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**Opening Remarks at the Meeting of The Migration Dialogue for West Africa (MIDWA)  
Thematic Working Group on “Climate Change, Land Degradation, Desertification, Environment and  
Migration”**

24-25 March 2021, Online Meeting

**Dear Directors, Dear Delegates, Dear colleagues, Distinguished attendees,**

**1. The migration and environment nexus is a reality in West Africa**

- Thank you for giving me the floor and also thank you to ECOWAS and to my colleagues at IOM for the organization of this first meeting of MIDWA on migration and environment.
- The countries of West Africa know the links between migration, environment, climate change, land degradation, and desertification very well.
- And I am very glad to see so many representatives of States present.
- There are countries in the region which are coastal countries, landlocked countries and island countries.
- There is a long history of migration due to the environment in West Africa, be it in the form of:
  - migrant workers moving during the harvesting season
  - pastoralists moving with their herds for greener pastures
  - rural migrants moving to cities
  - People forced to leave their homes due to floods and drought
  - or relocation (planned or not) as a last resort in the face of rising seas and coastal erosion.
- Over the past decades, the adverse effects of climate change and environmental degradation have intensified some of these processes in West Africa, compelling people to leave their homes, temporarily or permanently.
- Myself, I come from Mauritania, which is facing challenges of desertification as well as of sea-level rise, and where migration has been a response of communities facing disasters and climate change.
- The past year has also shown us that nothing stops climate change.

- Whilst borders were exceptionally closed because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the climate kept on changing, disasters kept on occurring and people kept on moving in reaction to changes in their environment.
- We also need to remember that many people were unable to move out of harm's way, creating additional layers of vulnerabilities.

## **2. Action on migration and climate change at the regional level is powerful**

- We owe all these people our full engagement to implement our commitments from the Global Compact for Migration, the Paris Agreement on climate change, and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction at the regional and national levels.
- **Working together at the regional level**, we can step up our commitments and make a positive difference to the lives of migrants.
- The regional level is a strong platform to address migration and climate change.
  - At the regional level, interests as well as challenges of countries converge and overlap; this makes priority-setting clear.
  - **Climate change knows no borders and all countries are affected.**
    - West Africa is facing floods and drought with regularity; and coastal erosion, desertification and sea-level rise are some of the main hazards affecting the ECOWAS countries.
    - Only by joining forces and collaborating we can have results from climate action.
  - **If looking at climate change with the migration lens is critical in the region, environmental degradation should also be looked at as a priority.**
    - In West Africa, urbanisation, land degradation and water quality also stand at the meeting point of migration and environment.
    - At policy-level, the migration sector should further contribute to urban, environmental, social and development policies.
  - **The ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol and common passport allows people to move freely in the region.**
    - West African States have thus been facilitating regular migration pathways for decades, including for those affected by disasters, climate change and environmental degradation.
    - This is an achievement coveted by many other regions.
    - ECOWAS is also the only African Regional Economic Community (REC) to have passed legislation to facilitate regional livestock and human mobility, including in the context of climate and environmental conditions.

- **Research tells us that if we don't take action, over 54 million people could be on the move within West African countries by 2050.**
  - So I invite you all, let's take action now, together, in West Africa.
  - Let's find solutions for people to be able to stay in their homes or to move safely, orderly and regularly. Let's also aid those already on the move.
  - In our action, priority should be given to green recovery and nature-based solutions, with migrants and youth.
  - IOM is committed to support States and migrants to prepare for climate change, together with partners. We have defined our Continental Strategy for Africa and our Strategy for West and Central Africa, and the migration and environment nexus is a clear priority for the years to come.

### **3. The MIDWA MECC Working Group is an opportunity to take action**

- The first meeting of the Thematic Working Group of the Migration Dialogue for West Africa on "Climate change, land degradation, desertification, environment and migration" is an opportunity:
  - To **form a shared understanding** among regional and national stakeholders of how disasters, climate change and environmental degradation affect migration, displacement and planned relocation in West Africa.
  - To **identify the priorities for action**. Let's look at the challenges and gaps as well as the opportunities and good practices related to addressing environmental migration and disaster displacement in West Africa.
  - To **define strategies for States to address these priorities**, in line with their commitments under the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) Objectives 2 and 5 related to environmental migration and disaster displacement.
  - To **make the MIDWA Thematic Working Group a strong structure**, with a defined scope and workplan. And I am glad that several Governments (*Governments of Senegal and of Sierra Leone*) have assumed their leadership on this topic.
    - This working group of MIDWA could take forward the commitments of States in the AU Revised Migration Policy Framework for Africa (MPFA) and its Plan of Action (2018-2027) as well as the soon to be adopted ECOWAS Regional Migration Policy.
    - It could also implement the commitments from the African Union 3 Year Implementation Plan of Action for the GCM in Africa (2020-2022).
- In closing, let me just say that I am very glad I am here today and that we have this opportunity to jointly address one of the biggest challenges of the 21st century. IOM is here to support.