



**ADDRESS BY THE COMMISSIONER GENDER AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS ECOWAS DR. FATIMATA DIA SOW
ON THE OCCASION OF THE EXPERT MEETING ON STATELESSNESS IN WEST AFRICA**

ABIDJAN, COTE D'IVOIRE 23 FEBRUARY 2015

Protocol,

I am pleased to welcome you to this very important meeting bordering on the attainment of the rights and welfare of all citizens of the ECOWAS region. The subject of the statelessness is at once, of critical importance and often overlooked. I must place on record my thanks to His Excellency President Alassane Ouattara President of Cote d'Ivoire and the good people of this country for hosting this meeting and to our friends and partners in UNHCR for working tirelessly with us in bringing this important issue to the fore and convening this meeting.

It is the case that thousands of people in West Africa are affected by the phenomenon of statelessness. This has a bearing on the human rights and dignity of our people and on national, human and regional peace and security. While the right to a nationality is a basic human right, statelessness remains a reality in our region. This is so despite existing ECOWAS legal frameworks which might, at least in part, mitigate the situation. The ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol relating to free movement and the right of establishment would certainly provide some amelioration to community citizens. Still a matter to be considered is the definition of the "community citizen" and matter of proof of one status as a community citizen.

Citizenship matters specifically because it is the very basis for political participation and voice, it is important in relation to property rights in certain instances and forms the basis for representative democracy and a say in the collective destiny of the individual's geographic, political and social space.

The causes of statelessness are to be found in the legislative regimes governing nationality and administrative practices in Member States. Provisions of nationality legislation that should be considered include those with respect to the rules of citizenship by reason of parentage or place of birth, the subjects of acquisition of nationality by spouses, by naturalization, dual nationality, loss and deprivation of nationality and weakness or non-existence of administrative systems for the protection of stateless persons. Of particular interest to this gathering should be the rate of saturation of civil registration systems including voter management systems (which are specifically applicable to persons having attained the age of majority). These three form a trifecta with regards to the rights of citizens both civil and political and economic and social. For this august gathering of

policy makers and strategic facilitators, this wider environ of our subject matter must be taken into consideration as well, in arriving at suitable recommendations.

As the UNHCR IOM study on Nationality, Migration and Statelessness in West Africa posits, at a more operational level, strengthening of civil registration systems (already highlighted), procedures for the proof of nationality, the problems of inaccessible naturalization procedures and official and unofficial costs must be addressed in a conscientious and systematic manner.

I would be remiss if I did not mention that responding to this problem by the ECOWAS Commission is a collective responsibility of sister Departments and Directorates; thus at this important meeting the Commission is represented by the Department of Social Affairs and Gender, Political Affairs Peace and Security and Trade and Free Movement. Of course the relevant Directorates within the Departments mentioned in attendance include Humanitarian and Social Affairs, Political Affairs, Free Movement, Legal Affairs and Communications. Beyond this conference these will have important roles to play in ensuring the goals of the ECOWAS Vision are met in relation to nationality as a facet of human rights and human security.

In concluding these remarks I would like to again appreciate the close and fruitful working relations we have with the UNHCR, not only in this area but in other matters as diverse as refugee management, IDP's and the establishment and sustained support for the EERT (ECOWAS Emergency response Team). My thanks again to His Excellency President Alassane Ouattara for hosting us and for the excellent hospitality we have and are still enjoying. I will all distinguished delegates a most fruitful meeting.

Thank you.