



**Speech by Federal President Joachim Gauck
to the Commission of the Economic Community of West
African States (ECOWAS)
in Abuja/Nigeria on 10 February 2016**

It is a pleasure and an honour for me to address you here at the Economic Community of West African States. This is where representatives of 15 nations gather together – 15 nations that have decided to work particularly closely with one another and have joined forces in order to strive together to enable their citizens to live in peace, security, prosperity and dignity. I would like to express my heartfelt thanks for your kind invitation.

In the past 40 years, you have achieved a great deal in West Africa. You have succeeded in opening the borders. You have recognised that transnational problems cannot be solved by one nation alone. You have recognised that you must pool your strengths in order to enable the West African economy to flourish. In my opinion, your greatest achievements include the Common External Tariff, freedom of movement and freedom of establishment. They also include the Parliament and the Community Court of Justice, which deals with human rights matters. These institutions can certainly help to foster the public's trust in your Community.

The history of your family of nations sounds somewhat familiar to us in Europe. The European Union also began life as an economic community. It too is a project aimed at creating peace and prosperity on the firm foundations of shared values. What Europeans and West Africans also have in common is the experience that integration is always a gradual process and that member states may disagree on reforms. The experiences of the past years have taught us that we must defend values and principles together again and again. And as I experience in Europe how difficult that often is, I have great respect for the progress that you have made in uniting West Africa. I know what huge challenges you must overcome here – in each country, in the region and ultimately on the continent as a whole.

It seems to me that Africa's contrasts and contradictions are magnified here in Nigeria. Indeed, this country stands for both sides of the coin – for strength, change and renewal, but also for crises and conflicts.

Many reports from your region give grounds for optimism. The people of Nigeria can feel proud that a democratic handover of power was achieved here in Abuja last year. The people also stood up for their rights in Burkina Faso. The high election turnout showed that people want to have their say in the future of their country. They will not allow themselves to be silenced or discouraged, even in the face of repeated setbacks. Democratic elections in West African countries are an encouraging sign. They give grounds for hope that it will be possible to further your young democracies. And they give grounds for hope that terrorism can also ultimately be defeated.

In many parts of the world, we are currently experiencing that democracy is not immune to challenges. It is important to strengthen democracy where it is at risk. This can be necessary anywhere – and naturally that includes Europe. Regional organisations such as the Economic Community of West African States and the European Union also draw their strength from the fact that they are communities of shared values. They work to protect democracy – even if the public does not perceive all of their initiatives.

Yesterday I visited Lagos, where I met people who want to change things in their country, people who are full of energy and ideas. During my visit, I realised once again just how many young, self confident and open minded women and men live in Africa. And large cities such as Lagos, Abidjan, Dakar and Accra also stand for economic strength, technological innovation, a diverse cultural scene and an active civil society. German companies recognised a long time ago that it is worthwhile investing in such cities. One aim of my visit is to remind people in Germany and Europe of this ambitious side of Africa.

But there are also other reports that we in Germany and Europe are following with great concern. I am thinking of the social, ethnic, religious and political conflicts that pose great challenges to Nigeria and other ECOWAS countries. Of course, I am thinking of terrorism, violence, flight, displacement, criminality, corruption, cases of arbitrariness in the police and judiciary, and poorly functioning administrations. I am thinking of poverty, hunger, illiteracy, a lack of education, disease and inadequate healthcare.

I am well aware that you have had an agenda for many years and that you are working on your own solutions – West African solutions. As the President of a European Union country, I also know how laborious it can be to make decisions and how hard it is to reach consensus, particularly when there are such large economic and social differences between member states. And it is for that very reason that

I am impressed by what your Community has achieved in political terms so far. I would like to highlight the ending of the crises in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Mali and Guinea-Bissau, as well as the hosting of migrants from the Sahel. Along with international aid workers, including aid workers from Germany, you successfully overcame the Ebola epidemic in West Africa.

I firmly believe that the hard work involved in integration is well worthwhile. Regional responsibility and solidarity pay off. It is only by working together that one can ensure security and stability. It is only by working together that one can pave the path to growth and development. And it is only by working together that you can build a West African "house" strong enough to withstand the storms of the future. The people in your countries are counting on you! Germany and Europe will continue to accompany you on your path. In the spirit of respect for your own solutions, we will continue to stand by your side as a partner.

Your Community's success means a great deal to us Germans and us Europeans. It means a great deal to us because we share interests and pursue common aims. After all, we know that countries, economies, cultures and societies are moving ever closer together. They are connected across borders in a large number of ways. They face the same threats. Regional crises and conflicts often have a global impact. Developing countries, newly industrialising countries and industrialised countries can only solve the many problems that are not confined to one country alone by working together. This applies equally to overcoming climate change, conserving biodiversity and creating peace and security. And all of us in politics, business and society share responsibility for our future.

In Germany and Europe, more and more people are becoming aware that Africa is not a distant world, but rather our neighbouring continent. They are becoming aware of how important it is to support regional development. Particularly in view of the latest regional and global crises, many people who were previously able to close their eyes to our interdependencies are becoming aware of the fact that we must take joint action in this shared world of ours. This is why I agree with President Buhari that what we need is regional and global solidarity. In the 21st century, there is no alternative to a policy of cooperation on all levels, a policy of negotiating and a policy of balancing interests peacefully. Africa and Europe need a stable world order.

I am visiting Nigeria at a time when people in Africa and Europe are the targets of heinous acts of terrorism. Flight and displacement have become a challenge that directly connects our two continents. We are very concerned to see that more and more people are compelled to leave their homes. Millions of Africans have been displaced. Millions are fleeing from terrorism, war, poverty and deprivation. Some of them

put their faith in unscrupulous people smuggling gangs and risk their lives to reach Europe. Many of them perish on this journey, die of thirst or drown in the Mediterranean.

What we in Europe sometimes fail to recognise is that African countries also harbour migrants in transit and take in thousands, indeed hundreds of thousands of refugees and displaced persons. Here in Nigeria alone, over two million people have had to leave their homes to escape the murderous attacks of Boko Haram. Most of them have remained here in Nigeria, but hundreds of thousands fled to neighbouring countries. This afternoon, I will visit a refugee camp and speak with aid organisations in order to see for myself what is happening on the ground. The aid workers in the region include many Germans.

In my homeland and some other European countries, we are currently experiencing a wave of willingness to help refugees. But at the same time, we are becoming increasingly aware in Germany of the challenges our society will face in integrating so many people. Yes, we want to remain an open country. And we do not turn away people who have a right to asylum or international protection in Germany. We also offer legal immigration options to people who want to work or study in Germany. But equally we recognise that our ability to take in people is limited. We simply cannot take in everyone who wants to come to Germany. We need to limit the inflow if we are to maintain willingness among the population to take in new arrivals. And we want to maintain this willingness.

All of us, Europeans and Africans, are experiencing migration in our own ways these weeks. It is good that Europeans and Africans spoke in Valletta about how migration could be managed in a better way. We should intensify this dialogue! We need to learn to see problems more clearly through the eyes of others. It is important to me to note that immigration can have a positive impact on societies as regards the economy, culture and people. However, immigration only provides opportunities if it is well organised. And some ideas will prove to be an illusion – migration to Europe will not solve Africa's fundamental development problems.

This is why we must succeed in eradicating the causes of flight and displacement together in the long term. There are many different reasons why men and women decide to leave their homeland. However, a lack of opportunities or even a feeling of hopelessness almost always plays a part in this decision. It is thus the task of responsibly minded politicians to ensure that the people share and participate in economic, social and democratic development. Of course, this does not only apply to your region. People all over Africa, including future generations, need prospects for their future. Only in this way can we prevent increasing numbers of desperate people from joining

the terrorists. And only in this way can we ensure that Africa itself benefits from the great potential found in its young societies.

Your own African solutions are also primarily needed here. But Germans and Europeans want to and will stand by your side in all areas where you assume responsibility for your countries' development and where you demonstrate the will to uphold democracy, the rule of law and human rights.

The Economic Community of West African States will also have to play its part in security in the region in the future. The brutal attacks of recent weeks have shown us once again that the fight against terrorism and violence remains a pressing task. Then there is the plague of organised crime and corruption – this too must be overcome. Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, arms trafficking and the drugs trade weaken the entire region. Your Community has already played a role in combating these problems. The establishment of a standby force would be a further important step.

Your countries are also responsible for solving pressing social problems, such as reducing poverty and disease. The social market economy is the basis for prosperity and economic strength in Germany. I think that this model suits our society. Perhaps it cannot simply be applied to other countries and continents. But nevertheless I am certain that every country desiring to develop successfully must ensure that the upswing does not merely benefit a few people, but rather the population as a whole, particularly during phases of rapid economic growth. If only a few people benefit, indeed if corruption and clientelism are the order of the day, then trust in the state and democracy cannot grow.

Good conditions are the crucial prerequisites for economic development. Education and training create opportunities and lay the foundations for a self determined life. Legal certainty and modern infrastructure are the basis for entrepreneurship and investment, including by companies from Germany and Europe. And we are happy to continue supporting you in these areas! I would like to state clearly at this point that we should develop the economic partnership between the European Union and the Economic Community of West African States. Both sides, Europeans and West Africans, will benefit if we succeed in stimulating trade relations and tapping into new markets, thus creating jobs.

We all know the fundamental requirement for the positive development of a state, society or economy. This requirement is respect for human and civil rights, as enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations. As members of the African Union, you also feel committed to this, so I also know very well that I am here among allies. But all of us here in this chamber are aware of the gap between aspiration and reality in some places, including at times in Europe. We

must address this gap every day. That is the way forward in Europe and West Africa. I would therefore like to stress once again what I said almost exactly one year ago in my speech to the Parliament of the East African Community in Tanzania.

Human rights are universal. They are not based on origin, religion, social or material status, sexual orientation or cultural tradition. They belong to each and every person, regardless of where and how he or she lives. Human rights violations must not be tolerated. And those who violate human rights should be held to account. This applies as much to Strasbourg and The Hague as it does to Arusha and Abuja.

The ECOWAS anthem says, "We'll make history." I think this is somewhat too modest because you already have made history. We in Germany and Europe see your hard work here. We see the efforts you are making to lead West Africa together towards a better future. I would like to encourage you to continue "working hand in hand" on your path. Wole Soyinka, the great Nigerian author and Nobel Laureate in Literature, described the true values of the continent in his work "Of Africa". I am certain that your Community will grow and flourish if you base it on the value that Soyinka says is most important: humanity.

Thank you very much.