



**SECOND ARB WOMEN'S CONFERENCE & CLIMAX OF 10TH NATIONAL
RURAL BANKING WEEK CELEBRATIONS**

**THEME: "DRIVING SUSTAINABLE FINANCIAL INCLUSION AND GOOD
GOVERNANCE IN RURAL AND COMMUNITY BANKS THROUGH ESG
PRINCIPLES"**

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

BY

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The Honourable Regional Minister,

National President and Executive Leadership of the Association of Rural Banks,

Managing Director of ARB Apex Bank Plc,

Chief Executives and Senior Management of Rural and Community Banks,

Friends from the Media,

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good morning.

It is a joy to be here for the Second ARB Women's Conference and the climax of the 10th National Rural Banking Week. This gathering has grown into an important national moment, one that brings together reflection, ambition, and a shared determination to strengthen the backbone of Ghana's financial inclusion journey.

Allow me to commend the Association of Rural Banks and ARB Apex Bank for sustaining this platform. Through your leadership, we have created a space where the sector can pause, take stock, and look ahead with clarity and purpose. That continuity is a gift to the entire financial ecosystem.

Where Rural Banking Must Go

This year's theme "**Driving Sustainable Financial Inclusion and Good Governance in Rural and Community Banks through ESG Principles**" captures the direction in which the world is moving, and the direction in which rural banking must go. We are

entering an era where the strength of a financial institution is not measured only by its profits, but also by the quality of its impact, the fairness of its practices, and the responsibility with which it manages risk.

ESG is not a fashionable term. It is the language of modern governance and long-term resilience. It blends purpose with profitability, and places people and the environment at the centre of decision-making. In many ways, ESG simply reclaims the original spirit of rural banking, service, trust, and community.

For over four decades, Rural and Community Banks have carried the weight of Ghana's financial inclusion agenda. You have expanded access to formal finance in communities where the presence of a bank once felt impossible. The evidence of your impact is everywhere: a farmer who can finally buy improved seedlings, a trader who transforms a table-top operation into a thriving store, a young woman who saves consistently through a mobile agent, and families who weather difficult seasons because a rural bank was willing to stand with them.

These stories rarely make the headlines, yet they hold the quiet power that keeps local economies alive. Rural banks have nurtured livelihoods, built resilience, and offered dignity to people whose economic activity is vital but often undervalued. For this, you deserve deep national appreciation.

A Changing Environment That Demands Fresh Thinking

But the world around us is changing and changing fast. Technology is rewriting how customers engage with financial services. Climate shocks are becoming more frequent

and more severe, directly affecting agricultural productivity and rural incomes. Younger customers expect convenience, transparency, and speed. Fintechs are widening the competitive landscape. And the public now demands governance that is transparent, ethical, and accountable.

These shifts are not threats; they are signals. They remind us that the institutions which endure are those that evolve. For RCBs, this means rethinking operations, investing in new capabilities, strengthening leadership pipelines, and building systems that can withstand uncertainty. The future will belong to banks that look ahead rather than look back.

ESG as a Blueprint for a Stronger Rural Banking System

This is where ESG provides a clear and practical roadmap. Environmental stewardship requires us to consider how our lending supports or undermines, the natural systems that communities depend on. Social responsibility pushes us to treat customers fairly, design relevant products, and build institutions that are inclusive in practice, not just in language. Governance disciplines us to lead with integrity, to manage risks with foresight, and to ensure that decisions taken in boardrooms reflect the long-term interests of depositors and the communities we serve.

ESG is not a burden; it is a strategic advantage. Banks that embed these values into their culture build trust faster, innovate more confidently, and attract partners and investors who prize sustainability.

Strengthening the Regulatory Foundation

At the Bank of Ghana, we are fully aligned with this direction. The **Sustainable Banking Principles** offer a clear guide for integrating environmental and social considerations into financial operations. These principles are meant to help institutions look beyond short-term outcomes and embrace practices that support stability, inclusion, and long-term resilience.

Alongside this is the Corporate Governance Directive for RCBs, which emphasises fit-and-proper leadership, effective oversight, and accountability. Good governance is not an administrative requirement; it is the anchor that holds an institution steady when conditions change. Without it, even the strongest balance sheet can crumble.

Our role as regulators is to guide, support, and supervise. But ultimately, the strength of each RCB depends on the integrity of its leadership, the quality of its governance, and the discipline with which policies are implemented.

Financial inclusion has always been a national priority, but we must never confuse access with empowerment. Opening an account is only the first step. People must be able to save safely, borrow responsibly, insure against shocks, and invest in their own progress. That is what true inclusion looks like.

Ghana has made impressive gains, yet the gender gap remains. Nearly 80 percent of adults now have access to financial services, but women still trail behind. This gap is not just a statistic; it is a signal that many women face structural barriers that limit their

economic potential. Rural banks, because of their proximity and commitment to community development, are uniquely positioned to change this reality.

Women as Drivers of Rural Economic Transformation

The truth is simple: when rural women thrive, entire communities rise with them. Women are the heartbeat of local markets, the stabilisers of households, and often the financial managers of family enterprises. They repay loans faithfully, invest strategically, and build businesses that endure.

The data reinforces this. About 63 percent of loans issued by RCBs go to women, and this portfolio consistently performs strongly. RCBs maintain an average NPL ratio far below the wider banking sector. These numbers tell a story of discipline, commitment, and trustworthiness.

This is why the Bank of Ghana requires that every RCB board includes at least one woman. But representation should be the starting point, not the finish line. Women must be part of strategy, product development, credit decision-making, and long-term planning. The sector becomes stronger when women's voices shape its future.

This conference is more than an event; it is a platform that nurtures leadership. It allows women across the rural banking ecosystem to learn from each other, share experiences, and build networks that strengthen their professional journeys. But the momentum must continue beyond today.

RCBs must intentionally build environments where women can thrive, offering mentorship, recognising potential early, and creating opportunities for women to step into high-impact roles. Empowering women is not just fair; it is smart business and sound strategy.

Climate Risks and the Opportunity of Green Finance

No discussion about the future is complete without acknowledging the impact of climate change. Rural communities are already feeling its effects. Weather patterns are unpredictable, floods and droughts are more frequent, and food production is under pressure. These realities affect loan performance, client resilience, and the financial health of rural banks.

But within this challenge lies opportunity. RCBs can lead Ghana's green finance agenda by supporting renewable energy solutions, climate-smart agriculture, water conservation projects, and eco-friendly rural enterprises. These investments protect the environment and create new business pathways that align with global sustainability priorities.

The Bank of Ghana remains a committed partner on this journey. We will continue to strengthen supervision, support capacity-building, promote responsible innovation, and collaborate with ARB Apex Bank and development partners to deepen the sector's resilience.

But the true drivers of progress will be the choices each institution makes, the standards you uphold, the risks you take, the products you design, and the values you champion.

Closing

As we celebrate the 10th National Rural Banking Week, let us use this milestone as a reminder of what matters most. The future of rural banking will be shaped not only by technology or regulation, but by integrity, innovation, and inclusion. These are the pillars upon which strong institutions are built.

Let this conference be a turning point, a moment when we recommit to sustainability, fairness, gender equity, environmental responsibility, and good governance. These values are not optional; they are the currency of trust in a fast-changing world.

Thank you for your dedication. I wish you a purposeful conference and continued success as you build a rural banking sector that uplifts communities, protects the vulnerable, and unlocks opportunity for all.

Thank you.