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Private Sector Support Programme

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE WEAN SEMINAR MEETING

Abuja (Nigeria), 1-3 June 2000

Declassified

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1. The third General Meeting of the WAEN was held recently at the ECOWAS headquarters in Abuja. The meeting was opened jointly by the Nigerian Minister for co-operation and regional integration and the Assistant Executive Secretary of ECOWAS. The purpose of the public part of this meeting was to address the following questions: "How can regional integration be accelerated? What is the role of the private sector in West Africa? What part does Nigeria play in regional integration?".

2. In addition to these public discussions, the WAEN, in accordance with its by-laws, held a general meeting of its members to (1) bring members up to date on the project, (2) update the Network charter and elect a new Executive Committee and (3) evaluate the current operation of the Network at the regional and national levels.

3. Despite a number of absences caused by the flare-up of violence on May 23 and 24 in Kaduna that left over two hundred dead, the various meetings were attended by WAEN members, ECOWAS leaders and a number of representatives of Nigerian business circles. The discussions took place in a very specific context, which may be described as follows:

A. This General Meeting was the first to be held within the framework of the new and final phase of the Private Sector Support Project (PSSP).

4. In this context, the national networks submitted plans of action for the year 2000, and priorities were proposed with a view to attaining visible and tangible results before the end of the year. The Networks and the PSSP decided how available funds would be allocated in view of these priorities and within the framework of the updated charter. The new charter places less emphasis on meetings, organisation and national representation, and instead stresses high-profile actions with an impact, in terms of increased business within the Network, that can be quickly measured.

5. The WAEN thus made two concrete decisions:

- a) Ask the PSSP for its support to quickly proceed to an in-depth study of the exact needs and potential of WAEN member companies as regards business relationships in four or five high-priority countries, including Nigeria.
- b) Concentrate its action this year on setting up sectoral sub-networks that bring together, on a regional level, WAEN members working in the same field or industry. **The WAEN hopes to start up at least five new "sub-networks" before the end of this year:**

Two such sub-networks are already operational:

- a) **NETFORCE** is for auditing and accountancy professionals. Its goal is to bring the French- and English-speaking accountancy professions closer together and eventually establish a pan-African accountancy profession.
- b) **NET.TRANSLOG** is for regional companies in overland, maritime and air transportation and logistics. This sub-network is working on a number of practical projects including the creation of a regional centre for training lorry drivers, a roundtable of independent operators working in regional air freight, and management of the Monitoring Unit on abnormal practices with regard to border crossings.

6. In addition to a project for an industry sub-network that would develop synergy with the Bourse Régionale de Sous-Traitance (Regional subcontracting exchange) and the Confédération régionale des Artisans (Regional confederation of self-employed trades), other networks that will soon be set up in the same spirit are:

- **LAWNET**, for French- and English-speaking lawyers and other members of the legal profession.
- **NETFINANCES**, whose objective will be to improve financing conditions for private companies by making it simpler and easier to use the tools now available or yet to be created (financial instruments, guarantees, etc.).
- **AGRINET**, which will allow manufacturers in the farm and food industry to work together on matters of joint interest (packaging, standards, “natural” foods, etc.). Upstream, the network will also include private sector operators specialising in micro-finance, and liaison with farmers’ organisations.
- **NETINFOTEC**, a network of professionals working in the new technologies and telecommunications.

B. The meeting marked the start of very concrete co-operation between the WAEN and ECOWAS in efforts to increase regional integration.

7. To encourage the creation of these professional sub-networks, June 3 was entirely given over to professional roundtable discussions open to WAEN enterprises and Nigerian operators interested in making contact with West African enterprises in the same fields (telecommunications, trade, the farm and food industry, etc.). Participants were invited to discuss what they consider to be the toughest obstacles to trade between Nigeria and its neighbours, whether they obstruct physical flows (obstacles to traffic flow) or intangible flows (monetary transfers, inter-bank clearing arrangements, etc.).

8. One practical result of these workshops was the creation of a regional Task Force for the private sector, made up primarily of leaders of the sectoral sub-networks. The objective of this core group will be to meet regularly with the Executive Secretary of the ECOWAS and provide him with concrete examples of companies that have benefited from regional integration. This group will also be responsible for developing a West African private sector strategy in this area, with a view to proposing practical actions to increase the fluidity of trade in the ECOWAS zone and with Nigeria.

9. In conclusion, WAEN members who participated in this third General Meeting felt that, despite the difficult situation, the meeting was important to the project’s future. Indeed, it marked the start of a process to make the network more dynamic by concentrating its actions on companies’ needs and on increasing their business flows, particularly through practical improvements to the business environment (sectoral sub-networks). Members of the WAEN expressed their full support for this process, which they consider vital to making the network move forward towards financial autonomy and independence. In view of this support, the representatives of WAEN member companies asked that an end be put to all the criticism, systematic downgrading and personal conflicts that have plagued the project for the past several months.