Terminology in English for people who define themselves as Afro-descent in Portuguese and Spanish remains problematic, particularly in areas with large populations of people of mixed heritage. Afro-descendants speak a variety of languages including Spanish, Portuguese, French, English, Garifuna, Kryol and a variety of dialects. In this essay Afro-descendant, Afro-latin American and black are used as synonyms.
The diverse populations of African descent in Latin America, which number approximately 150 million (some estimates range as high as 250 million) continue to face a significant number of challenges, including discrimination in employment and housing, economic exclusion, and under-representation in government, civil society and in the media. One of the major challenges in assessing the status of black populations is the lack of concrete data. The majority of Latin American countries do not collect information on race and ethnicity, nor do they document incidents of racial discrimination. In addition, any attempt to understand the struggles of Latin Americans of African descent must take into account economic and political problems on the global, national and local levels, whether it is in countries like Brazil, Venezuela, Colombia and Cuba where the population of African descent is significant, or in countries such as Argentina and Mexico, where they represent less than 5 per cent of the population. In all Latin American countries, Afro-Latin Americans with darker skin complexities continue to face greater pressures as they confront societies where racist languages and practices continue to be accepted in the mainstream. Socio-economic status can often mitigate these pressures, but Afro-Latin Americans are over-represented among the poor. According to the UN Human Rights Commission, the rights of Afro-Latin Americans in 2005 continue to be routinely violated, particularly in the areas of employment, health and housing.

At the same time, the region as a whole has witnessed a proliferation of NGOs dedicated to aiding Afro-Latin American communities. Since the 2001 World Conference Against Racism, Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance in Durban, South Africa, Afro-Latin Americans have succeeded in securing greater visibility to highlight their social situation. International agencies such as the UN, the Organization of American States, the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank, and NGOs such as Minority Rights Group International (MRG) and many others have made commitments to aiding and promoting Afro-Latin American issues on the global front. Within the region, many countries such as Brazil and Colombia have created a number of progressive policy instruments. Others, such as Honduras and Nicaragua, have recognized problems but have publicly bemoaned the lack of resources to address them. Because the vast majority of Afro-Latin Americans constitute part of the working poor with little access to education, health benefits and transportation, many incidents of racial discrimination go unreported. Moreover, black Latin Americans are over-represented in the prison systems of Latin America and are often subjected to random searches and harassment by police. Not surprisingly, Afro-descendant communities often view the policing authorities with suspicion and thus are reluctant to report cases of criminal discrimination.

Rights and concerns

Afro-Latin Americans fare poorly in areas of employment, health and education compared to their white and mestizo counterparts. According to the International Development Bank, for example, Afro-Latin Americans have higher infant mortality rates in many areas of South America. Areas with a higher proportion of Afro-descendants, such as Piura, Peru have historically reported higher infant mortality rates (93 per 1,000 live births), compared to the more mestizo city of Lima (45 per 1,000 live births) in the 1990s. Similar ratios have been reported among black people in the costal regions of Colombia, compared to other regions and among black Brazilians compared to white Brazilians. Afro-Latin Americans are over-represented among street children, the homeless and among prisoners in Brazil and Venezuela; and they continue to live in humiliating social and cultural environments in countries such as Uruguay and Ecuador. In Mexico and Argentina, their historical contributions and actual presence continues to be ridiculed, downplayed or even ignored. Moreover, Afro-Latin Americans face strong pressures to assimilate even though assimilation itself has not garnered them actual economic, political or social security. Patriotism and nationalism have routinely collaborated to coerce Afro-Latin Americans to ascribe to a sense of unified nationhood and to deny their ethnic traits or to ignore group needs in favour of national interests. Women of African descent face significant challenges of sexual violence, rape and access to jobs and education. National media and tourist industries continue to present limiting and one-dimensional stereotypical and sexualized images of black women in places such as Bahia, Brazil and Havana, Cuba. Meanwhile, many single black mothers face the daunting task of raising
their children alone on menial salaries. Only in the 2000s is there evidence that black consciousness movements are beginning to effect change in Latin American societies, although in many areas individuals still do not identify (politically, socially or culturally) with one another on the basis of racial ancestry. Thus, education and consciousness, both inside and outside the community, remain critical on many levels.

Global trends
Despite the historical invisibility of Afro-Latin Americans on the world stage, the period between 2000 and 2005 witnessed numerous international conferences which brought their plight to the forefront. The 2001 World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in Durban represented a watershed in the rights movement in Latin America, and continues to be an important reference point to this day. Latin Americans of African descent were energized by the historical opportunity to present their views to the international community. Almost all Latin America countries were present and signed up to the conference’s resolutions. Representing Brazil, Minister of Justice José Gregori recognized his country’s racist past and pledged dialogue with the country’s black movement, for example. Although the Argentine Ministry of Justice and Human Rights Jorge Enrique de la Rúa did not mention Afro-descendants by name, the Argentine presence along with other Latin American nations such as Paraguay, Peru, and Panama, and their signing of the anti-discrimination measures taken up by the conference, marked a new era in international discussions of race in the region. Afro-Latin American NGOs, which had participated in a number of preparatory meetings in dialogue with their governments prior to the Durban congress, were also present in full force in Durban, a week before government officials arrived. This new consciousness resulted in the historic commitment by some 20 Latin American governments to the idea that peoples of African descent: ‘should be treated with fairness and respect for their dignity and should not suffer discrimination of any kind based on origin, culture, skin colour or social condition.’

During 2003–5, black Latin Americans and their allies have organized a number of regional conferences, published several policy papers, and created networks to help promote Afro-Latin American issues. Institutions such as the World Bank, the Organization of American States, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), and the Inter-American Dialogue have become important allies to Afro-Latin American NGOs throughout the region. Networks in the United States such as the Global Afro Latino and Caribbean Initiative (GALCI), and the TransAfrica Forum have also played important roles. Regional networks such as AFROAMERICA XXI comprised of over 60 black NGOs, and Afro-Latin American elected officials in Spanish-speaking countries represent an impressive development, although no regional organization to date has brought together people of African descent from all the Latin American and Caribbean countries.

A number of other regional conferences in Central America, Brazil and the Caribbean have discussed ways to meet local, regional and international goals, while sharing experiences at the same time. In 2003, UNESCO’s 32nd General Conference adopted an international convention to safeguard intangible cultural heritage and listed specifically at least two Afro-Latin American population cultural practices: the Garifuna language, dance and music of Belize, and the rites of the Congo Kings in the Dominican Republic. On 5 August 2005, UNESCO supported the city of Esmeraldas, in collaboration with indigenous and black organizations, to create the Esmeraldas International Centre for Afro-Indoamerican Cultural Diversity and Human Development. It is also significant that the Organization of American States’ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) now includes the status of Afro-Latin Americans as a policy area and has established the position of rapporteur on the rights of people of African descent. Latin American activists and government signatories to the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance Declaration also agreed, ‘to incorporate a gender perspective in all programmes of action against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance …’

At the regional and national levels
Latin American states have instituted a number of important policy instruments since Durban. Paraguay and Honduras ratified the 1965 UN Convention on the Elimination of Racial
Discrimination, joining 17 other Latin American nations. In one of the most significant regional events since Durban, legislators of African descent from around the region held their first meeting in Brasilia on 21 November 2003. This unprecedented event brought together people from eight Latin American countries (Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Panama, Peru, Venezuela and Uruguay) and from the United States. The first meeting was followed by the Second Meeting of Legislators of African Descent in Santa Fé de Bogota, Colombia on 19–21 May 2004. At the end of the congress, legislators published the Bogota Declaration, in which they highlighted and reaffirmed their identities as Afro-descendants, recognized the paths of their ancestors and reiterated the commitments of national governments to the actions outlined in the declarations and plans of action of Durban. The third meeting of Afro-descendant legislators took place in Costa Rica on 28–31 August 2005; 135 participants from 19 countries discussed ways of fostering democratic participation among Afro-Latin Americans and other collaborative projects.

Activities among Latin American states indicate that some progress is being made, although more work in terms of implementation and monitoring of programmes needs to occur. Discrimination and maltreatment can be especially violent in poorer areas such as the favelas, the pueblos jovenes and in the shantytowns, where police forces still often act with impunity. In Brazil, Colombia, Peru and Venezuela, poverty, lack of educational opportunities, and the lack of proper sanitation, electricity and running water remain among the greatest challenges to Latin Americans of African descent.

Brazil
Countries such as Brazil and Colombia have made the most dramatic progress nationally. The Palmares Foundation, established in 1988, continues to function as an important state institution for the accreditation and granting of lands to communities of the descendants of enslaved Africans, although for many activists the process is too complex and lengthy. Articles 215 and 216 of the Federal Constitution mandate the protection and preservation of these federally certified lands (or quilombos) and the Palmares Foundation assists in the securing of land titles to the Afro-descendant communities. To date, the foundation has identified 743 quilombo communities, 42 of which have been officially recognized and 29 of which have received titles. The majority of Afro-descendants in Brazil live in urban areas, the majority in the favelas, with no land titles or ownership of property.

Monumental strides have taken place under the government of Luiz Inácio ‘Lula’ da Silva, at least symbolically. For the first time in its history, four of the national ministers are Afro-Brazilians, three of them women (Benedita da Silva, Minister of Social Services; Marina Silva, Minister for the Environment; and Matilde Ribeiro, who heads the Ministry for the Promotion of Racial Equality. The man, Gilberto Gil, is Minister of Culture. Federal universities around the country have continued to implement affirmative action programmes, and the federal government has mandated the teaching of African and Afro-Brazilian history in high schools and universities. Despite these advances under the ruling Workers’ Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, PT) of President ‘Lula’ da Silva, after two years Afro-Brazilians have not seen any major social or political changes which have benefited their communities. Moreover, the 2005 political crisis, which exposed corruption within the PT, has disappointed Brazilians and has shifted time and resources away from social programmes as the PT defends itself against allegations of corruption.

Brazil has also been in the forefront of affirmative action programmes, although not without controversy. Education Minister Paulo de Renato Souza voiced his concern that unprepared students might enter universities and he has called on the Inter-American Development Bank for US$10 million to help prepare Afro-Brazilian students for entrance exams. President of the High Court of Justice Paulo Costa Leite expressed concern that quotas represented an artificial way to allow black people to ascend in society, and that this may aggravate prejudice, although the federal court has declared the quotas constitutional.

Debates about reparations and affirmative action programmes for Afro-descendants continue to engender fierce debates across the region.

Colombia
Most Afro-Latin American activists and black NGOs support positive discriminatory practices in education and employment that benefit poor black communities but they warn against imitating...
Above: Afro-Brazilian woman, Salvador da Bahia, Brazil. Jeremy Horner/Panos Pictures
programmes in the United States, which they see as strengthening the middle class but doing little to ameliorate the problems of the masses of poor blacks. Afro-Columbians gathered over 23–25 September 2005 in the first International Seminar on ‘Truth, Justice, and Reparation for Afro-Colombian People for the Crimes of Slavery and Contemporary Violence’.

In Colombia, the 1993 Federal Law 70, which assigns seats in its National House of Representatives to Afro-Colombians, remains fully intact and has empowered Afro-Colombians and their communities, despite the ongoing civil war which has adversely affected them. Colombian law also acknowledges collective land rights for Afro-Colombian communities and mandates that Afro-Colombian history be taught in the secondary school curriculum. Constitutional laws, which have ensured Afro-Colombian political leadership on the national and regional levels, has also led to internationally visible organizations working on behalf of Afro-Colombians such as the Afro-Colombian Mayors’ Federation (Mr Oscar Gamboa, International Affairs Director) and the Congressional Black Associates (Yul Edwards, President).

Positive developments
Other positive developments have been reported in countries such as Honduras where authorities are creating a national programme for indigenous peoples and people of African descent. The Peruvian government established the National Commission on Andean Amazonic and Afro-Peruvian Peoples (CONAPA), although the body has few resources and no legal authority. Both Peru and Ecuador have anti-discrimination laws on the books. The 1997 Anti-Discriminatory Law remains important for Peruvians, as does the 2001 Afro-Ecuadorian People Law, although both remain largely symbolic since citizens have not been able to take human rights violators to court. NGOs throughout the region continue to play an important part in highlighting the needs of the Afro-Latin communities and in raising awareness among people of African descent. Through the Internet and cross-national alliances, many have garnered resources and acquired expertise that can be invested in the community.

NGOs such as Geledés in São Paulo Brazil, MundoAfro in Uruguay, the Centre of Afro-Costa Rican Women, and the Ecuadorian NGO Grupo Africa Mía continue to work for the rights of women of African descent who face discrimination in all sectors of Latin American society.

At the Congress of Legislators of African Descent, for example, delegates demanded that Ecuador discuss and approve a statute of racial equality. Throughout 2005, and Afro-Venezuelan NGOs have pressured the Chavez government to collect data on black people in the next census. In 2005, the Network of Afro-Venezuelan organizations, made up of 30 groups from around the country, petitioned for reform of the Constitution so that it recognizes multi-ethnicity and respects Afro-Venezuelan rights.

Human rights violations
Human rights violations among Latin American populations remain alarmingly high, although the situation varies considerably from country to country. In countries such as Brazil, Colombia and Venezuela, with large populations of African descent, abuses range from disappearances, extra-judicial executions, torture and unequal treatment in the economic, social and political spheres. In others, such as Argentina, Mexico, Paraguay and Uruguay, where Afro-descendants constitute small minorities, marginalization, prejudice and invisibility still plague hundreds of law-abiding citizens because of the colour of their skin. Reports of discrimination against Afro-Cubans, particularly in the Cuban tourist industry, continue to mount, although in the absence of a thriving civil society this issue remains unexplored on the island. In Brazil, Cuba, Peru, Venezuela and elsewhere, activists are joined by popular musicians, particularly rappers, who denounce racism in their art.

State-sponsored brutality
Government agencies have proven ineffective in curbing violence and in enforcing national and regional laws, while human rights violators continue to go largely unpunished. In Brazil, for example, in 2004 and 2005 hundreds of civilians were killed by police, the majority of them of African descent, allegedly as a result of gun battles, in the pursuit of criminals, or in the government’s war against drug smugglers. In one highly publicized case, police murdered the black dentist Flávio Ferreira Sant’Ana from the poor São Paulo neighbourhood of Santana because he was mistaken for a criminal. Police
reportedly planted a gun on his body and reported that he was killed in a shoot-out. His family was subsequently harassed because they made a formal complaint against the police officers who shot Sant’Ana, and argued that the shooting was racially motivated. Police brutality in the overcrowded prisons of Brazil, where people of African descent are over-represented, continues to be a major problem that has led to protest and riots.

The April 2004 prison riots in the Urso Blanco penitentiary system in the Amazon state of Rondónia, which resulted in inmate-to-inmate violence and 14 deaths, is unfortunately not an anomaly. The prison, which was built for 360 inmates, held 1,000. In addition to the racial violence perpetrated by state authorities, paramilitary death squads also continue to flaunt their power. In August 2004, death squads in the city of São Paulo severely beat 15 homeless people, 12 of whom were of African descent. Six of the wounded died in what officials called the most brutal attack on the homeless in Brazil since the 1992 Candelaria massacre in the city of Rio de Janeiro (reports of the number of victims of African descent vary). A 2003 study by Brazil’s Economic Research Institute Foundation found that there are 10,000 homeless who sleep in the São Paulo streets, squares, underpasses, thoroughfares and cemeteries. Afro-Brazilians make up the majority of this figure.

In Venezuela, the popular classes, including many Afro-Venezuelans, have supported the government of Hugo Chavez, although his support among Afro-Venezuelans is hardly unanimous. As in Brazil, Venezuela suffers from violent crime that disproportionately affects people of African descent. Police often take the law into their own hands, abusing their power and authority in poor neighbourhoods where Afro-Venezuelans are in the majority. Black Venezuelans are also over-represented in prisons where deplorable conditions and overcrowding lead to similar problems as in Brazil.

Discrimination
Jorge Ramírez, a lawyer who heads the Black Association for the Defense and Advancement of Human Rights in Peru, has documented the unfair treatment of Peruvians of African descent in the labour force and the stereotypical and limited portrayal of black people in the Peruvian media. ‘Racism in Peru is not in the laws,’ according to Ramírez. ‘It’s in the mentality of the people.’ Uruguayan sociologist Susana Rudolf’s study in 2003 and 2004, reached similar conclusions in Uruguay. According to Rudolf, racism inhibits the advancement of Uruguayans of African descent in school and in the labour force. In this small country of just over 3 million, the black population is estimated at about 180,000, the majority of whom make up the poorest strata of Uruguayan society.

In Mexico and Central America, the minority rights situation is mixed. In Panama, black people remain conspicuously absent from positions of political and economic power. The city of Colon, with its majority of African descent (many Afro-descendants of English-speaking migrants from the 19th and early 20th century), continues to suffer from the lack of government services. The Garifuna,