

WEST AFRICAN CIVIL SOCIETY STATEMENT

FOLLOWING THE MEETING ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE VALLETTA ACTION PLAN BY ECOWAS MEMBER STATES

Accra, 9th to 11th February 2016

The West African civil society organisations present in Accra, Ghana welcomed the ECOWAS meeting for the implementation of the action plan adopted by the European Union and African States at the Valletta summit in Malta on the 11th and 12th November 2015.

The tragic events, that continue to take place off the coasts of Europe, in the Sahara desert and the Gulf of Guinea, have not left the West African countries indifferent. West African civil society is, thus, pleased to see that ECOWAS member states are actively involved in finding solutions. Between September and November 2015, prior to the Valletta summit, numerous meetings were held between the various ECOWAS Heads of State and government ministries in order to adopt a common position. West African civil society welcomes the fact that they were consulted throughout this process and included in the dialogue and talks organised to this effect. However, it would appear that their message to the Heads of State has not been fully heard.

The migrant crisis in Europe, and the obstacles to free movement within the Schengen area that have followed, give ECOWAS the opportunity to show itself as a model of a free movement area. 84% of West African migrants live in one of the other countries belonging to ECOWAS. This fact alone indicates that the migratory issues faced by ECOWAS member states are fairly specific and, in some aspects, different from European Union migration management requirements. The willingness of our populations to move towards greater mobility within the ECOWAS region come up against the temptation to control free movement as implied in the Valletta action plan.

Civil society is concerned that the five main points in the Valletta action plan and the announced creation of a reception, professional training and orientation centre for migrants in Agadez, Niger, could threaten the historical free movement of our people within the West African area, as endorsed by ECOWAS protocols. Despite the security risks resulting from the multiplication of terrorist acts, which are condemned by Civil society, it believes that the appropriate response to the influx of migrants is to adopt migratory policies that respect the rights of migrant workers and the members of their families.

Civil society, therefore, calls upon ECOWAS member states to consider the necessity of respecting their populations' mobility rights when following the implementation the Valletta action plan and submitting projects to the 1.8 billion euro trust fund set up by the European Union.

Civil society reiterates the fact that irregular migration is rooted in the restrictive migration policies implemented by the European Union over recent years. A solution to irregular migration will only be found through open and sincere discussions between the European Union and ECOWAS member states to enable the population, and in particular young people, to move freely and to obtain visa exemptions as is the case for certain Latin American countries.

Consensual mobility could prevent West African migrants from fuelling the smuggler networks, would help boost their creativity, and subsequent to their migratory experience, encourage productive investments that create jobs for young Africans.

In light of the climate crisis, drought, coastal erosion and the multiplication of natural disasters in the ECOWAS region, civil society insists on the importance of including resilience to the impact of climate change in projects submitted to the trust fund. In following the Valletta action plan, a dialogue must be initiated to find solutions to the problem of refugees and internally displaced persons who are mainly found within the ECOWAS area, and for which the member states bear the cost despite their lack of resources.

The fight to tackle trafficking in human beings and migrant smuggling should not just be limited to the smugglers. On this subject, civil society emphasises the importance of supporting projects submitted to the trust fund that reinforce the legal framework and protection of the victims of trafficking and smuggling. It calls on ECOWAS member states to ratify all legal instruments related to human trafficking, migrant smuggling and domestic work. African civil society is convinced that one possible way to prevent human trafficking and migrant smuggling is the creation of safe professional migration channels and university mobility programmes within and outside of the ECOWAS area.

West African civil society wishes to express its reservations concerning the voluntary return mechanisms currently being implemented between the European states and the ECOWAS member states. It wishes to point out that in the interest of migrant dignity, the safety risks and the precariousness of the situation in which the person being returned might find him or

herself should be taken into account. Considering the importance of the diaspora in financing development in ECOWAS member states, and whatever their legal situation in the host country, returns should be managed with respect and in cooperation with ECOWAS member states. This should include the necessary psychological follow-up and professional reinsertion of the migrant in his or her country of origin.

In Civil society's opinion, the diaspora has a significant role to play in developing a 'win-win' migratory situation between ECOWAS member states and the European Union. Therefore, Civil society urges that mechanisms be put in place to facilitate access to trust fund financing for projects developed by or on behalf of the West African diaspora in Europe.

In order to monitor the implementation of the Valletta action plan, the financing attributed by the trust fund, and observance of West African migrants' human rights, all members of the civil society organisations present at the Accra meeting have agreed to form a West African Civil Society Observatory of the Valletta Action Plan. This observatory will ensure that civil society is better represented in regional and national talks on migration.

We call upon the Commission of ECOWAS and its technical and financial partners to support this initiative.

Accra, 11th February 2016