Inclusion of Afro-Descendents in Ethnic Data Collection: Towards Visibility

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Abstract
Afro-descendant civil society organisations in Latin America have pursued an important strand of advocacy on reforming national censuses. The aim has been to increase the ‘visibility’ of Afro-descendant populations through disaggregated data and thus to improve recognition of their distinct identity. Brazil is leading the way on such data collection while other countries are taking first steps, like Argentina and Chile. International organisations have offered support in these efforts, including development agencies and human rights institutions. The census questions added have not always met the expectations of civil society, nor have civil society actors always agreed among themselves on the categories of self-identification. The 2001 World Conference against Racism has also played a key role by challenging the ‘racial democracy’ myth, exposing racism as a factor in inequality and stimulating increased Afro-descendant social mobilisation.

Keywords
Afro-descendants; disaggregated data collection; census reform; 2001 World Conference against Racism; Latin American civil society

1. Introduction

This article will discuss the advocacy of Afro-descendant organisations to reform data collection in states of Latin America and the Caribbean to increase recognition of the existence and status of Afro-descendants. This advocacy has used three key strategies: mobilisation to raise awareness of Afro-descendant identity and increase self-identification; cooperation with international organisations (IOs) to elaborate and promote new standards for ethnic data collection; and targeting censuses to amend questions on ethnic, racial or cultural identity. The agency of Afro-descendant civil society actors in elaborating the need for such data will be traced, demonstrating how regional norms on data collection are changing as a result. The assistance provided by IOs, such as the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and the Inter-American
Development Bank (IDB), and political opportunity structures, such as the 2001 World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (WCAR), in altering norms on data collection will also be examined. The article will provide a profile of contemporary Afro-descendant civil society organisations (CSOs), which have a long and varied history of social mobilisation. Overall, the evidence will show how the population figures for Afro-descendants are increasing alongside the recognition of their identity, helping to redress an historical legacy of racism, the denial of racism and to increase the ‘visibility’ of people of African descent.

2. Afro-Descendant Identity and Racism in Latin America

There are an estimated 150 million people of African descent in Latin America and the Caribbean. Racial discrimination permeates each and every realm of life for Afro-descendants in the region: from the social to the political, in education, employment, cultural life and public health sectors. In many countries, the Afro-descendant population is politically marginalised, with little national representation and some participation at the municipal level. Securing access to land, including traditionally owned and occupied land, has been difficult. It is common for judicial and police systems to use racial profiling and provide less protection to Blacks at the same time as punishing them more severely.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, racism is a form of domination and an abuse of power, largely by a dominant class of white(r) people, and against indigenous people or people of African descent. Such racism is manifest in the many forms of everyday discrimination sketched above, further exacerbated by poverty and class domination. Prejudices and racist ideologies hold sway and are expressed in the many daily forms of public discourse.¹ Media commonly use stereotypical and negative images of people of African descent, employing implicit and sometimes overt denigration of Afro-descendants.

These inequalities are less visible because of the low level of disaggregated data available by ethnicity or race in the region. The collection of disaggregated data has long been undermined both by practices of self-identification and by state ideology. States have relied on the idea of “racial democracy” to project an image of racial harmony and non-discrimination based on racial and ethnic miscegenation. The term *crisol de razas* (literally, crucible of races) is commonly used to describe people of the region. This image has contrasted with the experiences of race and racism in the United States, where colour boundaries are strict and racial