The last two weeks have been abuzz with activity as engagement with several stakeholders took centre stage. On the 24 February, we held an update meeting with Class A members (countries in the risk pool) and Class C members (PCDG/UK Government and KFW/BMG) where we were proud to present the 2020 performance results. In addition to proving the value of premium support for Member States under these tough operating conditions, the results also show the importance of our donor partners who came on board to enable policy uptake. The meeting also laid out the plans for 2021 as we prepare for risk Pool VIII.

In driving the ARC mandate forward and ensuring that African Union Member States are well-equipped to respond to disaster events, collaboration with like-minded partners that complement our work, as well as with the Member States that we serve, is key to our success. With disaster events and disease outbreaks increasingly posing threats to African lives and livelihoods, and reversing development gains, there is an urgent need to intensify coalitions if we are to significantly improve the continent’s resilience. I’d like to give you a glimpse of some of our engagement efforts as we work towards strengthening relationships with our stakeholders.

**West African Development Bank / Banque Ouest Africaine de Development (BOAD) engagement**

In our ongoing efforts to rally African institutions and other partners towards building a disaster-resilient continent, on Monday, March 1, we met with President Serge Ekele of West African Development Bank / Banque Ouest Africaine de Development (BOAD) to explore how we can jointly assist members of Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in disaster response. With a common sense of purpose, we see value in exploring opportunities for possible synergies towards enabling countries in the subregion to better plan, prepare and respond to natural disaster risk events.

With 14 out of the 15 ECOWAS member states already members of ARC through signing our Treaty agreement; and many of them participating in the ARC risk pools, a formal partnership with BOAD will help both organisations accelerate initiatives targeted at technical assistance and resource mobilisation for premium support. We are excited about the shared missions of our two institutions, and highly optimistic that a formal partnership with BOAD will produce good results for promoting food security and disaster risk adaptation in the West African sub-region.

**Cementing the ARC / African Development Bank (AfDB) relationship**

Since the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding with the AfDB in 2017, we have continuously sought to mutually exploit the value of this partnership. Within the period, we held crucial meetings with two of AfDB’s regional offices, both of which are instrumental to our work. The engagements with Mrs. Nnenna Nwabufo, Director General of the East African Regional office on Tuesday, March 2, and Ms. Leila Mokadem, Director General of the Southern Africa Regional Office on Wednesday March 3, together with their technical teams, provided opportunities for both organisations to renew commitments for continued collaboration towards driving meaningful Disaster Risk Management initiatives on the continent.

As two frontline institutions devoted to promoting African-led initiatives for the sustainable development of the continent, we were deeply excited about our quick consensus and genuine readiness to work with Member States to become disaster resilient and food secure. Through our renewed commitments, we expect to significantly increase the number of qualifying countries that would be benefitting from the extension of AfDB’s flagship Africa Disaster Risk Financing Programme (ADRiFi) and the innovative Multi-Donor Trust Fund (MDTF) premium financing solutions. These two instruments have been designed to drive insurance uptake by Member States for disaster risk events.

**Country engagement: Kenya, Lesotho and Sudan**

- **Kenya:** On 22 February, we were privileged to have a productive engagement with the Kenya’s Chairperson of the Council of Governors Committee on Arid and Semi-Arid Lands. This meeting was critical towards building and cementing our relationship with the Government of Kenya as we explore synergies to finding effective solutions to enhance the country’s Disaster Risk Management. The meeting built on the consultations initiated in 2017 with the revamped Technical Working Group which have continued since then. We look forward to escalating our mutual engagements towards producing tangible outcomes for the country’s food security by promoting adaptation and disaster resilience.

- **Lesotho:** On the same day, we were also honoured to have a meeting with Honourable Mr. Kemiso Mosenene, Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister in Kingdom of Lesotho. Our discussions centred on the need to operationalise the planned ARC Programme in Lesotho as contained in the Memorandum of Understanding signed with the country in October 2020. We are continuing conversations with the government and remain optimistic that Lesotho will be joining the ARC risk pool to fully benefit from our insurance offering.

**A new Ebola outbreak in Guinea:**

On a different note, on February 14, we learnt a resurging Ebola virus outbreak in the Republic of Guinea. This no doubt brings back painful memories of the devastating outbreak of 2013 – 2016 that affected a number of African countries and led to extensive loss of lives. Combined with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the outbreak adds another layer of complication to the perils that we have to manage. With a mandate to help AU Member States respond to climate-related weather shocks and disease outbreaks, this new threat falls squarely into ARC’s work, and our Outbreaks and Epidemics team is working closely with the country and the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to assist. A detailed article on the matter follows.

**Celebrating International Women’s Day:**

As we approach International Women’s Day on 8 March 2021 and celebrate the women of the continent and the world over, we are reminded once again of the need to uphold gender equality principles in every aspect of our work. This year’s theme ‘Choose to Challenge’, is a reminder that we still have a way to go to ensure that everyone is treated equally and that we all have a role to play in eliminating gender bias and inequality. An article on ARC’s gender efforts also follows.

Happy reading!
While the battle against the COVID-19 pandemic is still far from over, another deadly disease outbreak has re-emerged in Central and West Africa, compounding the situation. On 7th and 14th February 2022, in line with International Health Regulations, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and the Republic of Guinea declared an outbreak of Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) in North Kivu Province, and in N’Zérékoré Prefecture respectively. To provide context, EVD is a rare but severe viral hemorrhagic fever disease caused by the Ebola virus and if untreated, is often fatal to humans.

The ARC Outbreaks and Epidemics (O&E) solution

As we intensify efforts to diversify the ARC product portfolio to cover the multiple perils that affect African countries, we are looking forward to the completion of development work and introduction of the ARC O&E into the market. Now more than ever, in light of the pandemic and the increased occurrence of disease outbreaks on the continent, the significance of this product in improving resilience cannot be underestimated. The product will underpin strengthen AU Member States’ preparedness and response capacities to high-impact infections disease outbreaks through the provision of epidemic risk management tools and innovative risk finance instruments.

In the wake of this recent EVD outbreak, ARC is proud to be showing solidarity with the Government of Guinea by offering technical expertise to enable a swift response. Although the ARC O&E product is not yet on the market, a staff member from the O&E Division has been seconded to support the Guinea Ministry of Health in this time of crisis, enabling response efforts to build on the work that was already initiated in the country in preparation for the launch of the O&E product.

Guinea, along with Uganda, was one of the two pilot nations that were selected by ARC and its partners for the development of outbreak and epidemic risk management tools and a sovereign parametric insurance product. The aim was to enable African nations to swiftly stop the spread of disease outbreaks using pre-approved contingency plans linked to timely and adequate funding to kick start a rapid country-led response.

ARC’s capacity development programme in Guinea

Since 2018, ARC has been working closely with Guinea’s Ministry of Health and its National Health Security Agency in implementing a research and development programme aimed at strengthening the country’s preparedness and response capacities. An Epidemic Risk Profiling Tool, composed of health and non-health systems indicators, was developed and used to evaluate Guinea’s preparedness and response capacities and identify gaps. In addition, a Contingency Planning Standards & Guidelines for Outbreaks & Epidemics, and corresponding templates were developed to assist the country’s development of pathogen-specific contingency plans at the local, regional and national levels. The tools ensure that the country’s response to public health emergencies of epidemic potential is consistent and of a high quality. Finally, Epidemic Risk Models were finalised to estimate the risk of experiencing disease outbreaks caused by Ebola virus, Marburg virus, Lassa virus and Neisseria meningitis. The models help assess the likely impacts of hypothetical interventions, guide outbreak preparedness planning, and inform an insurance policy for mitigating disease outbreak risks.

As the launch of the O&E product approaches, the race is on to complete the pre-launch phase and take the product to market.

Guinea’s response to the EVD outbreak and ARC’s technical assistance

The West African EVD outbreak that ended in June 2016 was devastating and resulted in 28,000 cases that included 11,000 deaths mainly across Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. Since then, African countries have strengthened their capacities to prevent, detect, and respond to major disease outbreaks.

From the confirmation of the first case, the Guinea Ministry of Health, through its National Health Security Agency, promptly reacted to limit further spreading outside the epicenter. As a result, the country has had a limited number of cases (13 confirmed and 4 probable cases as of March 3), all concentrated in the same locality.

The Ministry of Health, with the support of ARC, took part in the technical committee charged with the development of the national EVD response plan, and contributed to its development and translation into various presentations. The plan was first presented on February 25 by the Deputy Director General of the National Health Security Agency to the Guinean Minister of Foreign Affairs and Guinean Ambassadors based in Belgium, France, Netherlands, UK, Italy, Cuba, India, Ethiopia, and USA. Following this, the plan was further revised, translated into English, and presented during the Inter-Ministerial Consultation Meeting held in Conakry on March 2. Ambassadors, Ministers of Health, and Head of Delegation from Côte d’Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Senegal, and Sierra Leone unanimously acknowledge Guinea’s swift response to contain the outbreak, commended the efforts of technical and financial partners, and recommended a strong and coordinated regional response.

Lessons learnt and innovations

“*This time we are not enduring the Ebola outbreak, but we are facing it*,” said the Director General of the National Health Security Agency. There were a lot of lessons learned during the 2014-2015 West African Ebola outbreak and resurgence in 2016. Guinea has trained more than 4,000 health workers, and their expertise in community engagement, contact tracing, and vaccine campaign is internationally recognised, and benefited the EVD response in DRC. Moreover, to decentralise the response, all health districts are now equipped with an Epidemiological Treatment Center, and laboratory capacities have been strengthened. The Ministry of Health developed a community monitoring programme “Surveillance Active en Ceinture (SA-CEint)” to closely follow-up survivors on of Ebola virus disease and avoid re-introduction of the virus in the community.

On the innovation side, this novel outbreak will benefit from the global Ebola vaccine stockpile and new drug therapeutics used in DRC which have proven to improve survival rate of Ebola infected patients. Lost contacts will be traced, localised and reported at ports of entry to prevent further spreading in neighboring countries and at international level. Food assistance will continue to be provided to affected households, and communities will be supported with access to safe drinking-water and hygienic sanitation facilities.

Challenges and way forward

Like any other high-impact disease outbreak, Ebola presents similar challenges: access to timely, sufficient, and flexible funding to address the immediate financing needs and enable governments to implement their national response plans with the support of in-country partners. The initial Guinea EVD national response plan is estimated at around USD 45 million, and a commission has been set up to conduct a funding landscape analysis to delineate the funds available or already engaged, assess commitments, and gaps for each activity budgeted. As human and financial resources are being heavily consumed by the COVID-19 pandemic, extra resources are needed to contain not only the EVD outbreak, but also other ongoing outbreaks such as yellow fever, polio, and measles.

ARC promotes a risk layering approach by combining complementary risk financing mechanisms to protect against events of different frequency and severity. For exceptional events caused by Ebola, Marburg, Lassa virus or the bacterial Neisseria meningitidis, the sovereign risk transfer solution developed by ARC will contribute to protecting the government’s budget against fiscal shocks by transferring the risk to capital markets via a Catastrophe bond. ARC is collaborating with Africa CDC, WAHO, WHO and other partners to strengthen preparedness and emergency response against infectious diseases of epidemic potential, facilitate a policy dialogue with member states, and finalise the preparations for the product launch.
Women and disasters

Although there is still some work to be done, the journey towards mainstreaming gender into Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) is progressively gaining momentum. The initial strategies for DRR developed for the 1990-2000 International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction did not adequately incorporate specific gender components. However, since 2001, progress has been made to mainstream gender in DRR policies and programmes, and gender was later recognised as a cross-cutting principle of the Hyogo Framework for Action 2000-2015 on Building Resilience of Nations and Communities to Disaster, which states that: "A gender perspective should be integrated into all disaster risk management policies, plans and decision making processes, including those related to risk assessment, early warning, information management and education and training".

ARC Gender Strategy

Through an intensive consultative process with stakeholders and partners, ARC adopted its Gender Strategy in September 2019 to transform Disaster Risk Management (DRM) approaches and ensure gender equality for vulnerable women and men in ARC Member States. As part of its principles of engagement, the ARC Group adopts a differentiated approach to issues of gender equality and women’s empowerment (GEWE). ARC is not only committed to closing the gender gap which is central to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Agenda 2063, but also recognises that the role women play in agriculture and in disaster response is essential for food security and economic growth. ARC also acknowledges that Gender and Disaster Risk Reduction are both cross cutting development issues that need to be successfully addressed if we want to build the resilience of communities.

Moreover, ARC is mainstreening gender in all its project cycle to bridge the inequality gap between women and men and ensure they have equal access to benefits, resources, services, and capacity building.

The year 2020 marked the implementation of the ARC Gender Strategy approved in 2019, however, the COVID-19 Pandemic impacted the planned gender activities from the second quarter of 2020 negatively. The travel restrictions resulting from the lockdown in the duty station and the Member States, coupled with the restrictive measures imposed by national health authorities prevented activities to be carried out as originally planned. Furthermore, the restrictive measures forced all stakeholders to integrate some key temporary adaptations on the working methodology originally foreseen in the workplan.

Key achievements in 2020

- Gender and DRM training for Government Coordinators (GC) took place on August 25th with 28 participants (12 men and 16 women) from 8 Southern and Eastern countries (Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Rwanda, Sudan, Zambia and Zimbabwe). The training has equipped participants with the tools required to develop gender action plans for Member States in line with the principles of ARC’s Gender Strategy. The action plans will include key activities such as conducting Gender analyses; Technical Working Groups training sessions on Gender and DRM; Setting up of Gender, Advocacy and Communications subgroups; Engaging in policy dialogue and setting up of a Training of Trainers Network on Gender and DRM.

- Adoption of the Gender Transformative Fund (GTF) – GTF will support activities capable of transforming mentalities, gender discriminatory norms and practices, especially at the micro and meso levels of the community, support advocacy for equal power relations and engage in campaigns against systemic discrimination, harmful norms and practices. On the other hand, it will support the creation of an enabling environment for ARC’s operations, ensuring ARC’s presence at macro, meso and micro levels and support stronger relationship with all stakeholders through collaborations.