

## Afro-Ecuadorians

### Profile

According to the 2001 census, Afro-Ecuadorians are 604,009, or 5 per cent of the total population. However, Afro-Ecuadorian organizations argue that this number is inaccurate due to problems with self-classification. They estimate Ecuador's black population at ten per cent, or nearly double the official statistics. Living mostly in the northern coastal province of Esmeraldas and in the south-central coastal region, about two-thirds of Afro-Ecuadorians now live in urban zones. Although Afro-Ecuadorians have distinct cultural traditions, there is little recognition of their contribution to Ecuadorian society.

### Historical context

Slave ships first arrived in Ecuadorian ports in 1553 and slaves worked on plantations and in gold mines. Although slavery was abolished at independence in 1822, the descendents of enslaved Africans continued to suffer the consequences of that socio-economic system. One of the first Afro-Ecuadorian organizations, ASONE was founded in 1988 to reassert Afro-Ecuadorian dignity and to reverse the ecological destruction caused by lumber companies and shrimp farms of mangrove swamps vital to the coastal region. Afro-Ecuadorian consciousness became heightened in 1992 in response to the 500th anniversary of the European arrival in the Americas, where people of African descent were excluded from the narrative.

In 1998, leveraging international support and their connections with pan-Afro-Latin American networks, Afro-Ecuadorian organizations were successful in pressuring the Ecuadorian government to recognize them as a distinct ethnic group in the new constitution. Article 85 gives Afro-Ecuadorians similar rights to cultural patrimony and collective territory. Similarly, in 1998 President Alarcón created the government agency Corporation of Afro-Ecuadorian Development (CODAE) to address issues facing this population.

### Current issues

Starting in the late 1990s, there have been some significant changes in the situation of Afro-Ecuadorians. The 2001 census was the first in Ecuadorian history to include a question designed to account for the Afro-Ecuadorian population. Similarly, 2 October has been declared Afro-Ecuadorian Day. Nevertheless, many of the policy reforms have been largely symbolic. Although the constitution guarantees collective rights for indigenous people, the articles related to Afro-Ecuadorians are ambiguous. Consequently, Afro-Ecuadorian NGOs worked closely with Afro-Ecuadorian Congressman Rafael Erazo to draft a law further elaborating the collective rights for Afro-Ecuadorians. Approved by congress in May of 2006, this legislation still awaits final approval from President Palacios.

While Afro-Ecuadorians fair considerably better than indigenous people on nearly every socio-economic indicator, they still lag behind their white/mestizo counterparts. In 2001, 70 per cent of Afro-Ecuadorians did not have their basic needs satisfied (NBI) compared to the national average of 61 per

cent. Moreover, there is evidence that this group still faces regional inequalities and racial discrimination, particularly in urban areas. In 2006 the existence of blacks in Ecuador was brought to centre stage when it was revealed that two-thirds of the Ecuadorian World Cup team was of African descent. This was the first time in history that Ecuador qualified for the World Cup.

Afro-Ecuadorian activists have been effective in advocating for rights for Afro-Ecuadorians as well as raising consciousness among this group. Key umbrella organizations such as the National Afro-Ecuadorian Confederation and the National Coordinator of Black Women have had a presence in domestic politics as well as international policy circles. Afro-Ecuadorian women's organizations have been particularly effective, raising other important issues to address the specific concerns of black women. This has included the elaboration of innovative programs related to health, violence, work conditions and self esteem among Afro-Ecuadorian women.