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People of African descent

Recognition Matters:
Implications for Safeguards and Collective Rights

People of African descent have long sustained ecosystems through traditional practices and ancestral knowledge. Only recently have international frameworks begun to formally recognize their role in biodiversity conservation. This briefing note explores this issue — and why it matters.

Presentation

AAE is a consultancy company based in Uruguay. We provide consultancy services on strategic planning, adaptation, REDD+, climate finance and more, applying a human rights-based and gender-responsive approach to all our work.

AAE's Safeguards Briefing Notes discuss common terminology issues around safeguards work, based on existing definitions and recent developments in the safeguards sector. We acknowledge that the themes addressed in this documents are evolving. As such, the content may be updated over time to reflect new developments and understandings.

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Introduction

For the first time, the role of people of African descent in biodiversity conservation was formally acknowledged in a decision adopted at COP16 of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), held in Cali, Colombia (21 October–1 November 2024). This milestone recognizes Afro-descendant communities as key actors in sustaining ecosystems through traditional lifestyles and ancestral knowledge, aligning their contributions with the principles of Article 8(j). This briefing note explores who people of African descent are, the deep-rooted connection between their cultural practices and the environment, and the implications of their recognition within social and environmental safeguard frameworks. It also highlights the importance of collective territorial rights and customary governance systems in protecting biodiversity. Recognizing and safeguarding these contributions is essential to achieving both environmental and social justice.

Definition

“People of African descent” or “Afro-descendant peoples”, are all those people of African origin who recognize themselves as descendants of African victims of the transatlantic slave trade or of the African diaspora, sharing a common past that is manifested today through ethno-racial, cultural, linguistic, social and political characteristics. These communities are distributed throughout the American continent, so they share a sense of community, although each of them has its own worldview given the characteristics of the territory where they have developed, so today we can speak of Afro-Colombians, Afro-Hondurans, Afro-Mexicans, among others.

People of African descent are organized in biodiverse geographic spaces that comprise a great variety of ecosystems where they have traditionally created practices of caring relationship with the natural environment which provides them with food, cultural sustenance and community identity. These spaces can be called in some contexts as **Palenques (Colombia), Quilombos (Brasil), Cumbes (Venezuela, Cuba)**, collective territories, among other denominations that refer to these territories of governance of the Afro-descendant communities.

The role of Afro-descendant communities in caring for the environment

Afro-descendant communities have developed, based on their cultural heritage, ancestral practices, knowledge, customs, and traditions that define their existence and resistance. These practices have been built through a respectful appreciation of the land and the nature it holds. **Afro-descendant communities relate to the land from a perspective of care, not only because it is where they develop their culture and sustain their ethnic existence**, but also because it is the environment where they have established a relationship with nature, framed by a series of conservation practices that can be seen in the distinct methods of planting, managing, and harvesting various plant species, as well as in hunting, fishing, and wood extraction times, among others.

The way Afro-descendant communities understand the relationship between cultural practices and nature gives rise to a concept that synthesizes this connection into a single term, which is called environmental ethno-education. This term by definition carries an ethical and political responsibility for the care of the planet and the land, expressed in terms of cultural identity, aiming to harmonize the interaction between people of African descent and the natural environment they inhabit and utilize. The fauna, flora, and bodies of water not only provide them with food, medicine, and ensure the fulfillment of basic life needs, but also **serve as the place where all cultural practices of existence are reproduced.**

People of African descent and collective territories in the context of social and environmental safeguards

Afro-descendant communities in Latin America have a governance system and collective rights strengthened by community authorities, which have decision-making powers based on their own law. In some countries (e.g. see boxes) they have been legally and constitutionally recognized in national legislations, which has expanded their legal protections, particularly regarding the ownership, use, and management of their collective territories.



Community Councils are forms of organization recognized by Law 70 of 1993, which grants black communities collective rights over their ancestral territories. These councils manage their lands, promote sustainable development and preserve their cultural identity.

Example:

COCOMASUR: The Community Council of Black Communities of the Tolo River Basin and Southern Coastal Zone has achieved legal recognition of more than 39,000 hectares of collective territory. They have implemented education, environmental conservation and sustainable economic development projects, strengthening local governance and social cohesion.



Since the Brazilian constitution of 1988, the law recognizes the right of the quilombolas (descendants of Afro-Brazilian communities that lived in quilombos) to the ownership of the lands they traditionally occupy, as a recognition of their history of resistance against slavery.

Example:

The Association of Remaining Quilombo Communities of the State of Rio de Janeiro: is an organization that represents quilombola communities in the state of Rio de Janeiro, seeking to defend their rights and interests. The association is an important player in the fight for recognition, land titling and guaranteed rights for quilombola communities.

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Therefore, it is important to recognize that any decision made by a government about a territory ancestrally occupied by Afro-descendant communities that could directly or indirectly affect the relationship between their ways of life and the natural environment must be consulted beforehand through a route that is rigorously established with an ethnic and equality approach, formally involving their own authorities. This ensures decisions are made that recognize the governance of these peoples in their own territories, preventing serious environmental damage that could affect a way of life that Afro-descendant communities have developed over hundreds of years and that forms the foundation of their existence as an ethnic community.

Moreover, the application of robust safeguard frameworks (FPIC procedures, Environmental and Social Impact Assessments, and dedicated grievance mechanisms) serves to operationalize the recognition of Afro-descendant collective rights. By embedding these safeguards into project cycles their traditional ecological knowledge is systematically integrated into biodiversity conservation strategies, ensuring that development initiatives deliver both social justice and environmental sustainability.

The recognition of people of African descent within international social and environmental safeguard standards is a crucial step towards achieving social equity and restorative justice. Historically marginalized and often excluded from decision-making processes, these communities have borne the brunt of environmental degradation and land dispossession, and have been demanding recognition within international biodiversity and climate change conventions,. Formal inclusion in international conventions, as was the case with the inclusion of people of African descent in Article 8j of the CBD during COP16, not only recognizes their indispensable role in conservation, but it may also facilitate their efforts to secure land tenure rights and have a participatory voice in shaping environmental policy.

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