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## **A Regional Perspective on Afrodescendant Quality of Life**

Conference Room Paper by All For Reparations and Emancipation (AFRE)

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## Introduction

For centuries, the descendants of Africans enslaved in the Americas, herein referred to as Afrodescendants, have been subjected to numerous forms of discrimination in countries throughout the Trans-Atlantic Slavery Diaspora. From Jamaica to the United States, Cuba to Canada, Guyana to Guatemala, these individuals share a common thread...although their fathers may have come from a tribe in Cameroon and their mothers from a tribe in Nigeria, making them indeed African people, they are unlike other people of African descent around the world in that they cannot use their mother tongue to call upon any government in Africa for support. Through forced mixed breeding they were deprived of their mother tongue and thereby they are denied the use of it today. Due to slavery's lingering effects they speak the language of their slave masters—be it English, Spanish, Portuguese or a mixed language. This communal history is a determining factor in the quality of life of Afrodescendant communities, underlying the poverty, inadequate health care and unequal access to opportunity that Afrodescendants suffer in the states in which they reside today.

Discrimination against Afrodescendants has historically manifested itself in each nation in various ways, and to varying degrees. Still, in most cases, it is born out of a Euro-centric sense of racial, cultural, economic and intellectual superiority, and out of a fear of retribution for the indignities suffered during and as a result of slavery. Those identifying as “white” commonly afford themselves higher social standing than is permitted the descendants of slaves, in part because of Afrodescendant's slave ancestry itself. With ancestors who were severed from their mother tongue and cultural roots upon being kidnapped, Afrodescendants in the Western Hemisphere today cannot—except in very rare cases—claim tribal membership, point of ancestral origin, language, land rights or equality nor may they enjoy the benefits of their forefather's labors or experience true human equality. This is despite the fact that enslaved persons were responsible for building much of the infrastructure that presently exists in their respective nations, and for establishing the bulk of agriculture as well. In the state of Georgia (US), taxes charged on each slave were used to fund the state government's initial treasury.<sup>1</sup>

In many states, similar forms of exploitation and unjust enrichment were—and continue to be—implemented and used. Even in nations where Afrodescendants may constitute a numerical majority, they are shown to possess less wealth and political power than those of other races because of such discriminatory practices.

Overall, the lingering effects of slavery and race-based discrimination have had an all-encompassing, profoundly negative effect on the descendants of African slaves. Many nations are unaware of the difficulties facing this group, even within the constraints of their own borders. This paper seeks to spread awareness about the multitude of issues that currently face Afrodescendants in the Americas region, by attempting to highlight several factors within the context of this work, among them: the number of Afrodescendants in various countries, examples of discrimination against Afrodescendants and the economic and social conditions that result from such discrimination.

It should be noted that the study of Afrodescendants as a group is merely in its beginning stage, that acquiring accurate information on population numbers is still difficult and that this paper is in its initial form, to be completed in full at a later date. Some reports cited in this work may combine Afrodescendant and African immigrant populations together into one overarching

category. Others may not contain accurate information for various reasons, among them a reluctance on the part of individuals to identify as a slave descendant because of the perception of shame attached to such a claim. This paper attempts to accomplish no more than to substantiate the collective existence of Afrodescendants as a group and to lay the groundwork for future study regarding their collective quality of life; issues of identification would be addressed in subsequent research.

It is hoped that through the efforts of the Working Group on Minorities and other concerned parties, Afrodescendant populations throughout the Slavery Diaspora will be offered a forum in which to share like experiences with one another and with the international community. Such a forum could be useful in establishing effective networks and thus initiatives that will advocate for Afrodescendant issues on a regional and, later, global scale. The legacy that members of this group share is one that Afrodescendants alone can uniquely lay claim to; it is a portion of world history and an experience of collective human rights abuses that deserves to be examined and explored by international bodies, at the very least.

### **The Scattering**

An estimated 27,233 slave voyages arrived in the New World during the period of time ranging from 1492 to 1820, each new arrival bearing between 281 to 332 slaves.<sup>2</sup> These estimates fail to take into account the large numbers of slaves who were shuffled between various African nations, and who were taken to Europe, India and the Middle East. Information regarding Afrodescendant groups in these regions will be compiled during future research.

In the Americas, enslaved Africans disembarked at numerous ports throughout the region, and though many were held captive in areas close to the point from where they initially disembarked, many more were taken into the interiors of various nations, by boat or across land. The Cambridge Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database estimates 482 separate ports of arrival for these voyages in the Americas region; the listing of ports in itself is an overwhelming glimpse of how spread out and vast the trade actually was.

The above-cited data provides a framework for illustrating the dispersion of Africans into various nations. Although some estimates are much higher, scholars agree that at a minimum, between 12-15 million Africans were taken into slavery, where they were scattered throughout what has become known as the Slavery Diaspora; it was during this period of dispersion that most found themselves transplanted by force into societies both foreign and hostile.

### **Historical Overview and Current Population Estimates**

#### Northern America

Since there has been no census category established for Afrodescendants in the U.S. and Canada, accurate population counts do not yet exist. African immigrants and their descendants are encouraged to register themselves under the racial/ethnic categories of African-Canadian, African-American or Black alongside Afrodescendants who also choose these categories. While scholars are well aware that a loss of national identity and the lingering effects of slavery differentiate Afrodescendants from African immigrants and their descendants, most governments have yet to acknowledge the distinction. It may be beneficial, in the future, for governments and

NGOs to identify the differences in the quality of life of Afrodescendants and African immigrants and their children, with an eye toward analyzing the how the destruction of original identity has disadvantaged Afrodescendants specifically.

The first enslaved Africans are believed to have disembarked at Jamestown, Virginia (U.S.) in 1619<sup>3</sup>, although some Black leaders have argued with that date, asserting that the first ship carrying slaves arrived in 1555, piloted by Sir John Hawkins. Until 1865, Africans in the U.S. were enslaved, tortured and denied even the most basic of human freedoms. In that year, slavery was abolished, only to be replaced with segregation laws that further denied the humanity of the freed slaves and their descendants. These laws were enforced by state mandate until 1954, when the United States Supreme Court outlawed the notion of ‘separate but equal,’ calling for integration of the nation’s public school systems. Despite the Court’s mandate, Afrodescendants in the United States have been—and still are—subjected to sub-human treatment by their own government and by the society that surrounds them. Researchers at the Tuskegee Institute note that between the years of 1882 and 1951, 3,437 Afrodescendants were lynched.<sup>4</sup> In the U.S., hate crimes committed against Afrodescendants continue on, as illustrated in the 1991 beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles police officers, the beating and dragging death of James Byrd by white supremacists in Texas in 1998, and the shooting death of Robert Spencer in 2001. The father of eight children, Spencer was murdered as he left a Lake County, Florida convenience store by a man whose admitted goal was to “take out” as many black people as he could.<sup>5</sup>

According to the 2005 U.S. Census, 38.4 million people in the United States or 12.9% of the total population identify as Black, African-American or Afrodescendant. Fifty-five percent of the current Afrodescendant population in the U.S. resides in the nation’s Southern region, where plantation slavery began and was the most entrenched. There are several instances in the United States of Afrodescendant groups who have remained on the land worked by their ancestors, among them the Gullahs of South Carolina and the Georgia Sea Islands. Today, groups like the Gullahs struggle to hold on to their land, which their respective states continue to encroach upon.

The Black Exodus to Canada initially occurred in three phases; it is estimated that over 35,000 fled north in search of respite. Fabbi notes that “the majority of early Black immigrants came as a result of three significant American historical events: the American Revolution (1775-1783), the War of 1812 (1812-1814), and the Underground Railway movement (1830-1865).”<sup>6</sup> These migrations northward to freedom—combined with African immigration—have resulted in a current Canadian African/Afrodescendant population of 662, 200, representing just over 2% of Canada’s total population. Despite Canada’s historically significant role in the Underground Railroad as a place of safety for escaped slaves, many Afrodescendants in Canada today find that they face discriminatory circumstances and have been remanded to the outer levels of Canadian society.

#### Latin America

Vinson states that between the years of 1521 and 1817, Mexico imported almost 200,000 Africans to be used as slaves. These blacks were forced to work in silver mines, the farming industry, and on tobacco and sugar plantations.<sup>8</sup> Based upon data derived from the colonial period that places the percentage of Mexico’s African population somewhere between 10 and 12 per cent of the total, researchers estimate that about 9 million Mexicans could have significant African blood. The country’s political, business, social and cultural spheres, however, are

dominated by the white descendants of Spanish conquistadors, while mixed-race, indigenous and black people generally are relegated to supporting roles in society.”<sup>9</sup> Afrodescendants, also referred to as Afro-mestizos, reside mainly along Mexico’s coastline. Most Afrodescendant villages are located in remote regions, according to the African Diaspora Research Project of Michigan State University.

The Inter-American Development Bank estimates that approximately 150 million of Latin America’s 540 million people are of African ancestry.<sup>10</sup> Great numbers of African slaves were imported into the area during the colonial period, the highest percentage of enslaved residing in Brazil.

Brazil currently is home to the largest Afrodescendant population in the Americas. Forty-five percent of Brazilians identify themselves as Black, while in Colombia Afrodescendants comprise 26% of the total population; Argentina, Guatemala, Peru and Uruguay have small Afrodescendant populations that are concentrated in specific geographic areas. Bolivia, Ecuador and Costa Rica, along with other nations, have only begun to include questions related to race on their censuses, which means that many Afrodescendants may have gone uncounted. The NGO, Minority Rights Group International, laments the lack of available data on Afrodescendants in their 2004 report, blaming a lack of communication between Afrodescendant groups and their respective governments for statistical oversights, along with the fact that Afrodescendants are only now—at this late date—being recognized as a group. This much-needed research, MRG claims, could be used to improve upon the lives and circumstances of Afrodescendants throughout the Western Hemisphere.

The descendants of enslaved Africans in Central and South America live in rural areas and along the coastline, though many are migrating to large cities looking for work. This is an enormous undertaking for most, as disproportionate numbers of Afrodescendants across Latin America suffer from a lack of transportation, infrastructure and utilities, and are regularly denied access to health care, receive inadequate education, struggle with high unemployment rates and earn low incomes that place them easily below poverty level. In many countries, Afrodescendants—also dubbed Afro-Ecuadorians, Afro-Latinos, Afro-Colombians, Quilombos, Garifunas, Afro-Peruvians and Black Seminoles—constitute the lowest rung on the quality of life ladder. The Inter-American Development Bank undertook a survey of Afrodescendants in Honduras, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela; the study’s results showed an astounding similarity in group member’s experiences, despite the divergence of nations.

### The Caribbean

In Haiti, the Dominican Republic and Cuba, Afrodescendants are the majority. Explorer Christopher Columbus first stumbled upon the island of Hispanola in 1492. Spanish colonial rule meant that between the period of 1492 and 1821, large numbers of African slaves were brought to the island, which has borne several names, among them Ayiti, Hispanola, Saint Domingue and finally—after the nation’s 1821 revolution—Haiti.

The island proved to be the most profitable in the region for its colonial holders, but for Africans and their descendants, Haiti was one of the most brutal places in the New World in terms of the slave trade and its resulting legacy. Library of Congress researchers claim that modern Haitian

society—with its violence and conflict, poverty and rapidly declining quality of life—is a direct reflection of the nation’s slaveholding history.

“The mixture of races that eventually divided Haiti into a small, mainly mulatto elite and an impoverished black majority, began with the slavemasters’ concubinage of African women. Haiti’s slave population totaled at least 500,000, and perhaps as many as 700,000, by 1791. The slaveholding system in Saint-Domingue was particularly cruel and abusive, and few slaves (especially males) lived long enough to reproduce. The racially tinged conflicts that have marked Haitian history can be traced similarly to slavery,” a Library of Congress country study reports.<sup>11</sup>

Despite having expelled French colonial powers during a rebellion led by the formerly enslaved and proclaiming itself the first free Black republic in the West in 1804, Haiti has been unable to release itself from its legacy of slavery and violence. Black/mulatto conflict and human rights abuses are indeed common occurrences in the Haiti of today, which is 95% Afrodescendant.

The Dominican Republic provides us with a different take on Afrodescendants, in pointing out what the realities of life can be for those who choose to deny their slave heritage because of the perceived shame associated with it. Though the Dominican Republic and Haiti share the island of Hispanola—with the D.R. occupying over two-thirds of the island—the two nations are very different culturally, as well as economically. The D.R. maintains a Spanish-centered culture, and because of cultural differences refused to stay under Haiti’s rule after the Haitian Revolution occurred. The Dominican Republic emerged as a separate nation from Haiti in 1844 after many years of conflict, submitted to Spanish rule in 1861, then claimed final independence from colonial rule in 1865.

Eighty-four percent of Dominicans have African slave ancestry, though 73% of them self-identify as ‘mulatto’.<sup>12</sup> These distinctions allow Dominicans to move more freely through society, while at the same time giving them an upper hand and feeling of superiority over Haitians, who are to this day exploited and abused as sugar laborers in the Dominican Republic. Choosing assimilation into the Western world over embracing its African heritage has proven a beneficial choice for this nation, which now claims one of the fastest growing economies in the Western Hemisphere.

Ada Ferrer, in her book *Insurgent Cuba: Race, Nation and Revolution, 1868-1898*, states that in 1846, 36 % of the Cuban population were enslaved. Ferrer claims that more than 595,000 African slaves arrived on the island's shores during the last fifty years of the trade, which ended in 1886. Most of those enslaved worked on Cuba’s sugar plantations. Today, an estimated 62% of the nation’s 11,346,670 Cubans are of African ancestry.<sup>13</sup> Afrodescendants in Cuba continue to face discrimination, despite Castro’s revolution, and the Cuban government’s attempts at wiping out discriminatory practices. Large numbers of Afro-Cubans have fled Cuba for the United States over the years seeking economic refuge, as Greenbaum notes in her work; she states that for most Afro-Cuban patriots, the vision of social justice in the new republic remained elusive.<sup>14</sup>

In Bermuda, Jamaica, the Bahamas, Antigua and many other Caribbean nations, the history, circumstances and quality of life for Afrodescendants are similar, if not virtually identical. The bulk of scholarship done in this area verifies this assertion.

## Percentages of Afrodescendants

Brazil	45% or 83,750,757
United States	13% or 38,445,437
Columbia	26% or 11,168,112
Haiti	95% or 7,715,540
Dom. Rep.	84% or 7,518,028
Cuba	62% or 7,034,935
Jamaica	98% or 2,677,195
Venezuela	10% or 2,537,528
Panama	77% or 2,332,445
Peru	5% or 1,396,281
Ecuador	10% or 1,336,359
Honduras	7.7% or 1,128,449
Canada	2% or 662,200
Bolivia	4% or 354,814
Guyana	45% or 344,377
Puerto Rico	8% or 313,330
The Bahamas	85% or 256,521
Suriname	41% or 179,639
Uruguay	4% or 136,636
French Guiana	66% or 129,033
Belize	31% or 86,631
Costa Rica	2% or 80,323
Nicaragua	13% or 71,046
Guatemala	No Records
El Salvador	No Records
Mexico	No Records
Paraguay	No Records
Chile	No Records
Argentina	No Records <sup>15</sup>

Total: 169,655,616

Using the American Development Bank estimate of 150 million Afrodescendants in Latin America, the total becomes nearly 190 million. It is evident that studies and further research must be done in order to determine a more accurate population number for Afrodescendants.

## Economic Dependence and Poverty

Perhaps the most pervasive and long-lasting effect of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade is the economic dependence that has been forced upon Afrodescendants in its wake. This dependency has affected both Afrodescendants and those residing on the continent of Africa, though in very different ways.

In 1441, Portuguese traders returned to Portugal with the first shipment of captive Blacks, setting off a chain of destructive and exploitative events that scholar Robert July claims can never be undone.<sup>16</sup> The trade of salt, spices, cloth, firearms, tobacco, spirits, gold and slaves set the stage

for the first instance of African dependency on Europe and, later, on colonial nations. For the continent, this trade—which robbed Africa of many of its greatest artisans, architects and agricultural minds—has had a long-lasting effect on both economy and development, leaving her nations vulnerable to the processes and inequalities of both colonization and neo-colonization.

According to one estimate, 12 million Africans were taken to the Western world as slaves during the Trans-Atlantic slave trade.<sup>17</sup> Those enslaved found themselves completely dependent upon their captors for survival; meals, clothing and shelter were provided to the enslaved by the very ones who held them prisoner.

Institutionalized slavery meant that dependence on European powers became a total and complete reality, and it is one that has underscored the lives of Afrodescendants since slavery began in the Western Hemisphere. During the approximately 400-year duration of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, this sense of depending on white authorities for individual and collective needs became an ingrained, given part of life, erasing in the minds of most Afrodescendants the memory of a world where Africans once controlled their own destinies. Constant degradation and the need for bowing and scraping to one's master to get material needs met became a regular way of life for Afrodescendants, who were forced to deny their own humanity in order to survive.

When U.S. and Latin American countries released their enslaved populations from slavery, little to no provisions were made for those newly freed. After centuries of demanding subservience and utter dependence, these nations released multitudes of uneducated, illiterate freed slaves into a reality rife with poverty, unemployment, homelessness and state-sponsored welfare.

Being spewed out of a position of dependence into one of abject poverty, these freed slaves struggled to find respite, to establish their own communities and a sense of political autonomy, and to create a way for themselves to survive despite the odds instituted against them. Churches and schools were hopefully raised by the same hands that had once established the infrastructures of various nations, this time for self-benefit. However, a lack of available resources—land, building materials and access to education among them—meant that the quality of such work was far less than what was necessary for true sustainability within Afrodescendant communities.

#### Northern America

The City of New Orleans in Louisiana (U.S.) provides a perfect example of Afrodescendant reality in the U.S. Once the largest slave port in the nation and as of August 2005, 67% Afrodescendant, New Orleans is a historically Black and poor city, albeit one with a rich cultural heritage. During the final days of August, a levy break in the city's Lower Ninth Ward followed closely behind Hurricane Katrina, leaving thousands of Afrodescendants trapped in rising waters, without transportation, food, water, electricity or help. Too poor to escape during a mandatory evacuation, Black New Orleanians found themselves suspended on rooftops, and piled on top of one another in the Superdome and Convention Center, calling out to U.S. National Guardsmen—or any passer-by—for help. In most cases, their pleas were ignored.

Through television, prior to Hurricane Katrina, the world had seen Black people in the U.S. as powerful and rich. That false image changed when the snapshot taken by Katrina on New

Orleans, showed reality to the world; the majority of Blacks in the U.S. live in “3<sup>rd</sup> World” conditions, the same as all other Afrodescendants.

Invisibility is a factor of life for many Afrodescendants in the United States, especially when issues of poverty and wealth distribution arise. The Lower Ninth Ward, where the bulk of the damage to New Orleans occurred, is 98.3% Afrodescendant. Thirty-six percent of the Ninth Ward’s residents lived in poverty prior to the flooding, and 65% of the families there were headed by single women.<sup>18</sup> This poverty has come to mean unspeakable suffering for its victims; after the flood, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children received over 4,724 reports of missing or “found” children from New Orleans and surrounding areas.

According to the National Urban League, the overall economic status of Afrodescendants in the U.S. measures 57% of their White counterparts.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps a more powerful statistic, though, is one offered up by the New York Times, which cites nearly half of all Black men between the ages of 16-64 as being unemployed.

In Canada, incidents of racism and discrimination against Afrodescendants are prevalent and well documented throughout the cities in which they reside, and the economic and social legacies of slavery are becoming increasingly apparent to scholars. Consider what Das Gupta has to say on the subject, in her paper entitled *Racism and Paid Work*: “Racism continues today as part of our everyday culture, and as a convenient ideology for maintaining cheap labour provided by people of colour and Black people. The ideology of racism has, in post-slavery and post-colonial days, still resulted in the over-representation of Black workers and workers of colour in the least desirable, least secure, poorest paid segments of the workforce. Simultaneously, they have been excluded from better paid, secure, more desirable jobs through systemic practices in the labour market . . . The labour of people of colour and of Black people is assumed to be “natural”, “unskilled”, and therefore inferior.”<sup>20</sup>

Afrodescendants have a long history of residing in Canada, yet still their employment rates lag behind other races, even those who have newly immigrated to the nation. Black unemployment in Canada teeters near 40%, while among European groups the rates are lower than six percent. The 1991 Canadian Census estimates that 31.5% of African-Canadians live below the poverty line compared to 15.7% of the overall Canadian population. When child poverty statistics and the number of single-parent families living below the poverty level in Canada—40% and 23.8% respectively—are figured into the equation, the circumstances of Afro-Canadians become eerily similar to those of group members in the U.S. and abroad. Still another consideration in the poverty equation for Afrodescendants, in both Canada and the U.S., is the violence committed by and against young Black men, high numbers of whom end up dead, incapacitated or incarcerated, thus depriving Afrodescendant families of a primary income earner.

#### Latin America

The poverty of Afrodescendants in Latin America is staggering, even in a region where being poor is a fact of everyday life for most. The Inter-American Development Bank, in a 1996 study of Afrodescendant quality of life in Argentina, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Honduras, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela, found that Afrodescendant qualities of life in Latin America were much the same in all countries examined.

Presently there is little available data regarding the economic status of Afrodescendants in Mexico. Though this deficiency in the research is regrettable, it speaks clearly about the marginalization and near-invisibility of Mexico's Afrodescendant population, and about the failure of the Mexican government to identify the needs and circumstances of its minority groups.

Studies show that over 90% of Afrodescendants in Central and South America live below the poverty line, while working poor paying jobs and receiving limited education. Blacks in Latin America often face race-based discrimination, and they remain the most excluded sector of the population, according to Quince Duncan of the International Scientific Committee of the Slave Route Project In Latin-America. Duncan adds that "the situation of blacks has received less attention than that of indigenous people," and indeed several studies show that Afrodescendants have not been afforded the same protections and development assistance as have indigenous groups.

"Indians and blacks often compete for the same jobs," says Oswaldo Bilbao, executive director of the Center for Ethnic Development in Peru. "Indians say, 'We came first. We're owners of the land.' Blacks say 'I didn't want to come here. But I'm here, and I'm Peruvian.'"

A brief glance at statistics from around the region serves as an eye-opener for those who might question whether Afrodescendants suffer from greater degrees of poverty than other minorities. In Ecuador, 81% of Afrodescendants live below the poverty line. Over fifty percent of Afrodescendants in Brazil live in houses without adequate sanitation, while only 28% of white Brazilians do. Similarly, ninety-eight percent of Black Colombian communities lack basic public utilities.<sup>21</sup> El Choco, Colombia, the region on the Pacific Coast where many Afro-Colombians reside, is one of the poorest, most isolated regions in the country; civil warfare between government and guerilla forces has disproportionately affected Afro-Colombians, leaving hundreds of thousands displaced.

Over 80% of all Afrodescendant families in Colombia are poor, with an annual income of around \$500US, as opposed to \$1,700US for non-Black Colombians.<sup>22</sup> Afro-Colombians, like many other groups of Afrodescendants, live in areas where poverty, violence and social unrest run rampant.

Most Afrodescendants in Latin America are relegated to stereotyped jobs, many of them having basis in slavery. Minority Rights Group notes that Black males are often shifted toward low-paying jobs that require strength and little intellect while women are hired mostly as maids or child care-providers. Many of these women are single mothers with no job security or health insurance provided to them by employers. Garifunas—or the descendants of escaped African slaves—in Guatemala and Honduras also lag behind in quality of life measurement, despite having received some attention from NGOs and aid programs, unlike most other group members. Overall, development programs across the board fail to address Afrodescendant issues. In many cases, major decisions are made regarding historically significant and impoverished communities without Afrodescendant input or involvement, in a continuation of the invisibility that has historically attempted to define their existence.

## Caribbean

The World Bank estimates that only 38% of Haitians have access to safe drinking water. Facing wide-spread poverty, gut-wrenching desolation and deforestation and an unemployment rate of 60%, Haiti was virtually abandoned by the Western world after its revolution, perhaps because of its status as a free, Black, formerly enslaved republic with obvious military might in a world where white supremacy has systematically reigned dominant. Haiti remains isolated economically, aside from small amounts of international aid and loans from international banks, and must import 100% of its food from abroad. Haiti's population growth has begun to spin out of control; its overall population is expected to double by 2050<sup>23</sup> despite its standing as the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere.

Jamaica's yearly income averages \$2,690US, and 45% of Jamaican families are headed by single mothers. Unemployment rates average 9.5% for males and 21.8% for females; among youth ages 15-29 unemployment in Jamaica ranged from 20% to 31% nationwide.<sup>24</sup> In the city of Kingston, half of all households lack piped water and 60% their own sanitary facilities.

Reuters, in a 1991 study, notes that even though Bermuda has achieved one of the highest per capita incomes in the world, most Afrodescendants have not shared in the prosperity. The study found that black Bermudans with a university degree earned less than white Bermudans who had not even finished high school. In Cuba, where Afrodescendants comprise some 60% of the population, racism has worsened in the past ten years, according to a study conducted by the Cuban government. In Colombia, the National Planning Department acknowledges that 80% of Afro-Colombians live below the poverty line.

## **Cultural Assault & Discrimination**

Slavery in the Americas brought about the cruelest assault imaginable upon a people. The African captives, newly arrived in the Americas, were separated from others who spoke their language and were "seasoned" by violence and degradation. The intent of this "seasoning" was to bring about a slave mentality, destroy the essence of a people, and make them devoid of memory of self. A mental and spiritual "death" did occur, as the enslaved Africans were by brute force assimilated into the dominant, in most cases Euro-centric, culture. Today's Afrodescendants are demonstrating an ever-increasing desire to know and be themselves, and determine their own destiny as a people. This desire translates as a force for ethnogenesis and reparations.

Despite their growing desire for self knowledge and self determination, and despite their shared background and their commonality of experience throughout the world, Afrodescendants from various countries are still deeply divided by nationality, skin color, educational attainment and economic status. Implemented during slavery, the divide and conquer technique used by former colonial masters has so far kept Afrodescendants from coming together as a people in a mass movement whose primary goal would be to improve upon their collective circumstances.

## Northern America

In the U.S., government initiatives have boldly sought to destroy Afrodescendant attempts at establishing community, a sustainable culture, political autonomy and even mainstream political

involvement. The intricacies of COINTELPRO—a Federal Bureau of Investigation project that has historically targeted Black leaders—have begun to come to light in recent years, attracting the attention of members of Congress as well as that of social and human rights activists. The American media remains silent on this issue, as it has remained silent on most of the issues affecting Afrodescendants lives. This may be because of a shortage of Afrodescendant reporters and editors within the U.S. media industry, or due to a willful attempt on the part of white society within the United States to make the Afrodescendant invisible and thus irrelevant.

Disenfranchisement has historically been part of the effort to keep Afrodescendants out of the mainstream. In the 2000 U.S. presidential elections, Afrodescendant voters in Florida complained of experiencing intimidation at the polls and of political disenfranchisement, though their concerns fell on deaf ears. Hate crimes against Blacks in the U.S. continue unabated; this was most recently witnessed by the beating of a 64 year-old resident of New Orleans by several white City of New Orleans police officers during the month of October, 2005.

The Center for Democratic Renewal estimates in its 1997 publication *They Don't All Wear Sheets: A Chronology of Racist and Far-Right Violence – 1980-1986* that the White Supremacist movement in America consists of 15,000-20,000 activists and another 150,000 people who attend “Christian Patriot” meetings and Ku Klux Klan rallies. Whether white police who beat black civilians are members of this movement or not, such behavior reflects a betrayal of and neglect towards officers’ assumed roles of protector and civil servant, and illustrates a deep-seated sense of institutional racism that continues to envelop most American bureaucratic institutions today.

The Tulsa, Oklahoma race riot of 1921 is another example of American society at its worse. Sparked by the supposed sexual assault of a white woman by a young black man, white Tulsa residents went on a twenty-four-hour rampage, which resulted in the death of nearly 250 people and the burning of more than 1,000 black homes and businesses. A similar situation occurred in Rosewood, Florida in 1923. These types of incidents have happened frequently throughout American history and continue to take place in the present, as is illustrated in the abandonment and degradation of Black New Orleanians following the breaching of the city’s levy.

Instances of hate and neglect are not the only forms of cultural assault and discrimination that Afrodescendants in the United States must face. There exists a severe shortage of media coverage surrounding the daily lives of Afrodescendants, except when criminal conduct is alleged. Harmful stereotypes of Blacks continue to be perpetuated by the U.S. television, film and record industries, while racial epithets and assumptions pertaining to one’s blackness are a regular occurrence in most Afrodescendants daily lives. Once again, New Orleans provides a memorable illustration; reports of Black gangs murdering and raping in the dark of night, at the New Orleans Superdome, were beamed around the world by television reporters until, eventually, the stories were revealed as lies and commentators were forced to confess that there was no evidence of marauding gangs terrorizing anyone, or that they even existed

There is considerably less information available with regards to discrimination and cultural assault towards Afrodescendants in Canada than there is in the United States. In a 1995 report prepared for the Municipality of Metropolitan Toronto entitled *Hate: Communities Can Respond*, it is noted that, according to Metro Toronto Police statistics, racial minorities comprise

the most significant number of individuals violently attacked in hate crimes (54%) and that “black individuals were victimized in more than half (51%) of the racial incidents in 1995.”<sup>25</sup>

### Latin America

Mexico is only beginning to become aware of its race problem, which has come to the forefront recently. In May of 2005, the Mexican government took heat from American Blacks who criticized the release of a postage stamp featuring 1940’s cartoon character Memin Pinguin. The figure bears features that have stereotyped Afrodescendants in the West since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, among them over-exaggerated lips and protruded eyes. This image of Blacks is put forth by the mass media of various nations, albeit in different forms, and contributes to the stereotyping and exclusion of Afrodescendants. It is this type of thinking that adds to the burdens Afrodescendants must carry.

Afrodescendants in Latin America face outright race-based discrimination, and it colors nearly every aspect of their daily lives. Wade states that Blacks in Latin America are formally excluded from certain clubs and hotels, subjected to employment ads that call for a good, or “light-skinned” appearance, are insulted in the streets, harassed by citizens and targeted by police.<sup>26</sup>

These realities are in direct contradiction to the theory of racial democracy that exists in Latin America; this philosophy argues that being black is a transitory state which can be altered by whitening through miscegenation or wealth accumulation.<sup>27</sup> In both Brazil and Colombia, the countries with the largest Afro-Latino populations in South America, Afrodescendants are and always have been among the poorest, least educated and lowest paid citizens. Data debunks the racial democracy theory and illustrates a definite connection between discrimination and poverty in Latin America.

Not least among the forms of cultural assault and discrimination directed at Afrodescendants are the human rights abuses that have occurred over time and that continue to occur: forced assimilation and breeding, loss of mother tongue and indigenous religion, a disconnect from family history, genealogy and African nation of origin, along with an exploitation of Black culture by the popular media are among these. Because of such practices, there exists a resulting sense of shame for many that stems from being of African slave ancestry; it is often enough to keep Afrodescendants from identifying as such.

### Caribbean

The U.S. Department of State reported in 2004 that though slavery was abolished in the British Empire in 1834, racial segregation continued to be practiced in Bermuda’s schools, restaurants, hotels, and other public places until the 1960s. Although racial discrimination in any form is not legally tolerated in today’s multiracial Bermudian society, the State Department claims that race issues continue to play a role in Bermuda both politically and socially.

In Cuba, interracial relationships are widely frowned upon. Afro-Cubans are often regarded as more prone to criminal behavior, and Eurocentric standards of beauty dominate the culture. Despite attempts by the government to eliminate racism from Cuban society, racist ideas and attitudes continue to persist. Likewise, Jorge Ramirez of the Black Association for the Defense

and Advancement of Human Rights says “the racism in Cuba is not in the laws. It’s in the mentality of people.”

## **Education**

### Northern America

Within the U.S., the Urban League has found that teachers with less than three years experience teach in minority schools at twice the rate that they teach in white schools. This has a direct effect on the quality of education that group members receive and their level of educational attainment. While preschool enrollment for blacks dropped three points from 60% in 2004, white preschool enrollment increased four percent; these gradually declining numbers, for the most part, are indicative of the educational status of blacks throughout the nation.

At present, one in five Afro-Canadians are either attending university or have earned a bachelors degree. Perhaps the most notable complaint regarding the state of public education for youth in Canada is the lack of a presence of Afro-Canadian history; the Ministry of State – Multiculturalism is currently working to address this issue.

### Latin America

Afrodescendants in Latin-America receive little education, if any at all. In Brazil, the illiteracy rate for blacks over 15 is 20%, while only 8% for whites. The U.S.-based Chronicle of Higher Education states that “While 45 percent of the country’s 170 million people defined themselves as either black or pardo—mixed race—in the 2000 census, only 17 percent of university graduates are of mixed race and only 2% are black.”<sup>28</sup> Black Brazilians average 6.4 years of schooling.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Afro-Colombian communities struggle with an illiteracy rate of 32%, and with a scenario in which a mere 38% of Afrodescendant teenagers can attend secondary school. Only 2% of Afro-Colombian youth attend university.

### Caribbean

In nearly all of the above-listed communities and in the Caribbean, Afrodescendants are not afforded the same educational opportunities as members of other groups. These discrepancies are most blatantly visible when comparing the gaps that exist between white and black levels of educational attainment. On the whole, Afrodescendants represent a disproportionate number of high school drop-outs in their individual nations. Many of them are unable to read or write.

Additionally, their own group history—in all nations—is left out of virtually all state-based school curriculums. This shows a blatant disregard for the true historical record of each nation, particularly with regard to their own slavery past. The United Nations is attempting to address this issue with its Trans Atlantic Slave Trade Program, which seeks to incorporate information about the slave trade into school curriculums. In most nations, though, this program has yet to be implemented; if adopted, it could prove detrimental to national interests in its highlighting of the exploitation of Blacks and states’ complicity in this matter.

Poverty and a lack of educational resources often translate into inadequate education for children in Cuba. TransAfrica notes that the Abel Santa Maria School, which educates visually impaired children, has one functional computer for 212 children.<sup>30</sup> Cuba has a high literacy rate of 96%,

though only 81% of its citizens enroll in secondary school, and a mere 13% attend college. Ninety-three percent of Haiti's population is illiterate—a staggering number—while in Jamaica, government cutbacks have meant less access to education for many.

## **Health Care**

### Northern America

The health of Afrodescendants in the U.S. continues to decline. Infant mortality rates are twice as high for blacks, and adults experience disproportionately high mortality rates from causes that include heart disease and stroke, homicide, accidents, cancer, cirrhosis and diabetes. Afrodescendant males suffer from heart disease at twice the rate of whites, and blacks are more likely to die from breast cancer and prostate cancer.<sup>31</sup>

The Urban League, in its 2005 report, states that HIV infects Afrodescendants at a rate five times that of whites, that black women are twenty times more likely to become infected than white women and that blacks are five times more likely to be the victims of a homicide. A report issued by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights admits that discrimination in healthcare is a reality for blacks in the United States.

Some scholars believe that many of the mental health issues affecting Afrodescendant communities can be traced back to their slave ancestry, or at least attributed to the trauma suffered by some in the wake of that legacy. Harvard psychiatrist Dr. Chester Price describes the environment in which American Blacks live as a mundane extreme environment, or an environment in which racism and subtle oppression are constant, continuing and mundane. The “microaggressions” which Afrodescendants suffer, Price claims, have had a harsh impact on the psyche and worldview of Blacks. These injuries can affect Blacks' sense of self-perception and behavior, and are stressful, detracting and energy-consuming.<sup>32</sup>

Further research is required regarding the state of health for Afrodescendants in Canada.

### Latin America

Health in Latin America is a major concern for all communities, but Afrodescendants find themselves both unhealthier and with less access to care than other groups. At present, no available data specific to Afrodescendants regarding health in Mexico has been located. Further research is required. Minority Rights Group notes that health insurance in Colombia is afforded to only 10% of Afrodescendant communities, versus 40% of white communities.<sup>33</sup> In Brazil—a country with a 62 in 1,000 black infant mortality rate—the white population is 2.5 times healthier than the Afrodescendant population. Guyana's Afrodescendants struggle with the rising spread of AIDS; it is a disease that continues to affect them disproportionately, and which results in lower life expectancy, higher infant mortality and death rates, as well as lower population and growth rates. In the Esmeraldas region of Ecuador, Afrodescendants have a higher rate of both suicide and homicide, while the Garifuna in Honduras' coastal region show much higher HIV/AIDS rates than do the general population.

Across Latin America, statistics show that Afrodescendants overall experience higher HIV/AIDS rates, a severe shortage of doctors, higher infant mortality rates, lower life expectancy and higher incidences of diabetes, cancer, hypertension, high blood pressure and respiratory disease.

## Caribbean

The Caribbean is no exception when examining issues of health and inadequacies in health care. Haiti has a mere life expectancy of 54 years and an infant mortality rate of 71 per 1000. The World Bank estimates that malnutrition affects half of all children in Haiti, and that eleven HIV positive babies are born in Haiti every day. Overall, 300,000 people in this Caribbean nation are HIV positive, and Haiti and the Dominican Republic account for 85% of the reported HIV/AIDS cases in the Caribbean. Jamaica has a higher life expectancy rate, at 75.7 years on average, but many Jamaicans suffer from respiratory disease and high rates of diabetes. A 1997 report by the American Association of World Health reports that the U.S. embargo against Cuba has resulted in a significant rise in suffering and deaths in Cuba, where life expectancy averages 76 years. Cuba's infant mortality rate is 7% for the general Cuban population; specific statistics for Afro-Cubans were not found.

### **Legal Right to Equality Before the Law**

It is out of the legacy of slavery that conflict between Afrodescendants and Western political and legal systems was born. Afrodescendants in the Western Hemisphere have historically been disenfranchised, targeted by law enforcement officials and denied recourse for injuries sustained at the hands of racist systems. After centuries of being denied legal equality before the law, and after generations of suffering beneath the weight of legal, economic and social oppression, many Afrodescendants have become apathetic and separatist in their leanings. Efforts at recompense to Afrodescendant communities for abuses and injuries suffered have been on the whole largely non-existent, and even when attempted are usually ineffective because of mistrust of the system, and due to cloudy intentions and protected interests on the part of various states.

Yet the most damaging inequality before the law may be with regard to international law that protects the right of minorities to enjoy their original culture, to profess and practice their original religion, and to use their original language. While other minorities are able to enjoy the protections offered in Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the Declaration on the Rights of Minorities, Afrodescendants do not have equal protection under these laws, as their original language, culture and religion were taken from them by force during slavery and are denied to them in the lingering effects of slavery.

## Northern America

Haney and Zimbardo write that "At the start of the 1990s, the U.S. had more black men (between the ages of 20 and 29) under the control of the nation's criminal justice system than the total number in college. This and other factors have led some scholars to conclude that, crime control policies are a major contributor to the disruption of the family, the prevalence of single parent families, the number of children being raised without a father in the ghetto, and the inability of people to get the jobs still available."<sup>34</sup>

Race-based discrimination affects nearly every portion of the justice system in the United States, and while Afrodescendants comprise approximately 13% of the total U.S. population, they make up over 80% of inmates imprisoned. These numbers make it easy to conclude that disparities do indeed exist, and that Afrodescendants are therefore not entitled to legal equality before the law.

In the U.S., Amnesty International reports that evidence of racial discrimination and ill treatment and bias by police has been widely documented. Abuses include racist language, harassment, unjustified stops and searches and arbitrary arrests, as well as racial disparities in death penalty rates and incarceration. Amnesty states that police and prison guards frequently abuse prisoners with racist statements such as “nigger, boy, porch monkey and coon,” and exhibit an excessive use of force, electro shock and tasing.<sup>35</sup> In addition, there are numerous instances throughout U.S. history of Afrodescendants being targeted and even killed by police. In Chicago, of 115 civilians shot dead by police between 1990-98, 82 were black. The Sentencing Project states that an estimated one in ten Black males in America are incarcerated; if Black males in county and local jails are included in this estimate, the number rises to one in every seven. This is in stark contrast to the 1% of White males overall who are presently incarcerated in the U.S.<sup>36</sup> These disparities begin in the courtroom: the Urban League notes that Afrodescendants receive on average sentences that are six months longer than those of whites; Blacks are also more frequently sentenced to death for alleged crimes. These numbers have had an enormous impact on relations between Afrodescendant communities and law enforcement officials, as is noted by former U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno in the following statement in 1999: “For too many people, especially in minority communities, the trust that is so essential to effective policing does not exist because residents believe that police have used excessive force, that law enforcement is too aggressive, that law enforcement is biased, disrespectful, and unfair.”

In Canada, in the 1990's, a major study was conducted by the Commission on Systemic Racism in the Ontario Criminal Justice System concerning the impact of racism on Afrodescendant communities in Ontario. This commission was organized in response to the deterioration of the relationship between the Ontario Police Department and Afrodescendants in Ontario. “Blacks are over-represented in the prison population,” the study found. “In the six year period leading up to 1993, it was found that the Black population of Ontario increased by 36% while the number of Black prisoners admitted to Ontario prisons increased by 204%.<sup>37</sup>”

#### Latin America

Disparities in sentencing and incarceration rates for Afrodescendants are present in Latin America as well. A State Department Human Rights Report for 2003 found that “discrimination against blacks and indigenous people continued unabated, and that “people of color were five times more likely to be shot or killed in the course of a law enforcement action than were persons perceived to be white.”

Amnesty further notes that Afro-Brazilians are disproportionately targeted by security forces and are routinely denied the advantages allowed to white middle-class criminal suspects. In 2000, Sao Paulo reported that in 1999 54% of criminal suspects killed in the area by police were Black. Experts have testified that of those detained in Brazil, the majority are Afro-Brazilian. A disproportionate number of Afrodescendants are also held in jails and prisons in Colombia and Guatemala.

#### Caribbean

Bermuda is known internationally as a country with one of the highest per capita incomes in the world and is also known as a world leader in imprisonment. Ninety-eight percent of Bermuda's inmates are black, and that means 148 out of every 10,000 black males in Bermuda is in prison.

Disparities in sentencing and imprisonment in most Caribbean nations are difficult to prove at this point in the research.

## **Land and Home Ownership**

### Northern America

Fewer than 50% of black families own their own homes in the U.S, versus over 70% of whites, according to The Urban League. The League claims that Blacks are denied mortgages and home improvement loans at twice the rate of whites, and there are many instances of land being taken from Afrodescendants. In Louisiana, the Orleans Parish Levy Board has been ordered by the Superior Court of Louisiana to reimburse Afrodescendants for land the agency pushed them from. In 2001, the Associated Press compiled a series of articles entitled *Torn From The Land*, which documented similar takings. The AP documented 107 incidents of land-takings, in which 406 Black landowners lost more than 24,000 acres of farmland, along with 85 smaller properties. Further research is required in determining Afrodescendant land rights and home ownership rates in Canada.

### Latin America

Afrodescendants in Latin America are becoming increasingly involved in disputes over ancestral lands. Minority Rights Group argues that the lands on which Afrodescendants reside are often targeted for taking by developers and corporate investors because of a failure to recognize Afrodescendants as the rightful owners of land. Government authorities, MRG adds, often neglect to protect local populations from predatory companies and entrepreneurs. “Companies are allowed virtually unrestricted access into Afrodescendant areas in search of natural resources, while also encouraging colonization of traditionally Afrodescendant lands,” the NGO states, in its publication *Afrodescendants, Discrimination and Economic Exclusion in Latin-America*.

In Brazil, over 2000 Quilombos, or Afrodescendants, occupy some 30,000 hectares of land. Thus far, only 70 of 743 have had their lands titled. In Afrodescendant owned areas, especially in the rainforests of respective nations, development threatens to destroy the ecological order of things. Still—and despite the fact that large tracts of land have historically meant refuge from slavery and exclusion—developers seek to capitalize on tourism growth, and obtaining land titles for ancestral lands is becoming increasingly difficult.

### Caribbean

Further research is necessary in determining land rights and home ownership rates for countries in the Caribbean.

## **Summary**

This paper, at this point in time, is a limited attempt at providing interested parties with an overview of the quality of life issues that face Afrodescendants in the Americas Region; it is in no way comprehensive, but instead, is a work continuously in progress. Allowances must be made by the reader for time constraints, limited available scholarship and data in certain areas and for the fact that this work is the first of its kind in seeking to assess the situation of

Afrodescendants as a whole in various countries. Existing scholarship is country-specific; this work seeks to be group specific, and to be all-encompassing.

Nevertheless, it can be stated unequivocally that Afrodescendants throughout the region are subjected to similar forms of oppression, economic exclusion and discrimination. This similarity of experience is one of the things that defines them as a group; they are—for the most part—minorities in their countries of residence and are treated as having less importance than the majority population. Little can be done to alter their respective circumstances without changes in state-sponsored policy, greater economic inclusion and recompense for injuries and human rights abuses suffered. These things cannot occur without changing of societal mindsets with regard the lingering effects of slavery in the Americas. Until these tasks are undertaken by countries and international bodies as well, Afrodescendants will continue to face a decline in the quality of their lives.

### **Reparations as a Remedy**

International law supports reparations a *bona fide* remedy. The compensation for internment of Japanese Americans in the U.S. during World War II, the apology and compensation of the Governor of Puerto Rico for the domestic surveillance of its citizens in the late 1940s, the German government's various compensation programs following World War II, and New Zealand's reparations paid for theft of Maori land by the British during the late 1800s all support the idea of reparations as a remedy.

Detractors of reparations—both black and white—trivialize their importance and say that it “reinforces the notion of victimhood” despite the fact that the United Nations and other international bodies contradict this false notion. It is interesting to note how the use of the term “victim” can be distorted in a way that implies helplessness, dependency and weakness. In fact the opposite is true. Rosa Parks was a “victim” of racism, but her bravery ignited the modern civil rights movement. Jews were “victims” of the Holocaust, but it did not prevent them from successfully suing for reparations in a variety of courts. The Cherokee, Choctaw and Lakota were “victims” of genocide yet they have been successful in receiving compensation for the genocidal behavior of the United States toward them. In none of these instances were the “victims” helpless and in all of them, there is an eye toward seeking long-denied justice for their people. So it is with the unpaid debt to the stolen people from Africa.

It is recommended that as a preliminary step in reparations, each of the integral states wherein Afrodescendants reside exempt them from payment of taxes. If the states find that tax exemption is not possible, it is recommended that the entire tax revenue from Afrodescendants be invested back into their communities by the current federal, state and local authorities until such time as Afrodescendants are able to collect and handle their own tax revenues.

It is further recommended that the United Nations create a permanent forum for Afrodescendants, similar to the forum created for the Indigenous Peoples. Since Afrodescendants are a stateless people, they have only the UN to look to for protection. Within a forum, Afrodescendant leaders can peacefully meet together for the purpose of collective decision making. Most importantly, under a UN forum, Afrodescendants will be assured of receiving expert guidance, which is vital to their continued rise and development as a human family.

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