EXPERT MECHANISM ON THE RIGHT TO DEVELOPMENT

United Nations Expert Mechanism on the Right to Development

Thematic Study Policy Brief
No: 03 / October 2025

Racism, Racial Discrimination and the Right to Development

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Overview

This study of the Expert Mechanism on the Right to Development (EMRTD) is in response to the Human Rights Council. It highlights racism and racial discrimination as systemic barriers to realizing the right to development. Building on the 1986 UN Declaration on the Right to Development (DRTD) and the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action (2001), the study traces these barriers to legacies of colonialism, slavery, and apartheid. These structures persist today through disparities in health, housing, employment, education, justice, and political participation. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed how racialized and marginalized communities bear disproportionate burdens, reinforcing cycles of poverty and inequality. The report underscores anti-racism, non-discrimination, and equality of opportunity as central pillars of sustainable development.

Introduction

Racism and racial discrimination are rooted in the legacies of colonialism, slavery, and apartheid, which continue to shape systemic inequalities that obstruct the realization of the right to development. These legacies deny racialized communities' equal access to health, housing, education, employment, justice, and political participation, thereby entrenching cycles of exclusion and marginalization. The 1986 United Nations Declaration on the Right to Development affirms the principles of equitable participation, fair distribution of resources, and the dismantling of structural obstacles to human flourishing. Yet, racism and racial discrimination persistently undermine these objectives, particularly in the global South, where colonial histories continue to drive socio-economic disparities.

Systemic inequalities disproportionately affect people of African descent, Indigenous peoples, migrants, and other marginalized racial groups. These groups face higher levels of poverty, limited access to health and education, and barriers to political and economic participation.

This policy brief examines how structural racism exacerbates poverty, restricts access to essential services, and deepens global inequalities, while recommending pathways and practical implementations for States and the international community to integrate anti-racism as a cornerstone of the right to development.

Key Insights

- **Racism as a systemic barrier:** Racism and racial discrimination are rooted in colonialism, slavery, and apartheid, persist as systemic barriers that obstruct the realization of the right to development by perpetuating inequality and exclusion at national and international levels.
- **Intersecting discrimination:** Racial injustice combined with gender, migration status, religion, and other factors, deepens marginalization and vulnerability for groups such as people of African descent, Indigenous peoples, migrants, and LGBTQ+ persons.
- **Inequalities across development sectors:** Racialized communities face persistent disparities in health, housing, employment, education, justice, and political participation, undermining equal opportunity. Discrimination restricts access to these facilities and tampers with the right to development.

- **Global dimension:** Racism extends beyond national borders, undermining international cooperation, aid effectiveness, and global partnerships. Development agencies and international organizations often lack adequate diversity in their leadership and decision-making processes, thereby reinforcing patterns of exclusion and mistrust.

- **COVID-19 as amplifier:** The pandemic magnified existing racial disparities in health, employment, housing, and education. Racialized groups bore disproportionate burdens of infection, mortality, economic hardship, and xenophobic backlash, demonstrating how crises amplify systemic racism.

- **Data and accountability gaps:** Many States fail to collect or publish racially disaggregated data, concealing the full extent of discrimination. The absence of disaggregated racial data and weak accountability systems conceals inequalities. Without robust data and accountability mechanisms, racial disparities remain unaddressed, hindering effective policy responses.

- **Urgent commitments needed:** Achieving the right to development and the 2030 Agenda requires States and international organizations to embed anti-racism, equality, and inclusivity at the core of policies and partnerships.

Policy Implications

1. For States

- Integrate anti-racist measures into national development strategies, aligning them with the right to development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- Collect and publish race-disaggregated data across sectors (health, housing, employment, education and justice) to track inequalities and assess policy effectiveness.
- Enact or reinforce anti-discrimination legislation and ensure its enforcement in housing, employment, healthcare, and education.
- Guarantee the political participation of marginalized racial and ethnic groups and establish meaningful consultation mechanisms in policy design.

2. For International Organizations

- Include non-discrimination, equality, and inclusive participation as core principles in international development cooperation and aid distribution.
- Increase racial and national diversity in leadership and staffing within UN agencies, multilateral institutions, and aid organizations.
- Combat racism and prejudice that undermine trust between development partners, and strengthen global cooperation based on sovereign equality.
- Incorporate racial equality impact assessments in international development programming and financing decisions.

3. For Civil Society and Private Sector

- Monitor the implementation of anti-racism and right-to-development commitments, using human rights mechanisms and public advocacy.
- Establish internal accountability systems, diversity policies, and training to combat racial bias within NGOs, corporations, and development agencies.
- Partner with racialized communities to ensure their perspectives shape policy advocacy, media narratives, and development initiatives.
- Use private sector resources to support housing, employment, and educational opportunities for marginalized groups, contributing to the dismantling of systemic barriers.

Policy Recommendation

To effectively operationalize the right to development and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, States, international organizations, civil society, and private sector actors must prioritize anti-racism as a central pillar of development policy.

- States adopt and enforce comprehensive anti-racism laws and policies across key sectors (health, housing, employment, education, and justice), supported by race-disaggregated data collection and accountability audits. Governments should also ensure the meaningful participation of marginalized groups in development decision-making.
- International organizations embed equality and non-discrimination in development cooperation frameworks, address racial bias in institutional leadership and staffing, and apply racial equality impact assessments in aid programming and financing.
- Civil society and private sector actors strengthen internal diversity and equity practices, amplify the voices of marginalized communities, and monitor government and institutional compliance with anti-racism commitments.
- Global partnerships should move away from exclusionary or colonial legacies and advance equitable cooperation by recognizing racism as a structural barrier to development, ensuring that international collaboration promotes justice, inclusivity, and the dismantling of systemic discrimination.

Conclusion

Racism and racial discrimination are systemic barriers that continue to obstruct the realization of the right to development, deepening inequalities across health, housing, education, employment, and justice. It is rooted in colonial legacies and reinforced by contemporary crises such as COVID-19. These structures undermine both human rights and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. To eliminate racism, it requires more than declarations; it demands concrete, coordinated action across multiple levels, and to achieve equitable and sustainable development, anti-racism must be a core principle in national policies, international cooperation, civil society engagement, and private sector practices. Addressing racism is not only a legal obligation but also a development imperative for building just, inclusive societies.

Further Reading

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