



INTRODUCTION TO THE FORUM'S WORK

FORUM OF POLITICAL PARTIES, THE MEDIA AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN WEST AFRICA

(To be finalised)

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Mr. President,
Excellencies,
Distinguished participants,
Dear colleagues and friends,

I would like to welcome you and thank you sincerely for participating in the work to be undertaken at this *Forum on Political Parties, the Media and Civil Society* co-organised by the Sahel and West Africa Club and the Strategic Watch Club for Peace and Security in West Africa.

We are very pleased that you could join us in Benin for this meeting. I would like to genuinely thank our host country, its President, His Excellency Mr. Mathieu Kerekou, the Government of Benin as well as the City of Cotonou for welcoming us. It is not by chance that we have chosen to hold this meeting in Benin. This country has been a pioneer in the democratic evolution which took place in the early 1990s. Benin launched the cycle of the National Conferences in Africa, and is also, it should be emphasised, one of the rare West African countries to have allowed the private press to emerge with the creation of the *Gazette du Golfe* in 1987. It is also the country where civil society has always been and remains dynamic.

I would also like to thank sincerely the Club's partners, particularly, Luxembourg, Switzerland, France and Canada via the International Research and Development Center, as well as the UNDP and ECOWAS for their financial support to the organisation of this meeting.

Moreover, I would like to thank all of the prominent personalities who have accepted to champion this meeting, His Excellency Mr. Mamadou Tandja, President of the Republic of Niger and holding the office of President of ECOWAS, and His Excellency Mr. Alpha Oumar Konaré, President of the African Union who has transmitted messages to us that are included in the documentation provided to you. Their support has given even more magnitude to this event at both the regional and continental levels.

I am pleased to see so many of you and have the pleasure of confirming that the Forum's first challenge has been met, to be able to bring together representatives of political parties, the media and civil society from 18 sub-regional West African countries. Of course, as you can understand it, we have not been able to invite all of the representatives of political parties, the media and civil society from each of the 18 countries. We had to go through a selection process in partnership with the Strategic Watch Club for Peace in West Africa. We

are aware that many other representatives would have wanted to take part at this Forum. We hope that when you return to your respective countries, you can share with them the strategic thinking resulting from the work undertaken. This Forum is not just another event but rather a release mechanism for a process of consultation, action and concertation promoting the building and strengthening of peace and democracy in West Africa.

We are more than 200 people together here today in order to launch a dialogue at the regional level. I am pleased to count among us General Cheick Oumar Diarra, Deputy Executive Secretary to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), responsible for Political Affairs, Security and Defence, who during the morning will present the broad lines of ECOWAS' Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance. I am pleased to welcome the President of ECOWAS' Parliament, Prof. Ali Nouhoum Diallo who has kindly accepted to chair the Plenary session this afternoon.

I would like to emphasise that this meeting is yours; this Forum is yours. Those who have been responsible to organize this meeting would like you to engage in a constructive dialogue based on your experiences; to have open and direct exchanges, anchored in reality and understanding the situation in order to move the strengthening and building peace in democracy in the region forward.

Three questions:

1. **Why has the Sahel and West Africa Club been involved in organising this Forum?**
2. **What should be the principal objectives for our exchanges?**
3. **What could be the follow up to this meeting?**

1. Why has the Sahel and West Africa Club been involved in organising this Forum?

Concerning the first question, I would like to remind you what the Club is, give you our perspective of the region and indicate how this Forum is in line with Club's mandate.

Comment [LD1]: Point out

Some words of the Sahel and West Africa Club:

- In the mid-1970s, in the context of severe drought, several Member countries of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), an organisation to which the Club is attached, in partnership with Sahelian countries, created the Friends of the Sahel Club. The aim was to establish a forum for the international community to discuss and encourage strong support for the region. In 2001, our governing board decided to expand the Club's geographic coverage to encompass the 15 ECOWAS member countries, plus Mauritania, Chad and Cameroun. The Club then became the Sahel and West Africa Club in 2001.

- To take into account the evolutions of the region for the last 30 years and to respond to the demands expressed by our partners in the region, the Club has been involved into new topics. Accordingly, today, we work in four areas:
 - Medium- and Long-Term Development Perspectives
 - Agricultural Transformation and Sustainable Development
 - Local Development and the Process of Regional Integration
 - Governance, Conflict Dynamics, Peace and Security

- Within that framework of our work, our main objectives are to:
 - Promote a balanced perception of West Africa, taking into account the constraints while emphasizing the dynamics of change;
 - Support initiatives and efforts by the Africans towards peace ;
 - To play an advocacy role in support to the African endeavours on the international scene.

- The Club works in network with West African partners representing governments and all the actors of civil society in their diversity. It works in close collaboration with development partners of West Africa as well as international organisations; at the continental level, with the African Union, the NEPAD

Initiative and the AfDB; at the regional level with ECOWAS, UNOWA, WAEMU, CILSS as well as ROPPA and of course, the Strategic Watch Club for Peace in West Africa.

Now concerning our perception of the region:

- West Africa has experienced significant transformation, and should not be perceived as a stagnant region but rather as a region in constant evolution.

- In effect, a retrospective look at the region enables us to conclude that over the last two decades there have been significant social, cultural, institutional and political changes. To cite just a few: new modes of governance; a shift from a single-party to a multi-party system; expansion of the employment-generating informal sector; macro-economic and structural adjustments; economic liberalisation; changes in the configuration and role of the media; emergence of civil society's role in its professional or community-based representative organisations; evolution of women's rights in society and their changing role in public affairs; higher priority for local development and the regional integration process. Today, the importance of these challenges is exacerbated by the very high percentage of youth under 20 years of age (over 55% of the population). What other region of the world has undergone such transformations?

- These tremendous upheavals have created political and social tensions but also an opening and reconfiguration of the West African public space.

- In insisting on the dynamics of change, the purpose here is not to say that "everything is going well". We all are well aware that these changes have been impeded by problems related to governance; human security; national and international strategies and policies; new pandemics.

- For us, the main question is : **"Where and how are the approximately 430 million West Africans going to live in 2020?"**, which means an increase of over 10 million inhabitants than there are now. This demographic growth will be embodied by the predominance of youth seeking employment; increased urbanization; pressure on land and food security;

socio-economic infrastructure needs for an expanding population; heightened migratory movements, etc. These are some of many questions that will be at the origin of tensions even conflicts and to which societies and governments within the region will need to bring responses. These are some of the problems that will only find solutions within a framework linking the local, national and regional levels. Here are the reasons **why the Sahel and West Africa Club has been involved in organising this Forum.**

2. What should be the principal objectives for our exchanges?

- In West Africa, as elsewhere, people want peace and democracy. Each society must rely on its assets and resources in order to build peace; and women are playing a leading role in this process in West Africa.
- In order to build and strengthen peace and democracy in a country or region, it is necessary to have a good understanding of the societies and their evolutions, progress and challenges rather than adopting a superficial approach too often leading to pessimistic conclusions. This Forum will help raise areas of strategic thinking and action on these issues.
- All over the world, maintaining peace in society requires vigilance and persistent determination because nothing is ever a given. Dynamics of change raise hopes for the future yet at the same time raises tensions. And Africa is no exception.
- Today you have an institution at your disposal, ECOWAS, that is very much in demand with regard to conflict management and maintenance of peace and that is celebrating this year its 30th anniversary. We will have the opportunity during the Forum to be informed of the missions of this institution and the instruments it is putting at your disposal. General Diarra will introduce the Additional Protocol, already ratified by 9 countries.

- In your region, the social relationships forged by history are thus strengthened by the new proximity of populations in the region structured by a rapidly growing network of towns. As a result, the interactions between urban and rural areas have been modified. Territorial development should be rethought taking into account these evolutions. It is therefore important to decompartmentalise the actors and have them more connected through a network approach at the regional level. This is what this Forum seeks to promote.
- Finally, we shall not forget –even if it is not today’s topic- that Africa as the other continents needs to position itself within the new worldwide context. In this connection, a great cohesion at the regional level will strengthen Africa.

Why have you come together, you, representatives of political parties, the media, and civil society ?

- In the building and strengthening of peace and democracy, everyone should be able to contribute. As representatives of political parties, the media and civil society, you make up an essential pillar within this construction. Indeed the building of democracy cannot be dissociated from political plurality, freedom of the press and active participation of civil society?
- You have a lot of experience, real life and ideas in common to share on the region’s future. Nevertheless, you do not always agree on how to proceed. This Forum aims at stimulating at the regional level dialogue and synergies among actors while recognising their diversities and differences in approaches.
- We are here not to discuss a given conflict within region but to share your vision and your plans for the construction and the consolidation of peace and democracy within the region. The efforts can only be part of a consultation and a negotiation process; where there are no losers nor winners, but a common willingness to reach compromise to the benefit of the majority. Promote unity in the respect of diversity and building consensus allowing for smooth transition; this is of vital importance!
- We will advise you later on, on how we intend to proceed during this Forum.

3. What could be the follow-up to this Forum?

- I would like to ask you to think about the follow-up to this Forum.

- As you have well understood, we would not like the Forum to be an event without follow-up on the issue of peace and democracy.

- If you have accepted to participate at this Forum, then you too must believe that it is possible to go further together to build and strengthen peace and democracy in the region. It is in this spirit that we ask you, each at your level, to be committed beyond this Forum and increasingly involved at the regional level.

- It is now up to all of us to identify new courses of action anchored in the West African society's experiences for a better common future.

- We will be listening to you concerning the follow-up to this meeting.

Thank you.