and quality education in areas where communities of people of African descent live, especially in rural and marginalized areas, and take measures to ensure that education systems (public and private) do not discriminate against or exclude children of African descent and protect them from stereotypes and violence by peers or teachers. This can be achieved by training and raising awareness among teachers and adopting measures to increase the number of teachers of African descent in educational institutions (United Nations, 2014).

There are various international treaties that view education as a right and contribute in important ways to the fulfilment of other rights. Although the region has seen considerable progress in recent decades in implementing this right through expanded coverage, there have not necessarily been improvements in the quality and teaching of the skills needed to meet contemporary demands. Although primary education is practically universal in Latin America and the Caribbean and the percentage of young people attending secondary school has increased significantly, completing this level and increasing participation in tertiary or higher education remains challenging. However, the situation varies considerably among countries, and there is a considerable degree of inequality within them (ECLAC/UNFPA, 2020).

Regarding ethnic and racial inequalities, education is one of the main contributing factors to inequality and poverty experienced by Indigenous Peoples and persons of African descent (World Bank, 2015; ECLAC, 2017b, 2016a and 2012d; Telles and Steele, 2012). Despite advances in education in recent decades, large ethnic and racial gaps persist in access to and completion of secondary and, especially, tertiary education (ECLAC, 2017a and 2017b; ECLAC/UNFPA, 2020), in addition to challenges in implementing an intercultural approach in education (Corbetta and others, 2018).

Completing secondary education is viewed as the minimum requirement for breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty and securing a decent job as it would ensure that the minimum skills needed are acquired to enable people to develop freely and to optimize their learning capacity throughout their lives. People who do not complete secondary education are more likely to experience multiple forms of exclusion (ECLAC/UNFPA, 2020). However, secondary completion rates vary considerably among countries in Latin America. The best outcomes have been noted among young people aged 18 to 24 years, and in almost all countries, the proportion of non-Afrodescendent youth who have completed secondary education is higher than that of young people of African descent (UNFPA/ECLAC, 2022). Uruguay exhibits a very large racial gap on this indicator: in 2018, the proportion of young people of African descent aged 20 to 24 years who had completed secondary education (17.1%) was less than half that of non-Afrodescendent youth (38.9%) (ECLAC/UNFPA, 2020).

With regard to access to and completion of higher education, which organizations dedicated to people of African descent consider to be of the utmost importance, there has been progress in establishing community universities,¹⁹ scaling up research centres and, in some countries, adopting and implementing State policies on affirmative actions to promote equal access to higher education. Adoption of these affirmative action policies has gone a long way towards narrowing ethnic and racial gaps.

In Latin America, the percentage of youth of African descent aged 18 to 29 years in higher education is very low, ranging from 3% in the Plurinational State of Bolivia to 23% in Colombia. The percentage of young people attending higher education institutions is much higher in urban than in rural areas, and women almost always perform better on this indicator than men (UNFPA/ECLAC, 2022). However, some noteworthy progress has been made. In Brazil, for example, the implementation of affirmative actions and the expansion of higher education institutions resulted in a significant increase in tertiary education completion rates between 2002 and 2018 among both people of African descent and non-Afrodescendants. As a result, the percentage of youth of African descent aged 25 to 29 years who completed tertiary education almost quadrupled in that period (ECLAC/UNFPA, 2020).

Another important indicator of exclusion that should be highlighted concerns young people who are neither studying nor gainfully employed and are, therefore, at greater risk of falling into poverty or less likely to escape it. Around half this population belongs to the bottom two income quintiles and largely comprises women living in urban areas, many of whom already have children. These women account for a significant proportion of unpaid and care work within the household and struggle to complete their studies and enter the labour market owing to the inadequacy of care systems and policies to reconcile study, work and family life (ECLAC, 2018b and 2014b).

Closer examination of this indicator reveals very marked gender and territorial inequalities, which are exacerbated when combined with ethnic and racial inequalities. For example, in 9 of 14 countries in the region, the highest percentages of people who neither study nor work are young women of African descent living in urban areas (these percentages were much lower for men) (UNFPA/ECLAC, 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, around half of young people were forced to significantly increase the time spent on domestic work. Some 13% of those surveyed (young people aged 15 to 29 years) stated that they had to start caring for dependents at home (Working Group on Youth of the Regional Collaborative Platform for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2021).

In short, although some progress has been made in fulfilling the right to education in terms of access and education levels, significant gaps persist between and within countries on the basis of the socioeconomic level and ethnic and racial status of the population, among other factors. The exclusion, discrimination and structural racism that exist in the education system are undeniable and have an especially detrimental impact on people of African descent, even in countries with public, free and universal tertiary education, such as Brazil and Uruguay, which, nonetheless, exhibit high ethnic and racial gaps for this indicator. These levels of inequality will continue to plague people of African descent throughout their adult lives, since education is a determining factor in labour market participation, income distribution and well-being.

The temporary closure of educational and training institutions during the current health crisis has caused major upheaval in the education of millions of children, particularly those belonging to population groups that experience ethnic or racial discrimination and lack the conditions necessary to benefit equally from distance learning. To address this situation, some governments have increased access to digital content (in Paraguay, for example, this has ensured access to content for around 1.5 million students) (OHCHR, 2020a). However, this is a stopgap measure since it cannot replace school as a space for socialization. The scenario described above will undoubtedly exacerbate existing racial and ethnic inequalities, as many of the most vulnerable children depend on school not only for education but also as a source of food and other services (mental health and sexual and reproductive health education).

¹⁹ In Nicaragua, for example, there are the community colleges Bluefields Indian and Caribbean University (BICU) and the University of the Autonomous Regions of the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua (URACCAN).

There was a substantial increase in the digitalization of schools combined with the exclusion from the school system of those who could not adapt to the changes, resulting in substantial losses for children, adolescents and youth (more than half of students were unable to continue their educational activities due to a lack of connectivity and devices or teachers' weak digital skills) (ECLAC/OEI, 2020). According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), in Latin America and the Caribbean, around 154 million children and adolescents (more than 95% of those enrolled) were temporarily out of school because of the pandemic, and a large percentage of them did not have virtual access to educational content. In Brazil, the percentage of students of African descent dealing with Internet access challenges or low-quality connections who were unable to attend virtual classes was almost double that of non-Afrodescendent students (42% and 23%, respectively). Regarding equipment, while 29% of non-Afrodescendent students had to use cell phones for distance education, this figure rose to 48% for students of African descent. Inequalities are also observed in terms of the lack of adult time available to support distance activities: 35% for non-Afrodescendent students compared to 40% for students of African descent (UNICEF, 2021). Virtual education has become more widespread than initially expected and could increase the risk of permanent school dropout, especially among the most vulnerable children (OAS, 2020b). In Colombia, despite the government's adoption of the *Aprender Digital* strategy, which focuses on home-based learning, substantial digital divides remain, and the resumption of face-to-face classes has been postponed (Figueroa and Valencia, 2022).

Educational achievement is affected by socioeconomic conditions and the capacity of households to comply with health recommendations while supporting children and adolescents with distance learning activities (this includes, among other things, the availability of a strong Internet connection and adequate physical space, in addition to a stable home environment, free of violence and harassment) (ECLAC, 2021b). Undoubtedly, as they experience greater poverty and have limited access to modern technologies, children and young people of African descent are more severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic than their non-Afrodescendent peers, both in terms of access to education and employment.

3. Employment

The programme of activities for the International Decade for People of African Descent calls on States to take measures to eliminate racial discrimination in the workplace, particularly forms of discrimination that affect people of African descent, and to ensure full equality before the law for all. This means eliminating discrimination in labour legislation and barriers to participation in vocational training, collective bargaining, employment, contracts, trade union activities, access to judicial and administrative courts and safe and healthy working conditions (United Nations, 2014).

In Latin America, labour market participation is a determinant of access to well-being. Income from employment accounts for approximately 80% of total household income (ECLAC, 2017b and 2016a). Employment is one of the most important pathways to social inclusion and well-being and a determining factor in overcoming poverty, social and economic integration and access to social protection. Moreover, employment is one of the key mechanisms for developing personal autonomy, identity, dignity and a deeper sense of citizenship (ECLAC, 2010, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c, 2014a, 2016a and 2016c). However, labour market conditions are very unequally distributed depending on sex, age and ethnic and racial status and create significant gaps in access to employment and social protection. In Uruguay, for example, less than half of self-employed people of African descent are enrolled in or contribute to pension systems, compared with non-Afrodescendants (14% and 36%, respectively) (ECLAC, 2021a). This situation makes it difficult to overcome poverty and further perpetuates the prevailing exclusion, inequality and systematic racial discrimination in the region.

Limited labour market participation by people of African descent, driven by ethnic and racial discrimination, is evident in the gaps in unemployment rates between Afrodescendants and non-Afrodescendants. Ecuador offers a good example of the precariousness of labour market participation by people of African descent. According to the 2020 Report of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent, based on government data, more than 60% of the Afro-Ecuadorian population lives

in the marginal urban sectors of cities such as Quito and Guayaquil and face job insecurity (about 40% of workers of African descent are employed in the service sector, 18% in formal or informal trade and 12% in construction). These occupations do not enable savings or cannot fully meet families' basic needs nor support their livelihoods for a significant period of time.²⁰

Moreover—and this is a serious problem that must be addressed—higher education levels do not necessarily lead to higher levels of employment²¹ or income, nor do they reduce ethnic and racial and gender inequality.²² The exclusion and discrimination suffered by women and young people of both sexes in the labour market are experienced more acutely among people of African descent (ECLAC, 2016a, 2017a, 2017b, 2018a and 2018b; ECLAC/UNFPA, 2020; UNFPA/ECLAC, 2022).

The rise in educational levels for women of African descent is not equitably reflected in the labour market. This imbalance is due to the structural, intersecting forms of discrimination suffered by women of African descent. Persistent gender gaps—linked to the unequal sexual division of labour and women's greater responsibility for unpaid domestic and care work—intersect with the gaps caused by ethnic and racial discrimination. Thus, the employment and income rates of women of African descent are lower than those of non-Afrodescendent women (ECLAC, 2016a, 2016b and 2017a; ECLAC/UNFPA, 2020).

The pandemic has had a dramatic impact on employment and the organization of productive activities, with potentially irreversible consequences (ECLAC, 2020b). The economic activities most affected were face-to-face commerce, hotels and restaurants, and paid care services (including day care centres, homes for older persons and domestic work).

However, one of the harshest consequences of the pandemic was the decline in female participation in the labour market stemming from the need for women to take on additional responsibilities in care work because of the closure of educational institutions (ECLAC/ILO, 2020). This situation not only highlighted the importance of unpaid care in daily life, but also the double burden of work that falls to women, especially women of African descent. Half of women in Brazil had to take on more caregiving tasks during lockdowns, especially those with families (80.6%), and 54% were of African descent and performed these tasks with less external support (Prates and others, 2021).

In addition to highlighting the centrality of unpaid care, the pandemic revealed that people of African descent were overrepresented in “essential” occupations in many countries. Although these occupations were declared “essential,” not all States took measures to enable workers to perform their functions. For example, irregular workers who did not have employer-issued authorization to travel faced significant risks, including the risk of detention. Some 30% of domestic workers were fined or harassed for not having authorization to travel, and many were subjected to threats and insults to go back to their countries. In some cases, the police prevented them from going to their workplaces and many reported being afraid to go out to buy food. Moreover, frontline workers in the fight against the pandemic were at higher risk of contracting the disease than the rest of the population. This suggests that health-care systems should develop additional strategies to protect these workers, particularly people of African descent and minority ethnic groups (United Nations, 2020f).

²⁰ Rural workers are at risk of being evicted from their homes while looking for new employment. On a visit to Ecuador, the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent recorded allegations of forced evictions during the pandemic, which further worsened conditions for workers of African descent (United Nations, 2020k).

²¹ In Brazil and Uruguay, for example, the unemployment rate among young women of African descent (aged 15 to 29 years) was much higher than that of similarly educated non-Afrodescendent men. While in Brazil these rates stood at 19.4% and 9.9, respectively, in Uruguay, the difference was even greater, at 29.1% and 11.9%, respectively. The same pattern is observed among adults (aged 30 to 59 years), although with lower unemployment rates (ECLAC, 2016a).

²² In Brazil, Ecuador, Peru and Uruguay, for example, despite the fact that non-Afrodescendent women had on average 0.6 years more education than their male counterparts, and three years more than men of African descent, their employment income was practically equal to that of the latter and much lower than that of the former. The same is true of hourly income for Indigenous women and women of African descent, who occupy the lowest rung of the income ladder, even when controlling for education level. The higher the education level, the wider the gap (ECLAC, 2016a and 2016b).

Domestic workers play a key role in caring for children and dependent persons. In Latin America and the Caribbean, these workers totalled approximately 13 million in 2019, 91.5% of whom were women, many of African descent, Indigenous or migrant. In Brazil and Uruguay, over 16% of women of African descent are paid domestic workers, approximately twice as many as non-Afrodescendent women. An estimated 76% of women in this occupation do not have pensions (in some countries, over 90%). This occupational category has been severely impacted by job loss due to the pandemic. Between the last quarter of 2019 and the second quarter of 2020, the number of domestic workers declined by half in Latin America and the Caribbean. Notably, informal domestic workers are least likely to have access to unemployment insurance (in the region, only 9.8% were legally covered by social security) (ILO, 2021) and in Latin America, many domestic workers, especially those of African descent, are also heads of household.

Low social security enrolment rates not only hinder access to pensions in the future, but also to unemployment benefits, as seen during the pandemic and thus increase the risk of falling into poverty (ECLAC, 2021a). This situation is even more troubling in female-headed households, especially if they are of African descent, as they are more likely to experience poverty. For this reason, it is important to implement universal protection systems that address the diversity of circumstances faced by population groups experiencing greater vulnerability.

To cope with the labour market crisis caused by the pandemic, some countries implemented special policies: regulations to reduce the risk of infection in the workplace (especially for health care assistants, delivery staff and drivers); economic support measures to compensate for income loss (wage supplements, severance payments, support for self-employed workers, allowances for caregivers of dependent persons, extension of benefits for illness or unemployment, direct cash transfers and in-kind payments) and support for workers in precarious employment (including youth and domestic workers), among other policies (OHCHR, 2020a).

Only 21.3% of workers in Latin America were able to work from home during the pandemic (ECLAC/OEI, 2020). In Brazil, the percentage of employed, non-Afrodescendent remote workers was double that of their counterparts of African descent (17.6% and 9%, respectively) (IBGE, 2020). This and other similar situations highlight the urgent need to reduce and eliminate digital divides.

The unemployment rate, one of the main indicators of exclusion from the labour market, is higher than average for women, young people and those experiencing poverty or vulnerability (ECLAC, 2016a). In addition to the aforementioned groups, unemployment also affects people of African descent more severely, particularly young people and women (Del Popolo and Rangel, 2011; ECLAC, 2016a, 2016b, 2014a and 2013a; ECLAC/UNFPA, 2020).

Unemployment rates are much higher for young people aged 15 to 29 years, especially among women and people of African descent. The intersection of inequalities based on ethnic and racial status, gender and age manifests in high unemployment rates among young women of African descent: close to or over 30% in Brazil, Colombia and Uruguay and about double the rates for young women of African descent in Colombia, Ecuador, Panama and Uruguay. However, the widest gap is between young women of African descent and non-Afrodescendent young men. Unemployment among young women of African descent is about twice as high as among non-Afrodescendent young men with a similar education level in Brazil, Colombia, Panama and Uruguay and about 3.5 times higher in Ecuador (ECLAC/UNFPA, 2020).

Information on post-pandemic unemployment disaggregated by ethnic and racial status is still scarce. In Brazil, the proportion of unemployed people of African descent increased from 11.5% to 16.6% between May and November 2020, and from 9.2% to 11.6% for non-Afrodescendants. In absolute terms, the first group increased by almost 2.8 million unemployed persons and the second by 1.1 million (Prates and others, 2021). In Colombia, municipalities with a significant number of residents of African descent (Quibdó, Riohacha and Valledupar) recorded comparatively higher unemployment rates (iMMAP/USAID, 2021).²³ Riohacha and Quibdó are among the seven cities in the country that witnessed the greatest decline in female employment: the unemployment rate for women exceeded 32% in the third quarter of

²³ In Quibdó, 87.5% of the population is of African descent and 12.2% identify as Raizal, Black, Palenquero, Mulato or African American in Valledupar and in Riohacha (iMMAP/USAID, 2021).

2020, compared to the same period in 2019 (Isaza Castro, 2021). In Ecuador, the greatest impact of the pandemic on women's employment was noted in the Afrodescendent ancestral territories of Imbabura and Carchi, as mobility restrictions prevented them from traveling to Colombia to market their goods. In addition, many domestic workers lost their jobs or kept working in riskier conditions (indoors, without overtime, with a heavier workload and lower wages). Under these circumstances, many of them began to grow products for consumption and sale, including medicinal herbs to prevent and heal COVID-19 (Carabalí and others, 2021). In Uruguay, some of the hardest hit economic sectors were those employing persons of African descent, such as retail, domestic services, construction and transport, where 59% of men and 46% of women were of African descent (World Bank, 2020).

A significant increase in unemployment among young people is expected as a result of the pandemic, as this age group accounts for a considerable proportion of workers in the most affected sectors (including tourism, hospitality and gastronomy). Young people of African descent will be among the groups most severely affected by the fallout of the crisis because they already faced higher levels of vulnerability and unemployment and more limited access to new technologies and the Internet (UNFPA/ECLAC, 2022).

To mitigate the effects of the crisis precipitated by COVID-19, it is essential to implement policies that respond to the specific circumstances affecting young people of African descent, providing them with decent jobs and social protection (United Nations, 2020h).

Lastly, the pandemic erupted in the region during a period of major economic fragility and triggered the biggest economic and social crisis in the region's history, with devastating effects on the labour market that resulted in an increase in poverty and inequality (ECLAC, 2020a). Considering the severe ethnic and racial inequality that already exists, people of African descent face heightened risks, especially those living in the territories with the highest levels of poverty, unemployment and informality. Hence the need for greater social protection for these groups.

4. Health

Every human being is entitled to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health conducive to living with dignity. According to the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the right to health is an inclusive right extending not only to timely and appropriate health care but also to the underlying determinants of health, such as access to safe and potable water and proper sanitation, an adequate supply of safe food, nutrition and housing, healthy occupational and environmental conditions, and access to health-related education and information, including on sexual and reproductive health (United Nations, 2000, p.3) The United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights also stresses the importance of participation by all in decision-making on health-related issues at the community, national and international levels. The right to physical and mental health is closely linked to and dependent on the fulfilment of other human rights.

The programme of activities for the International Decade for People of African Descent recommends that States adopt measures to improve access to quality health services for people of African descent (United Nations, 2014). To achieve this, it is important to consider the social determinants of health, which affect growth, learning, work, aging and vulnerability to disease (PAHO, 2017). As people of African descent live in adverse socioeconomic conditions and grapple with woefully inadequate infrastructure (which negatively affects their health) as well as structural inequalities in education and employment, the impact of the social determinants of health weighs more heavily on them.

Health-related ethnic and racial inequality is reflected in mortality rates and sexual and reproductive health indicators. The infant mortality indicator is directly associated with poverty and reveals major inequalities between and within countries. In Brazil, Colombia, Panama and Uruguay, for example, the probability of a child of African descent dying before the age of one year is 1.3 to 1.6 times greater than that of a non-Afrodescendent child (ECLAC, 2017a and 2017b).

Data on maternal mortality in three countries revealed that women of African descent were clearly at a disadvantage, and the racial gaps were significant. While the maternal mortality rate for women of African descent in Ecuador was almost four times higher than non-Afrodescendent women, in Colombia, it was about twice as high. Although the gap was slightly smaller in Brazil (by 1.4 times), it was still substantial (PAHO, 2021).²⁴

According to 2019 data on female mortality in Brazil, 66% of deaths were among women of African descent, mainly in the 10 to 49 age group, while for white women, these deaths were concentrated in the 60+ age group. This could indicate that the socioeconomic inequalities or the inadequacy of access to health services are linked to ethnic and racial status (Brazil, Ministry of Health, 2021). Similarly, a study of COVID-19 deaths in Brazil in 2020 among different occupational categories found that there were more deaths among women of African descent than other groups (non-Afrodescendent women, Afrodescendent men and non-Afrodescendent men) in lower-skilled occupations, regardless of occupation, and that a disproportionate number of men of African descent died from COVID-19 compared to their non-Afrodescendent counterparts, regardless of occupation.²⁵

The challenges associated with adolescent sexual and reproductive health in the region have gained greater visibility in the region because of the increase in pregnancies among this age group. The Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, 1994) had already established the need to ensure adolescents' access to sexual and reproductive health services and education. Similarly, one of the goals of the 2030 Agenda is to guarantee universal access to these services, while the Montevideo Consensus on Population and Development establishes that these services should be accessible, timely, high-quality and based on a gender and intergenerational and intercultural human rights perspective. These services should be accompanied by school retention programmes for pregnant adolescents and young mothers, in addition to programmes to eliminate unsafe abortions. Finally, it is undeniably important to produce reliable statistical data on this issue, disaggregated by sex, age, ethnicity and race, cultural variables and geographical location, among other criteria (ORAS/CONHU, 2017, cited in UNFPA/ECLAC, 2022, p. 52).

Pregnancy among adolescents is associated with socioeconomic inequality and contributes to gender inequalities, as responsibility for caring for the infant falls mainly to young women, their mothers and grandmothers (Rodríguez Vignoli, 2014). It also affects the health of adolescent girls, makes it difficult for them to continue their studies and is associated with a higher risk of maternal morbidity and mortality.²⁶ When ethnic and racial variables are added, it becomes clear that pregnancy among adolescents is yet another manifestation of structural inequality between Afrodescendent and non-Afrodescendent young women (ECLAC, 2017a and 2017b). Likewise, the problems associated with adolescent pregnancy are exacerbated for people of African descent owing to their extreme vulnerability compared to other population groups, which widens ethnic and racial gaps and drives the intergenerational cycle of poverty.

In more than half of Latin American countries, adolescent mothers of African descent far outnumber non-Afrodescendent ones. One factor influencing these outcomes is educational level, as the percentage of adolescent mothers decreases as years of schooling increase. The percentage of adolescent mothers of African descent with 0 to 4 years of schooling is much higher in the 13 countries analysed. In the group aged 13 years or more, the percentage of adolescent mothers of African descent exceeds those of non-African descent in all but one country (Plurinational State of Bolivia). Ethnic and racial gaps are significant. In Honduras, the proportion of adolescent mothers of African descent stands at 11%, compared with 6% for non-Afrodescendent adolescent mothers (UNFPA/ECLAC, 2022).

²⁴ The Regional Task Force for the Reduction of Maternal Mortality has developed strategic guidelines to reduce maternal mortality in the region, with a focus on people of African descent (GTR, 2021).

²⁵ There was a statistically insignificant difference in higher-level occupations because, as suggested in the specialized literature, women of African descent are substantially underrepresented in those groups (Lima, 2021).

²⁶ Complications with pregnancy and childbirth are the leading causes of death among adolescent girls aged 15 to 19 years (PAHO/UNFPA/UNICEF, 2018).

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely limited the capacity of health systems to provide care, which has reduced access for many women and adolescent girls to sexual and reproductive health services, including family planning and STI prevention and treatment services. In light of the pandemic's impact on women and adolescent girls, UNFPA is working with governments in the region to ensure access to these services. The limited provision of antenatal services increases maternal mortality.

The High Commissioner stressed that the capacity of many States to respond to the pandemic had been undermined by years of underinvestment in public health services and the lack of universal access to health care. A growing number of private actors are filling the gap left by public health systems through insurance programmes that may be inaccessible to many people. This has prevented people with limited financial resources from being tested, thereby accelerating the spread of infection (United Nations, 2021c). The High Commissioner has also deplored the impact of the pandemic on the enjoyment of human rights, noting that the current multidimensional crisis has highlighted the strong links between race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status and health outcomes (United Nations, 2021c).

The pre-existing conditions under which people of African descent live resulted in a disproportionate increase in their rates of infection and mortality from COVID-19. For example, as of 9 April 2020, people of African descent accounted for 45.2% of COVID-19 deaths in Brazil, compared to 37.4% of hospitalizations (Ministry of Health, 2020, cited in ECLAC, 2020a). Measures to contain the spread of the disease include physical distancing, frequent hand washing, the efficient operation of health services and temporary closure of some economic activities. This worsens conditions for those who need to work to meet their immediate subsistence needs and who face more challenges in generating income, therefore requiring greater economic support (ECLAC, 2021b). Thus, it is critically important to consider the structural vulnerability of the population of African descent and to understand factors such as their territorial distribution (mainly urban and concentrated in the most depressed or least developed areas of the countries) in order to design specific policies and to understand how ethnic and racial inequalities are propagated and eradicate them.

ECLAC and the OHCHR have highlighted the inadequacy of health systems in the face of the pandemic. People living in poverty, those residing in rural areas, Indigenous Peoples and persons of African descent are more likely to be in poorer health as well as less likely to have access to basic health services, including those targeting the timely prevention and detection of diseases. In addition, the demographic²⁷ and epidemiological characteristics of the region impose a heavier burden on health systems (ECLAC, 2020c; United Nations, 2021c).

According to data from the 2nd National Survey on Food Insecurity in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Brazil, conducted in 2022 by the Brazilian Food and Nutrition Sovereignty and Security Research Network (Rede Brasileira de Pesquisa em Soberania e Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional - Rede PENSSAN), only 4 out of 10 families had ready access to food. The preceding survey, conducted in 2020 demonstrated that hunger in Brazil had returned to 2004 levels. However, while 53.2% of households with families identifying as white had no food security problems, this was only true for 35% of households with families of African descent. In other words, 65% of households headed by people of African descent experience food-related constraints. Compared to the first Rede PENSSAN national survey, hunger among households headed by people of African descent increased from 10.4% to 18.1% between 2021 and 2022 (Oxfam Brazil, 2022).

²⁷ Latin American populations of African descent have undergone or are in the advanced stage of the demographic transition. This means that the proportion of children in the total population is beginning to decline as the proportion of adults and older persons increases. In at least half of Latin American countries, the working-age population is larger than the inactive population. Known as the demographic dividend, this situation is more prevalent among populations of African descent and should be leveraged by strengthening education and employment policies targeting populations of African descent to overcome ethnic and racial inequality (ECLAC/UNFPA, 2020).

Responses to the pandemic must not only take the intersectional perspective into account but also the right to intercultural health, the right to respect for ancestral knowledge and the ways in which people of African descent view the disease. Both issues were addressed in the days of dialogue. The following observation on intersectionality by Sofía Carrillo is pertinent:

In terms of sexual health and reproductive health policies [...], interventions are not necessarily devised with due consideration of populations' specificities. In addition to an intersectional approach, in addition to a human rights approach, in addition to a gender approach, we need a differentiated approach because it is not sufficiently acknowledged that, for example, [...] women of African descent in our countries are at greater risk than non-racialized women precisely because of this colonial backwardness that hypersexualizes our Afrodescendent bodies. [...] This is the State's responsibility, and this is where we must focus our attention. Beyond the advocacy-related initiatives we may be able to undertake through civil society, the State must provide the response. [...] In our countries, we are not seen as people with rights. [...] We are agents of change, but we are also victims of this system characterized by racism, exclusion, machismo and sexism (UNFPA, n/dc).

Mirtha Colon (President of the Central American Black Organization (CABO)) noted that COVID-19 has shed light on a number of elements of intercultural health, such as the management of ancestral medicine and crops, and that it took this disease to remind us that we must revive these critical practices (UNFPA, n/da).

5. Housing

The human right to adequate housing encompasses more than four walls and a roof. It is the right of every woman, man, youth, boy and girl to acquire and maintain a home in which to live in peace and dignity. However, despite the international community's reaffirmation of the right to adequate housing, a chasm remains between the standards set forth in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and reality. The programme of activities for the International Decade for People of African Descent highlights that many people of African descent live in precarious and insecure housing and that States should develop and implement policies to ensure that this population can "gain and sustain a safe and secure home and community in which to live in peace and dignity" (United Nations, 2014, p. 10). Thus, having adequate housing is a human right recognized in international law and an obligation of the State (OHCHR, 2009).²⁸

One goal of the 2030 Agenda is to ensure that by that year, all people have access to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and to improve living conditions in marginalized areas (United Nations, 2015). The Montevideo Consensus on Population and Development includes a priority action on improving living conditions in dwellings and the need to expand access to basic services (ECLAC, 2013b). However, the large number of people in the region who do not have adequate housing, live in overcrowded conditions and lack basic infrastructure services drives the spread of COVID-19. This mainly affects people living in poverty, among whom people of African descent, particularly women, are overrepresented.

In a note on racial discrimination during the COVID-19 crisis, OHCHR points out that there are some 1.8 billion people worldwide experiencing homelessness or living in inadequate conditions (overcrowded and lacking running water and sanitation). In response, it recommends that States immediately adopt

²⁸ Adequate housing is recognized as part of the right to an adequate standard of living in the following instruments: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948); the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (1951); the Social Policy (Basic Aims and Standards) Convention, 1962 (No. 117); the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965); the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1976); the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966); the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979); the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169) ECLAC/OHCHR, 2018). The elements required for housing to be considered adequate include: legal security, liveability, accessibility, location, cultural relevance and sustainable, non-discriminatory access to services (drinking water, sanitation and washing facilities, means for food storage and waste disposal, energy for cooking, heating and lighting, among others) (OHCHR, 2009).

measures to mitigate the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on ethnic and racial minorities (financial assistance for rent and mortgage, moratoriums on evictions for non-payment, reduction or stabilization of rent prices, at least for the duration of the pandemic, and suspension of rate increases for water and energy, among others) (OHCHR, 2020a).

The Brazilian city of São Paulo is a classic example of life in large metropolises and the vulnerability facing people of African descent, particularly women heads of household. Although people of African descent represent 37% of the city's population, they make up 47.3% of the population in the areas where there were more COVID-19 deaths and 51.8% in the areas where there were more evictions and threats of expulsion. In addition, female-headed households that earn up to three minimum wages account for 23.4% in the city, 27.9% in the areas with the most evictions and threats of eviction and 27.8% in the areas with the most deaths from COVID-19 (Klintowitz and others, 2022).

The following is a brief summary of the housing conditions endured by people of African descent, based on a number of infrastructure indicators, such as overcrowding and access to drinking water, sanitation, electricity and Internet services.

(a) Overcrowding

Overcrowding is one of the greatest health risk factors associated with housing, not only because it increases the likelihood of disease transmission but also because of its potential impact on mental health by increasing the risk of violence. Income level is one of the main determinants of overcrowding. Overcrowding occurs when the dwelling cannot adequately accommodate all members of the household (ECLAC considers the threshold to be three or more people per bedroom), but the classification varies according to culture, era and territory. This is a key indicator during a pandemic because it reveals potential challenges in implementing measures such as physical distancing. The overcrowding indicator shows large gaps, especially racially based ones, that prevent the full realization of the right to adequate housing for people of African descent.

Previous ECLAC studies, based on the demographic censuses of 12 Latin American countries, uncovered the sizeable proportion of people living in overcrowded conditions, a phenomenon that disproportionately affected people of African descent in both urban and rural areas. The highest percentages of people of African descent living in overcrowded conditions were found in the Plurinational State of Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Honduras and Nicaragua. In Ecuador, the Plurinational State of Bolivia and Honduras, over 25% of the urban population of African descent lived in such conditions. Overcrowding was even worse in rural areas, exceeding 30% of the population of African descent in the Plurinational State of Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia, Honduras and Nicaragua (ECLAC, 2017a and 2017b). In Guatemala, 19% of people of African descent and 16% of the non-Afrodescendent population (30% and 25% in rural areas, respectively) experience critical overcrowding conditions (five or more persons per room) (ECLAC, 2021b).

Finally, it is important to highlight the challenges in implementing physical distancing measures among older persons of African descent during the pandemic since, in addition to overcrowded conditions, no less than one third of them live with children aged 0 to 14 years in Colombia, Guatemala, Mexico and Peru. The gap is greater in Colombia, where the proportion of older persons of African descent living in overcrowded conditions stands at around double that of their non-Afrodescendent counterparts (ECLAC, 2021b).

(b) Water

The Human Rights Council maintains that the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation is derived from the right to an adequate standard of living and inextricably related to the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, as well as the right to life and human dignity. The water supply for each person must be continuous and sufficient for personal and domestic use, which includes drinking, washing clothes, food preparation, and personal and domestic hygiene. Water for personal and domestic use must be safe and adequate. In addition, water services must be affordable for all. No individual or group should be deprived of access to safe drinking water because they cannot afford to pay for it.

Insufficient access to safe water sources is largely responsible for gastrointestinal diseases and is a major cause of child mortality. It also affects school attendance and performance, not only because of the health problems it can cause, but also because time spent in search of water reduces the time available for studies and work, especially for adolescent girls and young women (ECLAC, 2017b).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Health Organization (WHO) has reiterated the importance of good water and waste management to prevent human-to-human transmission. It also considers frequent hand washing to be one of the key COVID-19 prevention measures (WHO/UNICEF, 2020). The deep structural inequalities that hamper the realization of the population's basic rights are manifested in the incidence of deprivation of this right in the region.

A number of ECLAC studies have identified profound inequalities between people of African descent and non-Afrodescendants regarding access to safe drinking water, which were more pronounced in urban areas. In Uruguay, for example, the percentage of people of African descent suffering from water deprivation was about three times that of the non-Afrodescendent population in urban areas and twice that of the non-Afrodescendent population in rural areas (ECLAC, 2017a and 2017b). In Colombia, the percentage of people of African descent without access to safe drinking water was three times higher than non-Afrodescendants. In Mexico, that proportion was approximately twice as high. Similarly, in urban areas of the country, there were five times as many people of African descent (25%) without access to safe drinking water compared to non-Afrodescendants (5%), while in rural areas these percentages were 49% and 35%, respectively (ECLAC, 2021b).

(c) Sanitation

The right to sanitation falls under the rubric of human rights as a function of the right to an adequate standard of living, to adequate housing and to health. However, the repercussions of not fulfilling this right go even further and evoke the concept of human dignity (United Nations, 2009).

Unfortunately, this right is inadequately satisfied, and people of African descent endure much more severe deprivation of this right than other people in most countries in the region, especially in rural areas. In Brazil and Cuba, for example, over 70% of the rural population, both Afrodescendent and non-Afrodescendent, suffers some degree of deprivation of this right (ECLAC, 2017a). In Colombia, the proportion of people of African descent without access to sanitation was more than three times higher compared to non-Afrodescendants; in Mexico it was twice as high. The percentage of rural Afrodescendants in the same situation was 68% in Guatemala and Peru and over 30% in Colombia and Mexico (ECLAC, 2021b).

(d) Electricity

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for electricity has become even more acute to enable physical distancing —by making it possible, for example, to preserve food for longer periods and thus reduce the need to leave home— and to use telecommunications devices for education and work. It is also essential for receiving remote health care, socializing and entertainment, and receiving government assistance.

According to ECLAC, based on the most recent census data for four countries in the region (Colombia, Guatemala, Mexico and Peru), while access to electricity, on average, was almost universal in urban areas, territorial and ethnic and racial inequalities were pronounced. Approximately one quarter of the population in rural areas of Peru had no access to electricity, yet the proportion of people of African descent without access to electricity in rural areas of Colombia was twice as high compared to non-Afrodescendants (19% and 8%, respectively) and over three times as high in urban areas (7% and 2%, respectively). A similar trend was observed in Guatemala: 21% of the rural Afrodescendent population lacked electricity, compared with 13% of the non-Afrodescendent population (ECLAC, 2021b).

(e) Internet

Access to modern technology is an increasingly critical element in countries' development and influences several areas of society (health, education, production, employment, entertainment). In recent years, the region has made strides in providing coverage and access to new technologies, especially in mobile telephony, which has expanded access to the Internet. However, there are many significant inequalities and gaps in the region regarding access to this service, both between and within countries (ECLAC, 2019a and 2019b; ECLAC/UNFPA, 2020).

According to ECLAC census data, rates of home Internet access in the region are very low and characterized by large territorial and ethnic and racial inequalities. In Colombia and Peru, for example, the proportion of non-Afrodescendent populations whose households were connected to the Internet was about 1.5 times higher than that of their Afrodescendent counterparts and slightly lower in Guatemala (ECLAC, 2021b). In Uruguay, although more than half of the Afrodescendent population had Internet service at home (52%), the proportion of the non-Afrodescendent population in this situation was considerably higher (70%) (ECLAC/UNFPA, 2020). In Brazil, Colombia and Ecuador, the proportion of people of African descent with Internet access was between 25% and 50% lower than for non-Afrodescendants, and there were no significant differences in access between men and women (ECLAC/UNFPA, 2020).

Internet access, especially at home, has become even more essential during the COVID-19 pandemic to better enforce the physical isolation and distancing measures that reduce the likelihood of virus spread. In the education sector, activities have mainly been carried out in homes via the Internet. At the workplace, teleworking has made significant gains and is expected to continue to advance once the pandemic ends. Internet access is also increasingly important for health services, for social and family relationships and for people—especially children and young people—to acquire the skills and competencies needed for today's world. Therefore, it is ever more important to increase coverage and eliminate territorial, socioeconomic and ethnic and racial access gaps.

Finally, several countries in the region have taken measures to facilitate Internet connectivity during the pandemic. In Argentina, the Plurinational State of Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia and Ecuador, for example, mobile or fixed-line telephone companies and Internet and cable television companies have been prevented from suspending or cutting off services for non-payment for a specific number of months. In El Salvador, deferred payment for telecommunications services was approved. In Colombia and Argentina, virtual education applications that do not consume mobile data were implemented so that attending virtual classes did not incur extra costs. In Uruguay, at the beginning of the pandemic, a virtual platform was created with an ecosystem of over 173,000 educational resources. However, in view of the many gaps, long-term policies that focus on the most vulnerable groups are needed to realize the right to information, which currently assumes Internet access (OAS, 2020b).

D. Multiple, intersecting or aggravated forms of discrimination

The programme of activities for the International Decade for People of African Descent contemplates multiple or aggravated forms of discrimination and recommends that States adopt and implement policies to provide effective protection for people of African descent who suffer from this type of discrimination (for example, related to age, sex, language, religion, viewpoints, social origin, heritage or disability, among others). It also advises that States should review and repeal all policies and laws that discriminate against these persons and incorporate a gender perspective in the formulation and monitoring of public policies, taking into account the specific needs and realities of women and girls of African descent, including in sexual health and reproductive rights, ensuring adequate access to maternal health care (United Nations, 2014).

The promotion and protection of the rights of women and girls of African descent is high on the agenda. The OHCHR has shown that these groups suffer multiple concomitant forms of discrimination (based on nationality, migration status or social standing) and that, in Latin America, they have faced structural exclusion through limited access to education, employment and social security.²⁹

It is especially important to observe intersectionality as it relates to the improvement in education levels of women of African descent, which is not reflected proportionally in the labour market. This occurs because gender gaps, related to the sexual division of labour and the heavier burden of unpaid care work carried by women, are compounded by those caused by racial discrimination. The result of this intersectionality is that women of African descent have lower employment and income rates than non-Afrodescendent women and men (ECLAC, 2016a, 2016b and 2017a; ECLAC/UNFPA, 2020).

In Colombia, the absence of an intersectional approach in the government's response to the health, economic and social crisis contributed to widening class, gender, ethnic and racial, age and territorial gaps. People of African descent were especially vulnerable to these shortcomings and their various forms of intersectionality, including women, youth, migrants, older people and those living in communities, among other groups. In addition to the pandemic, they faced violence related to the armed conflict and groups that took advantage of the health emergency to secure advantageous territorial positions and control the mobility of the population in several municipalities (Figueroa and Valencia, 2022).

Another intersectional experience worth highlighting is that of LGBTQI persons of African descent. The IACHR has received information about the heightened vulnerability of these persons and the discrimination and violence to which they are subjected. Since 2007, 114 violent deaths of LGBTQI persons have been recorded in the Colombian Caribbean, about half of which occurred in areas of armed conflict. The victims were mainly transgender women and gay men, most of whom self-identified as Afrodescendent or lived in areas with a heavy concentration of this population group. Afro-Colombian lesbians face violence because of their sexual orientation, and episodes of humiliation and stoning of LGBTQI people from Creole communities have been reported on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua. In 2011, 41% of victims of violence against LGBTQI persons in Brazil identified as Afrodescendent, compared to 27% of people who identified as white. The 90% illiteracy rate among Brazilian trans women is also concerning, and the government has reported that the majority of LGBTQI victims of violence in Brazil were young people (OAS, 2015, cited in UNFPA/ECLAC, 2022, p. 51).

²⁹ It is worth noting that in 2020, on the International Day of Afro-Latina, Afro-Caribbean and Diaspora Women, the IACHR called on States to adopt special measures to eradicate the multiple forms of discrimination faced by women of African descent against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic (OAS, 2020C).

II. Policies and good practices to support people of African descent during the COVID-19 pandemic

Over the course of the pandemic, many governments implemented policies targeting the population most vulnerable to the crisis, including emergency cash transfers; regulations to reduce infection, particularly in the workplace (targeting health care workers, delivery workers and drivers); the provision of wage supplements, severance pay, cash transfers for self-employed, informal and domestic workers and caregivers of dependents; and the extension of sickness or unemployment benefits.³⁰

While such policies do benefit people of African descent, given that they are overrepresented in the most vulnerable groups in almost all countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, very few countries have implemented policies that exclusively target people of African descent. In light of this situation and the serious crisis facing the region, many Afrodescendent communities and organizations have mobilized to combat COVID-19. The most frequently used approach consists of distributing food, shelter and hygiene items acquired from product donation drives and fundraising and collection campaigns carried out by the organizations (ECLAC, 2021b).

In the few countries where disaggregated data on infection, mortality and case fatality are available, the disadvantaged situation of people of African descent is unmistakable.

during the first months of the health crisis, people of African descent in Brazil had a 10% higher mortality rate than whites and died more quickly after admission to intensive care units, not only because of their health history but also because they arrived at these units about a day and a half later than white people after the onset of the first symptom (Muniz and others, 2021).

In Colombia, which like Brazil is one of the few countries where COVID-19 data disaggregated by race were collected, the risks of hospitalization, intensive care unit admission and death among people of African descent were 21%, 88% and 24% higher, respectively, compared to the rest of the population (Sinisterra Ossa, 2021). It is also important to note that 81% of the Afro-Colombian population received the results of COVID-19 tests in an untimely manner (after 48 hours) and were 35% more likely to receive them after nine days, compared to the rest of the population (in some cases, the delay exceeded 50 days).

³⁰ ECLAC has created a database of support initiatives implemented by countries to support the most vulnerable populations in Latin America and the Caribbean. See [online] <https://dds.cepal.org/observatorio/socialcovid19/listamedidas.php>.

Situations such as these were especially prevalent in municipalities with a larger Afrodescendent population (Sinisterra and Valencia, 2020). Finally, although at the beginning of 2022, COVID-19 case fatality rates were similar at the national level (around 2.5 deaths per 100 infected), the rates for the Afrodescendent population reached 6.5% and 5.1% in the departments of Amazonas and Antioquia, respectively. Similarly, in departments with a high concentration of Afro-Colombian people, such as Nariño, Cauca and Valle del Cauca, case fatality rates exceeded 4.0% (ECLAC, 2022a).³¹

In Costa Rica, the largest number of COVID-19 cases at the provincial level had been recorded, in decreasing order (as of 15 June 2022), in San José, Alajuela, Cartago, Heredia, Guanacaste, Puntarenas and Limón (Costa Rica, Ministry of Health, n/d). It is worth noting that 31.7% of the Afro-Costa Rican population was concentrated in San José, 15.7% in Alajuela, 15.4% in Limón and 11.5% in Puntarenas (ECLAC, 2017a). In other words, almost three quarters (74.3%) of the Afrodescendent population was concentrated in the four provinces with the highest number of COVID-19 cases in the country.

On the coast of the states of Guerrero and Oaxaca in Mexico, the uncertainty of the Afro-Mexican population in managing the virus, the precarious socioeconomic and infrastructure conditions and the structural vulnerability of these territories were undeniable. Although infections and deaths were not proportionally much higher than at the national level (which may be a consequence of underreporting), there is a clear need to view risk from a sociocultural perspective, including the meanings attributed to experiences with the virus and its effects on people's health and daily lives (Berrio Palomo and others, 2021).

The situation facing communities of African descent specifically in relation to the pandemic is noteworthy, as in many countries, they are located in places that are difficult to access. In communities of African descent in Brazil, totalling 1,331,106 people, there were 301 deaths and 5,666 confirmed cases of COVID-19 recorded as of January 2022. This represents a case fatality rate of 5.3%, almost double the national case fatality rate of 2.8% as of 31 January 2022. Given the inadequate access of these communities to basic infrastructure, health and housing services, they relied on traditional knowledge to treat COVID-19 at the onset of the pandemic. In addition, limited access to the Internet, electricity and cellular telephones made it difficult to receive emergency cash transfers. In Ecuador, although mining activities were considered essential during the pandemic, no safety measures were taken to prevent or reduce infection in Afro-Ecuadorian communities (ECLAC, 2022a).

Afrodescendent communities also suffer from environmental racism, particularly in countries such as Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador and the Caribbean region.³² In Colombia, for example, violence worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic, and over 1,200 mega-projects, a military base and several major hydroelectric projects were planned for implementation on community lands, including a dam that will displace many Afrodescendent communities, particularly those whose lands are not demarcated. Despite threats to their lands, the killing of their leaders and the dispossession of natural resources during the pandemic, these communities play a critical role in the preservation of ecosystems and life (United Nations, 2021g).

Some examples of specific government policies focused on people of African descent and civil society initiatives to address the pandemic are highlighted below.

The Government of Colombia noted the importance of respecting communities' self-determination in implementing policies (Colombia, Ministry of Health and Social Protection, 2020) and, under the programme *Colombia está Contigo* (Colombia is with you), distributed food to the most vulnerable families in Afrodescendent communities. The Government of Costa Rica issued recommendations to prevent the spread of COVID-19 among people of African descent, based on their differentiated needs during the health crisis. It recommended that emergency committees consider sociocultural aspects to ensure

³¹ Information as of 17 January 2022, based on open data from the Government of Colombia (2022).

³² On this topic see also the report of the 2021 Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent, which includes guidance on addressing environmental injustice, racial disparities, unequal protection and the unique impacts of the climate crisis and environmental racism on people of African descent (United Nations, 2021g). The document describes the consequences of this situation at the regional level, especially in countries such as Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador and the Caribbean region.

equality as well as the adoption of approaches informed by gender and intersectional perspectives. The government also highlighted the importance of respecting the cultural identity and specific health needs of people of African descent (Costa Rica, Ministry of Health, 2020). Finally, it mandated that COVID-19 testing be carried out free of charge and that all quarantined persons receive adequate care in health facilities or through regular home follow-up (OHCHR, 2020a).

In Mexico, the Government emphasized the need for the measures implemented to consider cultural relevance, respect for the self-determination and autonomy of communities, and dialogue in decision-making. In addition, Afro-Mexican beneficiaries of the Indigenous Education Support Programme (PAEI) began to receive food and hygiene and health items (soap, gel and masks) in their communities (OAS, 2021a). In Peru, the government focused on conducting publicity campaigns with recommendations to prevent COVID-19 in the regions with the highest concentration of Afro-Peruvian people, with help from Afro-Peruvian leaders in preparing the materials and distributing masks (ECLAC, 2021b). It also published Administrative Directive No. 313-MINSA/2021/DGIESP Guidelines for the Formation and Functioning of the Indigenous or Afrodescendent COVID-19 Committees (composed of representatives of Indigenous and Afrodescendent organizations, among other stakeholders), focused on mitigating the effects of the pandemic.³³

In Honduras and Ecuador, humanitarian response plans were developed that included food distribution, technical assistance to organizations for women of African descent, support for the implementation of pedagogical practices during school closures and the promotion of economic autonomy and participation in decision-making, promotion of the value of ancestral culture and knowledge using economically and environmentally sustainable business models. In Brazil's *quilombola* communities, the national emergency plan provides for ethnic and racial self-identification and a specific loan programme (ECLAC, 2021b).

Civil society has also organized to address the pandemic through various initiatives.

In Argentina, Chile, Panama and Peru, organizations for people of African descent have joined forces with several government institutions to prepare and deliver food baskets to families of African descent (ECLAC, 2021b).

In Brazil, a group of favelas created a web page to disseminate various types of information: funds for projects to combat the coronavirus, news about COVID-19, audiovisual materials produced by and for the favelas, analyses and proposals to manage the pandemic, data on active groups and the organization of panels on the impact of the coronavirus in the favelas. In addition, they request help, promote products and services and report on money and goods received (Wikifavelas, n/d). The Paraisópolis favela is a good example of the importance of community work in low-income areas when combating a pandemic, as efforts to control the disease have been more successful than in other vulnerable neighbourhoods of the city.³⁴ As of 18 May 2020, the COVID-19 mortality rate was 21.7 people per 100,000 inhabitants, compared to the municipal average of 56.2 (ECLAC, 2021b).

In Colombia, grassroots organizations built networks to propose joint alternatives to prevent, monitor and manage the effects of the pandemic in their territories, including by exchanging and donating food, organizing markets, overseeing entries and exits in the territories and creating psychosocial support networks. Organizations involved in projects such as these have become havens of peace, which draw young people away from criminal activity and offer them an opportunity to socialize, thus strengthening the social fabric (Figueroa and Valencia, 2022). As the government response did not focus specifically on issues related to ethnicity, the National Conference of Afro-Colombian Organizations (CNOA) (CONPA, 2020) published guidelines for managing the COVID-19 pandemic, which include recommendations to prevent infection and for organizations to enhance preparedness, alert and

³³ See [online] <https://cdn.www.gob.pe/uploads/document/file/1815587/Directiva%20Administrativa%20N%C2%B0313-MINSA-2021-DGIESP%20.pdf>.

³⁴ This favela, located in the city of São Paulo, has more than 70,000 inhabitants and a population density of 61,000 inhabitants/km² (ECLAC, 2021b).

response measures to the pandemic. These measures include coordination with territorial and national authorities to develop plans to prevent or reduce infection, the creation of a support network, the adoption of communication measures, reinforcement of traditional medicinal practices, restrictions on visitation and the prevention of social stigmatization (ECLAC, 2021b). Stakeholders in Columbia also implemented an initiative that successfully connected mayors' offices, secretariats, grassroots organizations, community councils, educational institutions, universities and community libraries at the territorial level.³⁵ A comprehensive care programme was also implemented in sectors such as food security, health, education and community and epidemiological intelligence, with the objective of closing the gaps that separate the Afrodescendent population from the non-Afrodescendent population. This expansive territorial undertaking has built and enhanced the capacities of local government workers and other civil society actors (Perini and Lara, 2021).

In Ecuador, some organizations have made arrangements with international cooperation and governmental agencies to distribute hygiene and food products and provide health services to the most severely affected populations in the country. Several activities also target mothers and children to provide emotional and psychological support to households and distribute books and hygiene materials, including virtual activities on the impact of the pandemic on people of African descent, virtual medical and social support measures and cultural discussions on mental health. Civil society has implemented many of these solidarity actions in response to the lack or inadequacy of specific government policies (ECLAC, 2021b).

In Honduras, the two main Garifuna organizations in the country, the Fraternal Black Organization of Honduras, (OFRANEH) and the Community Ethnic Development Organization (ODECO), have attempted to cope with the pandemic by disseminating information on prevention, care and impact and continuing to demand action from the State in terms of assistance and efforts to strengthen health infrastructure and territorial rights (Agudelo, 2021). Likewise, given the limited effectiveness of the response to the pandemic by the Honduran national health system, OFRANEH promoted the construction of community homes for traditional health care as alternative spaces to provide physical and emotional health care of the Garifuna people and for the recovery of traditional medicinal expertise.

In Nicaragua, Afrodescendent organizations have distributed food and medical supplies, conducted radio campaigns in native languages, raised awareness about hygiene measures to avoid infection and provided updates on the spread of COVID-19 in the country (ECLAC, 2021b).

In Panama, a study on the impact of the pandemic indicated that dozens of organizations for people of African descent strove to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 through various initiatives, including by providing food support (56.7%) and promoting prevention (13.5%) and health (5.4%) measures (Joseph, 2020) (Joseph, 2020).

In Uruguay (Rivera Department), products were distributed specifically to families of African descent that had been previously identified by the organizations. The model implemented enables support for local commerce, families in their neighbourhoods and people deprived of their liberty (ECLAC, 2021b).

The Indigenous and Afrodescendent communities of the South Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region established quarantine periods and took preventive measures regarding entries and exits from their communities on the basis of Act No. 28, Statute of Autonomy of the Atlantic Coast Regions of Nicaragua (Villena Fiengo, 2021).

Although information disaggregated by ethnic group is insufficient (despite the efforts of some countries to record it), it is important to address the issue of vaccination. In Colombia, for example, a discussion was held with communities of African descent regarding the vaccination plan in their territories, and information on progress was disseminated, although not in a systematic and detailed manner (ECLAC, 2022a).³⁶

³⁵ The following participated in the experience: 4 mayor's offices and 15 of their secretariats (health, agriculture, economic and rural development, education, transport, social development); 20 grassroots organizations and community councils; 15 educational institutions and 2 community libraries; 2 private universities and 1 public university.

³⁶ For more details, see [online] <https://www.minsalud.gov.co/Paginas/Asi-va-la-vacunacion-contra-el-covid-19-en-grupos-etnicos.aspx> and [online] <https://www.minsalud.gov.co/sites/rid/Lists/BibliotecaDigital/RIDE/DE/DE/PS/boletines-poblacionales-narp.pdf>.

In Brazil, an interactive information system was created to monitor the vaccination process, which captures data disaggregated by ethnic and racial status. According to official figures, as of 21 March 2022, about 391 million doses had been administered, 25.6% to people of African descent and 49.8% to non-Afrodescendants (“white” and “yellow”). No information is available on the ethnic or racial group to which the remaining 24.8% of the vaccinated persons belong. The vaccinated population is clearly very unevenly distributed, with people of African descent representing about half of the total population of the country. A similar form of inequality is observed regarding booster doses, as 22.8% of the 63.5 million doses provided were administered to people of African descent and 51.4% to non-Afrodescendants (ethnic and racial status is unknown in 25.6% of cases) (ECLAC, 2022a). In addition, since at the beginning of the vaccination process, the priority groups had not been explicitly identified. In some municipalities, medical and nursing personnel were vaccinated first, while in others, nursing technicians and cleaning personnel were also included (people of African descent dominate these last two categories). Thus, there were three times as many white doctors vaccinated (67%) as doctors of African descent (22%) (Muniz and others., 2021).

One final, critical point worth highlighting that was also noted among the autonomous responses is the use of their own health systems to treat the symptoms of COVID-19. In Colombia, displaced communities of African descent (which represent approximately 12% of all internally displaced persons in the country) used their ancestral knowledge of medicinal herbs to mitigate the symptoms of the disease and shared this knowledge as they were displaced. Displaced communities are demanding that health services recognize their ancestral customs and traditions (Olaya Requene, 2021). In Ecuador (Imbabura and Carchi, which are Afro-Ecuadorian ancestral territories), declining female employment led many women facing economic hardship to grow medicinal herbs used to prevent and cure COVID-19 (Carabalí and others, 2021).

III. Recommendations for reconstruction with equality

The picture painted of the condition of people of African descent in Latin America and the Caribbean illustrates their heightened vulnerability compared to non-Afrodescendants and the need for specific policies to enable them to enjoy their rights on an equal footing. These populations are heirs to the victims of the transatlantic slave trade and, thus, victims of a system of privilege based on historical and structural racism that, to this day, places people of African descent at a greater disadvantage.

In most Latin American countries, these populations suffer elevated levels of inequality and deprivation in housing, water, sanitation, electricity, Internet access, health, education, employment and justice. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated ethnic and racial inequality owing to the pre-existing conditions that plagued people of African descent and has had multiple adverse and disproportionate effects. During the pandemic, mortality rates for this group have been several times higher than for others. In addition, the emergency COVID-19 measures implemented, including lockdowns, had an enormous impact on workers of African descent who are simultaneously grappling with the severe effects of the economic recession generated by the pandemic. This situation was compounded by the fact that people of African descent were overrepresented in “essential” occupations, on the front lines of the COVID-19 response and, therefore, less able to use telework. All this points to the significant structural inequalities that people of African descent continue to face.

In light of these factors, the United Nations Secretary-General has stressed the need to link health, social welfare, economic development and environmental protection between the present and the future and to build solidarity without borders so that all people have access to social services, social protection, protected jobs, gender equality and carbon neutrality. Without these measures, the suffering of the most vulnerable people, including people of African descent, will be amplified and protracted (United Nations, 2020l). On 21 July 2021, the Permanent Forum of People of African Descent—a consultative mechanism aimed at improving the quality of life of people of African descent and contributing to their equal political, economic and social inclusion—was established (resolution A/75/L.119) (United Nations, 2021h). This is an initial step towards the adoption of a legally binding instrument on the promotion and full respect for the human rights of this population group.

The United Nations agencies are prioritizing the incorporation of a human rights approach in all responses to the pandemic and the formulation by governments of innovative and inclusive ways to build more resilient, equitable and sustainable societies that protect human rights to emerge stronger from the pandemic. For these reasons, special recommendations focused on people of African descent are provided, to enable reconstruction with equality and combat structural racial discrimination.³⁷

A. Acknowledgement

1. Right to equality and non-discrimination

- Promote the implementation of national and international legal frameworks on the rights of people of African descent.
- Adapt institutions and policies to the multi-ethnic and multiracial realities in the countries, incorporating intercultural practices and promoting diversity, Afrodescendent culture and the fight against all forms of racial discrimination, stigma and stereotypes.
- Ensure that emergency measures taken during the pandemic are free of any form of discrimination, especially on the basis of racial, ethnic or national origin (OHCHR, 2020a).
- Implement special measures, including affirmative actions, with an intersectional and intercultural focus, to eradicate the multifaceted and worsening discrimination faced by women of African descent, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (OAS, 2020c).

2. Disaggregation of data

- Make communities and peoples of African descent visible in all official statistics, especially those related to the pandemic. People of African descent must participate in all stages of the process, from the production of information to its analysis.
- Track the impact of the pandemic on people of African descent through data disaggregated by ethnic and racial origin and other characteristics, such as gender, nationality and age, to facilitate intersectional analysis of the findings (OAS, 2020d).
- Ensure the disaggregation by ethnic and racial origin, age and gender of epidemiological registry data in Latin America and the Caribbean.
- Advocate for the recording of police information disaggregated by race to detect police abuse against people of African descent and to produce statistics on this population as a specific group of victims of violence or crime.

3. Participation and information

- Promote the equitable participation and inclusion of people of African descent, especially the poorest, at all levels of decision-making.
- Ensure access to accurate and timely information at all stages of the crisis and enable the meaningful participation of affected populations in decisions on COVID-19 policy responses.
- Ramp up efforts to provide universal access to the Internet—which is crucial for the effective exercise of various human rights—incorporating differentiated measures aimed at including people of African descent.

³⁷ Based on the recommendations of various United Nations agencies, especially ECLAC (2017a, 2021b and 2022a), ECLAC/UNFPA (2020), UNFPA/ECLAC (2022), as well as FAO (2021) and the IACHR.

B. Justice

- Prevent, investigate, prosecute and provide effective responses to racially motivated incidents by ensuring equality before the law and equal treatment in courts and other law enforcement entities (OHCHR, 2020a).
- Combat racism in the justice system (including the police force), reduce the prison population and resettle migrants by ensuring that people of African descent receive the same quality of health care as the community, regardless of their citizenship, nationality or immigration status.
- Prevent racial discrimination, especially among law enforcement officials, and guarantee the right to seek just and adequate reparation for harm suffered (OHCHR, 2020a).
- Regularly assess the satisfaction of communities of African descent with regard to the police force, the justice system and racial bias in these entities (OHCHR, 2020a).
- Implement protocols to prevent the excessive use of force, detentions and racial profiling in countermeasures adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially with young people of African descent (OAS, 2020d).
- Guarantee consultation and the free, prior and informed consent of communities of African descent during the pandemic, including considering the suspension of projects that may affect them if consultation is not possible (OAS, 2020d).
- Establish measures to protect women, adolescent girls and young girls of African descent from gender-based violence.

C. Development

1. Poverty

- Guarantee income security, support for families and children of African descent and specific social assistance for the most vulnerable members of this population.
- Ensure that COVID-19 responses guarantee the comprehensive protection of people of African descent.
- Establish a basic income and temporary shelters for people of African descent living in poverty, particularly for those experiencing homelessness or living in informal settlements and rural communities (OAS, 2020d).

2. Education

- Enhance access to free, quality education at all levels, without discrimination, through measures to promote secondary school completion, training and entry into higher education, including through affirmative action policies.
- Provide learning and vocational training tools for online learning, including free broadband Internet access and digital devices.
- Address the needs of children and youth who already face racial discrimination by expanding emergency food assistance programmes and other services for those who rely on schools as a source of social benefits (OHCHR, 2020a).
- Ensure continuity of learning for children and adolescents throughout the pandemic, preferably in schools, and mitigate the disruption of face-to-face classes because of the pandemic by building capacities in e-teaching and e-learning, particularly in disadvantaged communities and school systems (United Nations, 2020l).

3. Employment

- Promote access by people of African descent to quality jobs and positions of greater responsibility, paying special attention to young people who are neither studying nor working, particularly young mothers, and offering them support with care work so that they can complete their studies and enter the labour market.
- Compensate informal, self-employed, seasonal and domestic workers for the pandemic-induced lack of income (OHCHR, 2020a).

4. Health

- Guarantee people of African descent timely access to public and comprehensive health services informed by an intercultural perspective and provide them with accessible and inclusive information on the medical procedures they undergo, especially in relation to the pandemic (OAS, 2020d).
- Ensure non-discrimination in health care and consider the participation of people of African descent in decision-making as a standard practice, especially during the pandemic (OHCHR, 2020a).
- Ensure the availability of food, clean water and sanitation for all, with special emphasis on those suffering from racial discrimination (OHCHR, 2020a).
- Expand the geographic coverage of health services for at-risk people with COVID-19 living in remote locations, including communities of people of African descent, by identifying them and developing strategies for providing transportation, shelter, water and food (IACHR, 2020).
- Prioritize public health and compliance with international human rights obligations when making decisions or adopting policies regarding the approval, procurement, distribution and access to vaccines (OAS, 2021c).
- Guarantee sexual and reproductive health care, ensuring access to contraceptive methods and other supplies, as well as prenatal check-ups, childbirth and postpartum care to prevent maternal and neonatal deaths, unplanned pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and transmission of the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).

Vaccination

- Rapidly scale up vaccine manufacturing, ensuring fair, transparent, equitable, efficient and timely access to preventive tools, laboratory tests and medical supplies, among other essentials, for all peoples and countries in need (United Nations, 2020m).
- View vaccines as a public good, adopt a strategy for their production and distribution and ensure access for all people (United Nations, 2021c).
- Guarantee the universal availability and accessibility of vaccines. This means that States must provide them free of charge and immunize all people without discrimination.³⁸
- Consider criteria such as cultural relevance and geographical specificities in the vaccination process (IACHR, 2021).

³⁸ By the end of 2021, 90% of the population in 67 countries had not had access to a COVID-19 vaccine, while some rich countries had already purchased doses to vaccinate their entire population three times over (United Nations, 2021c).

- Prioritize the vaccination of essential health-care workers, including those providing home-based care, and provide them with the documentation needed to enable them to move around unimpeded for work, even if they are undocumented migrants, ensuring that they also receive the same assistance from social services.

Finally, the crisis caused by the pandemic must be seen as an opportunity to build a more sustainable, secure and prosperous future, which requires a human rights-based approach that puts people at the centre of all recovery efforts and addresses inequality and discrimination. It is essential to ensure the participation of all people and to establish a new social contract by transforming economies and developing global responses (United Nations, 2021c).

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People of African descent suffer high levels of inequality and deprivation which, as the figures presented in this report show, have been exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. This publication seeks to capture the perspectives of people of African descent and document some of their contributions and strategies for addressing the socio-health and economic crisis. To this end, the United Nations prioritizes the integration of a human rights approach in all responses to the pandemic and offers recommendations to combat structural racial discrimination and promote reconstruction with equality.



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