
INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR PEOPLE OF AFRICAN DESCENT GLOBAL WEBINAR PAHO DIRECTOR'S REMARKS

31 AUG 2022

Greetings distinguished participants and colleagues. Thank you for the invitation to celebrate the International Day for People of African Descent. A special greeting to the Afro descendant leaders, as well as the representatives who honor us with their presence today.

As an Afro-Caribbean woman from the small island of Dominica, I feel tremendous pride to be here with you today to honor the human rights and the fundamental freedoms of people of African descent.

In the Region for the Americas, Afro-descendants are close to one-third of the population – the Caribbean countries having the largest percentage Afro-descendant population. Half of the Brazilian population is Afro descendant; and between 7-10% of people in Colombia, Panama, Costa Rica, and Ecuador are of African descent. Yet, they are often invisible and, their contributions to the Region are unrecognized.

According to the World Health Organization's Constitution, the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, political ideology, or economic or social condition.

The Pan American Health Organization, Regional Office of the World Health Organization (PAHO/WHO) recognizes that there are racial and ethnic inequities in the Region of the Americas that affect the achievement of this fundamental right.

The long and complex history of social injustice and inequalities that began with the systems developed and institutionalized during the enslavement of Africans in the Americas is at the root cause of many of these inequities.

This history has re-expressed and reconfigured itself in multiple forms of structural racism, which together with other socioeconomic and gender inequalities, impact the social conditions and access to culturally acceptable, non-discriminatory quality health services for Afro-descendant people. We should note that LAC is the region with the greatest inequity in the world.

According to our PAHO report, the Health of Afro-Descendant People in Latin America, systematic racism in the health system results in a lack of trusting relationships. Systemic racism contributes to several negative outcomes, including lower access to health insurance, poorer quality health care and worse health outcomes. These differences are often exacerbated by gender inequalities, with Afro-descendant women more likely than all others to lack health coverage in several countries. For example, in Brazil, Afro-descendant women's level of dissatisfaction with the quality of health services is 5.3% higher than that of women of non-Afro-descent.

PAHO Director's Remarks, International Day for People of African Descent Global Webinar 2022

Based on interviews with women who gave birth in public hospitals, Afro descendant women report episodes of abuse, harsh and disrespectful language, and public humiliation due to socioeconomic status and cultural insensitivity. In Ecuador, Afro-descendant women have a maternal mortality ratio that is nearly four times higher compared to non-Afro-descendant women; in Colombia it is twice as high. These figures are unacceptable.

The Pan American Health Organization has worked tirelessly to support the countries of the Region to respond, contain and mitigate the effects of the COVID pandemic. Our strategies to confront COVID-19, however, are not one size fits all. We need clear, strong, and inclusive responses to the specific circumstances of Afro-descendant communities who have suffered disproportionately.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic posed challenges for populations, health systems and economies around the world, and greatly exacerbated the inequities for Afro descendants, particularly women.

PAHO published a report on the Impact of COVID-19 on Afro-Descendant Populations in the Region of the Americas at the height of the pandemic. We learned that Afro-descendant populations, especially women and young people, reported being subjected to systematic violations of their workplace rights, increasing their vulnerability to COVID-19. Unlike non-Afro-descendants, women of African descent experienced more job instability, and higher and unstable unemployment levels, often working in unskilled jobs in the informal economy. Such precarious types of employment with low and unstable incomes perpetuate cycles of poverty. COVID-19 prevention including masks, COVID-19 tests and treatment are inaccessible for many with cost being a significant reason. The cost of food during periods of compulsory quarantine, the lack of adequate housing, safe drinking water, and sanitation worsened the situation for Afro-descendant populations.

PAHO has a long history of working to improve ethnic equality in health. Our commitment to address the health concerns of Afro-descendant communities is demonstrated through our Policy on Ethnicity and Health, approved in 2017, and its Strategy and Plan of Action, approved in 2019. These mandates explicitly document the health challenges facing Afro-descendant populations in the Americas and generate commitments to address them. The plan's priorities – the generation of evidence, policy action, participation, recognition of ancestral knowledge, and capacity development – PAHO is collecting relevant information and evidence for a progress report that will be presented to Member States in 2023.

PAHO and the Organization of American States (OAS) collaborated to drive action to meet the health-related objectives of the Plan of Action for the International Decade for People of African Descent 2015-2024. In fact, in 2017, the ministries of health of Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela, with the support of PAHO and the Andean Organization for Health, agreed on the Andean Health Plan for Afro-descendants 2017-2021, which aims to guarantee non-discrimination in health services and the full enjoyment of the right to health.

PAHO also collaborated with young Afro-descendant leaders to generate a Regional Health Plan for Afro-descendant Youth of the Americas. In the plan, youth articulated their specific priorities, including the right to sexual and reproductive health with an intercultural approach and addressing the needs of young Afro-descendants in vulnerable situations, such as young people deprived of their liberty, belonging to migratory groups, displaced persons, young people living on the street, and young people with disabilities.

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PAHO—in collaboration with indigenous and afro-descendant leaders—produced a COVID-19 guidance document in 2020 to ensure that ethnicity concerns and culturally sensitive approaches are central in country-level responses to the pandemic.

Thanks to support from the Government of Canada, we are improving access of Afro-descendant communities, especially women from low-income and remote communities to COVID-19 vaccines. This project is training women community leaders to communicate and educate their peers on the benefits of vaccination and “busting” myths surrounding vaccine hesitancy for COVID-19 and other vaccine-preventable diseases. The role of these community leaders is contributing to higher vaccination rates in Latin America's second-largest irregular sanitary landfill in Brazil with a 70% Afro-descendant population. This is an important example of how we need to work at the community level and make sustainable change from within!

In line with PAHO's commitment and mandates to improve the health of people of African descent, I am happy to announce that today PAHO is co-organizing with our OAS colleagues and an NGO RIAFRO (The Inter-American Network of High Authorities on Policies for Afro-descendant Populations) a technical panel to address racial discrimination from a perspective of human rights and social determinants of health.

Greater strides are required to improve health and the access to quality and culturally appropriate services for all including the Afro descendants.

In order to achieve this fundamental right, we need strong commitment and broad collaboration to promote leadership within Afro-descendant communities, expand our partnerships, engage national authorities and work with civil society, the private sector, academia and the UN system.

By working together, we can implement effective culturally appropriate responses so that Afro-descendant populations emerge from this pandemic more unified and hopeful for our future. As PAHO's Director, I remain committed to this vision and goal.

Thank you.