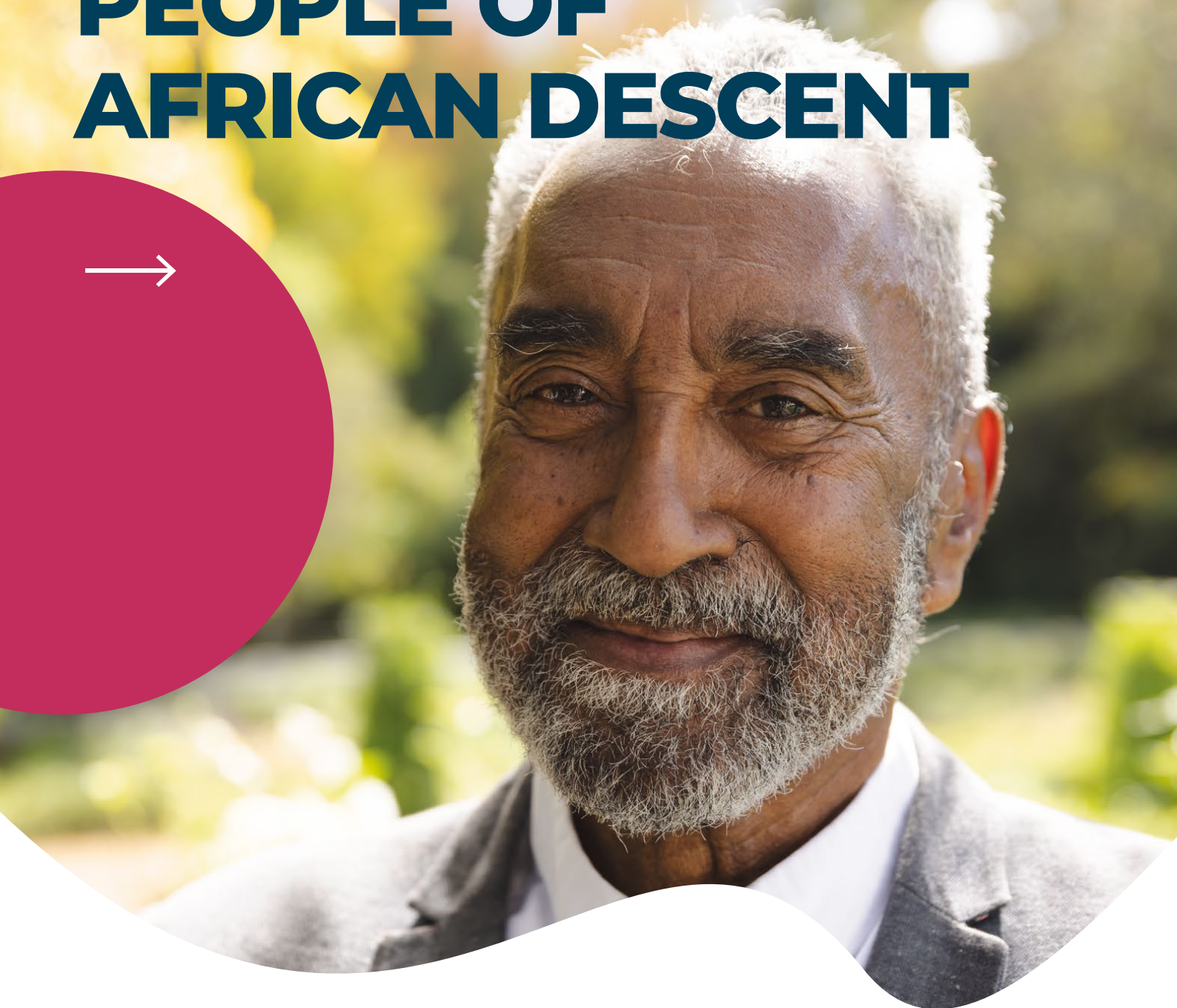


Thematic Brief

PEOPLE OF AFRICAN DESCENT



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Welcome!

Looking to mainstream gender and diversity in development projects? This guide shares key information about **people of African descent and how to design development projects that promote their inclusion.**

You can also explore other topic-based guides we have published to learn about the IDB's gender perspective and about the diverse groups the bank prioritizes in its operations: Indigenous Peoples, people of African descent, people with disabilities, and the LGBTQ+ population.



DEFINITION OF POPULATIONS

Who are people of African descent?

People of African descent are people who have ancestors from Africa, including both victims of the transatlantic slave trade and voluntary migrants.¹ According to the IDB's 2022–2025 Gender and Diversity Action Plan (GDAP),² the term Afro-descendants includes individuals who identify as Afro-descendant and Afro-descendant peoples, such as the Quilombolas, Palenqueros, Raizales, and Cimarrones (Maroons).

Negro, moreno, pardo, preto, Creole, Maroon, and Garifuna are among the many terms used across Latin America and the Caribbean to describe the diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural identities of people of African descent. Even within the same country, people may use different terms. In Colombia, for example, the acronym NARP is widely used in official documents to refer to Black, Afro-Colombian, Raizal, and Palenquero populations. In Brazil, the [Statute of Racial Equality](#) considers anyone who identifies as preto or pardo to be Black for legal purposes.³



1 - United Nations. (n.d.). [International Decade for People of African Descent](#).

2 - See: <https://www.iadb.org/en/who-we-are/topics/gender-and-diversity>

3 - This classification follows the skin color and race categories used by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE): *branco* (white), *preto* (Black), *amarelo* (Asian), *pardo* (mixed-race), and *indígena* (Indigenous).

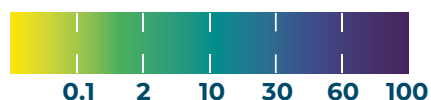
There are more than **140 million people of African descent in Latin America and the Caribbean**, representing **nearly a quarter of the total population**. In several **Caribbean** countries, such as Barbados and Jamaica, Afro-descendants make up more than **92% of the population**. **Brazil and Colombia** are home to the largest Afro-descendant populations in the region.



Do you love data?

Explore dashboards, databases, and libraries with information on people of African descent and other populations through the IDB's Data and Indicators from Latin America and the Caribbean portal!

% of population
that is Afro-descendant



□ Data not available

Using censuses and surveys to accurately estimate the Afro-descendant population can be challenging for several reasons. One key reason is that these estimates rely on self-identification, and people experiencing stigma or discrimination may be less likely to identify as Afro-descendant, leading to undercounting in official statistics. Methodological differences—such as how researchers design survey samples or word questions and response categories—can also affect the results.^{4 5}

Some people of African descent belong to **Afro-descendant peoples** with distinct collective identities and ways of life and, in some cases, historical and cultural ties to the territories where they live. In some countries, Afro-descendant peoples enjoy the same collective rights as Indigenous Peoples. In Brazil, for example, the 1988 Constitution recognized the right of *Quilombolas*⁶ to own their collective territories. In Ecuador, the 1998 Constitution recognized Afro-Ecuadorians as a distinct ethnic group and established their collective rights, which were expanded and strengthened in the 2008 Constitution.⁷

There are also **Afro-Indigenous** peoples that, as the name suggests, identify as both Afro-descendant and Indigenous, combining elements of both backgrounds in their culture. One example is the Garifuna people, who live in Honduras, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and Belize.

	Afro-descendant individual	Afro-descendant peoples or communities	Afro-Indigenous peoples
Identity	Self-identify as Afro-descendant	Self-identify as Afro-descendant + collective identity and sense of belonging	Self-identify as Afro-descendant and Indigenous
Rights	Depending on the country—or even the region—there may be collective rights, affirmative action policies, or other specific measures.		
Place of residence	Living situations vary: people of African descent may live in rural or urban areas and, in some cases, in legally recognized territories.		

4 - ECLAC & UNFPA. (2020). [Chapter IV. Visibilidad estadística de la población afrodescendiente y derecho a la información. In Afrodescendientes y la matriz de la desigualdad social en América Latina: retos para la inclusión \(pp. 127–156\).](#) Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC).

5 - ALAP & UNFPA. (2025). [Los desafíos de la inclusión estadística de los pueblos indígenas y afrodescendientes en América Latina y el Caribe. São Paulo: Latin American Population Association \(ALAP\).](#)

6 - Quilombolas are descendants of enslaved Africans who escaped slavery and formed self-sufficient communities known as quilombos. These communities have preserved their culture and identity to the present day. While they are legally recognized as a traditional people and have a constitutional right to land titles for their ancestral territories, only a fraction of their territories have received full legal title.

7 - Vernaza Arroyo, G. D., & Cruel Preciado, M. (2022). [Language and racial discrimination of Afro-Ecuadorians.](#) Centro Sur, 6(2).



Did you know that some Afro-descendant communities speak creole languages?

These started as *pidgins*, which are simplified languages that people who do not share a common language create to communicate during periods of inequality and forced migration.⁸

Afro-descendant peoples	Where do they live?	Who are they?
The Garifuna	Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua	The Garifuna are an Afro-Indigenous people descended from African survivors of slave shipwrecks who mixed with the Indigenous Kalinago people (also known as Caribs). Their language is also called Garifuna.
Palenqueros	Colombia	Palenqueros are descended from runaway African slaves who founded fortified communities known as palenques. Members of this community speak a creole language that blends Spanish, Portuguese, and Kikongo.
Raizales	Colombia	Raizales are descendants of enslaved Africans, British colonists, and free Afro-Caribbeans who settled in the San Andrés, Providencia, and Santa Catalina archipelago. They speak an English-based creole language known as San Andrés Creole.
Afro-Limonenses	Costa Rica	Afro-Limonenses are descended from free Afro-Caribbeans who migrated to the Limón province of Costa Rica for economic reasons in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Members of this community speak Limonese Creole.
Bay Islands Creoles	Honduras	Bay Island Creoles are descended from free Afro-Caribbean migrants and live mainly on the islands of Roatán and Utila. They speak the Bay Islands English dialect.

8 - Mufwene, S. S. (2008). The emergence of creoles and language change. In Handbook of Linguistic Anthropology. University of Chicago.

Afro- descendant peoples	Where do they live?	Who are they?
Creoles	Belice, Nicaragua, and Suriname	Creoles in Belize are descended from enslaved Africans and Europeans—mainly British settlers—who arrived during the colonial period. They make up about a quarter of the country's population, and their language, Kriol, serves as a lingua franca throughout the country. In Nicaragua, Creoles are descended from various waves of migrants of African origin—first enslaved Africans who escaped slavery and later free Afro-Caribbean migrants—who intermarried with European and Indigenous populations and settled along the Atlantic coast. They have preserved an English-based creole language, and their territories are legally recognized by the government. Creoles in Suriname are descended from enslaved Africans brought by the Dutch during the colonial period. They speak Sranan Tongo, an English-based creole with Dutch and African influences.
Maroons	Jamaica and Suriname	Cimarrones are Afro-descendant peoples descended from enslaved Africans who escaped colonial plantations and established autonomous communities in remote areas. Through armed resistance, they gained freedom and recognition of their lands during the colonial period. Today, they are recognized as tribal peoples with collective rights. In Jamaica, Maroons are descended from enslaved Africans who escaped to mountainous areas during the transition from Spanish to British rule following the British occupation of the island in 1655. They have preserved traditional leadership structures and developed Kromanti, an Akan-based linguistic variety used mainly in ceremonial settings and which is now rarely spoken. In Suriname, Maroons settled in the Amazon rainforest after escaping Dutch plantations between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They have preserved several English-based creole languages with strong African influences, as well as distinct forms of community organization.

Source: [Minority Rights Group](#).

KEY CONCEPTS

What key concepts should you be familiar with when working with People of African descent?



Race

Race is not a biological category, but rather a concept that has changed over time. It was first used in the nineteenth century to distinguish people based on physical traits. Race was also used to justify discrimination by linking physical traits to ideas of superiority and morality.⁹



Interculturality

This is a process in which different cultures—each with their own political, economic, social, and linguistic systems—interact and communicate on equal terms. It is not just about tolerating differences, but about turning them into opportunities for connection and collaboration.



Ethnicity

Ethnicity is not the same as race. It refers to a community that shares social traits shaped by cultural heritage and collective memory, such as language, culture, religion, institutions, values, social practices, and customs.¹⁰



Racial and ethnic stereotypes

These are generalized, oversimplified, and often inaccurate beliefs about the characteristics, behaviors, or values of people belonging to certain racial or ethnic groups.



Development with identity

This approach includes empowering people, respecting the environment, and managing land and natural resources, while respecting values, rights—including cultural, economic, social, and institutional rights—and state institutions and governance. It is based on principles of justice, integrity, reciprocity, and solidarity.¹¹



Racial discrimination

Racial discrimination refers to any distinction, exclusion, or unequal treatment based on race, skin color, ethnicity, or national origin that prevents or limits equal access to human rights and full participation in political, economic, social, or cultural life.¹²

9- Wade, P. (2000). [The Meaning Of 'Race' And 'Ethnicity.'](#) In *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America* (pp. 11-34). Quito, Ecuador: Ediciones Abya-Yala.

10 - Albertos, C., & Martín, C. (2021). [Guía de conceptos clave para el trabajo con pueblos indígenas.](#)

11 - Ibid.

12 - United Nations. (1965). [International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.](#)

Ethnic-racial identity: What are **self-identification**, **self-recognition**, and **self-ascription**?

The concepts of **self-identification**, **self-recognition**, and **self-ascription** refer to how Indigenous Peoples and individuals—and more recently Afro-descendant peoples and individuals—view their own identities. However, each term emphasizes something different. **Self-identification** and **self-recognition** focus on personal identity, while **self-ascription** is about **collective belonging** to a people or community.

All three terms share the prefix **self-**, meaning “by oneself,” reinforcing the principle that:

**Communities and individuals
determine their own identities and
do not need external validation**

In summary:

→ **Self-identification**

This is the term **most commonly used** in human rights, public policy, and court rulings across the region, both for Indigenous Peoples and People of African descent.

→ **Self-recognition**

This term is particularly **important in Colombia and Brazil**, where it has been recognized in court decisions related to the collective rights of Indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples.

→ **Self-ascription**

This term is **used less frequently**, except in Mexico, where it is the constitutional term used when recognizing Indigenous Peoples.

Language matters!

The language we use reflects what we believe and consider to be normal. When we use correct and respectful language, we recognize diversity, transform existing stereotypes, and help include Afro-descendant people and communities in all spheres of society.

- **“Afro-descendant”:** This term is widely used in Latin American and Caribbean policy and human-rights contexts. Use it primarily as an adjective, as in “Afro-descendant people,” “Afro-descendant communities,” or “Afro-descendant populations.” When referring to people collectively, “people of African descent” is generally preferred. Use the hyphenated form and capitalize “Afro” because it is derived from the proper noun “Africa.” The term may also be adapted to indicate a specific national identity, such as “Afro-Brazilian” or “Afro-Honduran.”
- **“Black”:** This adjective has been adopted by multiple Afro-descendant communities. Following AP Style—the IDB's default for English—it is mandatory to capitalize this adjective when used in a racial, ethnic, or cultural sense (e.g., “Black people,” “Black culture,” or “Black literature”).
- **Avoid noun reductions:** Words like “Afro-descendant” or “Black” should be used as adjectives rather than nouns to preserve individual identity. Avoid referring to people with reductive terms; opt for wordings such as “a Black person” or “an Afro-descendant person.”
- **Avoid “people of color”:** Do not use the expression “person of color” or “people of color.” Instead, choose “Afro-descendant person” or “Afro-descendant communities.”
- **Avoid possessive language:** Do not use possessive pronouns in relation to these populations (e.g., avoid “our Afro-descendants” or “our Black women”).



**When we use correct language,
we transform existing
stereotypes and help make
people of African descent more
visible and valued**

Please note:

If you are developing operational documents or project materials in Spanish, or communicating in Spanish-speaking contexts, the conventions and expressions in that language are significantly different. To ensure bias-free communication in Spanish, please consult the original [Spanish version of this factsheet](#).

MAIN GAPS

What are the main **socioeconomic challenges** that people of African descent in the region face?



Unequal opportunities in education

The main challenge facing Afro-descendant children and youth is staying in school. Although Afro-descendant students attend school at rates similar to their peers, they are far less likely to complete primary, secondary, and higher education, with gaps of 21%, 32%, and 71%, respectively.¹³ Afro-descendant children and youth also tend to complete fewer years of education and perform worse on standardized tests compared with the non-Afro-descendant and non-Indigenous population. Some of these disparities stem from unequal treatment rooted in racial stereotypes.¹⁴



Barriers in the labor market

The unemployment rate for people of African descent tends to be higher than for white and mixed-race populations—in many cases twice as high. Studies show that Afro-descendant applicants are less likely to be called for job interviews, and that hiring staff in public employment agencies often show implicit bias in favor of white candidates.^{15 16 17 18 19} Even when they have the same level of education as non-Afro-descendants, people of African descent are more likely to work in the informal sector and tend to earn lower incomes. Among highly educated workers, the wage gap between men and women is wider among people of African descent.²⁰

13 - Freire, G. N., Orellana, S. S., & Carbonari, F. (2022). [Afro-descendant Inclusion in Education: an Anti-racist Agenda for Latin America](#). World Bank.

14 - Botelho, F., Madeira, R. A., & Rangel, M. A. (2015). [Racial discrimination in grading: Evidence from Brazil](#). *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 7(4), 37-52.

15 - França, M., & Portella, A. (Eds.). (2023). [Números da discriminação racial: desenvolvimento humano, equidade e políticas públicas](#). Editora Jandaíra.

16 - Zschirnt, E., & Ruedin, D. (2016). [Ethnic discrimination in hiring decisions: a meta-analysis of correspondence tests 1990–2015](#). *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 42(7), 1115-1134.

17 - Lang, K., & Lehmann, J. Y. K. (2012). [Racial discrimination in the labor market: Theory and empirics](#). *Journal of Economic Literature*, 50(4), 959-1006.

18 - Nopo, H. (2012). [New century, old disparities: Gender and ethnic earnings gaps in Latin America and the Caribbean](#). World Bank Publications.

19 - Bertrand, M., & Mullainathan, S. (2004). [Are Emily and Greg more employable than Lakisha and Jamal? A field experiment on labor market discrimination](#). *American economic review*, 94(4), 991-1013.

20 - Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) & United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). (2020). [Afrodescendientes y la matriz de la desigualdad social en América Latina: retos para la inclusión](#) (Project Documents)



Lower incomes and higher poverty rates

People of African descent tend to have lower incomes and higher levels of poverty compared to the non-Afro-descendant and non-Indigenous population.^{21 22} Although these disparities have many causes, studies in Brazil show that part of the gap is tied to the legacy of slavery: Afro-descendant households earn between 3% and 9% less because of the effects of slavery that are still felt today.²³



Greater vulnerability among Afro-descendant households in rural areas

Although living conditions tend to be more difficult in rural areas than in cities for everyone, Afro-descendant populations are disproportionately affected. In Brazil, Ecuador, Panama, Peru, and Uruguay, Afro-descendant households in rural areas are more likely to live in poverty. They also have less access to basic services such as safe drinking water and electricity.^{24 25}



Urban segregation and vulnerability to crime

People of African descent living in urban areas are disproportionately affected by residential segregation and crime.²⁶ Many Afro-descendant individuals live in informal settlements (*aglomerados subnormais* in Brazil, *villas miseria* in Argentina, or *barrios marginales* in Colombia) with inadequate housing, poor public services, and insecure land tenure. This limits their access to government programs and services and makes them more vulnerable to violence, natural disasters, and stigmatization.

Many people of African descent live in informal settlements that make them more vulnerable to violence, natural disasters, and stigmatization

21 - Ibid.

22 y 25 - The World Bank. (2018). [Afro-descendants in Latin America: Toward a Framework of Inclusion](#). Washington, DC.

23 - Fujiwara, M.; Laudaes, H.; Valencia Caicedo, F. (2019) Slaves, Migrants and Development in Brazil, 1872-1923.

24 - World Bank. (2015). [Indigenous Latin America in the Twenty-First Century: The First Decade](#). Washington: World Bank.

25- The World Bank. (2018). [Afro-descendants in Latin America: Toward a Framework of Inclusion](#). Washington, DC.

26 - Urrea-Giraldo, Valoyes Vélez, & Quiroz Cortés (2022); or, Axel Borsdorf (2003).

INTERNATIONAL LEGAL FRAMEWORK

What **international instruments protect and promote the rights of people of African descent?**

The international legal framework related to Afro-descendant populations is based on norms and declarations that recognize and protect their rights. Explore some of the most important instruments below.

1948

[Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide](#)

This convention defines genocide as an international crime that includes any act intended to destroy, in whole or in part, an ethnic, racial, or religious group. It also establishes states' obligations to prevent and punish this crime.

1958

[International Labour Organization Discrimination \(Employment and Occupation\) Convention \(ILO Convention No. 111\)](#)

This convention commits states to promote equality and combat discrimination in the workplace. It applies to any distinction or exclusion affecting access to vocational training, access to employment, or working conditions based on race, color, sex, religion, political opinion, national extraction, or social origin. States that ratify the convention commit to develop and implement public policies that promote equality of opportunity and eliminate all forms of discrimination.

1965

[International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination](#)

This convention defines racial discrimination as any exclusion, restriction, or distinction that prevents the full enjoyment of rights and freedoms in public life on the basis of race, color, descent, or national or ethnic origin. It also requires states to condemn discriminatory propaganda; adopt measures to combat prejudice in culture, information, and education; and ensure equality in civil, political, security, and justice-related rights.



1966

[International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#)

Article 13 recognizes the right of all people to education and states that education should promote understanding and tolerance among racial, ethnic, and other groups.

1989

[Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention \(ILO Convention No. 169\)](#)

This is the primary international treaty recognizing the collective rights of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, including cultural identity, protection of their territories, and the right to prior consultation on measures that may affect them. Its category of Tribal Peoples can also apply to Afro-descendant communities that maintain their own institutions, distinct identities, and collective ways of life tied to their territories. Several countries across the region have relied on this interpretation to recognize the rights of Afro-descendant groups. The clearest example of this approach was [Judgment C-169](#) of 2001, when Colombia's Constitutional Court recognized Afro-descendant communities as Tribal Peoples and guaranteed their rights to prior consultation and territorial protection.

2001

[Declaration of the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance](#)

This declaration recognizes that Afro-descendant populations have been disproportionately affected by racism and racial discrimination, and therefore commits states to promote equality and eliminate discrimination. Key measures in the declaration include improving access to health-care systems, education, and essential services such as electricity and safe drinking water. It also emphasizes teaching the history and contributions of African and Afro-descendant people in schools and increasing their participation in decision-making processes. Finally, it calls on states to strengthen mechanisms and resources to support victims of racism and discrimination.

2013 ●

[Inter-American Convention against Racism, Racial Discrimination and Related Forms of Intolerance](#)

This convention commits states to prevent, prohibit, and punish all acts and manifestations of racism and racial discrimination. It also acknowledges how racial discrimination has harmed Afro-descendant people and emphasizes the need to protect and promote their rights. Finally, it calls on states to fight racial stereotypes and prejudice through education and awareness campaigns and to work with civil society organizations to develop and implement anti-racism policies.

2013 ●

[United Nations Resolution 68/237 on the International Decade for People of African Descent](#)

The resolution outlines measures to strengthen legal frameworks that promote equality and combat racial discrimination, support educational programs on Afro-descendant history and anti-racism, and expand economic opportunities. The Decade aims to recognize the cultural diversity and contributions of Afro-descendant populations, better protect their rights, and promote inclusion throughout society.



THE IDB'S APPROACH

People of African descent in IDB projects

At the IDB, we work to reduce the socioeconomic gaps that disproportionately affect people of African descent and promote equity. To support this work, the Gender and Diversity Sector Framework defines three lines of action grounded in evidence-based policies and strategies.

Line of action 1: Close structural gaps

→ Corrective policies

- Affirmative action policies in education: quotas for people of African descent can improve university graduation rates and earnings.
- Affirmative employment policies: quotas for people of African descent.
- Land titling programs.

→ Differentiated programs and services

- Culturally competent healthcare services tailored to the unique needs of Afro-descendant populations.

→ Universal policies

- Sexual and reproductive health services: promoting healthy behaviors, improving specialized care during pregnancy and childbirth, providing high-quality counseling, and expanding access to different contraceptive methods for people of African descent.
- High-quality preschool education.
- Minimum wages.



Line of action 2: Reduce biases against people of African descent



Policies to prevent unequal treatment

- Implementing legal and regulatory frameworks that prohibit racial discrimination.
- Using tools, including artificial intelligence, to reduce bias in decisions about jobs, loans, mortgages, and other high-stakes applications. Methods such as blind hiring help reduce bias by removing information such as gender, race, disability, or age from automated assessments.
- Piloting awareness campaigns aimed at reducing racial discrimination and harassment in public and private spaces.



Measuring unequal treatment

- Generating knowledge on policy instruments for eradicating unequal treatment, with an emphasis on access to housing, credit, and judicial services.



Line of action 3: Strengthen institutional capacity to design and execute policies



Supporting mainstreaming processes and resources so that all sectors make the inclusion of people of African descent a cross-cutting priority

- Technical assistance, knowledge products, and operational support to help institutions design, implement, and evaluate interventions that promote greater equity for people of African descent.
- Providing technical support and fostering dialogue to improve coordination, mobilize public investment, and help key ministries integrate diversity and inclusion into budget planning.



Improved data availability and quality

- Collecting better data on Afro-descendant populations through official statistics, administrative records, and georeferenced data systems.

Take the IDB's work in Brazil, for example:

- **Education:** policies to reduce gender and racial bias by updating school curricula and promoting racial literacy. Other initiatives have expanded digital inclusion in Quilombola schools by improving internet access and infrastructure. The IDB has also supported initiatives in São Paulo (BR-L1580), Pará (BR-L1548), and Amazonas (BR-L1621) that address these issues.
- **Afro-tourism:** programs such as Prodetur Salvador helped create jobs and increase income through tourism, especially for Black communities involved in ethnic and cultural tourism. Actions ranged from professional training for 1,066 Afro-descendant entrepreneurs to networking events and business platforms that benefited nearly 2,000 local businesses, along with destination branding efforts and the Salvador Capital Afro Festival, which attracted 15,000 participants.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Want to learn more?

Explore these resources:

- Projects and publications by the IDB's Gender and Diversity Division on Afro-descendant populations [\[English\]](#)
- IDB Gender and Diversity Sector Framework Document [\[English\]](#)
- Gender and Diversity Action Plan 2022–2025 [\[Spanish\]](#)
- Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) & United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). (2020). Afrodescendientes y la matriz de la desigualdad social en América Latina: retos para la inclusión. Santiago: [\[Spanish\]](#)
- Freire, G., Díaz-Bonilla, C., Schwartz, S.; Soler, J.; and Carbonari, F. (2018). Afro-descendants in Latin America: Toward a Framework of Inclusion. [\[English\]](#)
- United Nations webpage on the International Decade for People of African Descent 2015–2024 [\[English\]](#)
- Morrison, J., Ratzlaff, A., Rojas, M., Jaramillo, M., Lins, C., & Peña, M. O. (2017). Counting Ethnicity and Race: Harmonizing Race and Ethnicity Data in Latin America (2000–2016). See: <https://publications.iadb.org/en/counting-ethnicity-and-race-harmonizing-race-and-ethnicity-data-latin-america-2000-2016>

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