

## IMPERATIVES IN COMBATING TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS: AN ECOWAS PERSPECTIVE

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**Trafficking in persons** is a problem that impinges on human rights in that it is fundamental violation of the human rights and dignity of individuals, depriving them of freedom of movement, association and in certain cases, the right to life.

In West Africa, trafficking is mainly rooted in rampant poverty. Traffickers take advantage of the high demand for migrant workers in many local industries inclusive of mining, agriculture, fishing, restaurant, bars, massage parlors, commercial sex activities, petty trade, and a range of activities in the so-called informal sector.

Trafficking also takes place between West African countries and nations outside of West Africa including within Central Africa (Gabon for example) and to and through North African Countries (such as Morocco and Libya) to Europe. The main goal of this type of trafficking is the exploitation of the labor of victims and sexual exploitation.

Other causative elements of trafficking in West Africa include violence against individuals or communities, natural disasters, armed conflicts, social conflicts that fuel forced migration and increase vulnerability of children, and young girls and women. These all contribute to incidences of trafficking in persons.

**ECOWAS Member States** have, over the course of the last decade, taken concerted actions to combat trafficking in persons. The genesis of this was the adoption of the Political Declaration and Plan of Action to Combat Trafficking in Persons in West Africa in the year 2001 focusing on the areas of legal framework and policy development, protection and support of victims of trafficking in persons, prevention and awareness raising, collection, exchange and analysis of information, specialization and training and travel and identity documents. Over the years other measures taken include the adoption of a Joint Plan of Action and Multi-lateral Cooperation Agreement by West and Central Africa in 2006.

The ECOWAS Commission established a **Unit to combat trafficking in persons** in 2005 and the Unit has been the arrowhead for counter trafficking in the region. Activities of the Unit since its inception include conduct of an assessment of compliance of national legislation with the Palermo Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons , especially Women and Children, capacity building for Member States of ECOWAS in developing National Plans of Action and in establishing National Task Forces and training related to counter trafficking programming.

In the year 2009 the Unit developed a draft Policy on Protection and Assistance to Victims of Trafficking which was presented for validation and was adopted by Ministers and approved by Heads of States. This is the authoritative standards and benchmark for efforts within the region for the identification,

protection and rendering of assistance to victims. Likewise in the same year the Unit developed Guidelines on Witness Protection, Support and Assistance as a means of providing direction for practice in Member States, especially in conducting Trafficking in Persons investigations and prosecutions. At the present, the Unit is collaborating with other units in ECOWAS in determining linkages between trafficking in persons and child protection with a view to crafting appropriate strategies.

In the year 2008 ECOWAS instituted a process of annual review of the implementation of the ECOWAS Plan of Action focused aiding Member States in measuring actual progress made in implementing the ECOWAS Plan of Action. The process has institutionalized a system of yearly reporting that identifies challenges and obstacles and aids the ECOWAS TIP Unit in determining what measures would best assist Member States in achieving stated goals. The annual review meeting at which the synthesized report for all Member States is presented is also a forum for the sharing of good practices between Member States. At the 2010 meeting, Member States reported a total of 474 prosecutions recorded in 2009 for the offence of trafficking in persons. This was over a 300% improvement on the previous year.

The ECOWAS Commission, also in the year 2010 elaborated an internal **Strategic Plan** itemizing priority activities in combating trafficking in persons for the next five years. The priorities identified include: ensuring development of appropriate institutional, policy and legal frameworks for combating trafficking in persons and for child protection, development of methodologies and approaches in measuring and ensuring sustainable progress in combating trafficking and in protecting children, development of linkages between Member States and stake-holding agencies and development of Member States capacities for effective combat of trafficking and ensuring adequate public sensitization.

Activities under these rubrics cover review of existing legal frameworks for conformity with the Palermo Protocol on TIP and assistance to MS in further developing Legislations, development of a Regional Trafficking in Persons Fund , primarily focused on capacity building activities both in the area of trafficking in persons and child protection, support for operational initiatives of police forces within West Africa in combating trafficking in persons and violations of the rights of the child and developing a broad manpower resource base for the region on TIP and Child Protection as to ensure adequate provision of in-country capacity building initiatives amongst several other activities.

The Commission will in 2011 conduct an impact assessment of the counter trafficking initiatives within the region and is planning a bi-regional meeting with the Economic Community of Central African States to assess implementation of the Joint ECCAS/ECOWAS Plan of Action to Combat Trafficking in Persons.

In the years to come the ECOWAS Commission will strengthen its work in not only combating trafficking in persons but also in protecting children. The approach of the ECOWAS Commission in responding to the challenge of trafficking in persons is anchored in the desire for a vastly improved human security climate. This is central to the achievement of the goals of ECOWAS as a region.