

**STEERING COMMITTEE WORKSHOP ON THE MRU/GEF PROJECT
«ECOSYSTEMS CONSERVATION AND INTERNATIONAL WATER
RESOURCE MANAGEMENT IN THE MANO RIVER UNION.»**

April 2019, Freetown

**Remarks of Her Excellency Amb. Medina WESSEH, Secretary-General of the
Mano River Union**

- **Hon. Minister of water Resources,**
- **IUCN representatives,**
- **Technical and Development Partners**
- **National Coordinators,**
- **Distinguish Guests,**
- **Ladies and Gentlemen,**

It is a pleasure for me to greet you on the occasion of the 3rd Session of the Steering Committee Meeting of the Mano /GEF project "**Ecosystem Conservation and International Water Resources Management of the Mano River Union.**" in Freetown, Sierra Leone.

On behalf of the Secretariat, I wish to welcome all our distinguished guests to this very critical steering committee meeting of the GEF Project in the beautiful and historic city of Freetown which is home to the MRU Secretariat. The Mano /GEF project is one of the projects of the organization, if and I must put emphasis on it, successfully completed, will impact the lives of the citizenry of the sub-Region. As such, this meeting should serve as a useful platform to inform stakeholders on the objectives and expected outcome of the project and properly plan a way forward.

Hon Minister, Ladies and Gentlemen, you may recall that, since the launch of the Project at the regional level in July 2017, in Freetown barely one month after we

assumed the leadership of the MRU: - the Regional Executing Agency as project coordinator, in collaboration with other executing entities has,

- established the national and regional coordination units;
- Completed the signature of implementing agreements between Regional Executing Agency and IUCN;
- Established the Regional Implementing Agency and four National Executing Agencies (Cote d' Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone);
- Established local consultative committees in the forest landscape; and
- Recruited or in the process of recruiting local and international consultants to conduct various studies relating to the project.

The MRU acknowledges the financial support from GEF, through the IUCN to the Regional Executing Agency and the four National Executing Agencies for implementation of the project.

At this point, I wish to appeal for better management and national ownership and then later for support from other Development Partners both (technical and financial support) towards the implementation of the project in a proper efficient and well coordinated manner.

Ladies and gentlemen, the implementation of the project is currently ongoing, albeit with some serious challenges and significant delays. Though the project is in its second year, yet the implementation rate has been very low, especially at the national level. Again perhaps here we hope our partners would be able to review the structures of the project with the view to ascertain what is causing the monumental delays and slow pace of implementation at the national levels. I am informed that, most of the bottlenecks toward the slow implementation of the project were discussed during the just concluded mission led by GEF/IUCN in Freetown last week. I pray and do hope that a critical review with openness will be more forthcoming.

To this end, I urge the national executing agencies, to review these recommendations and take proper ownership of the activities as per their work plans, and to be very mindful of the procurement procedures of the MRU and its partners. I crave the indulgence of the National Executing Agencies and Governments of the MRU member States to pay more attention towards the implementation of the project.

Honorable Minister, Ladies and Gentlemen, the MRU basin is home to the bulk of what remains of the upper Guinea forest ecosystems, which extends from South of Guinea to the West of Togo, through Sierra Leone, Liberia, the Côte d'Ivoire and



Ghana. The MRU basin is the third largest reserve of biodiversity in the world, after the Amazon basin in South America and Congo basin in Central Africa. It has more than 9000 different plant species, of which at least 25% are endemic, with varied and abundant wildlife. It also has a large reserve of surface and underground fresh water, and almost 80% of water resource supply to the West African coast is generated from this area, through large transboundary rivers. Thus, as we stand proud of the potential of the MRU Basin, we must also be mindful of the potential threats to the Basin, through deforestation for cropping, cutting of timber and logging, exploitation of iron ore, bauxite, gold and diamonds mining activities which bring significant sources of income to our economies yet if not managed properly will leave us bare naked and exposed to all that endangers climate change globally. Governments and National Executing Agencies must be more aware of the burden and the balancing act that is required.

Ladies and gentlemen, the GEF project through IUCN, aims to complement the effort of MRU and the Member States to strengthen the capacities of actors in the management of transboundary natural resources for long-term ecological benefits, improve the forest adjacent communities, and support local communities in the development of alternative means of income generation. The outcome of the project when properly coordinated and executed in a timely and much more efficient manner, will lead to an increase in forest cover and other related advantages both at the local and global levels (eco-systemic services, biodiversity, carbon sinks).

I therefore urge the coordinators of the project to demonstrate the seriousness this project deserves and commitment to the coordination and implementation of the project, and to protect and preserve the forest heritage and resources in the MRU Basin with the people in each of these communities being at the center of their development and custodians of their environmental heritage. To not do so, we might witness a project on paper being “well implemented”, while the people in the communities may continue knowingly or unknowingly to do harm to the environment and before our very eyes the forest cover may disappear. Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, we have work to do and let us do it well.

Honorable Minister, Ladies and Gentlemen, at this point, let me take this opportunity on behalf of the MRU Secretariat, to express our gratitude to the Global Fund for Environment/GEF for funding this programme, to the African Development Bank



(AfDB), for its technical and financial support during the initial preparation of this programme in 2010; and to the USAID as key co-financing partner, through the West African Biodiversity and Climate Change (WA BiCC) programme. I also wish to express sincere thanks to IUCN, our Regional Implementing Agency supervising the Project, and also providing technical and financial support for the MRU/ BRIDGE project, which is intended to facilitate dialogue between actors within the framework of the governance of transboundary waters in the sub-region.

Once again I want to state the commitment of the MRU to strengthen and consolidate the cooperation and collaboration with its development partners to protect our forest cover and our environment for our children and our future.

Thank you for your kind attention and I wish you a fruitful deliberations.