



Afro-Latinos, Canada and Poverty in the Americas

BACKGROUND



Source: Statistical data provided by Inter-American Dialogue Race Report, January 2003. Map Resources. Adapted by CRS. (K. Yancey 10/18/04).

The term “Afro-Latino” technically refers to a person of African descent in a country where a Latin derivative language is spoken. In the Western hemisphere, this includes Spanish, Portuguese and French speaking territories. However, in popular usage, the term refers to African descendants only in Spanish and Portuguese speaking countries. The difference is the inclusion or exclusion of Haiti. Usage in this paper follows the popular convention and does not include Haiti.

One of the greatest challenges to development in Latin America is the prevalence of unequal social development. In this regard, descendants from Africa, or Afro-Latinos, are particularly burdened by political, economic, and social marginalization within Latin America. Afro-Latinos constitute approximately a third of the region’s population; yet, they are close to half of the region’s poor. Despite this correlation, Afro-Latinos have not received the recognition, attention and amount of targeted funding as indigenous peoples have. Afro-Latinos remain largely an “invisible” sector of Latin American society and many of the tools that the World Bank has identified as essential to poverty reduction – such as education, stable employment, and land titles – are inaccessible to many Afro-Latinos.

Reducing poverty in Latin America and realizing progress in reaching the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) will require a recognition of the link between race and poverty and the adoption of targeted programmes to provide the training, capacity building, legal reforms, education, health services and infrastructure to enable these communities to play a greater role in working with development agencies and local governments to advance development in Afro-Latino communities.

Being conscious of racial diversity in international development projects is one important step in addressing the marginalization of Afro-Latinos. The collection of data disaggregated by race can enable project proponents to measure benefits going to Afro-Latino populations. This approach ensures at a minimum that cooperation agencies do not pursue their goals at the cost of producing or reinforcing social and economic inequities.



INVISIBILITY OF AFRO-LATINOS

Latin America is a culturally, linguistically, and ethnically diverse region. It is estimated that Afro-Latinos constitute between 15 to 32 per cent of the region's population. In the colonial era, Africans were a highly visible and significant presence in every colony and urban centre in the Americas including areas that today appear to have no Afro-descendants such as Buenos Aires and Santiago.

While Afro-Latinos retain a presence in every country in the Americas, there is a paucity of information available about these populations and their historical, cultural, social, and economic contribution to development in the Americas. Until recently, information on African descendants has been absent from many Latin American national census and socioeconomic data.

Afro-Latinos are not well represented among national political, economic, and educational leadership in the region. For example, in 2003, only 27 out of 594 Brazilian congressmen claimed to be African descendants, although 45 per cent of Brazil's population self-identified as having African ancestry. In addition, there is not a single African descendent among Nicaragua's National Assembly, while 9 per cent of the country's population is Afro-Latino. The lack of visibility of Afro-Latinos has been attributed to a number of factors, both self-imposed and systemic. Intermarriage and the reluctance of some Afro-Latinos to recognize their African heritage has contributed to their lack of prominence. The preference of Afro-Dominicans to define themselves as mestizos, descended from Indians and Europeans, is instructive in this regard. While 84 per cent of Dominicans have African ancestry, they choose to distinguish themselves from their poorer Haitian neighbours and attempt to escape the racial discrimination associated with being black.

Estimating the Size of the Afro-Latino Population

Estimates by Angel Rosenblat in 1950 put the region's black population at nearly 29 million and the mulatto population at just over 19 million, equating with an Afro-descendant population of approximately 48 million, or 15% of the hemisphere's then population of 326 million inhabitants. However, in 1996 the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) found 150 million Afro-descendants in Latin America out of an estimated hemispheric population of 471 million or roughly 32% of the region's population. The differences between the two estimates are in part attributable to difficulties in defining who should be counted as Afro-descendant within the Latin American context.

INEQUALITY AND RACE

Not only are Afro-Latinos "invisible," they are also particularly plagued by unequal socio-economic development. There is increasing awareness of a dramatic correlation between African descent and political, economic, and social marginalization. According to studies conducted by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), race or ethnic origin has a direct impact on the socio-economic status of Latin American people. In many Latin American countries, Afro-Latin ethnicity is correlated with the highest indices of poverty and largest number of human rights abuses, and the lowest social indicators in the areas of education, employment, land titles and housing, as well as health.

Poverty and Human Rights

In a 1997 study funded by a Canadian trust fund at the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) found that while Afro-Latinos constitute 30 per cent of Latin America's population, they represent 40 per cent of the region's poor. The IDB findings suggest that poverty-reduction in Latin America relies on the ability of non-whites to achieve equal socio-economic status as the white population. Instead, Afro-Latinos are faced with inequality and social exclusion. Statistics from Brazil and Colombia, which are among the few countries with good data on race, support this finding and are likely indicative for the region as a whole. Data from Brazil show that blacks represent 45 per cent of the population, but constitute 64 per cent of the poor and 69 per cent of the extremely poor. Data from Colombia, which has the second largest Afro-descendant population after Brazil, show that blacks compose about 25 per cent of the Colombian population, and 80 per cent live in conditions of extreme poverty.

In several country reports on human rights, the US State Department indicated that the protection of the human rights situation of Afro-Latinos is problematic. In its 2003 report, it indicated that there is continuing discrimination against blacks in Brazil and Afro-Brazilians were five times more likely



than whites to be shot or killed during law enforcement. In addition, Afro-Ecuadorians were reported as being stopped by police more frequently for document checks. The report suggested that Afro-Ecuadorians confront both official discrimination and negative stereotyping. The violation of human rights of Afro-Latinos is also an artifact of the conflict in Colombia, where the Afro-Colombian communities experience a displacement rate that is 20 per cent higher than the rest of the population.

Employment and Education

In a recent study, the UN Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLAC) demonstrated that Afro-Latinos enjoy little or no job security. Data from Colombia indicates that 74 per cent of Afro-Colombians earn less than the minimum wage. Racial discrimination and income disparities in the labour market are compounded by inequalities in education. In Brazil, the average 25-year old Afro-Brazilian has only 6.1 years of schooling, versus 8.4 years for whites. Among the 3 million college students in Brazil, only 2 per cent are African descendants. In addition, illiteracy among Afro-Brazilian over 15 years of age is 20 per cent while for whites it is only 8 per cent. Similarly, illiteracy in black communities in Colombia is 45 per cent, versus 14 per cent for white communities.

Land and Housing

The World Bank and others have recognized that providing access to land titles for the poor is an important step to poverty alleviation. However, in comparison with indigenous groups, Afro-descendants have been much less successful in obtaining collective land rights. In addition, adequate housing is a problem among Afro-descendants. For instance, 52 per cent of Afro-Brazilians live in houses without adequate sanitation, versus 28 per cent of whites.

Health

There is a consistent gap between health indicators, such as infant mortality, homicide, suicide, and HIV/AIDS, for African descendants and the rest of the Latin American population. The Colombian healthcare system covers only 10 per cent of black communities, versus 40 per cent of white communities. In addition, the Chocó region of Colombia has the country's highest percentage of Afro-Colombians (70 per cent), as well as the lowest per-capita level of government investment in health, education, and infrastructure. This area of Colombia is also plagued with three times the rate of infant mortality, in comparison with the country's capital, Bogotá. Similarly, in 1993, the infant mortality rate by race of the mother in Brazil was 62 per 1000 for blacks and 37 per 1000 for whites. The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) has indicated that the gap in health indicators for Afro-Latinos may be attributed, at least in part, to racial discrimination.

CANADA'S ROLE

- To reduce poverty and achieve success in meeting the MDGs, it is imperative that Canada recognizes, understands, and endeavors to address the causes of underdevelopment in Afro-Latino communities.
- Canada is well placed to contribute to this cause through advocacy, sharing of experience and targeting of aid resources. Canadian history in implementing racial inclusion programs, through its First Nations policies and urban diversity projects should allow it speak with authority and leadership in regional forums and development agencies.
- The Canadian human rights and employment equity framework, which includes strong practical mechanisms for promoting diversity in the workforce and protecting against discrimination could be of use in informing the development of similar frameworks within the LAC region.
- Canada could contribute statistical analysis capabilities and, as it has done with gender, take a leadership role in gathering statistical data on race in order to understand the distribution and effects of development projects funded by donors such as itself, as well as the policies of Latin American governments.



- At present, the World Bank, IDB and Ford Foundation, as well as British and American aid agencies have all recognized that traditional development assistance is failing to reach the Afro-Latino population. Canada needs to heed this warning and review the effectiveness of its development interventions in reaching Afro-Latino communities. In turn, greater understanding about the effects of social exclusion and discrimination in Latin America could help Canada to refine its development and social policies, both at home and abroad.

Removal of institutional and social barriers facing Afro-Latinos is seen by the World Bank and other development actors as vital for the regional success in meeting MDGs, such as halving the poverty rate. In Canada, the 2005 International Policy Statement identified the reduction of global poverty as a core objective for the country and it recognized the linkage between poverty and social inequity, and the need for Canada to use its comparative advantages to achieve global poverty reduction through the promotion of equal social development and harmonious multiculturalism. Accordingly, a major component of success in meeting these objectives will be recognizing the connection between race and poverty in the Americas and placing this issue at the forefront of its poverty reduction agenda in Latin America.