CONCLUSIONS OF THE REGIONAL CONFERENCE ON THE REDUCTION OF INEQUALITIES IN THE WASH SECTOR IN WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA.

We, representatives of ministries and United Nations institutions, parliamentarians, academics, researchers, media professionals, civil society organizations, communities of West and Central Africa (particularly from Cameroon, Niger and Senegal) and our technical and financial partners involved in the fight for the reduction of gender inequalities in the WASH sector, held a regional conference from 18 to 19 June 2018 in Dakar, Senegal. The regional conference was held at the initiative of the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC) and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women).

It formed part of the Joint Programme on “Gender, Hygiene and Sanitation”, for which the issue of menstrual hygiene management is an entry point. The Government of Senegal, represented by the Ministry of Water and Sanitation, was the host country.

The Conference involved, first and foremost, the ministries of Water and Sanitation, Women and the Family, Health, the Environment, Education and Decentralization of the countries of West and Central Africa. It was run in a multisectoral, inclusive and innovative approach.

The conference was attended by 20 participating countries (French- and English-speaking), namely: Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Canada, Central African Republic, Djibouti, Ghana, Liberia, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Sweden, Switzerland, Tanzania, Togo, United Kingdom, USA and Zimbabwe.

It also provided an opportunity to share the conclusions of the final evaluation of the Joint Gender, Hygiene and Sanitation Programme, of innovations of recent years and, lastly, of research findings that have informed and illuminated public policy.

More important still, the Dakar Regional Conference gave the representatives from Cameroon, Niger and Senegal and from the other countries invited, and partners involved, the opportunity to work together to conduct a totally objective critical review of progress on the reduction of gender inequalities in the WASH sector and of the most important obstacles identified throughout the process.

Through multi- and cross-sectoral panel discussions led by eminent figures, conference participants were able to widely share their own experiences of mechanisms and strategies to address women's and girls' needs in national policies and budgets related to the WASH sector in West and Central Africa, and to water, hygiene and sanitation in particular.

Priority themes discussed at the Dakar Regional Conference included the state of knowledge of MHM, its integration into educational curriculums, community approaches to promote women's and girls' access to WASH services, MHM in humanitarian situations, state accountability, the monitoring of WASH indicators and, last but not least, innovative local initiatives.

The Dakar Regional Conference welcomed the significant outcomes and gains made by the Joint Programme on Gender, Hygiene and Sanitation, particularly in view of its short duration. Essentially, these are:

- The effective integration of women's and girls' needs (especially in respect of menstrual hygiene) into the national policies and budgets of Cameroon, Niger and Senegal. In Senegal, MHM is expressly included in the sectoral policy letter, in programming and in guidelines.

- An adequate and effective response to the needs for information, education and management of MHM. Studies have been conducted in Cameroon (3), Niger (1) and Senegal (3) to "break the silence" in various contexts (urban, rural, humanitarian, prison, settled peoples, nomadic peoples, etc.).

- Increased access to the right information for a change of behaviour. In this way, outreach has raised the awareness of many thousands of women, girls, men and boys in Cameroon, Niger and Senegal.

- The involvement and commitment of decision makers, technical and financial partners, civil society and grassroots communities to the promotion of MHM, particularly within United Nations entities under the banner of "Leave No One Behind".
CONCLUSIONS OF THE CONFERENCE

Dakar, 19 June 2018

- The emergence of an enabling environment in which women and girls enjoy their right to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services.
- The socioeconomic impact on the lives and empowerment of women and girls, through the provision of MHM-sensitive infrastructure in schools and colleges, markets, public places, etc. To this end, Senegal developed a prototype toilet which was used in Cameroon in the humanitarian setting. Niger has also used this design to build pilot toilets in public places.
- The collaborative, multisectoral, inclusive and learning approach by different stakeholders in the three arenas of the institutional, the operational and the community. Thus, Niger, Senegal and Cameroon have established multisectoral platforms. That in Niger associates ten or so sectoral ministries and technical and financial partners working in the WASH sector; the Senegal platform involves five sectoral ministries.
- The conference welcomed local initiatives in the region to enhance women's and girls’ access to safe sanitary products to manage their periods.

Despite the progress made, the conference has ongoing concerns around a number of major challenges related to gender inequalities in access to WASH in the West and Central Africa, particularly including:

- The pursuit of actions needed for the operationalization of the integration of Menstrual Hygiene Management into the implementation plans for different countries’ public polices and budgets and within sectors. Going beyond policy documents, this integration should be reflected in sectoral ministries’ flagship programmes and budgets.
- The low funding of the hygiene and sanitation subsector and the lack of suitable facilities for women and girls.
- The need for continued research to address issues that have not been covered. Those issues include the needs of specific target groups, such as persons with disabilities, women in prison, women in hospitals (management of post-partum blood, fistulas, violence in hospitals), and the elderly (incontinence).
- The still-high cost of industrially-manufactured sanitary towels and the difficulties that rural populations have in accessing re-usable pads.
- The lack of funds for the manufacture and distribution of hygiene kits.
- The inefficient management of public facilities and infrastructure, particularly latrines.

We, participants at the Dakar Regional Conference, make the following recommendations:

- Strengthen the scaling up of the experimental programme, the results of which deserve to be consolidated and expanded to other countries, stakeholders and target groups that have expressed actual demand for it.
- Continue intersectoral collaboration to reduce and then eliminate inequalities of access to WASH services.
- Ensure the effective integration and use of MHM indicators in the public policies and budgets of different countries, particularly in relevant ministries and services (at central and decentralized levels).
- Further target boys in schools to improve their level of understanding of menstruation.
- Integrate cultural aspects into awareness activities.
- Share MHM best practices and prototype latrines, including technical specifications and methods of construction.
- Harmonize actions and means of intervention on MHM issues around a common vision.
- Further involve the media in the implementation of post-2015 development projects and programmes, especially on the reduction of inequalities in the WASH sector.
- Strengthen the capacity of the media with regard to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in general, and SDGs 5 and 6 in particular.
- Establish a fund to support local initiatives and social enterprises working in MHM.
Closing the regional conference on behalf of Minister of Water and Sanitation His Excellency Mr Mansour Faye, First Technical Advisor to the Minister, Mr Diatta, congratulated participants on the quality of their work, exhorting them to take an active part in preparations for the 2021 World Water Forum, to be held in Dakar. Mr Diatta invited participants to strengthen awareness-raising and actions to promote women’s and girls’ access to WASH services, including for menstrual hygiene management, so that 2021 communities would have significantly raised awareness of MHM by the year 2021. The results of these actions to support communities would be presented at the 2021 World Water Forum.