

Healing our racial wounds: re-humanizing diversity in the COVID-19 era

UNESCO regional expert consultation series on racism and discriminations

Racism has continued to proliferate in many societies despite the progress made in the scientific fields that dispel its foundation, as well as in the development of adequate legal frameworks. “Race”, as a social construct, has been misused and instrumentalized, and has legitimized acts and behaviours that lead to discriminations, inequalities and injustice. The continuing struggle to fight racism has been a permanent effort by governments and institutions, but the battle is not close to be won.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the impact that discrimination and racism have in our societies, when the most disadvantaged groups (including based on racial features) are being disproportionately affected by the pandemic and its economic impact. But this is not a new challenge. The long-standing legacies of racism and prejudice bequeathed by slavery have prevailed and are still uncovering the wounds that taint the moral fibre of our societies. Instead of thriving in the multicultural societies that characterize the 21st century, humanity has squandered the richness of its diversity and has normalized racism and discriminations in many fronts.

Although the extent of the socio/economic repercussions of COVID-19 in minority communities still cannot be determined on a global scale, the pandemic has been disproportionately affecting these populations across the globe.

In some cities in the United States, this is relatively well documented by the figures. For instance, in Chicago, as of early April 2020, 72% of people who died of coronavirus were black, although only one-third of the city’s population is. Based on the findings of the Centers for Disease Control, the Marshall Project revealed the effects of COVID-19 in deaths in the United States in 2020: they increased by 35% among Asian-Americans, and 31% among African-Americans.¹ In addition, the Pew Research Center reported in July 2020 that about four in ten adults in the US say that it has become more common for people to express racist views since the pandemic began.²

In the Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) region, although the actual number of COVID-19 infections among the Afro-descendant population is not known due to the fact that the epidemiologic records available do not include data disaggregated by ethnicity, race and gender, African descendants are more affected by the pandemic than other communities.³ For instance, statistics in Brazil show that Afro-Brazilians are more likely to have severe respiratory symptoms that are lethal (more than 20%)⁴

In the UK, there is emerging evidence on the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on black, Asian and minority ethnic communities (BAME).⁵ Indeed, “not only up to April 30 among 6574 patients with COVID-19 in intensive care, one third were from non-white ethnic groups, even though ethnic minorities make up only 13% of the population as a whole; but also of 106 COVID-19 fatalities in health workers some two thirds (63%) were in BAME people (up to April 22, 2020).”

The pandemic also poses a serious threat to women’s employment and livelihoods as it deepens pre-existing inequalities, and exposes cracks in social, political and economic systems. From

¹ <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2020/08/21/covid-19-s-toll-on-people-of-color-is-worse-than-we-knew>

² <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2020/07/01/many-black-and-asian-americans-say-they-have-experienced-discrimination-amid-the-covid-19-outbreak/>

³ <https://lac.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/2-Covid-Afrodescendientes-ENG.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.latinamerica.undp.org/content/rblac/en/home/blog/2020/ser-afrodescendiente-durante-el-covid-19--exposicion-y-desiguald.html>

⁵ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanres/article/PIIS2213-2600\(20\)30228-9/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanres/article/PIIS2213-2600(20)30228-9/fulltext)

access to health services, social protection and digital technologies, to unpaid care work, the impacts of COVID-19 are exacerbated for many around the world. Women with caring responsibilities, informal workers, low-income families and youth are among the hardest hit.

Furthermore, in times of quarantine and social isolation, women and girls are more exposed to domestic abuse and gender-based violence, including sexual assault and rape, as they find themselves confined with their abusers. The UN estimates a rise up to 30% in domestic violence as a result of the necessary confinement measures that are taken to prevent the spread of the disease⁶.

At the outset of the pandemic, incidents of abject stigma and discrimination, including hate speech, have surfaced against populations who are or are perceived to be of Asian descent, and resulted in the #IAmNotAVirus movement. The COVID-19 crisis also paved the way for scapegoating and brought to fore the resurgence of far-right movements that spread hate and violence. Today, the global outrage that has heard the voices of citizens marching #BlackLivesMatter in different cities around the world, has unmasked the systemic racism that our contemporary world is afflicted with and has brought to the fore the disproportionate inequalities and discriminations that these affected populations have endured over time. According to E. Tendayi Achiume who is the UN Special Rapporteurs on contemporary forms of racism, “many of the groups who have been subject to racist and xenophobic attacks because associated with having spread the disease, were already subjects to latent intolerance and xenophobia. As it is not uncommon that in emergency situations such as the current pandemic, underlying problems that exist are exacerbated, these episodes might recur in any time of crisis. Thus, it is of the utmost importance to tackle the root causes of intolerance and racism taking into account the specificities of each context.

As the custodian of UNESCO’s work to promote social inclusion and fight against racism and discriminations, UNESCO’s Social and Human Sciences Sector is upscaling its ongoing work on racism and discriminations and will develop new action- and results-oriented initiatives in light of the fact that the racism trends and expressions are not improving, and have caused major anti-racist global movements. Revolving around four pillars (normative framework, knowledge base, capacity development and advocacy & partnership building), UNESCO’s cutting-edge networks and resources related to racism and discriminations will be leveraged in order to build an evidence base, and to seek insights on innovative ways that can be developed to counter racism and discriminations in the current context.

Leveraging UNESCO’s mandate and networks

UNESCO has been fighting against racism for more than 70 years following its launch of a global programme against racism with world-renowned intellectuals such as Claude Lévi-Strauss in 1949. The resulting *Declaration of Race* was first published by UNESCO in 1950. It led to a series of similar statements on racism, including the landmark Declaration on Race and Racial Prejudice (1978), which argued for implementing a number of policies in order to combat racism and inequalities, and has continued to be a global reference on “race” in academic and scientific communities. The essence of Article 1 of the Declaration, which states that “*any theory which involves the claim that racial or ethnic groups are inherently superior or inferior*”... “*has no scientific foundation*” still resonates until today.

Following the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance held in Durban in 2001, UNESCO adopted the Integrated Strategy to Combat Racism, Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in 2003. Over the years, the Declaration of

⁶ https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/webinar_inclusion_19may2020_rev.pdf

Race and this Strategy have guided UNESCO in its work in fighting against racism. As an outcome of this Strategy, UNESCO launched in 2004 the International Coalition of Cities against Racism (ICCAR) to mobilize cities against racism, which paved the way for the establishment of 7 regional and national coalitions in Europe (2004), Canada (2005), Africa (2006), Asia Pacific (2006); Latin America and the Caribbean (2007), Arab region (2008) and the USA (2013). Capacity-building initiatives, such as training workshops and sharing of good practices, and advocacy efforts, such as awareness-raising campaigns and travelling exhibitions, have been implemented by UNESCO in cooperation with the member cities in order to advance the global commitment against racism. The International Coalition was revitalized in 2014 and renamed the International Coalition of Inclusive and Sustainable Cities – ICCAR in order to align itself with the Sustainable Development Goals and Habitat III’s New Urban Agenda. It has grown to become an active international front against racism and discriminations with over 500 members across the globe. ICCAR’s key achievement is that it has become a global reference as a unique city-level platform in the UN system that undertakes a wide range of initiatives – ranging from policymaking, capacity-building to awareness-raising activities – and a laboratory of good practices for inclusive policymaking approaches.

In 2012, UNESCO published “Fighting racism and discrimination: identifying and sharing good practices in the International Coalition of Cities” which provided an overview of how cities of limited capacities and resources have found means to address racism and discrimination. By highlighting good practices being conducted by member cities, UNESCO continues to track case studies of effective policy responses and programmes that bolster inclusion and diversity in the urban space, by using the Ten-Point Plan of Action of the coalitions.

In November 2019, UNESCO launched the Master Class Series against Racism and Discriminations which aims to empower students to become youth champions in their own schools and communities, and spread awareness on how to deconstruct racism and discriminations. With the objective of creating impact on the ground, UNESCO has designed a monitoring system that involves follow-up evaluation schemes with the school establishments that have so far participated. The success of the first editions has resulted in the scaling up of this Series in various regions.

In 2020, UNESCO established the webinar series “Inclusion in the time of COVID-19: addressing racism, discrimination and exclusion” which invited policymakers, academic experts and practitioners on the frontlines of the crisis. The series revealed the importance of bridging the academic/expert perspective on racism and discriminations to the policy responses of national/local governments, as well as to the fundamental needs assessment mechanism targeting the most affected populations. The discussions emphasized that the pandemic is an accelerator and indicator of pre-existing imaginaries and forms of discrimination, including the fast-spreading epidemic of racial discrimination, hate speech, disinformation and conspiracy theories. Policy responses, guided by social values, are thus called to confront societal challenges and include the protection of vulnerable populations and the collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders. Special attention must also be granted to women and girls, asylum seekers, minority groups, and persons with disabilities. The webinars also underlined the importance of encouraging global action to tackle the pandemic, through an effective multi-level dialogue and coordination mechanisms among a wide range of stakeholders.

UNESCO’s Slave Route Project: Resistance, Liberty, Heritage has raised awareness on the transformations and cultural interactions that have resulted from the history of slavery, and has contributed to a culture of peace by promoting reflection on inclusion, cultural pluralism, intercultural dialogue and the construction of new identities and citizenships. UNESCO’s Global Citizenship Education programme fosters knowledge, skills and behaviours that help learners

become critical thinkers, responsible and active global citizens who value human dignity and respect for all, reject antisemitism, racism and other forms of prejudice.

To fill the data gap related to racism and discrimination, UNESCO has launched a partnership with the University of Harvard's Department of Sociology to conduct the Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) COVID-19 Project, a multi-method project that investigates how COVID-19 is shaping the lives of AAPI communities in the United States, focusing on the intensification of racism and xenophobia that this group has endured. By sharing the data collected, findings and messages with ICCAR member cities and other partners, the AAPI project will contribute to the elaboration of more inclusive policies aimed at supporting the AAPI communities, and contribute materials to the Master Class Series on Racism and Discriminations.

Given the lack of COVID-related data in Africa, UNESCO is partnering with the Association of Canadian Studies and Metropolis in collaboration with African cities in ICCAR to conduct the project entitled COVID-19 Social and Economic Impacts in Sub Saharan Africa. The project aims at identifying key issues, indicators and socio-demographics in order to generate evidence-based responses that address the social and economic dimensions of the COVID-19 crisis in Sub-Saharan Africa, including discriminations and inequalities.

UNESCO regional expert consultation series: what is it?

UNESCO's Social and Human Sciences Sector, with the collaboration of field offices and programme sectors, proposes to organize a series of six regional consultations to deconstruct racism, and unpack the societal challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic related to racism and discriminations. Today's global conjuncture calls for a deep reflection on what direction the international community wants to take in the midst of a renewed emergence of racist purposes. These online consultations also seek to contribute to the global rethinking in the lead-up to the 20th anniversary in 2021 of the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, as well as to the International Decade for People of African Descent (2015-2024). Moreover, UNESCO will develop a tool to identify the institutional structures, including legal and cultural frameworks, that contribute to the fight against racism and discriminations.

These discussions will focus on the intersectionality of discriminations, a crucial transversal angle in the analysis of social phenomena, that will delve into gender-based discrimination, as well as other contemporary forms. The consultations will also identify good practices to reduce discrimination and racism, through laws, legislations, awareness campaigns, and educational initiatives, and also discuss the specific research on these topics that need to be pursued.

From September to October 2020, a regional expert consultation will be organized weekly featuring high-level scholars, philosophers, thought leaders and practitioners of international renown who will be solicited to contribute their analysis of the current conjuncture and provide their perspectives and recommendations on the way forward. The consultations will be organized around six round table discussions featuring three to four speakers, as well as a moderator, in order to contextualize the debates and take advantage of regional expertise. In addition, a number of high-level discussions with prominent leaders will be conducted using a one-on-one consultation format. These expert consultations will be open to the public, specifically targeting national and local decision-makers including UNESCO's Member States and city networks, the academic and scientific communities such as UNESCO Chairs, the NGO communities, civil society, media and the private sector.

A global meeting will be organized in December 2020 in order to take stock of the outcomes of the regional expert consultations and chart a roadmap for future UNESCO actions, including the major 20 Anniversary Celebration of the Durban Conference. A communication strategy, aiming

to level up the visibility of the process, will be established to support these above-mentioned activities.

Outcomes:

The regional expert consultations will result in a set of recommendations that will guide UNESCO's future work in combatting racism and discriminations.

UNESCO's renewed effort seeks to nurture new effective actions. The regional consultations will be UNESCO's response to the worrisome trends of inequality (that cut across racial discrimination); and the disproportionate impact of COVID in certain groups. It also considers the global movement against racism, in a context where populism and nationalism is on the high. There is an urgent need to tackle this.

Each consultation will aim to address a set of questions that will examine the current regional situation, assess the enablers for collective action, and establish actionable recommendations.

The proposed questions that will be raised during the consultations are the following:

- How has racism evolved up to the current COVID-19 context?
- What intersectional discriminations are emerging and are re-emerging during the crisis? Up to what extent have racial and gender-based discrimination converged?
- What institutional structures, including legal and cultural frameworks, can contribute to the fight against racism and discriminations? And what effective policies?
- What are the new models of ethical and values-based governance to address the current racial dynamics fomented by the crisis?
- What policy options are available to guarantee inclusive and whole-of-community approaches that prevent racism and discrimination?
- What national and local synergies can be created to fasten the seeming disconnect between these two levels of governance?
- What roles do academia, the civil society, women and youth leaders, the artistic communities and international organizations play in contributing to establish adequate policy responses to thwart racism?
- How can the role of women and youth be optimized in the struggle against racism and discriminations?
- What tools and methodologies could be leveraged in order to address different types of discrimination?
- What is the role of UNESCO in the present conjuncture? What way forward should it take?

Creating enabling environments to defend the fundamental rights of all populations, especially men and women who are stigmatized due to the colour of their skin, and to allow them to thrive as citizens, requires a recalibration of governance approaches and societal structures. The current episodes of hate and violence bring to the spotlight the legitimate questioning of deep-seated injustice and inequalities that corrode societies. By bringing together the multicultural, diverse yet interconnected populations and their perspectives in the dialogue process, the COVID-19 context gives us the opportunity to rekindle the humanist spirit that takes away the fear and ignorance of the "other", and puts humanity back at the center of political, economic, social and cultural systems.