

THE ASIA PACIFIC SUBREGIONAL CONSULTATIONS ON THE HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION OF AFRICANS AND PEOPLE OF AFRICAN DESCENT

Summary Report prepared by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (17 October 2024)

I. INTRODUCTION

In view of the final year of the International Decade for People of African Descent (International Decade) (2015-2024), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR),¹ jointly with the Asia Pacific Network for People of African Descent (APN), organized a series of online consultations on the human rights situation of Africans and people of African descent in the Asia-Pacific region. These consultations were the first of the kind in this region.

Consultations were held for four sub-regions, namely for North-East Asia and South-East Asia on 27 July 2024, and for the Pacific and South Asia on 3 August 2024. The two-hour consultations were organized via Zoom. Interpretation was provided based on participants' needs. The Chatham House rule was used to encourage inclusive and open dialogue while ensuring protection of privacy and safety of the participants. In total, 48 persons (19 women; 29 men) participated in the consultations. All of them were Africans and people of African descent, from 14 different countries.²

During the consultation, participants shared their knowledge and lived experiences as Africans and people of African descent in the Asia-Pacific region, highlighting human rights concerns, including racism and racial discrimination. They also made recommendations for future course of action by states, OHCHR, members of the African diaspora, civil society organizations, and national human rights institutions. The recommendations were particularly related to the implementation of the programme of activities for the implementation of the International Decade for People of African Descent, International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) and the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action (DDPA) – the key UN frameworks for addressing the human rights concerns of people of African descent with regards to racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance. The present document outlines the key issues and recommendations identified in each of the four sub-regions.

II. KEY ISSUES AND RELATED RECOMMENDATIONS

A. South-East Asia (SEA)

Twelve participants (4 women; 8 men) from Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Viet Nam, participated in the consultation for South-East Asia on 27 June 2024. The participants discussed the following issues, and proposed recommendations to address the same issues:

¹ The Regional Office for the Pacific, the Regional Office for South-East Asia, the Senior Human Rights Adviser's Unit in the Philippines, and the Anti-Racial Discrimination Section.

² Fourteen different countries were represented at the consultations which includes Australia, China, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Japan, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Thailand, Viet Nam

- **Ignorance as a driver of racism and media misrepresentation:** Participants highlighted that ignorance is a pervasive driver of racism throughout the region, which leads to various forms of discrimination against Africans and people of African descent. In the workplace, they are often denied gainful and professional employment, and this discrimination extends to other areas such as healthcare access and entry to public spaces, including clubs. Social exclusion is also commonly experienced by Africans and people of African descent, reported as being distanced from others on public transportation or classroom.

This ignorance is compounded by a lack of education and awareness about the African continent, Africans, and people of African descent, which perpetuates negative stereotypes and fuels racism in the region. The media plays a significant role in reproducing and disseminating harmful stereotypes that contribute to the ongoing marginalization of Africans and people of African descent. Participants stressed the urgent need to promote unbiased media coverage that accurately represents Africa, Africans and people of African descent, as a means of combating these deep-seated prejudices.

- **Arbitrary detention, racial profiling and excessive use of force:** Several participants stated that Africans and people of African descent were often subjected to racial profiling in the context of law enforcement, reportedly leading them to being disproportionately subjected to excessive use of force by the police, arbitrary arrest, and detention. They shared several examples of cases where individuals have been allegedly arbitrarily arrested, disproportionately sentenced, or subjected to violence by the police.
- **Denial of access to public education:** Participants explained that both African students, who are non-citizens, and students of African descent, who are nationals of the country in which they reside, often face barriers in an educational setting, including a reported case of being denied admission to school.
- **Identity issues among African children and children of African descent:** Children born to an African migrant or a person of African descent and another parent belonging to the majority group in the society in which they live frequently face challenges related to questions about their identity based on how others perceive them due to their skin colour. These children are often ridiculed and publicly harassed, further complicating their sense of belonging and self-identity.

Recommendations made by participants in relation to the issues in South-East Asian countries

- **Social integration programmes:** There is need for developing programmes aimed at fostering enhanced interactions between Africans and people of African descent, and the rest of the population of the countries of residence, to promote social integration and mutual understanding.
- **Access to legal assistance and support:** There is a need to ensure that Africans and People of African descent have access to legal assistance, including through the provision of interpreters - in courts, police stations, detention centres, as well as paralegal services for those at risk of being trafficked. The creation of an advocacy group to promote further coordination and support from African embassies to their nationals was also recommended.
- **Freedom of movement and support networks:** The need to ensure freedom of movement for all, as well as the establishment of support networks, and support to migrants who wish to return home was identified.

- **Educational initiatives:** Participants recommended the introduction of courses on African history and culture in schools and universities to raise awareness and appreciation of the African heritage among the population.
- **Economic empowerment:** Participants stressed the importance of promoting the economic empowerment of Africans and people of African descent by fostering economic solidarity and enhancing their negotiation skills within their communities and beyond.
- **Data collection:** The need to collect and maintain accurate data on the situation of Africans and people of African descent in South-East Asia was identified as essential to inform policymaking and advocacy.
- **Community solidarity and cultural identity:** There is also a need to encourage solidarity, networking and support among communities of Africans and African descent to maintain cultural identity and connection and promote the appreciation and sharing of African culture within and outside African descent communities. Participants stressed the need to utilize social media to build and strengthen online communities of Africans and African descent, providing a platform for connection and support.

B. North-East Asia (NEA)

Fourteen participants (4 women; 10 men) from China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea participated in the consultation for North-East Asia. Participants highlighted several key issues reflecting the ongoing challenges they face:

- **Navigating ignorance, condescension, and the culture of silence:** Participants highlighted the complex interplay between genuine curiosity and condescending behaviours, such as micro-aggressions and subtle forms of racism, which Africans and people of African descent often encounter in their daily life. These behaviours, rooted more in ignorance than malice, is detrimental to the ability of Africans and people of African descent to interact with others with ease, express themselves freely, and participate in social life, contributing to a broader culture of silence. This culture of silence, coupled with language barriers, exacerbates misunderstandings and cultural misinterpretations, particularly in critical areas such as employment. As a result, Africans and people of African descent must develop mental resilience to navigate these interactions, carefully balancing their identities against the pervasive ignorance they face.
- **Media representation and stereotypes:** The media plays a pivotal role in shaping perceptions in North-East Asia. It often portrays Africans and people of African descent in a negative light, perpetuating misconceptions and stereotypes.
- **Lack of recognition of contributions:** Despite significant contributions made by Africans and people of African descent in the region in areas such as business, entertainment, and education, these achievements are often overlooked.
- **Workplace discrimination:** Discrimination in the workplace remains a significant challenge for Africans and people of African descent in countries of North-East Asia, even as they strive to break the glass ceiling. Despite their efforts and accomplishments, they continue to face barriers to professional advancement and recognition.

Recommendations made by participants in relation to the issues in North-East Asian countries:

- **Fostering understanding and cultural awareness:** There is a need to change the prevailing narratives surrounding Africans and people of African descent by promoting a deeper understanding of their historical experiences and cultural awareness. Reclaiming cultural heritage is essential for Africans and people of African descent, as is fostering an environment that is appreciative and respects their cultural identity.
- **Enhancing media representation:** The media plays a vital role in shaping public perception. It is imperative to explore avenues for promoting the African image, including through social media, in order to sensitize the public, counteract negative stereotypes, and highlight the positive contributions of Africans and people of African descent. There is an urgent need for new media content that explores novel ways of representing Africans and people of African descent, such as through movies and dramas that celebrate their contributions and diversity. By changing these narratives, the media can help reshape the perception of African identity and combat the negative stereotypes that are prevalent in the region.
- **Strategic engagement in policy discussions:** Africans and people of African descent must strategically engage in safe platforms where policy issues affecting their communities are discussed. It was suggested to seek further engagement of embassies of Africans in addressing concerns faced by their nationals.
- **Capacity building and network consolidation:** There is a need for increased capacity building of Africans and people of African descent advocacy on human rights issues affecting them, including consolidation of existing networks working on the human rights of Africans and people of African descent. By tapping into these networks, individuals can amplify their potential and contributions, creating a stronger, more unified voice.
- **Transnational collaboration and resource sharing:** Given the common challenges faced by Africans and people of African descent across North-East Asia, transnational collaboration and resource sharing are crucial. Sharing best practices can contribute to strengthening efforts to address challenges and promote progress.
- **Exploring investment opportunities:** Africans and people of African descent should be encouraged to explore opportunities in the investment sector and to engage in economic activities, in order to build economic power and gain greater influence in the societies in which they live.
- **Addressing network gaps:** There is need to develop strong networks of Africans and people of African descent living in North-East Asia, to facilitate referrals, mentorship, and opportunities for people of African descent. Strengthening these networks will provide the necessary support and resources to help individuals thrive.
- **Recognition of contribution by Africans and people of African descent:** Highlighting the successes of Africans and people of African descent in various fields could challenge the limited perception that Africans and people of African descent are predominantly associated with arts, sports, or crime.

C. South Asia

Five participants (2 women; 3 men) from India and Pakistan participated in the consultation for South Asia, including four persons who belonged to communities of descendants of Bantu-speaking and Swahili-speaking Africans, most of whom were enslaved and brought by Portuguese and British merchants during the 16th to 19th centuries.³ The discussion highlighted the following issues:

- **Derogatory names:** Participants explained that the terms “Siddi” or “Sheddi”, which are commonly used to identify their communities, are derogatory and often used to demean their communities, notably in Pakistan.
- **Lack of data:** A significant barrier to addressing the challenges faced by persons belonging to communities of African descent in India and Pakistan is the lack of reliable data. Without accurate information on their population size, socio-economic conditions, and access to services, it is difficult to formulate effective policies or interventions.
- **Quality education:** Participants underscored the severe lack of access to quality education for their communities. Discrimination in the educational system is pervasive, including a lack of quality and accessible schools and anti-black bullying from students and teachers within the schooling system.
- **Discrimination in employment:** People of African descent face considerable barriers to employment, which are exacerbated by both racial discrimination and the lack of educational opportunities. Challenges include discriminatory recruitment processes, lack of support for business, such as people refusing to purchase goods from businesses led by people of African descent. These challenges further entrench the community in poverty and limit their ability to achieve economic stability.
- **Barriers in access to healthcare and housing:** Access to healthcare and adequate housing remains a critical issue for communities of African descent in these countries. They often reside in impoverished conditions, and in the areas with limited access to basic health services and facilities. These disparities contribute to poor health outcomes and perpetuate the cycle of marginalization.

Recommendations made by participants in relation to the issues in South Asian countries:

- **Reclaim the term “Siddi” or “Sheddi” to counter its use as a derogatory term:** Immediate efforts should be made to educate the public and discourage the use of the term “Siddi,” or “Sheddi” in a derogatory manner. Instead, the terminology should be reclaimed to acknowledge the rich heritage and contributions of these communities.
- **Improve access to quality education:** Address systemic discrimination in the educational system by implementing targeted programmes that ensure equal access to quality education for communities of African descent. This includes providing scholarships, improving school infrastructure, and fostering an inclusive curriculum that respects and integrates African heritage and history.

³ According to a participant from Pakistan, these communities, who trace their ancestry to Bantu-speaking and Swahili-speaking Africans, were brought to the subcontinent by the Portuguese and British, beginning in the 16th century.

- **Conduct comprehensive data collection:** Governments and relevant stakeholders should initiate efforts for comprehensive data collection to accurately capture the demographic, socio-economic, and health status of the communities of African descent. This data is crucial for formulating effective policies and interventions tailored to their specific needs.
- **Enhance access to healthcare and housing:** Develop and implement policies to improve access to healthcare and adequate housing for the communities of African descent. This should include the construction of affordable housing, the expansion of healthcare services in underserved areas, and specific programmes to respond to their demands.

D. The Pacific

Seventeen participants (10 women; 7 men) from Australia, Fiji and New Zealand participated in the consultation for the Pacific. Some of the participants were migrants from African countries while others were people of African descent. The key issues identified during the discussion are outlined below:

- **Lack of recognition and visibility:** Participants expressed concern over the lack of recognition of the contributions of Africans and people of African descent within the Pacific region. Despite their significant impact across various sectors like education and health, the visibility of Africans and people of African descent remains low, owing to systemic racism which is rooted in the legacies of enslavement and colonialism and has contributed to the historical marginalization of their contributions. Despite achieving high levels of education, Africans and people of African descent are under-represented in leadership positions. Their career aspirations are often stifled due to systemic racism, resulting in many highly qualified individuals being relegated to menial jobs, far below their qualifications.
- **Educational challenges and historical awareness:** There has been a significant lack of education and awareness about the rich history and contributions of Africans and people of African descent. In Pacific countries, the education curricula do not provide for children of Africans and African descent to learn about their history and contributions to the society which results in low self-esteem and an inability to carry their heritage forward. Participants emphasized the importance of promoting accurate education on pre-colonial Africa, the “decolonization of self”, and the affirmation of cultural and ancestral identity.
- **Negative media representation:** The negative portrayal of Africans and people of African descent in the media is a significant issue that needs to be addressed. The media perpetuates blatant racism and stereotypes which contribute to the broader societal ignorance about African cultures and people. These negative representations reinforce harmful prejudices and undermine the achievements and potential of African descent communities.
- **Community support and the role of the African Union:** The lack of support within African and African descent communities for each other is another pressing issue. Participants suggested that the establishment of a presence of the African Union in the region could provide opportunities for greater advocacy and support for Africans and people of African descent living in the Pacific.

Recommendations made by participants in relation to the issues in the Pacific:

- **Support for community initiatives:** It is essential to provide robust support for community-driven initiatives within the African descent communities. Targeted support can foster community growth and improve overall development.
- **High-level meetings on immigration and integration:** Organizing high-level meetings with governments to examine the effects of immigration and asylum laws on migrant workers, asylum seekers and refugees, particularly African people, is crucial. These meetings should focus on both the economic and social imbalances created by discriminatory immigration practices. A holistic approach is needed to address these issues and promote equitable integration.
- **Narrative control and media representation:** Africans and people of African descent must take control of their narratives, countering the negative portrayals often propagated by the media. There is a need to highlight the contributions of Africans and people of African descent to the Pacific region. Platforms should be created to change the narrative about Africans and people of African descent and the African continent, and data should be collected by the states and people of African descent to demonstrate their impact, which can inform relevant policy decisions.
- **Leadership and representation:** There is a need to enhance the representation of Africans and people of African descent in leadership and decision-making positions. This is vital for influencing policy and societal change. Additionally, research on racism affecting Africans and people of African descent should be conducted by the states and people of African descent to expose the pervasive and systemic nature of the issue in the region.
- **Advocacy and awareness campaigns:** Continuous advocacy campaigns are necessary to raise awareness about discrimination, racial profiling, and the exclusion of Africans and people of African descent from employment opportunities. Sharing personal stories and experiences can be a powerful tool in these campaigns to highlight the realities of racism and discrimination experienced by Africans and people of African descent.
- **Capacity Building and Mentorship:** Initiatives to build capacity within African and African descent communities, including mentorship programmes, should be supported. These programmes can empower individuals, particularly the youth, to overcome barriers and achieve their full potential.
- **Addressing colourism within communities:** Discrimination based on skin colour, or “colourism”, within African and African descent needs to be addressed. This internal bias further divides and weakens the community, and addressing it is critical for unity and collective progress.

III. CONCLUSIONS

The consultations brought to light the persistent challenges faced by Africans and people of African descent in the Asia Pacific region, underscoring the need for wide-ranging measures to combat racism and promote and protect their human rights.

The consultations provided a platform for Africans and people of African descent from across the region to share their lived experiences of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related

intolerance, often deeply rooted in longstanding prejudice and stereotypes. The consultations highlighted that their manifestations vary depending on the unique historical and cultural contexts of each country. Experiences conveyed by the participants point to a need for urgent attention and intervention, including increased visibility for Africans and people of African descent, educational reforms, and policy changes to combat racial discrimination.

The insights gathered during the consultations emphasized the need for a comprehensive approach to address the multifaceted challenges faced by Africans and people of African descent. By fostering understanding, improving media representation, and promoting the recognition of their contributions, it is possible to combat the deep-seated issues of racism and discrimination and create a more inclusive environment.

Importantly, participants noted that the consultations fostered a sense of connectivity and collaboration among them, leading to proposals to work together, for example on research projects aimed at improving data collection on human rights issues affecting Africans and people of African descent. This collaboration is a critical step toward addressing the challenges identified and advancing the rights of people of African descent in the region.

While much work remains to be done, the momentum generated by these consultations underscores the need for continued collaboration, advocacy, and strategic action. Ensuring that Africans and people of African descent are recognized, supported, empowered, and protected is essential to achieving justice and equality in every aspect of life.
