

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

MINISTRY OF THE FAMILY,
SOCIAL AFFAIRS AND
NATIONAL SOLIDARITY

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC
Unity - Dignity - Labour

CABINET

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE BEIJING PLATFORM FOR ACTION (1995) AND THE OUCOME OF THE TWENTY-THIRD SPECIAL SESSION OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY (2000) IN THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

Introduction

As part of the preparations for the review and appraisal by the Commission on the Status of Women of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, a questionnaire was sent to the Government of the Central African Republic with a view to obtaining additional information about the situation there and facilitating the review and appraisal by the Commission.

In its reply to the questionnaire, which is based on the findings of a multidisciplinary working group set up by the Department for the Advancement of Women of the Ministry of the Family, Social Affairs and National Solidarity, the Government describes the country's social, economic and political situation, for consideration in the course of the review and appraisal. The questionnaire addresses two topics:

- Review of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly; and
- Current challenges and forward-looking strategies for the advancement and empowerment of women and girls.

The reply to the questionnaire is divided into four parts, in accordance with the methodological note.

Economic and social situation in the Central African Republic

The Central African Republic occupies 165th place among the 174 countries listed in terms of their sustainable human development rating. Per capita GDP for 2000 was estimated at \$US 260, as against \$US 514 in 1990. The economy is dominated by the primary sector. In 2001 this sector increased its share to 55 per cent, at the expense of the secondary (15%) and tertiary (30%) sectors.

Poor management of the country's public finances is one of the reasons for the social and political/military troubles which it has suffered. The reason for the low rate of tax revenue can be found in the structure of the GDP itself, where the primary sector occupies an important place but is lightly taxed. The country also has to cope with a burden of domestic and foreign debt and with its arrears of payment. Moreover, the large contribution of foreign resources to the funding of public investment entails a heavy dependence on external aid.

The impact of this economic and social situation on the people's living conditions is worrying. According to the *Human Development Report 2000*, six per cent of the country's population lives below the poverty threshold, and 45 per cent in conditions of absolute poverty. The failure of the system of Government has had a serious effect on the basic social services (education and health), which are continually paralysed by strikes caused by the irregular or interrupted payment of wages.

The education and health infrastructure has continued to deteriorate as a result of the meagre allocation of budgetary resources to these two sectors.

Life expectancy stood at 49 years in 1988 but had fallen to 44.3 years by 2000. The deterioration of the health service is due in large part to the rising incidence of HIV/AIDS: the Central African Republic is the tenth most seriously affected country in the world and first in the Central African subregion. Its infant mortality rate has also risen, and its maternal mortality rate remains the highest in Africa.

The rate of school attendance has fallen at all levels in the past decade. This situation is due to a series of blank years. Almost 60 per cent of children aged six to 11 do not attend school in their correct age-grade owing to the poor provision of school infrastructure throughout the country and the shortage of teachers; as a result, communities have to resort to parent-teachers.

The humanitarian situation of part of the population remains precarious. The partition of the country following the events of October 2002, the displacement of people within the country and across its borders, and the savagery of the looting and the robbery in public places, with their train of persistent physical and psychological violence, have left a deep imprint on social and economic life. The production systems and social services have been disrupted, even destroyed in some areas.

The political landscape has changed rapidly since 15 March 2003. With the Constitution suspended and the National Assembly and the Government dissolved, a National Transition Council and a transitional executive were established with a mandate to conduct the transition in a spirit of dialogue and national reconciliation. The Transitional Government has produced a general policy document and a strategy for economic and social recovery with four focuses: (i) consolidation of the bases of democracy and security; (ii) improvement of the public finances; (iii) relaunch of production; and (iv) rehabilitation of the social sectors. The National Dialogue, in which nearly 350 representatives of political parties, trade unions, religious organizations, local authorities and organizations of civil society took part, made progress in the search for consensual and sustainable responses to the country's various crises.

With the gradual return to peace and better security conditions, people's daily lives have resumed a more tranquil course although they remain in many respects severely disrupted by the very precarious situation, both in Bangui and in the provinces.

Part One: Overview of achievements and challenges in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment

In 1989 the Central African Republic adopted a policy for the advancement of women which took account of the important part played by women in the country's economic and social development. The State participated in several national and regional meetings whose outcomes, in conjunction with those of the international conferences, constituted a frame of reference for the drafting of a new policy document emphasizing the improvement of the status of women and the need to utilize their many different aptitudes to facilitate their full participation in the country's development. Following its ratification at the "National seminar to determine strategies for the promotion of gender equality", attended by political and religious authorities, trade union leaders and representatives of civil society, this policy document was adopted by the Government in 1999.

The National Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women (2002-2006) was drafted under the project "Support for national initiatives and national capacity building to promote gender equality" implemented under the auspices of the Ministry of Social Affairs. It was considered and ratified in July 2002 at a consensus workshop. The National Plan is consistent with the national policy for the advancement of women and takes account both of international concerns and of the country's specific needs. The priority areas on which the Government has focused its efforts are the promotion of equal rights, reproductive health, education, prevention of all forms of violence, and combating HIV/AIDS. Two of the strategic focuses of the National Plan are addressed by a draft action plan to combat harmful practices and violence inflicted on women and girls and a sub-programme on population, gender and development. Coordination matters and responsibility for the implementation of the National Plan were entrusted to the Ministry's Department for the Advancement of Women, which set up a National Coordination Office (ONC) for the advancement of women. The National Plan is not yet an effective instrument for securing equality between the sexes. The difficulties of putting it into practice are aggravated by the lack of arrangements for mainstreaming the gender tool and using it in the monitoring strategies and indicators.

The country has embraced the Millennium Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which have been incorporated in governmental policy, but the gaps between the sexes persist. With regard to the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women, it must be pointed out that the country's social organization is based on a patriarchal system in which the ranking and distribution of roles between the sexes perpetuate the inequalities suffered by women. This situation is part of the reason for the poor results of the efforts to involve men and boys in the promotion of gender equality. Some initiatives in the education and health systems have addressed such questions as the law, citizenship and education for family life and sexual relations. Since upbringing in the family confers a dominant role on men, the ignorance of the disparities in conjunction with the customs embraced by men and by women themselves results in a poor collective and individual awareness of gender issues and in unequal situations.

The gender gap in education persists; it been narrowed somewhat in Bangui but is wider in rural areas. The illiteracy figures show big gender gaps, although there has been some improvement over time.

There is a real bias against women in employment. In 80 per cent of the rural areas women constitute 87 per cent of the active population. Few women earn wages and most women are poor.

Several health indicators have shown declines, in particular the mortality rate among under-fives, the child immunization rate, and the rates of maternal mortality and attended confinements. The HIV/AIDS rate is 15 per cent, and women are more vulnerable to infection than men. In addition, women make very little contribution to the exercise of power and authority and are very poorly represented in political and administrative bodies.

The harmonization of the National Plan with the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly still stands at a low level owing to the scant political commitment on gender issues and to the country's critical economic and social situation. Accordingly, little account is taken of women's specific needs and concerns in the formulation of the national budget, and the level of funding of the line ministry does not allow it to discharge its responsibilities effectively.

The main legislative achievements point to some significant progress:

- The adoption of a democratic Constitution in 1995. This social advance was accompanied by increased awareness of the need to respect the universal principles of human rights; despite some progress, the effective protection of human rights is not yet a reality;
- The ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1992 and of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1991. The completion of the establishment of the legal foundations for protecting women and promoting equality between the sexes in social practices and behaviour is still being held up by the delay in signing the Additional Protocol of 1999. In fact, CEDAW has still had little impact on national legislation in spite of the awareness-raising activities carried out with the support of a number of the country's non-governmental organizations (NGOs);
- The adoption of the first Family Code in 1997 involved the amendment of many provisions of civil legislation from the colonial era which were unsuited to the present social situation;
- The 1997 Education Policy Act provides that education is compulsory for all. It is supplemented by an Order promoting girls' education, but the implementation measures cannot cope with the problems of school attendance;
- The recent amendment of the Criminal Code in 2003 includes authorisation of abortion on medical grounds in cases of incest, rape and HIV/AIDS infection.

With regard to national policies and development strategies, the scant publicity given to the national policy for the advancement of women and the National Plan of Action among any of the players in the affairs of the nation, the problems of operation and coordination experienced by the National Coordination Office (ONC), and the lack of discussion and agreement among the partners have contributed to the difficulties of promoting gender equality. However, in the struggle against the harmful practices and violence inflicted on women the awareness-raising work has helped to reduce the incidence of genital mutilation.

Although the aims of “Education for all” have been incorporated in the programmes of the National Education Development Plan, this Plan merely highlights the inefficiency of the education system. The National Health Development Plan and the National Reproductive Health Plan have not attained the objectives set at the international level despite some achievements such as the action taken on the Bamako Initiative in all the country’s health districts. The national anti-AIDS programmes established in several plans (1997-1999), which were designed to raise awareness at all levels and focus the measures on national capacity building, have produced poor results, and many difficulties persist, in particular women’s increased exposure to HIV/AIDS. A new strategic framework for combating HIV/AIDS and the eligibility of the Central African Republic to receive assistance from the Global AIDS Fund should strengthen the national measures for treating AIDS-sufferers and containing the spread of the infection among young people. The establishment of partnerships with civil society revealed a scant number of truly operational NGOs and grass-roots associations. But these bodies do play a part in the implementation of the measures to promote gender equality.

The strategic framework for combating poverty is being drafted in a difficult situation: the burden of illiteracy, malnutrition and poor health, aggravated by the AIDS pandemic and low incomes, is the main feature of poverty in the Central African Republic. Owing to this situation, the country has benefited very little from the effects of globalization. The problems of the national economy have reduced the people’s purchasing power and standard of living and have obstructed their access to new technologies.

The National Dialogue - one of the recent political debates to have addressed gender issues - highlighted women’s concerns and submitted recommendations to the Government. These concerns related to girls’ education, women’s literacy, compensation for women who suffered violence during the “events”, maternal and child health, and the effective application of the quota of 35 per cent women in decision-making and CEDAW bodies. The country’s women made a powerful contribution to the peace negotiations in 1997, 2001 and 2002 by promoting national reconciliation through messages and marches for peace and national unity.

This summary of the country’s experience of implementing the Platform for Action and the outcome documents of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly must be seen in a context of poverty and post-conflict disorder affecting most people in the Central African Republic in both urban and rural areas; they are living in a critical situation and suffering many forms of insecurity (physical, health, monetary, food) and have very little capacity for action owing to the fragility of an education system which offers little choice, especially to girls. The main challenges to the country over the next decade will remain the reduction of poverty, consolidation of respect for human rights, elimination of discrimination and violence against women and girls, conduct of a relentless battle against HIV/AIDS, and securing changes in attitude, all with a view to progress towards gender equity.

Part Two: Progress in implementation of the critical areas of concern of the Beijing Platform for Action and the further initiatives and actions identified at the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly

Progress has been made in implementing the critical areas of concern of the Platform for Action in the shape of a number of political reforms, legal measures and programmes and projects for the advancement of women.

Political reforms

Reforms have been under way for a decade now, in step with the democratization process. The democratic Constitution adopted in 1995 provides for decentralization, separation of powers, civil rights, and political pluralism expressed through political parties and other organizations of civil society. These principles were confirmed by the adoption of legislation on freedom of communication, political parties, the Electoral Code, and NGOs. These social changes have been accompanied by increased awareness of the need to respect the universal principles of human rights. The holding of free, democratic and independent elections constitutes progress and gives a measure of the consolidation of the republican and democratic bases of the institutional management of the State. However, this progress must be reinforced in a learning process concerning the good governance of the Central African Republic. The Constitution asserts the principle of non-discrimination and proclaims the equality of all human beings without any distinction based on sex.

Social changes have been evident since the beginning of the democratization of political life in 1993. This process has injected fresh energy into civil society, political groupings and the media. For example, several NGOs and women's associations have helped, through awareness-raising sessions, seminars and workshops held country-wide, to increase women's awareness and knowledge of their own and children's right to protection and have facilitated exchanges of experience and information. Credit for the celebration of Mothers' Day and International Women's Day is also due to NGOs and women's associations. A number of radio and television debates have given women from all social and occupational groups opportunities to air their views, notably during the National Dialogue in 2003, which provided the first occasion for a substantive political debate on gender issues and women's concerns. This forum, which expressed the feelings of whole population, gave special attention to girls' education, application of the quota of 35 per cent women in decision-making bodies, improvement of maternal and child health, and psychological support for women who suffered violence during the armed conflicts. The Monitoring Committee, composed of equal numbers of men and women, is responsible for ensuring the application of all the recommendations by the Transitional Government.

This democratization process has not yet benefited women in terms either of their political representation or of their participation in decision-making. The discrimination suffered by women is apparent in the distribution of power and authority. Women are very poorly represented in political and administrative bodies (under five per cent). As for the Legislature, before the dissolution of the National Assembly in 2003 there were only 10 women in a total of 89 deputies: women had advanced by three per cent between 1990 and 2001 (UNDP, 2003).

Some women's NGOs succeeded in mobilizing women to become involved in the country's political life and stand in the 1999 elections to the Legislature. At present, the Transitional Government, the National Transition Council and the Monitoring Committee for the National Dialogue can together boast of 17 women members. In the Judiciary, women account for under 12 per cent of the personnel of the judicial services, under three per cent of the judges, and 3.2 per cent of the lawyers. In the general administration, women hold under one per cent of senior management posts and five per cent of management posts. In the economy, under five per cent of enterprises are headed by women. The unequal distribution of responsibilities is evident at the community level: women account for only 10 per cent of village or district heads and hold only five per cent of the 169 mayoralties. There are very few women chairpersons or secretaries of grass-roots organizations.

The Government has incorporated human rights in the nation's legal arsenal and ratified a number of international texts and legal instruments concerning the protection and promotion of human rights. But violations of human rights persist. There have been cases of arbitrary arrest and/or unlawful detention of women and children suspected of witchcraft or charlatanism. The victims may be exposed to a form of public condemnation notwithstanding the rules guaranteeing a presumption of innocence. The situation in the prisons remains precarious, and the conditions under which women and children are held are well out of line with the minimum rules for the treatment of prisoners. The rights to basic education and health are also fragile. The living conditions of women in particular are difficult and precarious.

The many measures taken by all the national and multinational partners and the training, awareness-raising and extension programmes have improved the situation. NGOs have played an important role in recent years in the efforts to secure the effective exercise of human rights in the Central African Republic. These bodies, some of them women's organizations, have become the spearheads of the protection and promotion of human rights. But their action remains limited. Their personnel's lack of professional qualifications and the scant support given to their programmes obstruct their human rights work. The struggle to secure respect for human rights remains a real challenge in the quest for sustainable development. The proposed incorporation of the national human rights education policy in school and university curricula in accordance with the recommendations of the International Decade for Human Rights Education (1995-2004) should be put into practice. The other challenges include improving the access of the largest possible number of citizens to basic infrastructure and quality public services and mainstreaming the human rights dimension in the development strategies.

National policies and programmes

The Government has made the health and education sectors its chief priorities.

Health policy

The governmental authorities have committed themselves to speeding up the introduction of a health policy. Several national health development plans have set out the main areas of action and the priority objectives and have brought new strategic focuses to reproductive health and to

the fight against HIV/AIDS, which has produced three successive action plans and is currently addressed under a multi-sectoral strategy.

Maternal and child health occupies an important place in the national reproductive health policy. The programme is based on the recommendations of the national symposium on safe maternity, the regional reproductive health strategy for Africa (WHO Regional Committee, 1998-2007) and the recommendations of the International Conference on Population and Development.

Progress has been made in primary health care, but the maternal and child health activities produce poor results. The under-five mortality rate rose from 158 per 1,000 in 1995 to 194 per 1,000 in 2000; the immunization coverage is declining; the number of orphans is estimated at 110,000; the maternal mortality rate is 948 per 100,000 live births; the HIV/AIDS seropositive rate among pregnant women is between 5.3 and 22 per cent (cases of AIDS are found in all the prefectures, and the trend is towards feminization of infection); the number of births attended by qualified health personnel has fallen slightly and there is a big gap between urban (74%) and rural (26%) areas. This situation is connected with the poor accessibility and availability of the health services, the poverty of households, and the social and cultural backwardness which prompts women to use traditional medicine. There is connection between the fight against HIV/AIDS and the results of the effort to improve maternal and child health. In fact, the impact of AIDS has nullified all the efforts to reduce infant mortality over recent years.

Examination of the AIDS situation shows that women are more vulnerable to HIV than men, for the following reasons: greater psychological vulnerability to sexually transmitted infections; little negotiating power when it comes to use of contraceptives; high risk of infection from husbands infected as a result of extramarital relations; exposure to situations of sexual exploitation and rape; and less knowledge of HIV/AIDS and its prevention resulting from poor education. The effects of HIV/AIDS can be greater for women: they are less independent with respect to family spending, and this restricts their access to health services; they are usually responsible for caring for family members stricken with AIDS in addition to their domestic work; girls are more likely to be withdrawn from school to care for child with AIDS or to perform household chores, or because of early pregnancy; and the death of a husband from AIDS leaves the widow as head of family and therefore more exposed to poverty.

All these factors are due in part to ignorance of the legal texts on promotion of women's and children's rights and to the failure to apply them effectively. Moreover, the social protection provisions do not help to reverse the trends working against improvement of the status of girls and women in terms of eliminating the precariousness of their living conditions. The lack of gender analysis is a further reason for the scant involvement of men in the reproductive health activities. In order to reverse these trends the goals of the new reproductive health strategy aim at incorporating reproductive health in the training of health personnel, improving the coverage and providing equitable access to the reproductive health services, promoting the cause of women and children and furnishing protection for them, and involving men in the information, education, communication and other activities in the field of reproductive health. The measures will be based on a multi-sectoral approach in partnership with the Ministries of Youth, Social Affairs and National Education. In addition, the current programme on prevention of the

transmission of HIV from mother to child should deliver greater accessibility to these prevention measures as a means of reducing the risk of infection of children.

The necessary conclusion is that the Central African Republic is severely affected by the AIDS epidemic. But the epidemic has prompted a national response, timid at first but then enjoying increasingly vigorous support from the Government and improved multi-sectoral collaboration through ministerial committees to combat AIDS (agriculture, transport, mines, national defence, education, youth, social affairs) and mobilization of NGOs and the private sector; but the results are very inadequate. In view of the critical situation, all the stakeholders must act to reduce the impact of HIV/AIDS on the people's health and on the capacity of households to generate the resources which they need in order to break free from poverty, and to prevent children from dropping out of school following the death of a parent from AIDS. Many challenges remain: young people's resistance to use of contraceptives; early sexual relations, especially for girls; weak economic power of households; poor school attendance rate and high illiteracy rate; insufficient recourse to the health services; high incidence of sexually transmitted infections; discrimination between the sexes; and ignorance and denial of the true impact of AIDS.

A change of strategy is needed, and new avenues must be explored in order to improve prevention and treatment and the understanding of the factors facilitating the spread of the epidemic and its impacts in the Central African Republic.

Education policy

In 1997 the Government adopted the Education Policy Act, which provides for free and compulsory education for all. This Act has been supplemented by an Order promoting school attendance by girls. The new National Education Development Plan sets out priority action programmes targeted on pre-school education, girls' education, and technical and vocational training and refresher courses. But budgetary difficulties are impeding its implementation. The indicators describing the country's education system are discouraging despite the acceptance by the people of the principle of education, the introduction of free compulsory education for children, and the re-incorporation of private education in the national education system with a particular focus on girls' education and the creation of community schools staffed by parent-teachers.

The scale of the country's poverty and the paucity of the education system's share of the national budget are two of the reasons for the system's disorganization and poor performance and for the low rate of school attendance. The national school attendance rate declined from 58 per cent in 1990 to 49 per cent in 2001-2002, and there is a big gap between urban (60%) and rural (32%) areas. The drop-out rate is very high: only 24 per cent of children reach the fifth grade. The disparity between school attendance by boys and girls is due to a distribution of social roles which imposes on girls a daily burden of work which limits the possibility for them to attend school regularly. Moreover, Decree No. 67/130 of 1997 compelling all pregnant schoolgirls to return to their families is still in force, constituting serious discrimination against girls. The girls' attendance rate has improved slightly in relation to the boys' rate, especially in secondary education. While the girls' rate for the whole country is lower than the boys' rate, the rates are

the same in Bangui, suggesting some change of attitude in urban areas. In rural areas much remains to be done to achieve equality between the sexes in this regard.

The national literacy rate for the 15-24 age group rose from 52.1 per cent in 1990 to 68.7 per cent in 2001 (UNDP, 2003) - a clear improvement. The figures show that illiteracy is commoner among women and in rural areas. However, there has been a slight improvement over time. The female to male literacy ratio (15-24 age group) was 60:100 in 1990 and 67:100 in 2000 (UNICEF, 2001; UNDP, 2003).

The most direct impact of HIV/AIDS on the supply of education services has been felt in the social and economic spheres: many teachers have contracted HIV; the number of orphaned children is rising; and the human capital is declining in both numbers and quality. A person's standard of education has a powerful effect on his or her knowledge of HIV/AIDS and means of prevention. With this in mind, the Ministry of National Education established an important project entitled "Education on family life and population issues" in primary and secondary schools. This project is designed to encourage children to think about problems of population and family and social life by means of awareness-raising activities focused on health, polygamy, excision, sexuality and HIV/AIDS; 165 pupils have been trained under the project as peer teachers and 190 adults as teachers to put across prevention messages.

The country has fallen far short the global target of education for all by 2000. The decline in school attendance constitutes a serious problem for development. The school-attendance gap between boys and girls remains wide. The ineffectiveness of the education system is demonstrated by the low rate of transfer from fifth to sixth grade in primary schools. The country has an acute drop-out problem. The continuing high rate of adult illiteracy, especially among women, is a serious handicap. In this situation, the trends can be reversed only by effective implementation of the National Education Development Plan, with full account taken of AIDS-related problems, and by bigger budgetary appropriations for education.

National policy for the advancement of women

The National Plan of Action came into effect after an initial phase of dissemination of information about the Family Code in Bangui and some of the provinces, with support from several NGOs having expertise in the fields of law, health, economic affairs, education, and micro-project training. It addresses the questions of women's rights and violence against women and girls in the context of the Family Code, CEDAW, the work of the National Committee to Combat Practices Harmful to Women and Girls, and the rights of the child.

The legal measures adopted by the Government to provide protection for women and children mark some significant progress:

- Ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1992;
- Ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1991;
- Adoption of the first Family Code in 1997;
- Recent (2003) amendment of the Criminal Code, which now provides for abortion on medical grounds in cases of incest, rape and HIV/AIDS infection.

Protection is also provided for women in other national legislation, such as the Labour Code, the Electoral Code and the Nationality Code, as well as in the health, education and social protection legislation. This legislation is a judicious mix of French law and local custom. It suppresses or weakens a number of practices harmful to women and seeks to reinforce women's protection.

For the purposes of the Family Code a detailed review was conducted of many provisions of civil law of colonial origin which are not suited to the country's circumstances. Although marking an achievement, the Family Code does not incorporate certain provisions of CEDAW. Polygamy remains a problem owing to the failure to stipulate equal obligations towards all wives and children. Inequalities persist in the distribution of property following divorce or widowhood. Wives and orphans are not sufficiently protected by the law. The possibility of supplementing the legal foundations for the protection of women and promotion of gender equality in social practices and behaviour is still being obstructed by the delay in signing the Additional Protocol to CEDAW of 1999 and in securing the effective functioning of the national CEDAW monitoring committee.

The country's fundamental legal instruments formally recognize equality between the sexes. But women remain in reality in an uncertain legal position characterized by:

- Poor educational standards;
- Inadequate health care;
- Precarious economic circumstances;
- Scant participation in public and political life;
- Little independence in decision-making in the family;
- Low social esteem.

It is impossible for women to enjoy and exercise their rights in this context.

The following are the main reasons for this situation:

- The burden of custom and tradition;
- Ignorance of their rights on the part of women themselves;
- Ignorance of women's rights on the part of men and the population in general;
- Women's failure to assert their rights;
- Inaccessibility of legal recourse;
- High cost of legal proceedings;
- Inadequate implementation of the policy for the advancement of women.

The country's women suffer physical (45.4%) and psychological (51.6%) violence, especially at the hands of their husbands. They are also subjected to harmful traditional practices: excision (35.9%); abuse of the dowry system ; persistence of widowhood rites; accusations of witchcraft; forced marriage; and food taboos. And they are victims of coercive practices: expulsion from the conjugal home; lengthy periods of concubinage; and the predominance of polygamy. Women suffer violence in all areas of life: in the home, in public services, in the workplace, and in educational establishments. There are exposed to sexual harassment (14.1%). The pressure of the economic crisis is also exposing women in the street and in the home to rape (30%) and prostitution (9.5%). Very few of the women victims of rape bring complaints either before the courts (0.5%) or to a person of influence (2.9%).

The concern to combat the violence to which women are subjected has manifested itself in a number of measures: adoption of the legal instruments mentioned earlier; and some progress with the implementation of programmes and projects to improve women's health and education and to strengthen their financial position by means of income-generating activities.

The National Committee to Combat Practices Harmful to Women and Girls was established by ministerial order in 1997. It constitutes the basis of one of the priority areas of the National Plan of Action to combat all forms of discrimination against women. The Committee's mandate, exercised through a multi-sectoral and comprehensive approach in partnership with the Education and Health Ministries and NGOs, is to take concrete measures to prevent and eliminate violence against women and girls, improve awareness of situations of violence, secure application of the provisions of CEDAW, furnish legal, medical and social support to women victims of violence, and publicize the legal instruments. The measures taken by the Committee have included the decentralization of the activities through the establishment of prefecture committees and the conduct of studies on women's health, the forms which this violence takes, and its social and cultural causes. Information and awareness-raising campaigns have been carried out in areas where these harmful practices are most commonly found. Awareness-raising work has also been done with political leaders, technical personnel of ministerial departments and representatives of civil society. Several training seminars on strategies for combating harmful practices have been attended by members of the prefecture committees, senior social affairs officials and representatives of the media.

The results of these activities show that greater awareness has led to a decline in genital mutilation. The practice of excision is prohibited by CEDAW and it was abolished by a 1966 Order covering the whole territory of the Central African Republic. The incidence of excision fell from 43 per cent in 1994 to 35.9 per cent in 2000, but the rate is still higher in rural areas. It appears that 26.7 per cent of women are against the practice and 21.6 per cent in favour of its retention. Women's opinion of excision tends to become more negative in step with the proportion of women coming out against it. This trend towards a negative perception of the practice appears to be connected with its decline and prompts the conclusion that the information, education and communication work has had a greater impact than the application of the existing legislation. The women practitioners of excision also seem to be acquiring an initial awareness of its harmful nature.

Despite these encouraging results the still awareness-raising work at the grass roots is still insufficient. And some of the provisions of CEDAW are unsuited or inapplicable to local situations. Cultural factors in a strongly patriarchal society and the lack of information allow the perpetuation of the violation of women's rights. The National Committee has scant institutional support, the networks and contact groups are still insufficient, and the intersectoral approach remains non-participatory. The intervention strategies do not really take an integrated approach which would attack the causes of the harmful practices. Moreover, the measures were introduced before the adoption of the action plan to combat harmful practices and violence against women and girls and lack the benefit of indicators (social and cultural category, standard of education, matrimonial situation, ethnic and religious affiliation) and monitoring mechanisms.

It is important to counter the current forms of discrimination against women and girls in order to secure development which is better-balanced in gender terms. The challenge is to improve the knowledge of the present situation and the trends of violence against women and to translate the guidelines contained in the Constitution, the Family Code and CEDAW into individual and institutional practices and behaviour. It is imperative to build up managerial capacities and the capacity to assist women victims of violence. Amendments must be introduced in the laws and regulations which perpetuate discrimination against women, who must have guarantees of effective protection in this regard, and steps must be taken to ensure equality of treatment.

With respect to the rights of the child, efforts have been made to improve children's legal protection through the adoption of several pieces of national legislation and measures to provide administrative, social and educational protection:

- Establishment of a Human Rights Commission dealing inter alia with children's rights;
- Adoption in 2000 of a Disabled Persons (Protection and Advancement) Act, which has provisions on disabled children;
- Amendment of the legislation on adoption;
- Establishment of a juvenile court in Bangui and four such courts in the provinces.

The rights of children are proclaimed and guaranteed in various international and national instruments, but the measures adopted for their application remain very weak, and there are several legal gaps to be filled.

Examination of the situation of the country's children shows that they are exposed to a number of risks to their survival and development: the continuing imposition on girls of traditional practices such as excision and "pawning"; the continuing physical and mental maltreatment and sexual abuse and exploitation; the large number of children living in the street or from the street; sexual harassment; exposure to HIV/AIDS and early pregnancy; child labour (63.5 per cent of under-fifteens work, 3.3 per cent with and 33 per cent without pay, and 12 per cent of girls and 5.8 per cent of boys do domestic chores for more than four hours a day).

Unfamiliarity with the legal instruments, the ignorance of the rights of the child on the part of parents and children, the difficulties which children have in asserting their rights, the primacy of customary law over positive law, and the shortage of qualified personnel and institutions to care for children in need of special protection are some of the reasons for the inadequacy of the protection provided for children. Furthermore, the lack of a national policy on children and of legislation to protect children at risk make it impossible to formulate a national legal, administrative and social frame of reference for the assertion of children's rights.

The national legislation on the protection of children contains lacunae which must be filled - with respect, for example, to children from indigenous minorities, children in armed conflicts, and disabled children. The national legislation on the administration of juvenile justice, the right to information and the right of children to take part in social and cultural activities must be brought into line with the international instruments. The legislative, administrative and social provisions relating to the adoption of a national policy on children and legislation on protection of children at risk, children's access to appropriate information, measures to protect them against maltreatment and exploitation, their freedom of expression, and their genuine exercise of their

rights must be reinforced if there is to be any significant improvement in the protection of the country's children and the guarantees of the exercise of their rights.

Conflict-settlement policy

The Central African Republic has undergone a succession of political and military crises which have prompted the nation's women to make their contribution to the settlement of armed conflicts. In 1997 a women's movement composed of NGOs and religious organizations came together spontaneously to support the initiatives for settlement of the conflict and to participate in the restoration of peace and in the national reconciliation efforts by disseminating messages of peace and national unity which were heeded by the various parties. A national reconciliation accord was achieved with the support of the international community. Women had thus been able to play their traditional role of resolving social conflicts.

In 2001 women were once again called in, but the intensity of the conflict had shattered the foundations of society and generated a social schism. The atmosphere of violence, mistrust, fear, loss of confidence in institutions, and withdrawal into oneself prevented women from mobilizing to ease the political, military and social tensions.

In 2002 women took new initiatives by presenting a peace memorandum to the Head of State, the belligerents and the international community and by holding a peace march to mark International Women's Day. A programme of support for women victims of the violence between October 2002 and March 2003 was established with backing from the international community. It has three components: legal, medical and psychological. Women and children were catered for in the aid programme for the return of refugees by measures to facilitate family reunion and economic reintegration (support for income-generating activities) and by social measures (education and health).

The participation of women, and especially of women from the families of former combatants, in the special programme on demobilization and reintegration of former combatants and security for development is regarded as decisive in several respects. On the one hand, their involvement in decision-making from the outset can provide a guarantee of the effective reintegration of their husbands, brothers and sons. On the other hand, they are the primary victims of security incidents in the home and in public places. They are firmly committed to the life of their communities and they will have a big role to play in the identification and implementation of concrete means of improving security.

Economic development policy

The country's traditional social organization is based on a patriarchal system in which social roles are ranked and distributed by sex, an arrangement which accords wider choice and decision-making power to men. The traditional system of matrimony is such that women are one the "gifts" by which relations of reciprocity and exchange are expressed and social existence as such is affirmed.

The social and economic arrangements governing the distribution of work are inequitable. They help to make women more vulnerable by imposing a burden of social and family duties. The disparities mean that women have unequal access to basic services and suffer major social, political and economic disadvantages. There is a bias against women in the conduct of economic affairs. Where money is concerned, there is a flagrant disparity in the distribution of purchasing power. Women usually engage in poorly paid work in the informal sector. Only one in five women has a job in a sector other than agriculture. They are under-represented in relation to men in technical occupations. Women's poor standard of education has implications for their integration in the labour market. They cannot obtain jobs without the provision of incentives to make them more competitive. When it comes to access to resources, the country's women have enormous difficulty in obtaining bank loans and do not have the benefit of a resource-allocation system which takes their special circumstances into account. And in terms of economic independence in the household, almost one woman in 10 is subordinate to a man when it comes to deciding on the use of the resources which she has generated, despite the fact that the Family Code stipulates that women shall be free to dispose of their profits and wages.

Poverty-reduction policy

Poverty is a fact of life in the Central African Republic. In 1993, 67 per cent of the population was living on less than a dollar a day. The poverty is worst in rural areas and women are generally poorer than men, a situation which does not facilitate their access to the basic social services. In terms of the evolution of per capita GDP between 1993 and 2000, the incidence of poverty has not declined. Households headed by women are one of the most seriously affected social categories. In terms of food security, two per cent of women of childbearing age find themselves below the critical calorie-intake threshold; the number of underweight children in the under-five age group declined slightly between 1995 and 2000.

The surveys on which the strategies were based concealed the special concerns of women and gave scant attention to gender analysis. In these circumstances it is difficult to appreciate the constraints on women or to determine their degree of vulnerability in terms of geographical location. Gender data were not taken duly into account in the evaluations on which the development strategies were based, and it has been difficult to categorise priorities by differentiating between the specific demands of women and the general living conditions. As a result, the poverty-reduction targets are far from attainment. The deterioration in the public finances has made it impossible to launch the country on the road to growth. And the absence of statistical data makes it impossible to present a sex-disaggregated profile of poverty in human and monetary terms. The implementation of the various poverty-reduction programmes has been fragmented over vast geographical areas, with little impact on the people.

Furthermore, an examination of the relationship between HIV/AIDS and development shows that families, communities, the whole population and all sectors of the economy have been affected. There has been a loss of human capital as a result of the intensification of the poverty of individuals and households stricken by HIV/AIDS, a drain on financial capital to pay for the health care of infected persons and to support children orphaned by the epidemic, and a weakening of social capital due to the exhaustion of the mutual-help and solidarity networks.

The critical poverty situation constitutes a priority. The challenge will be to:

- Improve the statistical tools and establish poverty indicators disaggregated by sex and by region with a view to identifying the directions in which human and monetary poverty are heading as part of the continuing process of formulating the strategic programme to combat poverty (interrupted by the successive crises) and incorporating the fight against HIV/AIDS in that programme;
- Strengthen the basic social services and expand people's access to them;
- Support people's means of subsistence by creating an environment favourable to self-development which takes gender issues into account.

Main lessons learned in implementation

Gender issues manifest themselves forcefully in the Central African Republic in the shape of the persistence of big disparities between men and women. Poverty is one of the reasons for the discrimination suffered by women and it manifests itself in their very harsh living conditions. Despite the existence of several pieces of national legislation and the ratification of a number of international legal instruments, the situation has changed little and remains characterized by the paucity of the measures for the protection of women, the failure to apply the available legislation, and the ignorance of women's rights on the part of women themselves and of men.

There is a need to study the socially constructed relations between men and women in the Central African Republic in order to obtain a clearer idea of the many inequalities suffered by women and to bring out the fact that men too may be victims of such an asymmetrical social system and that they too may benefit from fairer gender relations. These problems present serious challenges not only to the promotion of the status of women but, beyond that consideration, to the whole approach to development. Their solution will have to take the relationship between men and women into consideration at all stages of the programmes and projects; and the structure and effects of this relationship will have to be analysed, with respect to both men and women, in all fields - social, economic, political and cultural.

The incorporation of the gender concept as a development tool will subject the country's people - both men and women - to the test of changing their ways of thinking and acting in the light of a realization of the need for society to change and for social and economic issues to be addressed in a different way. Time for assimilation and integration will be required in the process of gradually overcoming the cultural resistance and the traditional practices which remain "refuge" values in a situation in which the social fabric is disintegrating.

Gender issues are not stated explicitly or affirmed in the policies, programmes and projects. And attention may be drawn here to the differences of interpretation and appreciation of the gender concept on the part of political leaders and society at large. Nor are the concepts of gender and "women and development" made sufficiently clear in terms of their background, objectives, strategies and specific means of intervention or of their complementarities. The apparent difficulty of conceptualizing the gender vision and a gender policy to promote equality between men and women in the political, economic, social and cultural fields is connected with the very weak presence of this egalitarian principle in the social and cultural practices of the men of the Central African Republic.

Projects are the Government's main means of channelling resources to the development process. One of the difficulties of translating research into effective programmes to help women is the lack of a suitable analytical framework for incorporating women in programme and project analysis. In addition, most of the economic initiatives for the advancement of women are formulated in a context of a certain vision of the role and place of women in society. They are viewed more as a "vulnerable group" needing additional income than as independent social stakeholders. The consequence of this approach is that in the micro-projects identified - most of which are in any case hardly innovative and have few multiplier effects - funding is provided for unsustainable activities, the loans are too small, and the women are grouped into automatic categories without any consideration of their way of structuring their relations or of their system of organization, which could have provided a base for the assistance measures.

The relationship between men and women was forged over the long history of society but it is not set in concrete and can therefore change in a direction more conducive to effective action. The strengthening of women's capacity to act on the basis of equal responsibility with men and of their own independence stands at the heart of development issues. The women's question can no longer be addressed solely in terms of a "target group". Achievement of the essential changes, especially in the light of the country's poverty, will depend on the place accorded to women and on their assumption of equal responsibility in economic, political and social life. All the people of the Central African Republic must play their part in changing the balances.

The main feature of the country's social and economic situation is the serious deterioration in the core indicators, which implies that it has an enormous challenge to take up on the road to sustainable development. This challenge is being addressed in the efforts to attain the Millennium Development Goals and the objectives of the Beijing Platform for Action.

Part Three: Institutional development

The institutional mechanism for promoting the advancement of women is the Department for the Advancement of Women of the Ministry of the Family, Social Affairs and National Solidarity. This national mechanism has several offshoots, which are described below.

The mandate of the Department for the Advancement of Women is to initiate and coordinate gender and development activities throughout the country with the support of the regional social affairs offices. It has established an “advancement of women” subsector consisting of the Ministry itself and a number of the other technical ministries, the private sector, civil society, and international cooperation agencies. Through the National Coordination Office (ONC) the Department is responsible for implementation and coordination of the National Plan of Action.

The ONC was created in 1987 by a ministerial order, which was amended in 1998. It is a technical and consultative body. Its mandate is to coordinate the activities of the various agencies working in the “advancement of women” subsector. It reports to the Department for the Advancement of Women. The ONC acts as the Beijing monitoring committee which had been set up following the Fourth Conference. It is responsible for identifying partners, publicizing the policy for the advancement of women and the National Plan of Action, ensuring the technical supervision and the monitoring and evaluation of the activities, developing the relations with other sectors, and promoting gender equality in the formulation of policies, programmes and projects. It played an active part in the drafting of the national policy for the advancement of women.

Another ministerial order established a technical committee to act as the ONC permanent secretariat. This committee is composed of representatives of the operational sectors and senior officials from some of the ministerial departments, development projects and organizations of civil society. It is located in the Department for the Advancement of Women. Its functions are to convene meetings, collect information and monitor the implementation of the National Plan of Action at the central and regional levels through ONC focal points nominated in the prefectures. Nine of the current 16 prefectures have ONC focal points, and four have been established in ministries (Planning and International Cooperation, Agriculture, Livestock, Commerce and Trade) with a mandate to mainstream the “women and development” approach in the programmes and projects.

The operational sectors (health, education, employment, agriculture, commerce and trade, environment, law) bring together various players from the technical services, NGOs and organizations of civil society. Their task is to determine common measures addressing the specific problems of women and means of intervention, and ways of pooling human, material and financial resources in the implementation of these measures.

Civil society forms part of the mechanism for putting the Platform for Action into effect in the shape of the NGOs members of the ONC, the Organization of Women of the Central African Republic, and small sectoral networks. The NGO role is to contribute to the study of the situation of the country’s women and their needs in all areas of social and economic life.

Although the Government has adopted the national policy for the advancement of women and its accompanying National Plan of Action, the arrangements for coordination and monitoring of the National Plan's implementation are beset with obstacles and constraints of several kinds.

The low status of the institutional mechanism for monitoring the implementation of the National Plan causes difficulties in managing its coordination, supervision and evaluation activities. The location of the ONC in the Ministry's Department for the Advancement of Women and its lack of sufficient focal points limit its access to decision-making on policies, programmes and projects. This situation also exacerbates the confusion over roles and areas of competence between the Department and the ONC. The failure to include the ONC focal points in most of the ministerial planning tables raises doubts as to the legitimacy of the coordination mechanism, the genuineness of the ministries' wish to mainstream the gender approach, and the degree of importance assigned to the promotion of gender equality in the sectoral development programmes and projects. This situation restricts the scope of the advocacy at the highest decision-making levels for promotion of equality between the sexes and contributes to the difficulty of mobilizing resources, implementing the Platform for Action on a crosscutting and intersectoral basis, and mainstreaming the gender dimension.

The ONC is unable to play its full role as coordinator in the establishment of joint activities and synergies for the mainstreaming of gender in the national policies and development programmes and projects. The limited capacity to mobilize resources and secure collaboration among the players, the unsuitable professional profile of some of the players, and the failure to take the gender concept on board constitute obstacles to the establishment of effective working arrangements to back the implementation of the Platform for Action. Gender differences are not taken into account in the approach taken by the operational sectors, which remain locked in the concept of specific action in favour of "women and development".

The involvement of the country's NGOs is still too limited in terms of numbers, qualified personnel and national expertise for them to be able to support the Government in its efforts to implement a gender policy at all levels. The Central African Network for Women (RESEFAC), created following the Fourth Conference, has put regional offices in place and established its headquarters in the Central African Republic. The failure of the national mechanism to accept representation of the national office of RESEFAC deprives it of a dynamic potential for promoting gender equality and empowerment of women at the national, subregional, regional and international levels. The limited coverage of the existing networks and the weakness of their links with other organizations, the lack of transparency and the paucity of the exchanges of information between the partners are further factors impeding the monitoring of the National Plan of Action.

Given the country's economic and financial difficulties, only small budgetary appropriations can be made for the Ministries of Social Affairs, Agriculture and Livestock. Some grants are made to NGOs. But 80 per cent of resources come from foreign partners (United Nations system, bilateral cooperation) through the funding of programmes and projects in various fields (environment, institutional back-up, reproductive health, micro-projects, projects for French-speaking countries). However, the financial support provided by the partners has enabled the Department for the Advancement of Women, in association with the ministries involved and NGOs, to hold

several training workshops (integration of women in rural development, gender issues, mutual credit systems), to conduct a number of studies and surveys to obtain data on the situation of the country's women, and to monitor the drafting of the Family Code. The partners have also furnished support to NGOs in the preparation and organization of awareness and discussion sessions on the policy for the advancement of women, peace issues, and the national legislation for the protection of women's rights.

The monitoring system is based in principle on the determination of indicators for each programme and the incorporation of these indicators in the national information system operated by the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation. This system is inefficient. The monitoring and evaluation tools generally consist of no more than the reports on meetings and the periodic and annual reports of the various agencies describing the programmes of activities, the social groups targeted, and the measures carried out.

A database compiled by the Department contains the findings of studies and enquiries on various aspects of women's lives. The available sex-disaggregated data are used in particular by the health and education sectors to facilitate policy formulation and programme planning. But essential information is missing, notably for the economic, farm, commercial and employment sectors. The database does not serve its purpose, for it does not show what women are doing or why. The information is not presented and organized in such a way as to facilitate its use in the development programmes and projects. The lack of reliable data for monitoring implementation is one of the reasons for women's scant involvement in the activities, especially in the activities relating to gender issues, and their limited access to and control of the programmes and projects, as well as for the inadequate analysis of gender issues affecting the activities and for the inadequate evaluation of the project cycle. This situation also exacerbates the difficulties encountered at the national level in the planning of policies, programmes and projects owing to the failure to classify the objectives in terms of the urgent problems and the people's immediate needs.

The fact is that the Central African Republic suffers from a lack of statistical data. The disorganization, unreliability and insufficiency of key sex-disaggregated indicators and the inaccuracy of the data are critical obstacles to the analysis of the trends at the regional, prefecture, sub-prefecture and community levels. Many of the strategies are designed without taking account of the need for gender equity. It is difficult in these circumstances to construct monitoring and evaluation indicators. Accordingly, the improvement of the statistical tools and the planning of target-attainment is a precondition for any future action.

The remaining institutional development challenges are connected with the establishment of an operational national mechanism backed by the political will to move the implementation of the Platform for Action and the outcome documents of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly forward to new positions. The strengthening of this mechanism will depend on the construction of a general framework for gender analysis and the training of the players in methods of gender analysis tailored to and integrated in the development policies, programmes and projects. The main challenge will be to boost the efficiency and effectiveness of the system of data collection and analysis in order to lay the foundations for a social project designed to

satisfy the aspirations of as many of the country's people as possible and to bring the gender policy into line with the scale of the social demand.

Part Four: Main challenges and actions to address them

The priority areas in which the Government must take measures and initiatives for the advancement and empowerment of women relate to the reinforcement of the action strategies for the economy, reproductive health, the fight against HIV/AIDS, institutional development, education, and legal protection.

Expansion of the economic integration of women

The need for a powerful economic and social recovery, improvement of the effectiveness of the programmes and projects, and expansion of access to social justice calls for a new vision of development which systematically includes women. Despite the work done in some fields, the planning of development programmes does not always recognize the real and powerful contribution which women can make to the development process or appreciate the programmes' impact on women. The urgent need to correct the shortcomings stems from problems of the economy and equity. Women are key players in the economic system and their scant involvement in the development projects leaves their economic contribution unexplored.

Women constitute a majority of the population but usually find themselves at the bottom of the ladder when it comes to employment, education, income and status. Economic recovery and social justice will necessitate a greater effort to integrate women in the country's development process. Equity and the restoration of economic growth are compatible goals which must be sought in conjunction with each other. The incorporation of an analytical framework in the planning of development policies, programmes and projects and of the national budget will contribute to a clearer picture of the roles of women and men in society, the determination of the division of tasks between the sexes, and the understanding of the social and cultural forces which will reinforce that division or facilitate its change.

Reproductive health

The priority aims are to improve by 2008 the indicators on maternal and child health, family planning, sexual relations, and traditional practices harmful to the health of women and girls. The action strategies will be designed to strengthen the capacities of the reproductive health services, the monitoring arrangements, human resources, and training. These strategic focuses will deliver stronger advocacy for the protection of women's and children's rights and for the involvement of both men and women in the efforts to solve the reproductive health problems in the community, in the family and in the care facilities.

The fight against AIDS

Much remains to be done by way of improving overall knowledge of the epidemic's impact, strengthening the multi-sectoral aspects of the fight against AIDS, and boosting the efficiency of the national and regional action programmes. Attainment of the relevant Millennium Development Goal will require major efforts to prevent infection and change social and sexual behaviour. The priority measures will have the following goals: to combat discrimination against and stigmatization of infected persons and improve the diagnosis rate in order to make more men

and women to realize that they are seropositive and adopt protected sexual habits; to support the strategies for enhancing the capacities of households affected by HIV/AIDS, especially households headed by women, through the creation of income-generating activities and the social integration of orphans; and to promote innovative strategies for prevention and for the medical and psychological care of persons living with HIV, in particular the development of means of preventing the transmission of HIV from mother to child and improved access to appropriate care and treatment.

Institutional development

The challenge is to improve by 2005 the institutional mechanism for implementing and monitoring the measures for the advancement of women and to secure better coordination by moving the National Coordination Office (ONC) up into the Office of the Prime Minister. The attainment of the objectives will require the establishment at that level of a committee responsible for the mainstreaming of gender issues in the Government's policies and programmes. This committee should be chaired by the Prime Minister and composed of representatives of the various ministries and of civil society. Its mandate should be to:

- Design the strategies for mainstreaming gender issues in the Government's policies, programmes and projects, especially with respect to women's representation and participation in management and decision-making bodies;
- Coordinate and monitor the implementation of the policies, programmes and projects and ensure that gender issues are taken into account;
- Develop and distribute the tools for dealing with gender issues, in particular analysis, monitoring and evaluation indicators;
- Initiate studies and research on gender questions;
- Participate in the subregional process of debate, negotiation and action to mainstream the gender dimension in development policies and to draw the lessons of experience.

A review of the status, membership and mandate of the ONC, the establishment of focal points in the prefectures and sub-prefectures, and the gradual opening of community information centres on gender matters at the sub-prefecture level will facilitate the publicizing of the gender dimension and its acceptance and integration in all bodies taking decisions and carrying out activities.

It will also be necessary to build up the capacities of the ministerial departments by equipping each of them with a unit composed of technical personnel and representatives of NGOs from the operational sector. Each unit will be responsible within its ministry for mainstreaming the gender approach and its implementation tools in programme and project planning. Funds will have to be made available for the conduct of training workshops on gender questions for the each ministry's staff. The Ministry of Social Affairs will be responsible for coordinating the ministerial units by creating a framework for discussion among the ministries themselves and with the organizations of civil society and the development partners and by facilitating the networking of initiatives and experience connected with gender issues

Education

The emphasis will be on reinforcement of the efforts to attain Millennium Development Goals 2 and 3 by 2008 by seeking to achieve a significant reduction of the gender disparities in primary and secondary education, expanding the possibilities for all the country's children to complete the full cycle of primary education, and improving the literacy rate among rural women. The measures will focus on compliance with the legal obligation for all children aged five to 15 to attend school, on enrolling girls and keeping them in the system, and on improving the planning of adult literacy programmes, especially for women, in the national education policies and the development programmes and projects.

This will require increased budgetary appropriations for education to increase the human resources, with priority given to rural areas. Means will be devised for communicating with and educating parents in the family and the community in order to secure greater equity in the distribution of domestic tasks among the members of the household and thus reduce the amount of work done by children in the 5-15 age group, but this will constitute a big challenge in a difficult social and economic context. Education on sexual relations and HIV/AIDS will have to be expanded at all levels of the system, and the action strategies will have to be tailored to the specific sensibilities and needs of boys and girls. The involvement of peer teachers in the fight against HIV/AIDS will have to be expanded in the schools.

Legal protection of women and girls

The initiatives in this area will focus on application of the legislation designed to secure by 2009 the effective exercise of women's and girls' right to protection. The strategy will be based on a multi-sectoral approach (health, education, social affairs, youth, sports, arts and culture, justice). It will include advocacy for the implementation of CEDAW, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Family Code and stronger measures to publicize these legal instruments at all levels where decisions are made and activities are carried out, as well as at the grass roots. Special attention will be paid to enhancing the awareness of judges so as to secure the precedence of positive law over customary law based on social and cultural habits, practices and beliefs which clearly perpetuate the discrimination against women. The harmonization of the existing national legislation with the international instruments (ratification of the Additional Protocol to CEDAW of 1999), the amendment of provisions of the Family Code concerning polygamy, inheritance rights and the situation of widows and orphans, the adoption of a national policy on children, and legislation to protect children at risk should enhance the exercise of their fundamental rights by women and children.

These forward-looking strategies are among the policies which the Government plans to introduce in order to translate the political, social and economic potential into practical realities and continue the implementation of the Platform for Action and the outcome texts of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly at the national level between now and 2009.

ANNEX
PRINCIPAL INDICATORS AND COMMENTS

(Sources: multiple indicator cluster survey (MICS 2000), UNICEF, Bangui, April 2001)

HEALTH

Infant/child mortality

- Infant mortality rate: 130.6 per 1,000, with a slightly higher rate for boys. Children of mothers with secondary education are at lower risk than children of mothers with primary or no education;
- Child mortality rate: 73.4 per 1,000, with a slightly higher rate for boys;
- Infant/child mortality rate: 194 per 1,000.

HIV/AIDS

- 66.4 per cent of the country's women in the 15-49 age group have heard of HIV/AIDS;
- 50 per cent of women say that they know of no means of preventing the transmission of HIV/AIDS;
- Three per cent of women have a good knowledge of the ways in which HIV/AIDS is transmitted;
- National HIV/AIDS rate: 15 per cent;
- **The seropositive rate among pregnant women ranges from 5.3 to 22 per cent (HIV/AIDS is spreading in all the prefectures, at a slightly faster rate among women);**
- The confidential diagnosis unit in Bangui has found that six females are infected for every male in the 14-25 age group.

Antenatal care

- 69 per cent of women attend for at least one antenatal check;
- 31 per cent of women do not have any antenatal checks.

Attended confinements

- 52.4 per cent of women give birth at home;
- 44 per cent of women are attended by qualified personnel;
- **Maternal mortality rate: 948 per 100,000 births.**

Contraception

- Seven per cent of women use modern means of contraception;
- 58 per cent of women have sexual relations before age 15.

EDUCATION

- More girls (2%) than boys (1.8%) enrol in pre-school classes;
- The gross school attendance rate is much higher for boys (86.2%) than for girls (65.3%), except in Bangui, where the girls' rate is higher;
- The net attendance rate in primary (6-11 years) is 43 per cent: 46.5 per cent for boys and 39.1 per cent for girls. The net attendance rate increases with the age of the child. It is 18.7 per cent at age six and attains its highest level of 55.3 per cent at age 11. The boys' net rate is

higher than the girls' at all ages. Between the ages of seven and nine the girls' net rate virtually marks time, pointing to the scale of drop-outs by girls;

- The current legislation sets the age for enrolment in primary at six years, pending the application of Act No. 97.014 of 1997, which reduced the age to five years. The results show no disparities between boys and girls;
- Retention in the system: out of every 100 children who enrol only seven reach grade CM 2; 7.5 per cent of them are boys and 6.7 per cent girls;
- 47 per cent of children in the 5-17 age group have never attended school: 41.5 per cent boys and 52.7 per cent girls;
- 9.3 per cent of children had dropped out of school since the last school year before the survey. That annual drop-out rate is a very high one, for it represents one half of all drop-outs among the children surveyed. The rate is higher for boys (10.1%) than for girls (8.4%);
- 11 per cent of children in the 12-17 age group attend secondary school; the gap between boys and girls is insignificant at all ages. Children enrol late in secondary education;
- There is a bias against females in household education levels: 59.6 per cent of females aged five or older have never attended school, as against 38.5 per cent of males; 7.8 per cent of females aged five or older have secondary education or higher, as against 16.3 per cent of males;
- 48.6 per cent of 16-year-olds are literate: 64.7 per cent boys and 33.5 per cent girls. Young people of either sex have higher literacy rates than their elders. Illiteracy is commoner in rural areas and is found among 81.9 per cent of the female population.

CHILDREN

Orphans

- 10.2 per cent of 15-year-olds have lost at least one of their biological parents;
- The number of children orphaned by AIDS is estimated at 110,000.

Domestic work performed by children aged five to 14

- 63.5 per cent of these children work (3.3 per cent are paid and 33 per cent unpaid);
- 71.4 per cent do domestic work for less than four hours, with no disparity between boys and girls;
- 8.9 per cent do domestic work for more than four hours: 12 per cent girls and 5.8 per cent boys.

PROTECTION OF WOMEN

- 35.9 per cent of women undergo excision, mainly in rural areas. The practice of excision is in decline: the incidence fell from 43 per cent in 1994-1995 to 35.9 per cent in 2000;
- 45.4 per cent of women say that they have suffered physical violence (especially at their husband's hands). The proportion is slightly higher in rural areas;
- 10.5 per cent of women have lodged complaints of physical violence;
- 51.6 per cent of women have suffered psychological violence (insults, violation of rights);
- About one third of women have been victims of rape: 35.6 per cent of them on three or more occasions, and 10 per cent at the hands of a third person - a worrying fact in the light of the spread of AIDS;

- Very few women victims of rape have complained either to a court (0.5%) or to a person of influence (2.9%);
- 14.1 per cent of women acknowledge having been subjected to sexual harassment;
- 9.5 per cent of women have been forced into prostitution. Most of the cases involve adolescents acting under the influence of a third person;
- 40.6 per cent of widows say that they have been dispossessed of property inherited from a deceased husband, most of the cases occurring in the home;
- 56 per cent of divorced or widowed women have lost custody of a young child.
