



**FOR EQUALITY  
BETWEEN WOMEN AND MEN**

## **15 ECOWAS member states work hand in hand to meet the challenge!**

Best practices and lessons learned during  
the elaboration of a *Regional Protocol  
for the Equality of Rights between  
Women and Men and for  
Sustainable Development  
in West Africa*

October 2013



## INTRODUCTION

This document summarizes the experience of elaborating a ***Regional Protocol for the Equality of Rights between Women and Men and for Sustainable Development in West Africa*** and the process for ensuring its adoption.

The objective of the process: the adoption of a legal instrument to fill in existing gaps and take into account the new challenges and issues raised by women's participation in the sustainable development of their region. It was the Women's Rights and Citizenship coalitions (DCF) that decided to act collectively around a common issue: enhancing the legal framework for the promotion and protection of women's rights in West Africa.

## PART I: THE PROCESS OF ELABORATING THE EWM REGIONAL PROTOCOL

### Why a EWM regional protocol?

*“Despite the commitments undertaken by states through legal instruments and the progress noted, women do not fully enjoy the same rights or opportunities as men. Moreover, there is a growing feminization of poverty and the ongoing impunity of the authors of gender based violence. This reality is common to every country of the West African region to varying degrees.”<sup>1</sup>*

### Opportunities

No specific sub-regional legal instrument exists which guarantees women's rights and also integrates certain particularly crucial questions in West Africa, such as the persistence of conflicts, environmental degradation and climate change.

## THE PROCESS ADOPTED TO ELABORATE THE PRELIMINARY DRAFT PROTOCOL

### The partners

The regional Equality between Women and Men (EWM) component of the Uniterra program supported six partners, all of them coalitions of women's organizations which prioritized strengthening the legal framework for the protection and promotion of women's rights in West Africa. The coalitions in question were the Guinean National Coordinating Committee for Women's Rights and Citizenship (CONAG/DCF), the Coordinating Committee of Women's NGOs and Associations of Niger (CONGAFEN), the Pivot Group/Rights and Citizenship for the Women of Mali (GP/DCF Mali), the Coordinating Committee for Women's Associations of Mali (CAFO), the Burkinan Coalition for Women's Rights (CBDF) and Senegal's Siggil Jigeen network. Of course, these coalitions are themselves composed of member organizations, which constitute another level of stakeholders.

From 2009 to 2013, these coalitions received support from sixteen volunteers from Canada (14 of them women) and had 27 opportunities to participate in regional coordination meetings, international conferences on women's rights or partnership development meetings.

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<sup>1</sup> *Argumentaire pour l'élaboration d'un Protocole pour l'égalité de droits entre les femmes et les hommes pour le développement durable dans l'espace CEDEAO, coalitions/DCF, June 2011.*

These coalitions also obtained support from regional or national organizations, including the ECOWAS Gender Development Centre (EGDC), WILDAF West Africa, Senegal's Ministry for Women, Culture and Gender, *le Conseil du Statut de la Femme du Québec*, as well as various networks and numerous human rights advocates. Convinced of GE's importance, the African Union's Commissioner/Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Women supported the process and the draft Protocol.

## **The stages completed**

### **1. Consensus around the issue: supporting arguments (2008-2011)**

The idea of having ECOWAS adopt a *Protocol for the Equality of Rights between Women and Men and for Sustainable Development* followed a long process initiated in 2008 by Guinea's CONAG/DCF. Three workshops were necessary to produce, in 2010, a Regional Action Plan around a common issue, formulated on the basis of consensus: "Enhancement of the legal framework for the promotion and protection of women's rights in West Africa."

Once validated, this Regional Action Plan took the form of national action plans developed by each coalition in order to better respect each country's priorities and to ensure effective implementation through constructive policy dialogue with decision-makers.

A set of supporting arguments shared, amended and enriched was presented in 2011 during a plenary session and approved by acclamation in the presence of the heads of state of Senegal and Liberia, the ministers responsible for gender or the family of the ECOWAS member states, representatives of regional and international financial institutions, and of African and foreign civil society organizations.

### **2. Elaboration of the preliminary draft Regional GE Protocol (2011-2012)**

An initial version of the preliminary draft, based on the *Protocol on Gender and Development* adopted in southern Africa, was submitted to the EGDC in July 2012.

The initiative launched by the six coalitions only concerned five West African countries. As there are fifteen ECOWAS member states, it was necessary to present the preliminary draft during a regional workshop, which included the participation of forty-five persons, including delegates from coalitions, networks and organizations or experts on the question (November 2012). The new version was officially submitted to ECOWAS in February 2013.

### **3. Tabling the preliminary draft with ECOWAS (February 2013)**

The preliminary draft protocol is in the hands of ECOWAS' Commissioner for Human Development and Gender. It is her responsibility to make representations in favour of the initiative and ensure that the process comes to fruition with the adoption of this new legal instrument.

The text emphasizes the necessity to promote equality by imposing two obligations on states. First, states must make their laws consistent with the obligations enshrined in the preliminary draft protocol. However, the protocol initiative goes further in that it invites states to adopt and implement policies in favour of gender equality. One controversial question remains pending: whether these policies may include affirmative action, notably in favour of women.

### **4. Gaining support and mobilization (2013- )**

Two coalition/DCF delegates took part in the 57<sup>th</sup> Session of the UN's Commission on the Status of Women (March 4-15, 2013). Participants included representatives of states, international financial institutions and civil society organizations. It was therefore an opportunity to explain the merits of the

instrument and to popularize its contents with CSOs from ECOWAS countries. Several ECOWAS cabinet ministers, including the prime minister of Burkina Faso, expressed their firm commitment in favour of the Protocol.

### Progress to date and next steps

More action is required until ECOWAS adopts the Protocol. To that end, the coalitions deem it indispensable that all existing opportunities be seized to continue advocacy efforts until the Protocol is adopted. In November 2012, a regional steering committee was set up in Dakar to ensure coordination of these efforts.

Once the Protocol is adopted, an action plan will be put in place to accompany its effective implementation in different countries. Annual monitoring and evaluation is planned and shall be based on clear indicators to be described in the action plan. Said monitoring reports shall, therefore, facilitate the exercise of citizen oversight.

## PART II: GOOD PRACTICES, LESSONS LEARNED AND REMAINING CHALLENGES

Even prior to its adoption, the winning of support and mobilization around the preliminary draft of the *Protocol for the Equality of Rights between Women and Men and for Sustainable Development in West Africa* represents an impressive feat: getting the fifteen states of West Africa to speak with a single voice demanding, at long last, that the rights of women and girls be recognized and enforced.

### Good practices

Several strategies or practices employed during the process proved to be good practices:

- ♦ The decision to elaborate a binding protocol on women's rights for the countries of West Africa came from **the grassroots**. It was the coalitions themselves that took the initiative and proposed a document which reflects their fundamental concerns.<sup>2</sup>
- ♦ A **participatory approach** was followed throughout the process. At every stage, the documents produced were presented, explained, amended and approved by the coalitions' members.
- ♦ **The alliances between states and CSOs** crystallized around the preliminary draft Protocol.
- ♦ Uniterra's **unfailing support**, "*which put a resource person at our disposal to accompany the Coalitions at the regional level, along with volunteers who provided support*".<sup>3</sup>
- ♦ **Networking**, initially practiced among the coalitions, subsequently expanded from the grassroots upwards towards the highest levels, i.e., ECOWAS and the African Union, and even achieved international visibility. Strategic and judicious alliances were the engine of this process.
- ♦ **Circulating information** is fundamental, both for mobilizing and for convincing and explaining. A newsletter<sup>4</sup> created for this purpose played an important role.

### Lessons learned

- The whole must reflect its parts: we must work together even as we respect national particularities.

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<sup>2</sup> *Rapport de capitalisation*, Siggil Jigeen Network, 14 August 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Mouniratou Tangara, volunteer with the RSJ network.

<sup>4</sup> *INFOS-ÉFH-Afrique de l'Ouest*, created by the Uniterra regional project officer.

- Preliminary training. Elaborating a Protocol requires a broader understanding of the body of human rights law. Good preparation is necessary to shorten the learning curve.
- Broad support. Broader participation of grassroots, religious and youth organizations, particularly girls' organizations, is essential in the medium and long terms.
- Coordination must be based on the sharing of responsibilities. Clearly specifying roles, defining responsibilities and clarifying expectations are all essential in coordination.
- The support of influential persons, particularly in the political and religious spheres, adds clout to arguments and may contribute to bringing on side the hesitant.

### Remaining challenges

To complete the process and, in the longer run, ensure that women's rights are not only recognized but also enforced, the coalitions and their allies must still overcome several related challenges: lack of funding, complex communications issues between partners and towards populations, political instability, governments' lack of political will and, finally, turnover among staff in institutions and among members in organizations.

- ♦ **Adoption but more importantly enforcement: compel states to enforce the Protocol.** The Protocol provides that states shall ensure the implementation of national, regional and international legal instruments, in accordance with timelines and oversight through appropriate monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.
- ♦ **Resilience in the face of instability: stay on track despite obstacles,** such as political instability, conflicts<sup>5</sup>, economic crises and climate change.
- ♦ **Constant multi-platform communications: develop a strategy and customized communications products for different target groups.** Fluid, transparent and continuous communication must be ensured between Anglophones, Francophones and Lusophones
- ♦ **Stable staffing and leadership: the right persons in the right organizations and institutions.** Being able to count on the resource in charge of the file is becoming a crucial imperative.
- ♦ **Appropriate financial resources.** We must ensure that we have the resources to support networking in the push for the Protocol's adoption and its subsequent dissemination.

### CONCLUSION

Those who collaborated in the exercise of documenting it are convinced of the importance of the process undertaken for the adoption of a **Regional Protocol for the Equality of Rights between Women and Men and for Sustainable Development in West Africa**. The women who took the initiative put it well: they thought of it because they are the first to suffer multiple forms of discrimination. *"We thought of it ourselves because we are the ones affected."*

To recount the process is to highlight the hard work invested in it. It also underlines the work that remains to be done before the Protocol is adopted and especially all the efforts still needed until, at long last, women and men enjoy equal rights.

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<sup>5</sup> Niger, Guinea, Senegal's southern Casamance region, northern Mali where Tuareg populations are making demands.