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Development (ARCC)

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Libreville, Gabon

**REPORT ON
THE FRANCO-AFRICAN CONFERENCE ON WOMEN IN DEVELOPMENT**

1. One of the major concerns of the African Training and Research Centre for Women of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA/ATRCW) is to ensure that policies and programmes related to the Advancement of women in the Africa region are well coordinated and harmonized. In this regard, ATRCW makes efforts to participate in major global, regional as well as subregional conferences and meetings where policies and strategies for the advancement of women are discussed. Decisions and recommendations of such Conferences are thereafter presented to the Africa Regional Coordinating Committee on integration of women in development, a subsidiary organ of the ECA Conference of Ministers, for necessary guidance.

2. It is in this spirit that at the invitation of the Ministry of Cooperation and Development of France, the ATRCW took part in the Franco-African Conference on Women and Development held in Paris, France from 16 to 17 November 1992. This report on the Conference is therefore prepared with a view to drawing the attention of ARCC to the major decisions of the Conference. ARCC, in turn will be in a position to counsel member countries on ways of getting maximum benefits from these decisions.

3. The report will in its first part give background information on the Franco-African Conference on women and development. It will then report on major highlights of the Conference and decisions reached. Finally, the report will suggest a few measures for follow-up action.

1. BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE CONFERENCE

4. The Franco-African Conference on Women and Development was a second Conference of French speaking Sub-Saharan African countries, the Petites Antilles and France around the issue of women and development. The first Conference had been organized three months earlier in Bamako, Mali from 29 to 30 September 1992. The major purpose of the first Conference was to review the status of women in general and recommend strategies for concrete actions geared towards improving their living and working conditions.

5. It should be noted that the idea of holding such a Conference is in line with recommendations of Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies for the Advancement of women and the Abuja Declaration on Participatory development: the role of women in the 1990's which called for partnership among institutions engaged in the advancement of women and greater coordination of governmental and non governmental actions aimed at integrating women in the development process of the continent.

6. The Franco-African Conference was innovative in the sense that it gave an opportunity to open a dialogue on women issues between, on one hand, officials from governments and those from civil societies, and on the other, women from developing countries and those from a partner developed country. The Conference was also an occasion for participants to articulate their views and strategies on priority issues on women and development.

7. The outcome of the Bamako Conference on women and development was a Declaration which highlighted recommendations of the Abuja Declaration taking into account specificities of countries participating. The Bamako Declaration was subsequently presented to the Franco-African Summit held in Libreville, Gabon from 5 to 6 November 1992. During the Summit, Heads of State and Governments from French-speaking countries and France took firm commitment to provide full support to concrete actions seeking total integration of women in development.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE CONFERENCE

8. In line with the decisions of the above mentioned Summit, a second Franco-African Conference on women and development was convened in Paris, France, on 16-17 November 1992. The main purpose of the Conference was to design action oriented policies for the implementation of recommendations of the Bamako Declaration. In this connexion, the Conference was expected to identify concrete actions which would enhance the role of women in development; to identify ways of drawing international assistance towards African women's activities possibly through South-North partnership; and based on needs expressed by women from the South, elaborate a French Government's cooperation policy which gives priority to the integration of women in development.

9. The Conference was also expected to elect members to two committees, a committee of experts and a ministerial committee to ensure follow up to recommendations and decisions adopted in Bamako and Paris.

3. PARTICIPATION

10. The Franco-African Conference was highly attended by representatives of civil societies and Government officials from the following countries: Angola, Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cape Verde, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Cote d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, France, Gabon, Guinea, Guinea Bissao, Madagascar, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Niger, Petites Antilles, Rwanda, Senegal, Seychelles, and Togo. There were also observers from the international and United Nations organisations namely ACCT, ECA, ILO, OCDE, UNESCO, UNICEF, UNFPA, UNIFEM, WHO and the World Bank. It is worth noting that the Conference brought together twenty African ministers in charge of women affairs and three French ministers. Such high level representation facilitated appropriate decision making at the Conference.

4. HIGHLIGHTS OF THE CONFERENCE

11. In line with the objectives of the Conference, issues covered at the Conference could be grouped into three areas of concentration:

- (i) Definition of action oriented programmes for the advancement of women;
- (ii) South-North Partnership on women in development issues;
- (iii) Follow up on the Bamako Declaration and the Paris resolution.

12. Specific activities were identified within each area to respond to expressed women's needs.

(i) Definition of action oriented programmes for the

advancement of women

13. The primary concern of the Conference was to design action oriented programmes which would contribute to the enhancement of the role of women in development. In this respect, the Conference emphasized the importance of developing programmes which reflect real needs of women at the grassroot as well as at higher levels of development as they would constitute the basis for future cooperation. The presence of civil societies at the conference was in fact aimed at ensuring participatory approach in the formulation of policies and programmes geared to women's needs.

14. In view of the above, the Conference identified three major areas of action, namely

(i) Creation of favourable institutional framework and institutional building;

(ii) Concertation and coordination between government machineries and women's groups as well as associations involved in promotion of women particularly at the stage of formulation, implementation and monitoring of women related programmes;

(iii) Social, economic and political empowerment of women through education at all levels and in all technical sectors of development; involvement in the spheres of political and economic administration; increased employment opportunities; setting up of special credit schemes; protection of the mother and the child's health; and greater participation in peace and democracy processes.

15. In addition to identifying specific actions to be undertaken within the three areas of concentration, greater solidarity among various actors involved in the promotion of women was recommended.

(ii) South-North Partnership on women in development issues

16. It appeared from the Conference that in the situation where resources are constantly declining and women are becoming poorer to the extent that a great majority cannot satisfy the basic needs of their families, there is need for more gender sensitive cooperation programmes in order to ensure that policies formulated towards full integration of women in development can be translated into concrete actions. In this regard, the Conference called for not only firm commitment from all partners to ensure effective promotion of women but also for South-South and North-South stronger collaboration in the achievement of women's goals. Likewise, the Conference made a special appeal to France to consider cancellation of debts of countries which deploy particular efforts in the field of women in development.

17. In response to the appeal and in line with the decision of the Franco-african Summit of Libreville as regards women's issues, the French Government announced, a number of measures aimed at reorienting its cooperation policy to take into consideration the women's dimension. The following are some of the measures announced:

(i) Setting up of a programme of mobilisation of women of 20 million French Francs at the beginning of 1993. The programme will cover women in development projects which are sustainable and can bring about social transformation and economic development;

(ii) Invitation to each Head of Cooperation mission to devote a substantial portion of its line of credits to specific women projects;

(iii) Eligibility of education, health, environment or cottage industries women's projects to the Fund for conversion of debt announced in Libreville.

18. In addition to the above measures, it was pointed out that the French Ministry of Cooperation and Development would take the following steps:

(i) Set up a Fund for specific assistance aimed at improving women's living conditions and their working methods (the assistance will, for example be in form of a guarantee scheme for women's enterprises to facilitate access to credit etc...). Other donor countries and international organizations were invited to join the Fund in order to diversify sources of funds;

(ii) Ensure that a training component which partly addresses women issues, is included in each project;

(iii) Pay particular attention to balanced allocation of fellowships between men and women; and

(iv) Intensify support to institutions dealing with maternal and child's health.

19. It was further noted that the expert committee set up to ensure follow up of the Bamako and Paris resolutions would be consulted with regard to the allocation of the above mentioned resources.

20. Through these measures, the French Government demonstrated its conviction that promotion of women could contribute to social and economic transformation and development in Africa. The gesture was highly appreciated by participants and women were exhorted to ensure judicious use of these precious resources.

21. Access to and utilisation of these resources will require specialized technical and negotiation skills. ECA should therefore assist women from beneficiary countries to build their capabilities to formulate and negotiate bancable projects. ECA could also play an advisory role to both partners in advocating the use of some of these resources for large scale multinational projects.

(iii) Follow up mechanisms to Bamako Declaration and Paris resolution

22. In view of the importance of decisions taken both in Bamako and Paris, it was essential to set up mechanisms for monitoring the implementation of these decisions. The mechanisms set up for the purpose are: a committee of experts, a ministerial committee and a sponsors' committee.

23. The experts committee called the "scientific committee" is entrusted to analyse the situation of women taking into account the overall trends of development and recommend actions to be taken. The committee also has the mandate to be involved in the preparations of the 1994 Regional and the 1995 World Conferences on women. It comprises seven experts, two from West Africa, two from Central Africa, two from countries of the Indian Ocean and Mozambique and one from France. The members of the committee are selected on the basis of their individual competence, their experience in women's issues and their commitment to the promotion of women.

24. The second follow up structure is a ministerial committee whose principal objective is to ensure the link between political decisions and priorities defined by the civil society. The committee consists of six representatives from African countries (two from each of the three subregions).

25. Finally, there is a committee of sponsors made up of a number of personalities who share the conviction that development comes through recognition of the role of women.

5. **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

26. The Conference provided the opportunity to refocus on priorities in line with emerging women's aspirations. Priority actions defined at the Conference are more likely to be implemented following the financial commitment by the French Government.

27. It is therefore recommended that :

a) Utilization of the announced French Government assistance be well coordinated and measures be taken to ensure that it reaches the end beneficiaries;

b) Advisory services and training should be organized for selected women leaders to enable them to master the question of conversion of debt into development programs and to develop bancable programmes accordingly;

c) Other donor countries and agencies should be sensitized to adopt similar measures to ensure full implementation of the Arusha and Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women.