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From geoheritage to geoparks: A tool to improve human and socio-economic sustainable development in Africa

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Africa consists of a rich and diverse geoheritage which is still not well investigated. National inventories are limited to few initiatives in a handful of countries often as part of geoheritage research activities conducted by universities and/or geological surveys. Compared to other regions of the world, Africa is still delayed in instituting geoheritage inventories and protection and addressing the economic use of their geoheritage. The link of geoheritage to local socio-economic sustainable development through the promotion of geotourism within geoparks will help to increase the awareness of local populations and decision makers about the necessity to use sustainably their geoheritage assets in economic and social dynamics. In the absence of national legislations that allows the inventory, the conservation and the rational economic use of geological sites, the creation of geoparks in Africa could be an opportunity to establish local inventories and to protect their geoheritage through the education of local populations and/or the institution of local laws. In order to help to improve this situation, the African Association of Women in Geosciences (AAWG) created, in 2009, the African Geoparks Network (AGN) during the preparatory meeting of its fifth conference entitled “*Women and Geosciences for Peace*” held in Cote d'Ivoire. The AGN aims to increase the awareness of the local population and decision makers regarding the need for sustainable use and management of geoheritage in particular for the benefit of local socio-economic sustainable development targets through the promotion of both geotourism and the creation of geoparks. The first international conference on Geoparks in Africa and Middle East entitled “*Aspiring geoparks in Africa and Arab World*” was held in 2011 in Morocco. As a follow up of the conference, the first book including African geoheritage was published in 2015. AGN and AAWG in collaboration with other stakeholders are organizing many workshops and field trips to promote the geoheritage for society on the African continent; and to build the capacity of local population.

According to the AGN, a geopark is an area where the geoheritage and all heritage components should be used as a tool to *i)* improve the infrastructure of rural areas through the development of geotourism by building roads, creating and improving accommodation, supplying remote areas with electricity and drinking water, creating adequate spaces to sell local products, including the development of museums and cultural/information centres; *ii)* enhance human development; and *iii)* promote sustainable peace in all regions of Africa. Geoparks, like other managed areas, should be used as a space to promote sustainable peace. Local communities should use their territories and become more involved in their development and their protection, and thus benefit directly from the revenues generated by activities conducted, such as geotourism. Encouraging the creation of trans-boundary Geoparks in Africa will help address conflicts by empowering local communities from different countries to work together in managing their natural resources, and to accept and manage their differences and diversity. In the African context, geoheritage could be used as a tool to reinforce social integration. Trans-boundary Geoparks like any other managed areas could play a key role to highlight the opportunities for African countries to trade goods, services and investments across borders, they could help to remove barriers to trade in Africa and reinforce African socio-economic integration. Geoparks could be also used as an area to promote best practices in mining and carrying governance, such as rehabilitation and economic utilisation of the geotouristic potential of the abandoned mines and carries.

