**LAUNCH OF THE ECOWAS SUPPORT PROGRAMME FOR THE PROVISION OF FUNCTIONAL EQUIPMENT TO DISABLED CHILDREN IN TOGO**

*On Thursday 11 July 2024, the Department of Human Development and Social Affairs, through its Directorate of Humanitarian Affairs, organised a workshop in Lomé, Togo, to launch the activities of the ECOWAS support programme for the provision of functional equipment for disabled children in Togo. The aim of this activity is to assess, together with stakeholders, in particular the Ministry in charge of social inclusion, associations and federations of disabled people and partners, the urgent needs for functional equipment that ECOWAS could acquire and offer to disabled children to facilitate their social inclusion in Togo.*

With a view to promoting social inclusion and reducing the vulnerability of children aged between 1 and 17 living with a disability in West Africa, the ECOWAS Commission approved a budget of 200,000 dollars at the beginning of 2024 to implement the pilot phase of the programme to support and supply functional equipment to disabled children. The pilot phase of this initiative, which will run for 12 months, covers Nigeria and Togo, and will be gradually extended to other Member States in 2025.

The initiative was launched in Lomé by Mr Bileba N'GMEBIB, the Secretary General representing H.E. Madame Adjovi APEDOH-ANAKOMA, Minister for Social Action, Family Promotion and Literacy of Togo, in the presence of Dr Fernando Jorge ALVES D'ALMADA, Principal Programme Officer for Social Affairs, representing Fatou SOW SARR, ECOWAS Commissioner for Human Development and Social Affairs, representatives of the ECOWAS Permanent Representation and National Office in Togo, leaders and members of associations and federations of disabled people in Togo, and partners.

In his welcome address, Dr Fernando Jorge ALVES D'ALMADA conveyed ECOWAS gratitude to the Togolese authorities and recalled that as part of the implementation of its 2050 vision of an ECOWAS of States to an ECOWAS of peoples, it is vital that the social inclusion of people with disabilities is carried out in the spirit of leaving no one behind.

Following the ECOWAS representative, goodwill messages were also delivered by Mr Gratien AKPAKPO NUMADO, President of the Federation of Persons with Disabilities in Togo (FETAPH) and Ms Pelagie BOKO-COLLINS, Representative for Togo and Benin of Sight Savers.

In his official opening speech, the Secretary General of the Ministry in charge of Social Action thanked ECOWAS for this programme and went on to describe the many initiatives taken by the Togolese government to promote social inclusion in Togo. "*The project we are launching today is the very expression of the shared concern of the ECOWAS Commission and the Member States to take account of the specific needs of people with disabilities in the implementation of public policies..... It is the culmination of a long and fruitful process of reflection and consultation that has enabled us to mobilise the resources needed to support children with disabilities with specialised equipment*", declared Mr Bileba N'GMEBIB.

Following the various presentations, group work and discussions, the stakeholders identified a number of items of equipment that ECOWAS could acquire to support disabled children in Togo. The finalised list will be officially transmitted to ECOWAS by the end of July.

According to the report of the regional study on the inclusion of disability in the ECOWAS region, there are some 240 million disabled children in the world. Similarly, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has pointed out that around 15% of children aged 0-17 are disabled in West and Central Africa. Children with disabilities continue to face marginalisation and multiple discrimination. They are among the most vulnerable populations simply because they may not be able to assert their rights and benefit from adequate protection, at both individual and institutional levels (UNICEF, 2021).

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