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WEST AFRICA CELEBRATES INTERNATIONAL WOMEN’S DAY

International Women’s Day on 8 March offered an opportunity for West African leaders and citizens to reflect on women’s social, economic, cultural and political achievements, showcase the progress being made on closing the region’s gender gap and highlight persisting gender inequalities. The day was marked by a large number of gender-focused special events and activities. Ghana’s theme for this year’s celebration was: #Women Too - Press to Progress as Game Changers. In the lead-up to 8 March, the country organised a series of advocacy activities to focus on institutional and socio-cultural barriers to gender equality. “Women’s participation in governance: state of play, challenges and perspectives” was the official theme put forward by Burkina Faso. The goal of their activities was to encourage stronger female participation in political, economic and public life. Mali chose as its theme, “Women as mediators in the restoration of social cohesion in the G5 Sahel.” Malian women spoke out against the weak representation of women’s voices in the Algiers peace agreement implementation. Their activities also focused on how to protect women against domestic violence. Nigeria’s first lady Aisha Buhari launched the “Leave our daughters alone” campaign to stop abductions and other harmful practices against women. Nigeria also published its 4th annual list of the 100 most inspirational and influential women to promote as change-makers, innovators and female leaders. As part of the OECD’s March on Gender, the Sahel and West Africa Club Secretariat (SWAC/OECD) drew attention to the living conditions of women and girls in West Africa and the persistent discrimination affecting them. It organised on 9 March a special event entitled, “Why women and girls matter in West Africa: A closer look at inequalities and social institutions.” Ambassadors from Ghana and Nigeria participated in the event.
SIERRA LEONE: TIGHT PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Some 2.7 million Sierra Leoneans cast their ballots in the 2018 general elections on 7 March to choose a new president, a new parliament and new local council representatives. Sixteen candidates competed for the presidency, including Foreign Minister Samura Kamara who was the candidate of the ruling All People’s Congress (42% of votes) and the main opposition candidate Julius Maada Bio (43% of votes). President Ernest Bai Koroma was not eligible to run, having served two five-year terms in office. The voter turnout during the first round was very high - reaching nearly 84%. None of the candidates won the required 55% of votes necessary to win outright and a run-off election is scheduled for 31 March. The two leading candidates differed by less than 15 000 votes, which has added to a tense electoral climate. Some clashes were reported between supporters of the ruling party and the main opposition group in the capital city of Freetown and in some districts such as Kono. ECOWAS commended the peaceful process of the first round of voting and called on the civil society, including the traditional and religious leaders and the media, to work on creating a “peaceful environment for the successful and peaceful completion of the electoral process.” This election was the first in the world to be supported by blockchain technology, which is supposed to ensure transparency by using public ledgers to make cryptocurrency transactions. Traditional ballot papers will be used for the 31 March presidential run-off.

UEMOA, SWAC TAKE STOCK OF CO-OPERATION PRIORITIES

UEMOA Commission President Abdallah Boureima met a delegation from the Sahel and West Africa Club Secretariat (SWAC/OECD) in Ouagadougou on 12 March. They took stock of their co-operation since 2011, when UEMOA joined the Sahel and West Africa Club as member, and discussed future work priorities. Over the past six years, the two organisations have worked together on the regional governance of food and nutrition security, the food economy, natural resources and environment, cross-border co-operation and security-development issues. SWAC’s analysis and policy dialogue activities directly feed into UEMOA work processes. Notably, they supported the drafting of the 10-year UEMOA Community Programme for Agricultural Transformation and Food and Nutrition Security (PCD-TASAN) and the establishment of the UEMOA Regional Fund for Agricultural Development (FRDA). SWAC also plays an important role in lobbying and on policy dialogues to make sure that West African concerns are heard on the international stage. For example, it supported the West African delegation to showcase the region’s actions and priorities at the COP21 climate change summit in Paris. UEMOA leaders expressed their satisfaction with SWAC membership and aim to further deepen co-operation alongside regional organisations such as ECOWAS and CILSS. In the future, SWAC and the Commission intend to amplify co-operation with a larger number of UEMOA departments. The SWAC delegation also met with commissioners in charge of territorial planning, regional markets and co-operation as well as peace and security to get a better understanding of their on-going and future work priorities. The SWAC delegation was composed of Laurent Bossard, SWAC Secretariat director; Jean Sibiri Zoundi, deputy director; and Jean de Dieu Somda, special representative of the SWAC president.

CHINA TO BUILD NEW ECOWAS COMMISSION HEADQUARTERS

On 13 March, the ECOWAS Commission signed a memorandum of understanding with the Government of China for a USD 31.6 million grant to build the new ECOWAS Commission Headquarters in Nigeria’s capital city. The agreement was signed by the Chinese ambassador to Nigeria, Zhou Pingjian, and newly appointed ECOWAS Commission President Jean-Claude Brou. A growing number of ECOWAS staff members are spread out at three different sites in Abuja, which makes internal collaboration increasingly difficult. The new building will bring all ECOWAS staff under the same roof. The agreement, which comes into force with immediate effect, provides for offices and a conference complex building, as well as road facilities, electrical equipment, parking lots and security posts. The Chinese government will also offer three-years of maintenance services after the construction has been completed. According to the ECOWAS press release, the new headquarters will be of “high-quality” and reflect the “culture and Africaness of member states.” The Chinese government has also built the African Union Commission headquarters in Addis Ababa, worth USD 200 million, as a “gift to the people of Africa.”
**CILSS PROGRAMMES: CO-ORDINATION MEETING**

The 7th CILSS Steering Committee meeting was opened on 16 March in Lomé. It provided an opportunity to take stock of current regional programmes implemented by CILSS and its development partners. Three major programmes were the focus of discussions: the World Bank-funded Regional Sahel Pastoralism Support Project (PRAPS), the AfDB Programme to Build Resilience to Food and Nutrition Insecurity in the Sahel and the UEMOA-funded information-sharing platform on food security, locust control and pesticide management. This steering committee meeting brought together all CILSS partners and covered all regional projects managed by CILSS; it contributes to improving co-ordination, information sharing and synergy building. The meeting is organised once a year and also assesses the implementation of recommendations from the previous year. The ECOWAS Regional Agency for Food and Agriculture (ECOWAS/RAAF) organised a similar meeting a few days ahead of the CILSS event.

**SWAC WEBINAR: WARS AND CONFLICTS IN THE SAHARA-SAHEL**

On 21 March, the SWAC Secretariat organised its first webinar drawing on key findings from the West African paper No. 10, “Wars and Conflicts in the Sahara-Sahel.” Some 70 policy-makers, experts and partners participated in the online debate. Faced with the political pressures of successive coup d’états, protest movements and the threat of Islamic extremism, the Sahel-Sahara areas experience compounded threats to peace in an increasingly volatile global environment. A better understanding is needed of the root causes of violent conflict and of the critical factors leading to escalating tensions between warring factions, to create viable and sustainable paths to regional peace and security. The webinar featured a presentation by the paper’s author Olivier Walther, a visiting associate professor with the Center for African Studies at the University of Florida (UF), as part of the collaboration between the SWAC Secretariat and the Sahel Research Group (UF). Rinaldo Depagne (West Africa project director, International Crisis Group) and Francesco Strazzari (adjunct professor, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs Consortium for Research on Terrorism and International Crime) participated as panellists.

**MUST READ: GENDER INEQUALITY IN WEST AFRICAN SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS**

The Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) in West Africa looks at how formal and informal laws, social norms and practices restrict the access of women and girls to equal rights, justice, employment opportunities and resources across 17 West African countries. The paper is published in the OECD West Africa papers series and aims to provide policymakers with the necessary tools and evidence to design more effective gender-responsive policies. Putting social institutions at the core of policy responses may open new and sustainable ways to promote gender equality in the region.

**OPINION: GENDER EQUALITY IN WEST AFRICA? THE KEY ROLE OF SOCIAL NORMS**

Gender equality remains unfinished business worldwide, including in West Africa, and particularly in the Sahel. “Passing laws and devising national strategies are not enough”, highlights an article published by the OECD Development Centre and the SWAC Secretariat on the Development Matters blog. Drawing on key findings from the new SIGI-West Africa study, the article highlights the key role of social norms. Discriminatory social norms weaken the implementation and efficacy of gender-sensitive policies, exposing women and girls to on-going discrimination. Policymakers must embrace the challenge of transforming social norms to allow both West African women and men to benefit equally from development opportunities and economic growth.
The Sierra Leonean Finda Koroma took office as Vice-President of the ECOWAS Commission on 1 March 2018. She will support Jean-Claude Brou, the president, in fulfilling the ECOWAS mandate and will represent him in official meetings. The vice-President’s office is in charge of enhancing co-ordination and receives support from units dedicated to monitoring and evaluation, strategic planning and relations with other ECOWAS institutions. Before joining the ECOWAS Commission, Koroma worked as executive director of F.K. Consulting, Inc. She has more than 20 years of experience in both the government and development sectors, where she has worked at senior levels, and in the extractive sector. A lawyer by profession, Koroma holds a master’s degree in international law and international trade from Cambridge University in the United Kingdom. She also holds an MBA from Harvard Business School. Finda is the sister of the Sierra Leone’s First Lady Sia Koroma.