

Good day to all,

On behalf of the international foundations, The WILD Foundation and The International Conservation Fund of Canada, and as Head of the Mali Elephant Project, I want to thank you for your participation in this first high-level meeting on a sensitive subject in this period of Mali's history. This is a subject that concerns all Malians, all friends of Mali, and environmentalists familiar with the affected areas. I speak of the armed conflict that has shaken the northern parts of Malian territory for over a year.

Ladies and gentlemen, as you know better than I, this conflict has destabilized the social equilibrium, and upset the economic environment and the socio-political balance of the affected areas. The resulting displacement of people and tensions between and within communities has disrupted the equilibrium that allowed rural populations to use, with caution, the Gourma's fragile natural resources for their livelihoods.

How can urgent humanitarian assistance -- essential in this post-conflict phase -- be quickly deployed to alleviate the sufferings of the present, without aggravating the current tensions that are already threatening a peaceful and sustainable future? This is the question we need to ask - which we are already asking - in the Malian Gourma?

Minister responsible for Decentralization, reconciling the communities immersed in a conflict that has been imposed upon them, requires encouraging them, and motivating them to develop and implement natural resource management plans as a means to bring together the multitude of users, occupations and ethnic groups and unify them in a common cause of benefit to all. It also requires being a true promoter of strengthened local governance systems to create a new sense of citizenship through empowering the populations in improving their living conditions. It is in fact to ensure that local authorities, communities, and technical and financial partners play their role in promoting economic and social development.

Minister for the Environment and Sanitation, working for social cohesion within communities and between victims of inter-ethnic conflict requires engaging in the short, medium and long term, in the capacity building of stakeholders. This is in order that they conduct participatory processes of consultation, negotiation and consensus decision-making based on local management agreements, defining the rules of access and use of resources, and specifying the methods of control and sanction.

Sirs, the representatives of regional councils, advocating reconciliation between and within your populations requires encouraging the emergence of inter-community fora to support the role of local authorities as regulatory bodies capable of legitimate arbitration.

Dear participants, distinguished personalities, for the areas afflicted by conflict, it is your commitment, your determination to take the lead in social reconciliation, that is a pre-requisite for the success of physical reconstruction. And which is also the first requirement for the survival of a national and international heritage that will benefit current and future generations: I speak of the elephants of the Gourma.

I would like to take this opportunity to sincerely thank the Minister for Decentralisation and Spatial Planning and the Minister of Environment and Sanitation, as well as the teams from their national directorates, for their commitment and support throughout the process of planning this workshop.

Ministers, distinguished participants, allow me to extend my sincere greetings and thanks to everyone present, for their support in the process of reconciliation. I would like to add that, given that this workshop is the first step in a process, it is essential that your participation is as interactive as possible, our goal being that the process be an alert, thought through by you and for you. I count on you to make this a very productive meeting, and we will endeavour as much as possible to include all of your contributions in the resulting workshop report.

But before I conclude, I want to wish from my heart that peace and tranquillity return definitively to Malian territory in general, and to the regions directly concerned in particular, so that the victim populations may forget everything that has happened and return to working together in peace.

Thank you.

Dr Susan Canney,
Leader of the Mali Elephant Project, an initiative of The WILD Foundation and The International Conservation Fund of Canada.
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