

# UNPAD SURVEY ON PERCEPTION OF RACISM IN THE UN SYSTEM

## INTRODUCTION

### | What is UNPAD?

General Assembly Resolutions 68/237 of 7 February 2014 on the Proclamation of the International Decade for People of African Descent and 69/16 of 1 December 2014 on the Programme of activities for the implementation of the International Decade for People of African Descent called upon Member States and international organizations to take action to promote equality and inclusion of persons of African descent and to directly engage with persons of African descent for the purposes of doing so.

In direct response to the call for action by the resolutions, some 150 staff members across the United Nations system, pledged their support to the goals of United Nations People of African Descent (UNPAD, formerly known as UNSONG), mainly to establish a platform for the coordination of the engagement between the UN Administration and UN personnel of African descent, pursuant to resolutions 68/237 and 69/16, and in so doing, promote equal inclusion, further recognition and facilitate access for persons of African descent in the United Nations system while increasing the visibility to the issues facing them.

### | The need for a survey on experiences of racial discrimination in the United Nations

UNPAD has been seeking to engage the UN Administration in this debate about racial discrimination and racial bias in the United Nations since its creation some four years ago. Sadly, the catalyst for the debate has been the tragic loss of a man's life – that man being George Floyd who was brutally murdered by police officers in the United States of America – our host nation. This has led to global attention to the issue of racism that is long overdue and a recognition of the importance of the Black Lives Matter movement and its relevance in every sphere of our world including within the walls of the United Nations.

UNPAD is encouraged by the Secretary-General's commitment to "an honest conversation on racism" in the United Nations and in our effort to inform this conversation, we launched a short survey that was open to all personnel of the United Nations, its agencies, funds and programmes on their experiences of racism, whether directly experienced or witnessed. The purpose of the survey is to act as a starting point for our honest conversation in the United Nations. Its objective is not to provide all the answers but to hold a mirror to our Organization, founded on the most noble of principles – to force it to recognize that we do not always live up to our values as expressed in Article 1(3) of our Charter of "respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion".

Based on a data driven appreciation of where the organization currently stands in the spectrum of racial sensitivity and needed action, taking into account the voices of those historically known to be most victimized and disenfranchised on the basis of race, the organization is better placed to take informed corrective action. The UNPAD survey, the first of its kind in the United Nations to address racism and mobilize response from people of African descent, is unique in this respect.



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The UNPAD Survey was launched on 22 June 2020 and was widely distributed to UN entities, Agencies, Funds and Programmes. It was shared with all senior management of the UN and some Under-Secretaries-General distributed it formally to their staff. The survey was open for only two weeks and received as many as 2,857 responses. Initially launched in the English language, it was later translated in French and disseminated among colleagues in French-Speaking duty stations.

The Survey questions were drafted and approved by the UNPAD Steering Committee. The collection of data, analysis and report drafting were handled by external consultants.

Of the respondents, the vast majority, 2,292 respondents self-identified as African or Afro descendant. Respondents were given an opportunity to describe their heritage which represented a vast range of Afro-descendent identities such as Afro-Latino, Afro-Polynesian, Asians of African descent, Afro-Caribbean and mixed heritage. There were 122 respondents who self-identified as European, 113 as Middle-Eastern and 143 who self-identified as Asian. A total of 435 respondents self-identified as not being Black/African descendants or of mixed Black/African heritage. The overwhelming number of respondents, 1,944 however, self-identified as African.

The highest number of respondents were from Agencies, Funds and Programmes (997) respondents while Field missions represented the second highest number of respondents with (686).

The grade, level and contract modality of respondents were widely varied: The majority of respondents were at the professional level (1,058). There was a significant number of General Service staff (644) and many more contractual types and levels including USGs, UNVs and interns. The survey gained the confidence of senior managers. Six (6) USGs and Five (5) ASGs completed the survey.

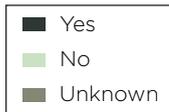
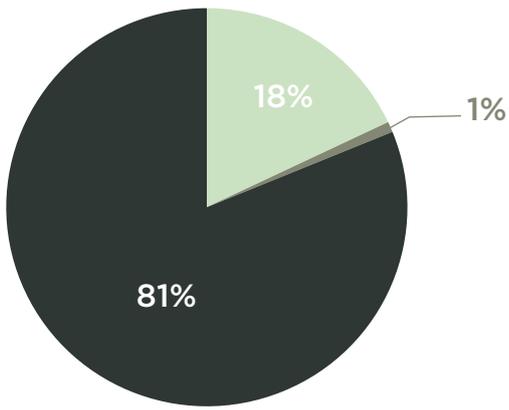
The demographic of respondents to the UNPAD survey demonstrates that the issue of racial discrimination and racial bias is widely witnessed, experienced and United Nations personnel, especially those of African descent see a need for it to be addressed.

On the question of whether colleagues had experienced racism, a majority said they had (52%). Some of the 47% that said they had not, also provided examples of witnessing racism even if they did not experience it themselves. In the section on examples of racism experienced, there were a plethora of comments like:

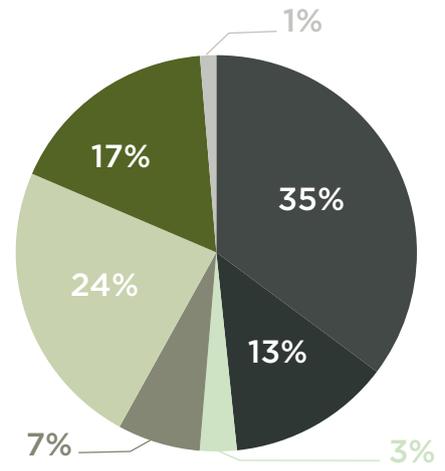


The open-ended question on examples of racial discrimination provide insight into the experiences of our UN colleagues of African descent. While it would be easy to describe them as anecdotal, we must be cognizant of the fact that whether subject to the scrutiny of our investigative services or not, these are perceptions that are held by UN personnel. 1,455 respondents provided a range of examples of racism – some providing multiple examples illustrating their personal or witnessed experiences.

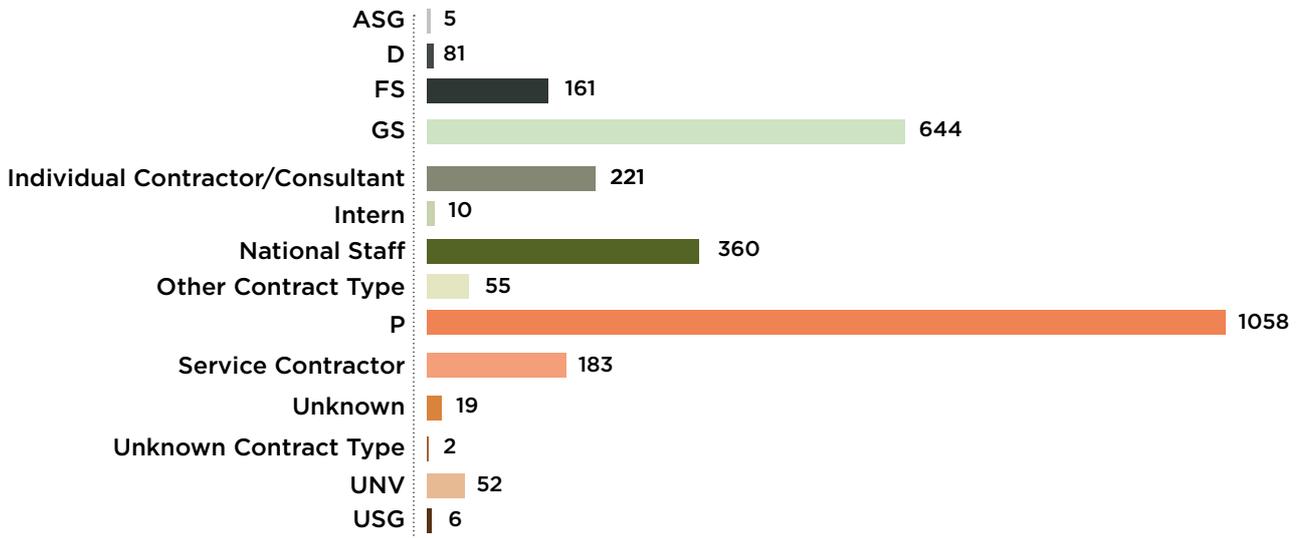
**Count on African or Afro-Descendant**



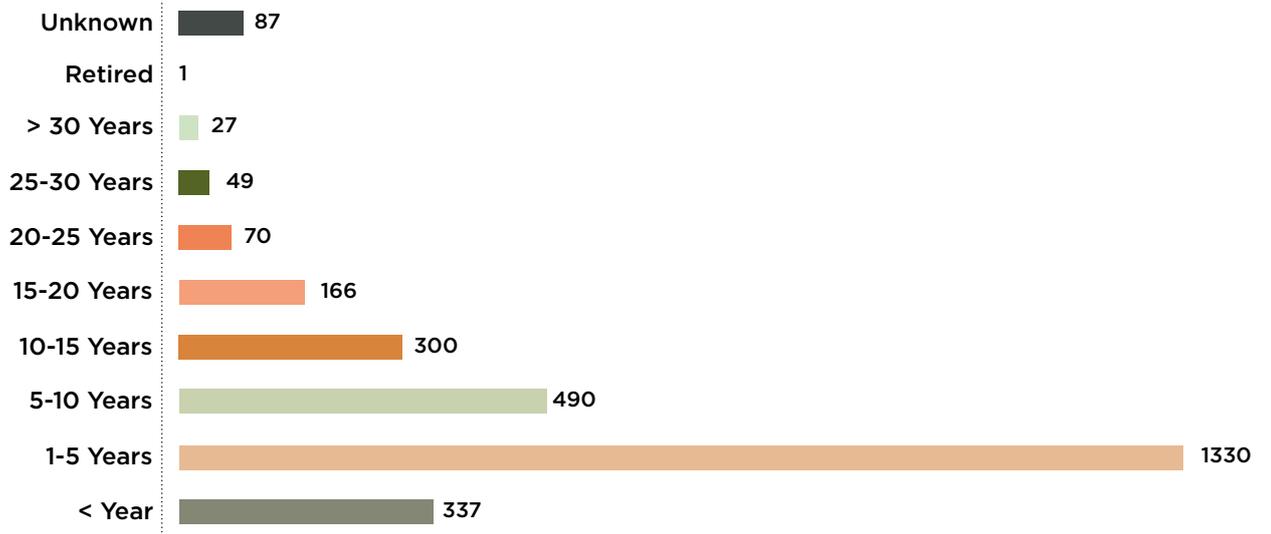
**Current Office**



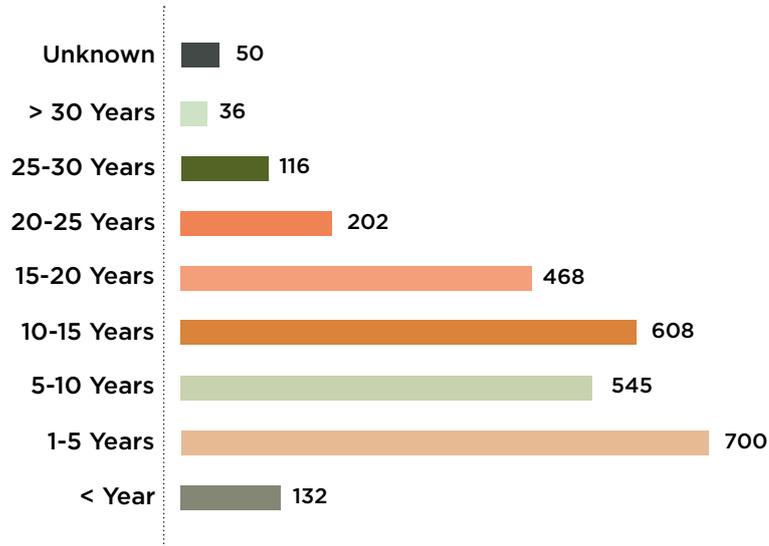
**Current Grade/Level**



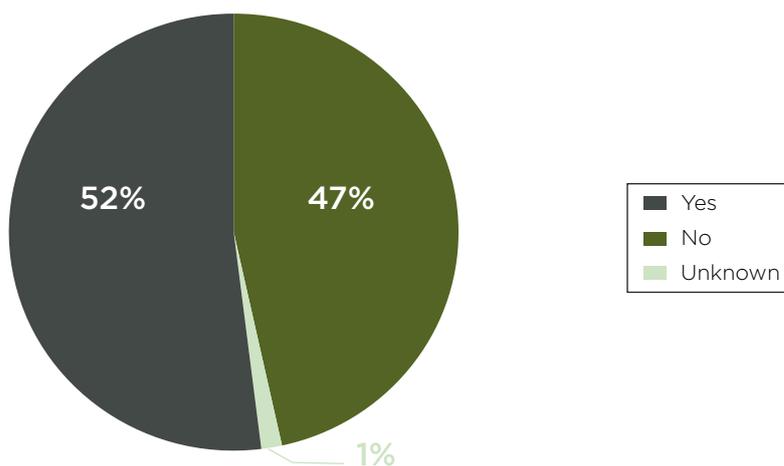
### Years at Current Duty Station



### Years worked at the UN



### Experience of Racism



## QUALITATIVE RESULTS

### Efforts made by UN entities, agencies, funds and programmes

A large majority of respondents stated that there is nothing or very little that has been done to tackle institutional racism and racial discrimination. However, some respondents, recognized the following measures taken to address racism in their respective UN agencies/entities:

Trainings related to discrimination

Leadership Dialogues

Events celebrating diversity

Emails/Internal memos

Promulgation of core values

Ongoing survey

### Examples of racism

The examples shared of racial discrimination and racial bias experienced by respondents reflect the most poignant aspect of the UNPAD survey. Many colleagues took time to share and relive painful experiences of racism in various aspects of their work - from recruitment, to their day to day engagement with colleagues, to their ability to progress in their career. UNPAD believes that these lived experiences of a significant number of the UN workforce warrant serious attention by the UN administration.

#### Recruitment

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- *It's very hard to see Africans appointed at HQ level.*
- *Under qualified White candidates are often given jobs over qualified Black ones.*
- *The most important decisions such as the recruitment of an international staff are based on racial criteria.*
- *When a recent recruitment exercise resulted in only Whites being selected, I was told it was because there were no qualified black people.*
- *I am well qualified and been stuck as a P3 for 10 years.*
- *Higher positions are not given to Africans and in some department there is no race or geographical balance.*
- *There is a high proportion of people of WEOG nationality in the organization and notably at higher levels.*

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## Career development

- *There is a lack of promotion opportunities for qualified people of colour.*
- *I am constantly denied an opportunity to go on mission – this is seen as a reward for my white colleagues.*
- *As an African, I am given the impression that my career path is limited to dangerous duty stations.*
- *The staff evaluation system can be manipulated to deprive opportunities.*
- *When it comes to downsizing, staff of African descent are often the first to be targeted.*
- *In a mission where I worked, white UNVs would be quickly converted to international staff positions. The pattern of racial promotion has never been a secret.*
- *Opportunities are denied to Africans whereas a 99% white team will be sent on Rapid Deployment Mission even to countries in Africa.*
- *Non inclusion in training programmes that require travel outside the mission.*
- *Despite my Western education, I am still not perceived as a good drafter because English is not my first language – but I am from a former British colony.*

## Disrespect

- *A white colleague refused to report to a Black Supervisor.*
- *The white staff in my office did not accept my leadership and would systematically undermine me.*
- *Whites at a lower grade do not accept Black supervisors (P3/P4 level) and prefer to report to more senior supervisors who tend to be White.*
- *As a team leader, I get described as aggressive and abrasive if I put my foot down.*
- *Gaslighting and general disrespect to local staff.*
- *You see people of European descent disrespect senior colleagues of African descent.*

## Retaliation/Disproportionate Sanctions

- *Many Black colleagues are sent to particularly difficult duty stations – in the deep field as retaliation.*
- *I was told to hand over my duties to a junior White colleague and redeployed to a remote field location.*
- *Blacks receive the most severe punishment.*
- *I witnessed a woman of colour get punished and kicked out ruthlessly for reporting bad procurement practices.*
- *I was transferred to a remote area as punishment because of my race.*
- *The feeling of everyone in the office is that the Westerner has benefitted from senior management's indulgence and given a second chance while the African has been punished harshly for the same thing.*
- *I face retaliation for reporting wrongdoing – abuse of power and mismanagement of resources.*
- *There is retaliation if you stand up for yourself by damaging your reputation and blacklisting you.*
- *I have been threatened with job termination and retaliated against when I challenged decisions that put me in a compromising position in relation to my professional integrity.*

## Exclusion

- *I was once told that it would be better not to go to a donor meeting as they would be more receptive to a European.*
- *I am often excluded from key decision-making opportunities.*
- *My input is routinely disregarded not because of merit but because it is coming from me.*
- *I am often rendered invisible by managers in meetings.*
- *Sometimes there is a lack of communication from my Supervisor.*
- *I am not included in many shared folders that are used in the office for internal communication.*
- *In recent years, my organization has stopped giving delegation of authority or Officer in Charge to national staff.*
- *I am often left out of the room even though I have the technical expertise.*
- *Africans are always excluded in consultations.*
- *I was asked to give a colleague my responsibilities because he was White and from a donor country. I was told staff like me are not able to attract funding.*
- *I have been excluded from interesting assignments and official business travel and replaced in the middle of assignments involving travel with no explanation.*

## Microaggressions

- *My colleagues referred to local staff as “these people”.*
- *I would be dismissed in meetings, even when I made valid contributions.*
- *As an Afro-Arab, I am constantly told your English is so good.*
- *I am seen as aggressive because of my Caribbean heritage.*
- *I was told that my duty station was not for people of my colour.*
- *The tone in meetings towards Africans is often condescending.*
- *A colleague assumed that because I am of African descent, I must be working within the African branch of my organization.*
- *I’ve been told my face doesn’t fit.*
- *Some managers will remind you that you are being recruited because of geographical advantage rather than your competencies.*
- *A colleague once remarked that I did not need a lift because I could run fast because of my heritage.*
- *I was having a discussion with a colleague who mentioned casually that people should stick to their own kind.*
- *During the Leadership Dialogue, Let’s Speak about it! There was reference made to “deepest darkest Africa” by UN staff.*
- *I’ve been told you speak so well. You speak like you have been educated in another country.*

## Higher/ Unrealistic expectations

- *Sometimes I feel like I am being set up to fail – given tasks without the tools to do them.*
- *African staff were requested to leave a mission based on allegations of misconduct while misconduct by other races were simply ignored.*
- *There is a big difference in the administration of justice and performance appraisal vis-à-vis African staff.*
- *Workload distribution – being given a lot more work than White colleagues.*
- *I was given the task of setting up an office which I did successfully and then trained a number of colleagues, I often worked overtime without compensation and was never considered for a promotion. Instead a new colleague of European descent who came in later to support me was considered for a promotion.*
- *Some staff members get heavier workload than others and have to work harder to prove that they can deliver.*
- *Added workload unrelated to TORs.*
- *Black officers are expected to carry the bulk of the workload which others take credit for.*

## Harassment/Discrimination

- *I have heard colleagues being referred to as monkeys on occasion.*
- *Once a colleague referred to Africans as still living in trees.*
- *I was harassed by my own staff and encouraged by my manager to resign without a proper process.*
- *I found a way to test the racism in my organization by drafting something and asking my European junior to send it – it received praise whereas when I would submit my work myself, I would face negative comments.*
- *A white colleague once asked me “Can you speak English” while mocking my accent.*
- *Being a man of colour, young and visibly LGBTI, there was an issue of intersectionality and I was disrespected. Most of the issues were subtle, mostly relating to unconscious bias.*
- *There is a general bias that means Blacks cannot hold certain positions in an office, such as finance without being supervised by a White Supervisor because they are too corrupt.*
- *I was told by my manager that as a woman of African descent, UN colleagues would not listen to me when I speak.*
- *When I complained about blatant racism, I was told I was being too sensitive and that I had no sense of humour.*
- *I was the only Black Colleague when my new boss came in, he decided that I should be reassigned to another office. Once I moved a Non-African replaced me.*
- *They refer to us as unicorns when they are forced to recruit “a women from the South” or “straight from the boat”.*
- *Different rules and considerations are applied to me as a woman from South Asia versus WEOG colleagues from “important countries”.*
- *A colleague told me I should not be in Rome and asked when my contract was expiring so I could go home.*

## **Suggestions to address racism and systemic racism within the UN**

Respondents suggested the following actions to address racism:

### **Recognize there is an issue:**

- Acknowledge that there is racism in the institution and have an open and honest conversation about it through forums or townhalls;
- Awareness raising campaigns;
- Treat systemic racism with the same urgency as other issues such as gender equality or sexual harassment. Like those issues, ensure a zero tolerance policy;
- Empower people of African Descent.

### **Staffing:**

- Ensure fair and transparent recruitment processes as well as a diverse recruitment panel;
- Review data on staff intake and career advancement;
- Ensure equal representation across all levels and not only for tokenism;
- Ensure equal opportunities in terms of career opportunities.

### **Accountability:**

- Provide investigation mechanism such as OIOS when complaints arise;
- Ensure accountability for failure to diversify and clear disciplinary measures;
- Hire experts in every agency to investigate and give recommendations;
- Develop more 360 reviews for leadership positions to ensure that people are heard and grievances are managed.

### **Review framework:**

- Decolonize our policies and programmes;
- Establish a taskforce to develop a strategy;
- Develop zero tolerance policy on racism.

### **Internal support:**

- Create a platform for victims to safely report, without fear of retaliation;
- Ensure there is a focal point, a champion to advocate and promote racial diversity in every agency.

### **Training:**

- Develop a mandatory training on racism and unconscious bias;
- Organize awareness-raising sessions;
- Train managers on racism and unconscious bias to lead by example.

## CONCLUSION

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The UNPAD Survey demonstrates an urgent need for first and foremost acknowledging that racial discrimination and racial bias exist within the UN system and that they must be addressed and eliminated once and for all if we are to hold true to the values espoused in the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention for the elimination of Racial Discrimination.

This document does not seek to reach any definitive conclusions but to demonstrate the need for a conversation – one that is urgently needed – followed by concrete action. Many respondents of the UNPAD Survey remarked that they were tired of completing surveys with comments like:

“We have had too many surveys, and nothing is done....”

“I am again submitting this survey to see if it will be acknowledged or will just be for the sake of collecting statistics”

“Check the records. This survey is not necessary”.

There is a cynicism among many UN colleagues which can only be dispelled through concrete responses and evidence of changes being made in the organization.

There are already a number of recommendations made by UN personnel that is included in this survey – these recommendations, while not exhaustive, serve as a useful starting point for a way forward.

In addition, the survey responses pose an ideal starting point for further inquiry. For example, the comment that people of African descent experience less career progression opportunities vis-a-vis their counterparts should provoke the organization to audit its human resources data. If the data in fact show that there is a stagnation in professional career growth for people of African descent, the root causes of these should be further analyzed. Whether attributable to racism or other cause, the emerging data from a proper root cause analysis will help direct the necessary corrective action to be taken.

Staff who have been retaliated against for speaking up against racism should be invited to share their concerns with the investigative services of the organization so that offending managers can be held duly accountable.

As it shortly commemorates its fifth year of activism against racism inside the United Nations system, UNPAD remains firmly resolved to holding the United Nations system accountable to the ideal of equality for all, regardless of race, as espoused in the Charter of the United Nations and other international instruments.

For any questions or comments about this report, please contact UNPAD at [unpad@unpad.org](mailto:unpad@unpad.org).