

**OPENING REMARKS BY THE ECOWAS COMMISSIONER FOR SOCIAL AFFAIRS
AND GENDER; DR FATIMATA DIA SOW AT THE EXPERT MEETING ON THE
VALIDATION OF THE REGIONAL PLAN OF ACTION ON ERADICATION OF
STATELESSNESS
BANJUL, REPUBLIC OF THE GAMBIA
7th – 8TH MAY, 2017**

The Regional Representative of UNHCR,

Honorable Minister of the Interior, The Gambia,

Distinguished Experts from ECOWAS Member States,

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Press,

I am indeed delighted to welcome you all to this very important meeting committed to the validation and adoption of the Regional Action Plan for the implementation of the Abidjan Declaration on the eradication of Statelessness in West Africa. I must acknowledge and appreciate the commitment and collaboration of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) with the ECOWAS Commission in the fight to eradicate statelessness in our region. This fight requires unprecedented cooperation by the international community and I am pleased that these two organizations are working closely towards achieving the expected outcome of the Abidjan Declaration which is a historical instrument in eradicating this menace.

Before I proceed, I would like to express my profound gratitude to His Excellency, President Adama Barrow, the President of the Republic of the Gambia and the good

people of this country for their great hospitality and the facilities placed at the disposal of this meeting.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the subject of Statelessness has come a long way on the agenda of our regional goal and now it has been taken away from the shadows to the spotlight. It aligns with our shift in vision from ECOWAS of States to ECOWAS of People and therefore goes to the heart of the regional integration process of ECOWAS.

In the last two years and with the support of UNHCR, we have focused on the challenges of Statelessness, addressed its root causes and have defined a way forward in eradicating this menace. Statelessness, like many other human rights violations is often rooted in discriminatory beliefs and practices. Everyone has the right to belong and the right to nationality. However, millions around the world have been denied these rights ranging from children, women and men for diverse reasons which include gaps in nationality laws and administrative practices which may create problems of discrimination that are not written into law.

On February 25, 2015, ECOWAS Ministers of Internal Affairs and Justice gathered in Abidjan to address this subject of Statelessness particularly as it affects the ECOWAS region. The discussions at the meeting resulted in the adoption of 62 recommendations to end statelessness and the adoption of a 26-point ministerial declaration now referred to as the Abidjan Declaration addressed mainly to Member States. Thereafter, further action was taken to by the ECOWAS Commission with the support of UNHCR to develop a regional action plan as a mechanism in the implementation of the Abidjan Declaration. And today, we are here to take concrete actions by validating this regional action plan in order to achieve the target of the Declaration in eradicating Statelessness by 2024.

The Plan of Action for validation entails six strategic support measures that ECOWAS and UNCHR can provide to Member States in accordance with Articles 22 and 25 of the Abidjan Declaration; it includes measures that ECOWAS will adopt to follow-up on the commitments made by Member States in the Abidjan Declaration and it spells out mechanisms for monitoring the implementation.

The strategic objectives developed in the Action Plan for deliberation and validation are as follows:

- **To ensure compliance with relevant legal, policy and institutional frameworks for eradicating statelessness,**
- **Strengthening Data Management system for effective response to the challenges of statelessness,**
- **Free movement of stateless persons, integration and protection,**
- **Advocacy and Sensitization of populations and stakeholders,**
- **Guarantee access to proof of nationality and**
- **Establish strategic and operational follow-up mechanisms.**

These are concrete objectives along with their corresponding activities which member states are called upon to validate and recommend to ECOWAS Ministers of Justice/Interior (as the case may be) in the spirit of understanding and cooperation.

On behalf of the President of the ECOWAS Commission, I urge us to fight this cause collectively for the future and safety of our region while wishing you all successful deliberations.

Thank you!