

## **20 years later, the reality of ethnic rights in the Afro-Colombian population facing the declaration on the rights of minorities.**

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Talking about the issue of ethnic minority rights in a country like Colombia can be risky as well as complex, taking into consideration that the collective ethnic territories (of Afro and indigenous peoples) are permanent scenes of the armed conflict, especially those in the regions of the Pacific Coast as they are surrounded by jungle and make it difficult to enter.

With the constitutional reform of 1991, Colombia began a broad policy development in favour of the recognition of afro-descendant population highlighting the rights on: prior consultation, collective ownership of ancestral lands, ethnic education, access to the political arena, an assigned number of spaces in University among other positive things. However, despite this broad legal framework it is necessary to look at the reality of those who live in the South Pacific region of Colombian, a place where more than 60% of the afro descendant population live.

One of the biggest problems facing this region is the growing racism and discrimination, although Colombian law opens the door for access to education for afro descendants, there is no public policy on access to employment on an equal footing. On the contrary, it is quite common to hear members of the States' public corporations expressing racist remarks without there being any exemplary sanctions, which is surprising considering the fact that in Colombian law it is considered a criminal offense to do so. Similarly, access to employment within the public sector, specifically within the ministry, the armed forces, and positions of high representation are banned. The President of the Republic himself has stated that no person of Afro descent is good enough for the ministry. Furthermore it is quite common for NGOs and international organisations who conduct activities in the areas to only hire staff from the country's capital or foreign staff who are likely to ignore the social profile and the potential of those who live there.

Within the private sector it is common to find public job offers in the national newspapers that have the letters 'NN' meaning no black people. It is also quite evident that the structural and State racism, which translates into complete invisibility and neglect of the nation. Considering that the Pacific region is engulfed in complete poverty, with the highest rates of poverty, child malnutrition, suffering, illiteracy, lack of basic needs, forced displacement and violent deaths, combined with the constant presence of armed groups making the life of the residence a living hell.

Another issue that the collective territories and the black communities of Cauca, Choco and Nariño face are the international extraction companies of precious metals who have the approval of the State. This phenomenon is destroying the rivers that have represented the basis of livelihood for the families for generations. Today the river has high levels of chemical such as mercury which destroys the biodiversity of the river; the riverbanks have been destroyed due to

the heavy extraction machinery which has consequently caused flooding in the sidewalks. In addition the indigenous peoples no longer want to cultivate because it has now become economically useless since the soils are no longer fertile due to glyphosate being used to fumigate the land, therefore making it more faceable doing work for the minors. All this has led to the loss of traditional values, the loss of the family as the core of society, high rates of prostitution, recruitment of minors and the ever increasing presence of illegal armed groups in the area show a blind and neglectful State to a reality that if they do not address these problems soon, it will become a matter not only of regional but international importance, because it is within our territories that the violation of human rights occur far too often without there being a solution or action, this is why we call on all the agencies and organisations to join efforts so that cases such as these are brought to the attention of the international community.

Finally, my recommendations for the implementation of the convention in my country are:

- a) Spread this important instrument in the ethnic collective territories through ethnic education and afro-Colombian Studies as a mechanism for reducing racism and racial discrimination.
- b) Promote and support strategies that promote the participation of young women and children to enable inclusion and generational change in the political and decision making in order to guarantee social inclusion.
- c) Build a public policy for access to employment with different ethnic approach, as we have seen the law that already exists is not sufficient, there must also be political will for this to materialize.
- d) Support projects that promote endogenous development and pave the way for the right to your own future or choice of development.
- e) The proposal for the creation of the United Nations Fund for ethnic minorities would be a success in the struggle to ensure compliance with the Convention. However, this must also be recreated at the local level in order to join efforts and progress in meeting the objectives and recommendations adopted in the Convention.