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Harmonizing synergies for wide-ranging parliamentary action against child trafficking and labour and strengthening South-South and Triangular cooperation

Regional seminar jointly organized by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), the International Labour Organization (ILO), in cooperation with the Parliament of the Economic Community of Western African States (ECOWAS) and with the support of UNICEF

ECOWAS Parliament, 25 to 26 May 2016, Abuja (Nigeria)

SEMINAR CONCLUSIONS

We, members of the ECOWAS Parliament, the national parliaments of Benin, Cameroon, Ghana and Niger, representatives of international organizations and civil society, gathered in Abuja from 25 to 26 May 2016. We met to take stock of how the recommendations of the regional seminar held in Abuja in June 2012 were being implemented; to consider where national and interregional work might be mutually reinforcing; to share good practices; and to identify priorities and plan for their implementation in the short, medium and long term.

Child trafficking and labour is against the best interests of the child; they continue to be topical issues, in spite of concerted efforts to eradicate them. They should feature more than ever among the priorities of parliamentary work related to promoting the rights of the child.

In that regard, we were reminded of the June 2012 Abuja seminar, together with the context in which it was held, and its results, including the key arguments and recommendations made.

We were also reminded of the actions that were committed to in order to combat child trafficking and labour, and to protect children in accordance with the ILO Minimum

Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138) and the ILO Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182).

In view of the continued existence of child trafficking and labour, we believe that a detailed research project should be carried out in order to determine their causes. In that regard, we recognized that poverty constrains families and forces them to resort to child trafficking and labour. That has disastrous consequences both for the family and for society as a whole. We unanimously condemned those two scourges, which constitute a serious threat to the children as the driving force of future society.

Nevertheless, we noted that poverty is often a weak explanation for what drives child trafficking and labour. On balance, we noted that no family defined as poor was ever truly set free from poverty by the sale of their children.

Similarly, we believe that we should be careful in our approach to the word "work" and clearly distinguish between light work and work that should be banned. We understood clearly that the issue was not so much about the sort of work that is part of the way children are socialized and introduced into the adult world, and that is linked to our ancestral values; rather, the issue under discussion was more one of work that could compromise the physical, psychological and intellectual development of the child. It is therefore important that, in the context of our work, and to avoid any confusion, we keep in mind all assessment criteria when differentiating those two types of work. The reality is that we would not be able to instil a healthy work ethic in our children while at the same time engaging in a relentless campaign against child labour.

Similarly, and to prepare for future work, we insisted that there should be a clear definition of the word "trafficking" in the description of child trafficking. In that regard, we were informed that, according to article 3 of the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (2000), also known as *Palermo Protocol* or the *Trafficking Protocol*, the phrase "trafficking in persons" is defined as "the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the

giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation."

Our discussions on child trafficking also focused on what is known as baby trafficking, which we strongly condemned. Baby trafficking is taking on worrying proportions in the subregion; if we are not careful, such trafficking, which is not necessarily exploitative, could fuel the sort of trafficking that was designed to exploit children.

Given the serious and persistent nature of those problems, we judged that it was imperative to act even more swiftly by committing to voluntary and courageous action, which established a binding obligation to deliver results for the benefit of our peoples. From our position as elected citizens' representatives, that will involve:

- An increase in both vigilance and mobilization in order to combat child trafficking and labour more effectively;
- A greater awareness among people of the need to promote the rights of the child and to cooperate in dismantling child trafficking networks;
- A strengthened legislative body, including texts that are accessible, understandable, applicable and provide for enforcement, through the inclusion of both punitive measures and procedures to enable victims of trafficking to be cared for;
- The establishment of a law applicable throughout the ECOWAS community to enable strategies to be harmonized;
- The promotion of income-generating activities by establishing simplified processes for granting credit in order to empower parents who are held back by poverty;
- The promotion of cooperation between parliaments throughout the regions of West and Central Africa, as part of an effective approach to combating child trafficking and labour.

Turning specifically to the issue of poverty and ways in which it could be reduced, we believe that we should seize opportunity offered by the new 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It was adopted last year and is made up of 17 goals. Goal 8 (promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment and decent work for all) should contribute to an improvement in people's well-being. We should join the ongoing efforts of the international community to implement those goals.

We have learned important lessons from our national experiences of the fight against child trafficking and labour, from which we can draw inspiration, including in terms of:

- Establishing neighbourhood watch groups and school committees to combat trafficking in children;
- Bringing children who have stopped going to school back into the system through education programmes;
- Setting up a programme for the protection of domestic workers and the promotion of their rights;
- Asking the Government oral and written parliamentary questions about the implementation of legislation on combating child trafficking and labour;
- Participating as parliamentarians in the national committee for monitoring the implementation of the national action plan for the elimination of child labour;
- Establishing parliamentary bodies that are specifically designed to take action against child trafficking and labour;
- Making a substantial grant available to each parliamentarian to support the provision of microcredit in his or her constituency for projects relating to education, health, and assistance to young people and to women.

We received training on the mechanisms of the ECOWAS Commission for Combating Child Trafficking and Labour, and on the legal and political context in which these mechanisms have been established. Our attention was particularly drawn to the crucial issue of child protection as a preventive and more all-encompassing measure as it relates to the promotion of the rights of the child, including the fight against child trafficking and labour.

We were provided with detailed information about the ECOWAS plan of action for the elimination of the worst forms of child labour, which aims to:

- Provide a specific and coordinated platform to facilitate interventions that give effect to the commitments made by Governments to improve the way in which the rights of the child are promoted;
- Provide a response for the ECOWAS States through which they can fulfil the obligations that they have made by ratifying international instruments;
- Support Member States in their commitment to implement the Decent Work Agenda in Africa for 2007–2015, which urges Member States to prepare national plans of action for the elimination of child labour.

We have been informed of the key aspects of this plan of action. Therefore, we now recommend that we take ownership of the plan as part of our preparations to contribute to its implementation.

Child trafficking and labour is a persistent and recurring phenomenon, whose elimination is intrinsically linked to the coordination of all strategies. With that in mind, we believe that a network of all those involved in the fight against child trafficking and labour should be set up. To achieve that, the network must include parliament, technical and financial partners, civil society and the Government. Integrating the strategies of the various people involved has the advantage of amplifying the efforts of those pursuing targeted action.

At the end of our discussions, we identified the following priorities that we wish to implement, with support from international partner institutions including the IPU, ILO and ECOWAS Commission:

1. Conduct an inventory of regional and international legal texts and instruments on child trafficking, child labour and child protection (international conventions, regional policies and action plans etc.);
2. Carry out a study of the legal texts that relate to child trafficking, child labour and child protection. The study would consider the coherence of such texts among ECOWAS Member States and the coherence between State-level legal texts and relevant international legal instruments. The study would propose adjustments to legal frameworks that would be designed to harmonize them in relation to child protection;
3. Encourage ECOWAS Member States to ratify and ensure the implementation of relevant international instruments on child trafficking and labour, and on child protection; and encourage those States to adjust their national legal framework accordingly, while taking account of the economic, social and cultural realities of each country;
4. Develop a handbook for parliamentarians that would raise awareness about child trafficking and labour, and child protection;
5. Develop a handbook for parliamentarians about the oversight of Government action on combating child trafficking and labour;
6. Encourage national parliaments in the ECOWAS region to:

- i. Seek to be involved in national steering committees established to combat child trafficking and labour;
 - ii. Run internal information sessions for parliamentarians on child trafficking and labour, and on child protection; and provide support to efforts of awareness-raising of the population;
- 7. Ensure effective collaboration and coordination between the ECOWAS Commission and ECOWAS Parliament on the one hand; and among the ECOWAS Parliament, the Central African Economic and Monetary Community, and parliamentary and civil society networks on the other, all of which are involved both in the fight against child trafficking and labour, and in taking joint, harmonized action in that regard.

Abuja, 26 May 2016