

FOREWORD TO THE FIRST EDITION

Africa's economic and social development has been held back by armed conflict that has inflicted death, injury, hunger, homelessness and family break-up on the innocent and deprived some of the poorest of our people of the chance of decent standards of basic human needs such as security, housing, health, education and economic prosperity. Furthermore, the aftermath of conflict has left a legacy of weapons and ammunition that fuel crime and lawlessness, thus depriving Africa of the stability it needs for economic and social development.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) remains firm in its conviction that unchecked proliferation of small arms poses a major threat to national and regional security. This proliferation fuels conflicts, engenders increased criminality and facilitates cross-border instability. It is imperative that we get rid of these tools of death and misery.

In direct response to this situation, and recognizing the fact that our objectives for economic development can only be achieved in an environment of peace, security and stability, the Heads of State and Government of ECOWAS on 31 October 1998 signed a Declaration of a Moratorium on the Importation, Exportation and Manufacture of Small Arms and Light Weapons in West Africa.

However, for this declaration to have practical impact on the ground, we need the involvement of civil society; that is, the direct implication of those who suffer most from the scourge of small arms and light weapons proliferation. For effective and efficient action to take place on a sustainable basis, ordinary women and men from West Africa must be closely involved in the process. This people-based engagement is certainly the best guarantee for success.

Advocating for civil society involvement is one thing. Finding the right strategy for that is quite another. We should avoid ill-fated top-down approaches that dictate to people what is good for them, what needs to be done and how. Here is a good opportunity to remember that in other areas (economic and social development notably) in the past such top-down

policies have not only been ineffective, but in the long run, they have ended up being counter-productive. The time is ripe to learn from past mistakes and work together toward the integration of the people of Africa in the implementation of policies that affect them.

This imperative of getting the grass roots on board is what the work of UNIDIR's project on Peace-building and Practical Disarmament in West Africa is all about. With this publication, UNIDIR gives a voice to the civil society of Sierra Leone and lets it tell what it thinks is the best way, not only to take part in the peace-building process, but also to collaborate with political authorities and the international community in our collective effort to tackle the scourge of small arms proliferation. This is a unique move as far as arms regulation and arms control policies are concerned in this region. UNIDIR has given the civil society of Sierra Leone the opportunity to contribute to the national and regional debate on the control of small arms proliferation. UNIDIR's initiative is not only timely, it also shows the way for innovative action. There is a need for sensitization campaigns in order to further mobilize West African civil society and to encourage it to initiate all necessary complementary measures that would enhance or promote policies against small arms proliferation.

We welcome this initiative from UNIDIR. It deserves our consideration and it benefits from our full support.

Lansana Kouyate
Executive Secretary
ECOWAS