

**Regional Ministerial-level Meeting for the Validation and Adoption of the Regional Plan of Action to
Eradicate Statelessness in West Africa**

Banjul, the Republic of the Gambia

9 May 2017

**Statement by Marie-Pierre Poirier,
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Tuesday 9 May 2017, 10:30–11:00 am

Your Excellency Adama Barrow, President of the Gambia
Your Excellency Marcel de Souza, President of the ECOWAS Commission
Honorable Ministers of Justice, Ministers of Interior, Ministers of Foreign Affairs
Distinguished Experts and colleagues from regional and international organizations, development and civil society partners,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
All protocol duly observed

I would like to start by congratulating ECOWAS, UNHCR and the government of the Gambia for the ambition to move the agenda of ending statelessness in West Africa to the next level. While the Ministers Conference in Abidjan in 2015 – the first of its kind – created a strong political commitment to eradicate statelessness, this Conference aims even higher with the validation and adoption of a regional Action Plan to put an end to the unbearable situation of hundreds of thousands of people who are deprived from their basic rights to identity and nationality. For us UNICEF an essential first step to achieve this objective is that each child has a birth certificate.

Ensuring that no-one born in our region is left invisible, is a key target of the Sustainable Development Goal no 16 that aims at *Promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels*. This target should also be included in all national development plans as it lies at the core of individual development.

Currently, in West and Central Africa, an estimated 40 million children under 5, do not have their births registered. The birth certificate is one of the most important legal documents of all time – proving where a child was born, who his or her parents are, providing the basis for establishing his or her nationality – and yet, millions and millions of children do not have it.

This is nothing short but the scandal of an invisible population.

Too many children are being born and die without existence in any official government record.

These children are invisible in the eyes of the law, and deprived from their rights to basic services such as health and education.

These children are particularly vulnerable to multiple child rights violations such as child marriage, child labour and recruitment to armed forces, as they have no proof of identity, no proof of age, no nationality.

These children are invisible but they are real. And they are our children.

UNICEF is fully committed to supporting countries in their efforts to reach the Sustainable Development Goals, including target 16.9 that aims *By 2030 at providing legal identity for all, including birth registration*. Our support is primarily channelled through the African Union Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (APAI-CRVS) that aims at permanently reforming civil registration systems across the continent, including in all ECOWAS Member States.

The African Union Programme is important in its holistic way of ensuring that every child is registered: It is only with functioning civil registration systems that follow international standards and recommendations, and that are nationally owned and professionally managed, that countries can achieve continuous, compulsory and universal registration of – not only – births, but also other vital events such as deaths, marriages and divorces, to ensure every life is accounted for. Such well-functioning civil registration systems are key to prevent statelessness.

UNICEF is a proud member of the Global Coalition to End Childhood Statelessness, launched in 2016, to bring greater coherence in supporting countries on required changes to nationality laws and on registration of displaced populations and groups that are excluded from birth registration on the grounds of religious, ethnic or national identity. Concretely, this means support to necessary adjustments to current registration policies and practices to make them inclusive of all children born in a territory, helping to remove the barrier of lack of birth registration that can prevent children from acquiring a nationality, thereby eliminating the risk of becoming stateless.

Distinguished colleagues, while Africa faces challenges in registering its population and ending statelessness, we should make use of immediate opportunities.

This Regional Ministerial-level Meeting has all the potential to transform into reality national development plans and platforms to ensure that every child enjoys equal opportunities despite their place or origin of birth.

The 4th AU Ministerial Conference on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics that will be organised in October 2017 in Nouakchott, Mauritania, will serve as another important platform to further strengthen political commitment for more inclusive registration policies and practices.

By connecting these and other mutually reinforcing platforms and through our collective commitment, we can transform the scandal of invisibility in our region into a continent where every child is counted and where the life of every child counts. We UNICEF reaffirm our commitment to do our part to make this happen, as part of UN coordinated support to the region. Each and every child is counting on us.

Thank you.