West Africa sees a lot of movement across borders; especially minors who are always looking for ways out of poverty or trying to access basic services such as education or health. From the onset of their journey, many of these young children and teens find themselves in precarious and hazardous situations and often times fall under the sway of traffickers and other people who seek to exploit them. As majority of the children leave their families - either forced or otherwise to neighboring countries, they tend to miss home and are often eager to return back to their families but do not have the means to do so.

The West Africa Network’s goal, as part of the umbrella organization of ISS, is to protect and reintegrate children who find themselves in vulnerable situations displaced in and within the West Africa professionally and socially in a family setting and offer them prospects for their future; by strengthening the capacities of West African countries, who are all non-signatory states of the 1996 Convention. So far, 5’000 children and youngsters have been supported.

Most of our core activities fall already implicitly under the scope of the 1996 Hague Convention. In addition, WAN is willing to actively promote the mechanisms and safeguards of the 1996 Hague Convention particularly in the following areas where we are already working.

1) Strengthening the cooperation among involved actors according to articles 31 and 32 of the 1996 Hague Convention

In order to ensure quality care of children, a mechanism of cooperation and direct communication has been established between the coordinating NGOs and the involved states. The latter contribute to the care of children and ensure good governance and policy implementation. Professional child protection NGOs are responsible for coordination, mobilization and facilitating the care of the child. Transnational cooperation is thus ensured by NGOs who act as a focal point.

As a result, since the 2000s, there has been an increased bilateral agreements with the aim to successfully return children to their countries, the approach has been built based on synergies and strengthening of existing resources (state, CSOs and their networking). Once a year, the 15 Ministries in charge of child protection meet in a steering committee to strengthen collaboration and partnership in order to evaluate the activities of the Network, plan the development of the WAN and elaborate the working methods and the standards of intervention.

ISS WAN thus acts as facilitator for inter-sectoral and cross-border cooperation in order to ensure a harmonized approach regarding these complex situations. Therefore, ISS WAN is perfectly placed to further strengthen the cooperation mechanisms and the safeguards, foreseen by the 1996 Hague Convention, at a national, transnational and regional level.

2) Promote a wider ratification/accession and implementation of the 1996 Hague Convention in the countries which we operate

Our target region cover non-signatory states like Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Ivory Coast, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo. All member countries of the network rely on a method of concerted action based on common standards. In line with the 1996 Hague Convention and other international standards, all these actions are done in the best interest of the child as they form the basis and guiding principles on which minimum rules are to be observed at all times for the return and during emergency situation.

1 Art. 31 and 32 of 1996 HC: Facilitation of communication, agreed solutions and the child’s tracing can occur “either directly or through public authorities or other bodies”.
Fatimata, a 16 year old Malian girl and a school drop-out who was lured by a man from her village to Cote d'Ivoire under the pretext of finding her a high-salaried baby-sitting job. Fatimata's parents gave their consent to her departure as they saw this as an opportunity to relieve them of their burden. On arrival in Cote d'Ivoire, the man attempted to engage Fatimata into prostitution; she was lucky to escaped. She found herself running in the streets of Abidjan begging in order to survive. As fate would have it, the police went on a swooping exercise where poor Fatimata was picked by the police and sent to the station for interrogation. It was during the interrogation exercise that the police found Fatimata to be of Malian origin.

As WAN is a regional mechanism premised on referral and protection of identified vulnerable children on the move, the police called a local partner, a member of WAN to come and manage the case. Before the conception of WAN, a victim like Fatimata would have been in police detention for some days and ultimately deported under difficult circumstances to her country.

The Ivorian partner provided emergency care for Fatimata and immediately notified the WAN partner in Mali for family tracing. Arrangements were made for the safe and secured return of Fatimata back to Mali through this network. Fatimata was reunited and reintegrated into her family by the Malian member of the network. With the support of the ISS WAN, the local Ministries of Social Welfare and Ministry of Education, Fatimata went back to school. She is now in the final year of her secondary education.

The case of Fatimata is not different from that of many young children in WA who often times are exploited when they find themselves in vulnerable situations.

The intervention thus follows a common procedure called the Regional Standards which consists of 8 steps that guides partners on the appropriate approach to take in the management of a victim; it has been validated by all the countries in the region and has become a routine tool for the management of cases by the partners in the sub-region.

As such, eight steps have been identified for the care of children:
- The child’s identification
- Emergency options for the child
- The study of the child’s personal situation, including his/her family and environment
- Family Tracing and Assessment efforts
- Consideration of alternative placement for child outside family
- Social, educational or professional reintegration of the child
- Monitoring of the child after their return (over a minimum of 2 years)
- Supporting the development of parental and community capacities

Direct communication and cooperation mechanisms with competent governmental authorities and implementing bodies form the base for efficient child protection on a case-by-case basis. WAN is thus a network that can promote the ratification/accession of the 1996 Hague Convention through existing relations as well as its practical implementation through well-established and proven practices.

Conclusion

WAN clearly fills in a cooperation gap in West Africa by connecting the child protection systems of the region. Therefore it provides a framework that facilitates work across borders, promotes collaboration between concerned states and give clear references to all professionals, regardless of the country where they come from. WAN looks forward to making better use of 1996 HC framework for the cross border protection of children.