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ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR AFRICA

**Eighteenth Meeting of the Africa Regional Coordinating Committee
for the Integration of Women in Development (ARCC)**

**Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
24-26 April 1997**

**AN ASSESSMENT OF
THE AFRICA REGIONAL COORDINATING COMMITTEE (ARCC):
A STATEMENT BY CAMEROON**

1. Although it was under consideration from 1977 at the first Regional Conference held in Mauritania, the Africa Regional Coordinating Committee for the Integration of Women in Development (ARCC) was created in 1979, after approval of its organizational structure and mandate by the ECA Conference of Ministers, in resolution 365 (XIV). It was established at the same time as the subregional committees. ARCC has the peculiarity of being both an intergovernmental organization (NGO) and a subsidiary body of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA).

2. According to the founding documents, the goal of ARCC is to pursue the advancement of women in Africa, within the political, social, economic and cultural spheres in each country. It is specifically mandated to:

(a) Harmonize and coordinate the subregional programmes on the role of women as approved by each subregional committee;

(b) To review and assess the programmed activities carried out in the region within the context of the advancement of women;

(c) Report to the ECA policy organs on subregional and regional activities and programmes for women;

(d) Mobilize resources for implementation of subregional and regional programmes;

(e) Use the African Training and Research Centre for Women (ATRCW), renamed the African Centre for Women (ACW) in 1994, as the ARCC secretariat.

3. Appraising ARCC as a regional coordinating mechanism for the implementation of the Platforms for Action that were issued at the 1994 Dakar and 1995 Beijing conferences respectively, necessarily brings us to the national and subregional mechanisms which liaise organically with the Committee. This arises from the fact that the regional programmes formulated by ACW emerge from the strategies defined by national machineries during regional and world conferences. Such has been the case with the strategies developed at Lusaka, Arusha, Abuja, Nairobi, Dakar and Beijing. These programmes should form a basis for collective action by all member States.

4. The situation which led to the creation of ARCC was the euphoria following the International Year for Women (IYW), the Lusaka strategies which were endorsed by the Heads of State at Lagos and the Lagos Plan of Action. This strategy was projected to the year 2000. Although some twenty countries had already committed themselves to structural adjustment plans (SAPs) by the early 1980s, some again achieved acceptable levels of economic growth, with quite low external indebtedness, despite the stagnant

poverty in rural areas and low levels of industrialization. This is the case with Cameroon. The generalized economic failure and

the host of social consequences which have been evident since 1985 have caused the 1980s to be known as the "lost decade" for sub-Saharan Africa. Chiefly preoccupied with macroeconomic concerns, African governments have been late in responding to the commitments made in the Lagos Plan of Action. The only concern at the time was economic recovery. In other words, the ARCC conceived in the period of euphoria after the IYW and after the first United Nations Decade for Women, was predicated on premises which eventually turned out to be flawed.

5. A series of shocks, both national and international, have weakened this machinery that was already fragile structurally, ill-prepared to weather the storm, and without well-organized programmes and resources.

AT NATIONAL LEVEL: THE CASE OF CAMEROON

6. Structural weakness, absence of policy backed by a well-ordered national plan of action and insufficient resources both human and financial, have hampered the capacity building of ARCC through the subregional structure of the Yaoundé MULPOC.

7. From 1975 to 1984, a unit for the advancement of women functioned as the national machinery, located within a large Ministry of Social Affairs. It was not until February 1984 that a lightweight ministerial department structure was established, to carry out research studies. In 1988, it was once more annexed to the Ministry of Social Affairs. This development has, nevertheless, enhanced the functioning of the machinery which expanded its scope and in time, acquired methods and equipment. Reference will be made to a multi-sectoral policy document which also delineates all the institutional aspects. A targeted plan of action is linked to the policy document.

8. Another element is capacity building for women in management (projects, policy formulation..). This has the advantage of improving methodological approaches and work tools. It is within this new context that the policies of Chad and Cameroon have been formulated and every opportunity afforded to the women of Central Africa to put their heads together about common concerns, including a project for establishing a free-trade association. It must also be made clear that this rigorous approach is reflected in the country reports and in the regional Platform. It is to UNIFEM that the credit goes for filling a gap that should have been filled by ACW. Cameroon's case is neither isolated nor the worst. It must be said that the machinery has been in place since 1984 and has many achievements to its credit.

AT THE SUBREGIONAL LEVEL

9. The gaps found at the national level are reflected at the subregional level, amplified by the political instability in some countries of the subregion and by the absence of a follow-up

monitoring structure within the MULPOC. The numerous changes in the leadership of these machineries have not encouraged the consolidation of established bonds of cooperation.

10. In conclusion, the first requirement which will make ARCC a successful coordinating mechanism will be national policies that are coherent, which integrate the macroeconomic situation and enjoy the support of all other sectors. Moreover, such policies should be expressed in well-articulated programmes of action with a monitoring and control mechanism.

11. The second requirement is expansion of the membership base and of the number of observers. The number of members apparently does not meet any criterion besides representation of a subregion without guarantee of genuine representation, considering the absence of a truly common subregional programme.

12. Taking into account also the new partnership being forged between civil society and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), any support in addition to that from member States would be welcome. The massive attendance at such meetings is an indicator of the interest in issues concerning women.

Membership capacity-building

13. At ARCC meetings, we have noted weaknesses in the technical substance of the documents, but these have not been picked up by participants, especially since they are poorly informed about what is at stake in the issues raised, and about the precise role of the machinery and its activities. This keeps the discussions at a rather low level and ends up with conclusions and recommendations issued without deep thought.

14. The preparation of the fifth African Regional Conference and the fourth World Conference on Women brought about improvements in this regard. Women anxious to control the stakes and opposed to the systematic supremacy of the countries of the North, proved their skills during the negotiations. Such action justifies the creation of an expert forum to backstop the bureaux established to follow up conferences, before submission of documents to policy organs.

15. If, as ECA maintains, taking women into account is not merely a question of social justice but is also essential for economic recovery, and if gender appears to cut across all sectoral policies, strategies and objectives, then it is justified that the

Ministers responsible for Women's Affairs should be present at the ECA Conference of Ministers of Planning.

ARCC AS A COORDINATING MECHANISM FOR THE DAKAR AND BEIJING PLATFORMS

16. A precise definition of ARCC's mandate remains a problem if the follow-up mechanisms for the regional and world conferences have the same secretariat as the ARCC, that is, ACW. This will be structural duplication, since the ARCC programmes arise from the subregional programmes, which themselves grow out of national plans for action. Such action plans form the basis, or better yet, the national priorities of the regional and world Platforms.

17. Furthermore, ARCC hosts a regional meeting at least every three years. From now to the year 2000, what with the role of the bureau elected to monitor the Platforms, ARCC will not be up to anything more than mustering resources at the regional level.

18. Aware of the complexity of the problem posed by ARCC and anxious to avoid duplication and to preserve ARCC's efficiency and rational use of resources, Cameroon suggests the following:

(a) ARCC should become an annual regional conference of Ministers of Women's Affairs. This conference will be responsible for assessing the extent to which gender is taken into account in all development sectors. It will be preceded by an expert group meeting;

(b) The expert group meeting is to be held before the plenary meeting of the Committee. ARCC experts will participate in the Technical Preparatory Committee of the Whole (TEPCOW) which takes place before the ECA Conference of Ministers;

(c) The Ministers of Women's Affairs will participate in the ECA Conference of Ministers responsible for Planning;

(d) It is essential to reestablish the mechanism for monitoring women's activities within the MULPOCs (the practical modalities should be discussed with member States);

(e) ACW's human and financial resource capacity should be strengthened, expanded and diversified. Staff should be able to formulate policy and plan activities;

(f) Multi-sectoral plans should be prepared at all levels, defining objectives, strategies, sectoral projects, monitoring mechanisms and total cost;

(g) Gender disaggregated data should be prepared; and

(h) In the context of capacity building within the machineries, governments should establish contacts with the agencies and institutions providing training to women, to sensitize them to the fact that there should not be a below-40 age limit for women's training in Africa. This condition cannot be applied to African women, whether or not they are experts, workers or managers. It is when the African woman is over 40 years that she is more able to assert herself and aspire to improvement of her skills as a development agent.