



OFFICE OF THE SPECIAL ENVOY OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL
FOR THE GREAT LAKES REGION

Outcome Document

Regional Consultative Roundtable on Economic Empowerment of Women and their effective participation in Peacebuilding in the Great Lakes Region within the evolving context of COVID-19

Theme: Women as Agents of Change for Social and Economic Transformation
28 July 2020

1. On 28 July 2020, the Office of the UN Special Envoy for the Great Lakes Region (GLR), in coordination with countries of the region, Guarantors of the Peace, Security, and Cooperation (PSC) Framework (UN, AU, SADC, ICGLR)¹, and the Advisory Board for Women Peace and Security (WPS) in the GLR, convened a virtual consultation on the economic empowerment of women and their effective participation in peacebuilding within the evolving context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants included regional women entrepreneurs and small, medium and large scale business stakeholders, regional and international women organizations, senior government officials, civil society organizations (CSOs), representatives from international and regional organizations (including UNECA, OIF, Trademark East Africa, CEPGL, IFBPW & AWAN), international financial institutions (WBG, AfDB, IDFC), and international partners, including members of the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC), as well as representatives of regional media.

2. The event was part of an ongoing series of consultative roundtable dialogues on the WPS Agenda in the region and focused on ‘Women as Agents of Change for Social and Economic Transformation’. It took place following a meeting of the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) on the Great Lakes Region on 11 June 2020, and the recent adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2532 (2020), which “*Acknowledges the critical role that women are playing in COVID-19 response efforts, as well as the disproportionate negative impact of the pandemic, notably the socio-economic impact, on women and girls, children, refugees, internally displaced persons, older persons and persons with disabilities, and calls for concrete actions to minimize this impact and ensure the full, equal and meaningful participation of women and youth in the development and implementation of an adequate and sustainable response to the pandemic*”.

3. The event was held within the context of the 20th anniversary of UNSCR 1325 (2000) and further to UNSCR 2493 (2019), which requests all UN entities to make use of the annual consultations with regional organizations to encourage the implementation of the WPS Agenda, and promote cooperation and sharing of best practices.

¹ Details of acronyms reflected at end of document.



4. The dialogue aimed to foster a common assessment of: i) the challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in the region, including consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic; ii) the opportunities available through instruments, in particular through the AfCFTA, for the inclusive and sustainable economic empowerment of the women entrepreneurs in the region; iii) and to formulate recommendations on ways to support women-led businesses with a view to ensuring their full, equal and meaningful participation in the development and implementation of adequate and sustainable responses of post-COVID-19 recovery initiatives.

Opening Statements and Regional Overview

5. In his opening remarks, UN Special Envoy Xia acknowledged the disproportionate and negative impact of the pandemic on women and girls, especially in the economic sphere, and stressed the need to place women at the centre of all response initiatives. He emphasized that women entrepreneurs are the vector for social change and structural transformation of African economies and sustainable development, and as such were a true leverage for consolidating peace and security in the Great Lakes Region. Clare Akamanzi, Chief Executive Officer of the Rwanda Development Board (RDB), noted that empowering women is a pathway for attaining the Sustainable Development Goals and that equipping women with entrepreneurship and innovation skills to absorb under-utilized labour force remains a priority for the RDB. Reiterating Rwanda's commitment to convene the upcoming Great Lakes Investments and Trade conference (GLITC), scheduled from 2-4 December 2020 in Kigali, she emphasized that the Conference will allow the region to explore investment opportunities in industries, such as light manufacturing and agribusiness.

6. The opening session was followed by presentations by Mama Keita, UNECA Director for Africa -East Africa; Amany Asfour, World President of International Federation for Business and Professional Women; and Joseph Lititiyo, Deputy Executive Secretary of the Economic Community for the Great Lakes Countries (CEPGL), with a focus on the state of the regional economy, the impact of COVID-19 on women entrepreneurs in the region and proposed initiatives for recovery.

7. The various statements highlighted the importance of the dialogue in view of the fact that women are bearing the burden of multiple dimensions of the pandemic, with a major effect on their health, and by extension their ability to continue to lead, and be involved in their small and medium businesses. Participants discussed the ability of women to be agents of change for socio-economic transformation, with a focus on economic empowerment, set against the challenges of the COVID-19 related economic downturn experienced by women-owned businesses in the Great Lakes. General agreement was reached on the need for gender sensitive responses to the economic, social and health care recovery initiatives. They further discussed ways to mobilize women for their effective participation in the GLITC.

Discussions

8. The participants noted ongoing regional funding initiatives being launched by the partners. On July 17, the OIF launched the "*La Francophonie avec elle*" projects grants, with funds ranging from 15,000 to 80,000 Euros, targeting projects contributing to increasing the resilience of the most

vulnerable women and girls. Additionally, on April 2019, the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) announced the 2 X Africa projects with \$1 billion commitment to invest in women on the continent. Within the context of the Great Lakes Investments, the World Bank is financing the Great Lakes Trade Facilitation Project. The project is a US \$79m regional operation that involves DRC (\$34m), Rwanda (\$26m), Uganda (\$14m) and COMESA (\$5m). AfDB mentioned that they are investing in equity funds that are deploying gender-based financing tools amongst other of their initiatives.

9. The roundtable consultative meeting addressed the following three thematic areas: (i) Financial access for women led businesses; (ii) Regional business development with/for women; and (iii) Cross-border trade led by women.

(i) Financial access for women and youth led businesses

10. In considering financial access for women led businesses, participants noted that extensive pre-qualifications for funding continue to marginalize women and youth from accessing equitable and low-cost funding. It was also noted that women-led venture capital firms were in the minority, thereby reducing the women investors cluster in the Great Lakes region. In addition, current investor appetite is predominately postured towards industries and markets that have high returns and low representation of women in business in the region, such as energy and technology. This is largely being driven by investor dependency on market investment trends, lethargy towards research on gender and youth-based funding, as well as acute gender and youth disaggregated data deficiency in the context of women in business in the region. The participants also noted that women in small scale business and youth lacked the technical knowledge in analyzing and accessing existing gender sensitive funding opportunities in the region.

Recommendations:

- *Create gender sensitive investment funds designed to minimize the funding pre-qualification, reduce interest rates for loans, and accompanied by post COVID-19 pandemic recovery grants.*
- *Advocate for the creation of more women-led venture capital firms.*
- *Support gender sensitive funding research, promote the use of gender and youth disaggregated data, so as to inform funding strategies for women entrepreneurs particularly in agriculture, and for the youth entrepreneurs involved in technology.*
- *Facilitate online and digital learning platforms in the region, to enable women to widely and equitably access a broad spectrum of business knowledge, training and capacity building at a low or no cost.*

(ii) Regional business development for women and youth

11. In addressing regional business development for women, participants recognized the need to increase intra-regional trade through regional market integration. It was noted that there was a need to create an enabling regional market ecosystem for the women, by concretely addressing constraints to market linkages, such as fragmented regional trade policies.

12. It was also observed that women had begun to innovate their businesses in response to the harsh economic conditions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular by joining the digital

economy. Providing support for women to trade seamlessly across the region will catalyze the growth of domestic and regional small businesses and markets, which is largely composed of women. It was further noted that this would entrench resilience mechanisms for women led businesses.

13. Participants also noted the challenges faced by youth entrepreneurs, such as unfair competition in the market and lack of intergenerational mentorship and role models. Furthermore, it was noted that women frequently lacked fixed assets, such as land, which would serve to enable business capital resilience and security of their livelihoods.

Recommendations

- *Build the technical capacity of women, to participate in the continental market through the AfCFTA.*
- *Promote research and the generation of data to improve the profile of women in trade.*
- *Member states to harmonize trade policies, laws and procedures, and look into temporarily reducing taxes for local products, especially in the agriculture sector.*
- *Provide support to women entrepreneurs to enable them to participate in post COVID-19 socio-economic recovery through agriculture, ease the availability and accessibility to fertilizer, seeds, and small farm equipment, with a view to increasing food security for women entrepreneurs in the region.*
- *Reduce, or temporarily put at zero rate, the cost of fertilizers, seeds and small-scale farm equipment.*
- *Create digital platforms for women-led businesses in the region to assist women to build business capacity, exchange business knowledge and to seamlessly trade with each other.*
- *Establish a regional platform or caucus of experienced women in business as mentors and role models in the region, to enable the youth entrepreneurs to access regional intergenerational business mentorship.*
- *Regulators in the region to address practices that lead to unfair competition particularly that affecting young entrepreneurs.*
- *Strengthen equitable trade and business policies that enable youth and women to be effective partners in businesses.*
- *Member states to accelerate the adoption and enforcement of laws enabling women land ownership.*

(iii) Cross-border trade led by women and youth

14. The COVID-19 pandemic restrictions have reduced cross border movement and increased the duration of delivery of goods across the borders, especially among the women who constitute 75% in the region's small-scale cross border trade ecosystem. The additional and compulsory national health regulations and testing reduces women's capacity to trade.

15. It was noted that women lacked the knowledge related to the one-stop border post system and cross border regulations and policies in the region, which is a critical tool for cross border business decision making. The fragmented and complex cross border taxation protocols, as well as non-tariff barriers, continue to impact on the cost of women doing business and increase the likelihood of gender-based violence at the border crossings, due to the length of time women spend at the border.

Recommendations

- *Member States to work collaboratively to encourage and boost cross-border trade through favourable and harmonized tax regimes, with a focus on women cross-border traders.*
- *Member states to work at eliminating non-tariff barriers.*
- *Member states to harmonize a regional health policy in order to ease health safety compliance for women.*
- *Strengthen women business associations as advocacy mechanisms and gender-based institutions for information sharing and for post COVID-19 recovery capacity building in cross border and informal trade.*
- *Member states to work together to maintain open borders in an effort to help in the economic recovery of cross-border traders, the majority of whom are women.*

Next Steps

16. In considering the list of recommendations, O/SESG and ICGLR Private Sector Forum will establish a small working group to extract key concrete recommendations for consideration by the PBC.

Note of Appreciation

17. Participants expressed their gratitude to the Office of the Special Envoy, the PSC-Framework Guarantors and the Advisory Board for WPS in the GLR for convening and facilitating this important meeting in preparation for the upcoming PBC meeting on WPS and ahead of the GLITC in Rwanda.

Done in Nairobi
28 July 2020

Acronyms:

ACFTA:	Africa Continental Free Trade Agreement
AfDB:	African Development Bank
AU:	African Union
AWAN:	AWAN AFRICA
CEPGL:	Economic Community for the Great Lakes Countries,
ICGLR:	International Conference for the Great Lakes Region
IDFC:	International Development Finance Corporation
IFBPW:	International Federation for Business and Professional Women
OIF:	Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie,
PBC:	Peacebuilding Commission
SADC:	Southern African Development Community
UNECA:	UN Economic Commission for Africa
UN:	United Nations
WB:	World Bank