African Women’s Decade: Stepping Up Action for & with Rural Women to 2020

1. Contextual Background:

On 15th October 2010, which was International Day of Rural Women, the African Union (AU) officially launched the African Women’s Decade (2010-2020) to advance Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment, through a dual top-down and bottom-up approach. The Decade aims to serve as a political platform for galvanizing and bolstering actions geared towards accelerated implementation of all global and continental policies, including AU Assembly Decisions on gender equality, women’s empowerment and human rights. The Decade’s theme, “grassroots approach to gender equality and women’s empowerment”, recognizes the vital roles and contributions of rural women in promoting peace, equality and socio-economic development, from households to the community and national level. Consequently, the Decade emphasizes the catalytic benefits and impact of adopting an ‘inclusive grassroots approach’ in our work to empower women, promote their human rights and achieve gender equality, in the context of the continent of Africa.

The Decade’s ten thematic areas further highlight the links between women’s political, economic, social and cultural rights; and thereby provides a unique opportunity to further strengthen linkages and integrated approaches in efforts to promote women’s rights. Consistent with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and other continental commitments, such as the AU’s Agenda 2063, the Decade prioritizes ten thematic issues, which are of critical relevance to rural women in Africa. These are: combating poverty through promotion of economic empowerment and entrepreneurship of women; agriculture and food security; women’s health, maternal mortality and HIV/AIDS; education, science and technology; environment and climate change; peace, security and violence against women and girls; governance and legal protection; finance and gender budgeting; women in decision making; and mentoring youth to champion gender equality and women’s empowerment.

Much has been achieved for, by and with African women and girls since the launch of the Decade. However, much equally remains to be done for, by and with rural women if we are to achieve the twin-goal of women’s empowerment and gender equality in Africa, in ways that truly ensures no one is left behind. The time for action is now! With only two years remaining to the end of the Decade in 2020, there is an urgent need to step up efforts with concrete and targeted actions aimed at fulfilling the commitments made to rural women’s empowerment and gender equality in Africa. This necessitates urgent and concerted efforts by African Heads of State and Government, regional
and subregional organizations - particularly the AU and Regional Economic Communities (RECs),
development partners and civil society organizations (especially rural women themselves), at all
levels, in accelerating implementation of all priority commitments made on the women of Africa.
The 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063 both provide strong impetus for advancing work in this respect.

2. Proposed High-Level Side Event:

It must be noted that despite laudable progress made in implementation of the Decade’s thematic
priorities at national, subregional and continental levels, challenges remain, especially for most
rural women in Africa, who continue to face unequal day-to-day realities because of entrenched
socio-cultural norms and practices. Indeed, there have been significant gains in key areas such as
legislation, establishment of gender/women’s mechanisms including gender ministries, prevention
and response to sexual violence in especially public spheres, promotion of women’s political
participation and representation in parliament, combatting maternal mortality and HIV/AIDS,
gender parity at senior level in the African Union Commission, and election/appointment of female
presidents. However, the realities of most rural women in Africa continues to be characterized by
experiences of daily structural discrimination, including in the areas of inheritance; access to land,
property and financing; gender-based violence (especially sexual and domestic violence); lack of
access to affordable, decent or adequate healthcare, education, training and employment; early and
forced marriages; discriminatory cultural norms/rites; and underrepresentation in local governance
and decision making.

Like the interconnected thematic priorities of the Decade, the global 2030 Agenda and Africa’s
Agenda 2063 collectively have aspirations, goals and targets that are integrated, indivisible and
balanced. Both agendas, inter alia, call for the promotion of human rights, achievement of gender
equality and empowerment of all women and girls. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)
encourages significant increase in investments to close the gender gap and devotion of resources
to development of rural areas, including support to women farmers. Agenda 2063 demands the full
empowerment of women in all spheres, with equal social, political and economic rights; and rural
women’s access to productive assets, including land, credit, inputs and financial services. The two
agendas consequently provide renewed political impetus and useful platforms for accelerating full
implementation of the priorities of the African Women’s Decade, in the remaining two years to
the target date of 2020, and beyond.

The 62nd Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW 62), to be held
in March 2018, on the theme “Challenges and Opportunities in Achieving Gender Equality and
the Empowerment of Rural Women and Girls”, further presents yet another opportunity for all
actors to commit to accelerated action to make women’s empowerment and gender equality a daily
reality for especially rural women. The proposed high-level side event will seize on the unique
opportunity of CSW 62, which focuses on rural women and girls, to increase political awareness
on the African Women’s Decade, at the global level. It will highlight existing needs and challenges
of rural women in Africa (as well as their agency), and galvanize support and crucial partnerships
to advance accelerated implementation of the Decade’s priorities, at especially grassroots levels.

In raising high-level political awareness, the event will focus on five main themes of the Decade,
namely:
(i) Economic empowerment and entrepreneurship of women;
(ii) Agriculture and food security;
(iii) Peace, security and violence against women and girls;
(iv) Governance and legal protection; and
(v) Finance and gender budgeting.

3. Objectives:

The high-level side event aims to raise awareness, at the global level, on the African Women’s Decade, and mobilize strong political leadership for accelerated implementation of the Decade’s thematic priorities for rural women in Africa, in the remaining two years to the target date of 2020, including through the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063. Specifically, the event’s objectives are to:

(i) Highlight progress in implementation of the African Women’s Decade, with focus on impact on rural women in Africa;
(ii) Identify existing needs and challenges of rural women and girls in Africa, outlining key areas for urgent and accelerated action in the remaining two years to the Decade;
(iii) Discuss how implementation of the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063 can further enhance implementation of the African Women’s Decade for rural women and girls; and
(iv) Agree on concrete political actions for ensuring the Decade achieves meaningful results for rural women and girls by and beyond 2020.

4. Expected outcomes:

The key messages and recommendations from the event will be published and disseminated widely. It would also feed into future processes and activities of the AU relating to the commemoration of the end of the African Women’s Decade.

5. Format:

The event will be structured as a high-level interactive panel discussion, featuring lead African women from the United Nations system and the African Union, including the Regional Economic Communities (RECs), as well as development partners and civil society. The event is open to all.

6. Participants:

Given its political focus, the event will target African Ministers of Gender or Women’s Affairs and their counterparts from other regions, Permanent Representatives to the United Nations, regional and subregional organizations -- including the AU and RECs, development partners, private sector, civil society organizations (especially rural women’s organizations) and the media.

7. Organizers:

The event will be organized by the African Union, United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and the United Nations Office of the Special Adviser on Africa.