

## INFORMATION & COMMUNICATION DIRECTORATE

**Press Release No:**

**Date:** 13<sup>th</sup> September 2023

**Venue:** Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

### **The Africa Platform on Children Affected by Armed Conflicts undertook a Lessons-learning mission to Sierra Leone on the Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Children affected by Armed Conflicts**

The Africa Platform on Children Affected by Armed Conflicts (AP CAAC) undertook a lessons-learning mission to the Republic of Sierra Leone to assess and learn from the initiatives undertaken on rehabilitating and reintegrating children affected by the decade-long civil war (1991-2002). AP CAAC commended the deliberate and concerted efforts undertaken by the Government in collaboration with key stakeholders and partners to address the plight faced by children during the conflict and called on the Government of Sierra Leone to continue to lead efforts in promoting children's rights. The lessons-learning mission to the Republic of Sierra Leone occurred from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> of September 2023. The mission aimed to provide a lessons-learning opportunity for the Platform to learn the best practices on the rehabilitation and reintegration of children affected by armed conflict to enhance the capacity of the Platform on measures to be recommended, contextually, to countries in conflict situations.

The delegation was led by H.E. Jainaba Jagne, Permanent Representative of The Gambia to the African Union (AU) and the Co-Chair of the AP CAAC. It comprised H.E. Rebecca Otengo, Permanent Representative of Uganda to the African Union (AU), H.E. Ntsiwa Sekete, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Lesotho to the African Union (AU), representatives of the Ambassadors of Ghana, Mauritania, Namibia, Nigeria and the AU Commission, as well as the Save the Children Liaison Office to the AU, in its capacity as the secretariat of the Platform. The mission engaged with critical stakeholders in Sierra Leone, including representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, the Ministry of Gender, Children's Affairs, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Social Welfare, the Family Support Unit, the National Human Rights Commission, UNICEF, survivors and CSOs including Save the Children, Fumbal Tok and Centre for Memory and Reparations.

The delegation, which paid a courtesy call to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, was received by H.E. Francess Alghali, the Deputy Minister. "*We are glad that the Platform chose Sierra Leone to come and see what we have done to continue to consolidate peace in our country and help our children,*" said the Deputy Minister in her welcome remarks. She also alluded to the relevance of legal and institutional frameworks and collaborations with key partners, including CSOs, in pursuing rehabilitation and reintegration of children affected by armed conflicts.

At the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs, the delegation met with H.E. Dr Isata Nahoi, the Minister of Gender and Children's Affairs. The discussions centred on the programmes and initiatives for rehabilitation and reintegration of children affected by conflict in post-conflict Sierra Leone, particularly children formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups. The discussions underpinned the relevance of normative frameworks, advocacy, coordination, a whole community approach, and smart partnerships.

The delegation met the two deputy ministers at the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education. The discussions highlighted the role of education as a strategic intervention tool towards rebuilding the lives of children affected by armed conflicts through rehabilitation and reintegration into the community. The discussions underscored the relevance of peace and civic education, innovation and creativity, children and youth participation and community engagement.

At the Ministry of Health, the Minister, H.E. Dr. Austin Demby and Deputy Minister, H.E. Jalikatu Mustapha, received the delegation. The discussions centred around the impact of conflict on the health sector and measures that can be undertaken to recover, particularly in the enhancement of the welfare of children, including their mental health.

The Minister of Social Welfare, H.E. Melrose Karminty, also received the delegation. This Ministry was crucial in supporting children separated from their families after the conflict after the conflict. The need for robust psychosocial support programmes, interagency collaboration and coordination, multisectoral approach and capacity building were underscored in the discussions.

AP CAAC was received by Robert B. Kowa, Solicitor General in the office of Attorney General and Ministry of Justice, to learn about the justice system's role in upholding children's rights in situations of conflict, particularly children associated with armed forces and armed groups. The exchanges centred on the relevance of normative frameworks in protecting children and a diversional approach. The treatment of children formerly associated with armed conflicts and armed groups as victims and not perpetrators was distinctively emphasised.

The delegation was further received by the Chair of the National Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone, Madam Patricia Ndanema, to discuss the role of the Commission in the promotion and protection of the rights of children in post-conflict Sierra Leone. Created in the wake of the conflict, the Commission has, among others, a role to advise the Government on programmes and policies related to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's recommendations.

At the Family Support Unit (FSU), the delegation met the Head, Mrs Fatma Kamara, to discuss the unit's role in supporting the rehabilitation and reintegration of children affected by armed conflicts. The FSU plays a key role in addressing sexual and gender-based violence, this being one of its priorities.

The Platform was also received by the UNICEF Country Representative, Rudolf Schwenk, for a discussion on intervention measures initiated to support the Government of Sierra Leone regarding protecting children during and after the conflict. The measures include but are not

limited to mainstreaming child protection in peace agreements, DDR, peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction and development programmes, capacity building, family tracing and reunification, community reintegration and strategic education programmes. The key lesson was that efforts can be made to release children from the hands of belligerents even before the end of the conflict.

Additionally, the delegation met key CSOs, including Save the Children, Fumbal Tok and Centre for Memory and Reparations, which have been instrumental in supporting the implementation of TRC recommendations to facilitate reconciliation in post-conflict Sierra Leone using traditional methods with child protection and participation at the centre of their programming. Inclusivity and partnerships were key lessons from the meetings.

The Platform undertook this lessons-learning mission following its inaugural mission to Mozambique as part of a series of field visits to various AU Member States to support and advocate for the welfare of children in situations of conflict in Africa, including consultations with children to ensure that their best interests, concerns and recommendations are well reflected in policy outcomes and implemented.

It should be recalled that the AP CAAC Platform was inaugurated on 23rd September 2021. The Platform brings together individual AU Ambassadors and key child protection stakeholders committed to engaging and sustaining advocacy for protecting children in humanitarian situations during armed conflicts in Africa. The Platform is co-chaired by Ambassador Jainaba Jagne, the Permanent Representative of the Republic of The Gambia to the AU, and Ambassador Bankole Adeoye, the AU Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security.

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