

Remarks by H.E. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

**At High-Level Plenary Event on "Turning Evidence into Practice:
Learning from What Works to Accelerate MDG Progress"**

United Nations, Wednesday, September 22, 2010

Excellencies;

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen:

Our time is short, and it is important to speak straight to the topic at hand: How governments can accelerate progress towards the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

For us in Africa, the MDGs represent country commitments that can and must be met. Evidence from across African countries has shown that rapid progress towards the MDGs is possible. As reflected in the last African Union Summit, we are ready to do everything possible within our power to ensure that the MDGs are achieved.

We have made progress on the continent as a whole. Extreme poverty rates dropped rapidly since the late 1990s, at least until 2008 when the global food and economic crises hit. The last decade corresponded to a period in which Africa, after several years of socio-economic stagnation, made important gains. Like Liberia, Africa on the whole has also made remarkable progress towards MDGs 2, 3, and 6.

Yet, despite progress, significant challenges remain. There has been stagnation in improving maternal mortality in Africa. Liberia ranks high in this shortcoming. On hunger, progress had been slow,

and the impact of the food and fuel crisis, coupled with the 2009 global recession, may have led to some reversals.

In the case of Liberia, since the end of the 14-year civil war in 2003, the country has embarked on a path of home-grown recovery and development, supported by our development partners. The country has put in place policies for national reconciliation, peace-building, and sound macroeconomic reforms, all of which are critical to achieving the MDGs.

Based on an improved policy environment and strong collaboration from development partners, Liberia has made significant progress in MDG 2 (Achieve Universal Primary Education), MDG 3 (Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women), and MDG 6 (Combat HIV/AIDS, Malaria, and Other Diseases). The increase in net enrolment of children in primary schools recorded in one year (2008-2009) reflects the potential of Liberia reaching MDG 2 by 2015 with improved coordination, appropriate policies and adequate support.

The outlook for the remaining five years to 2015 in Liberia builds on accomplishments such as the debt relief and the rebuilding of basic health services program and the formation and implementation of the basic package of healthcare services; the building of roads, schools and hospitals; a national aid policy committed to the principles of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and the Accra Agenda for Action.

We also sought innovative ways for government resources to catalyze activities which, when proven effective, were supported through public-private and public-philanthropic partnerships. Our approach to aid management has facilitated donor engagement and impact-oriented results. Through direct monitoring and coordination of non-NGOs and aid projects, Liberia has

appropriately leveraged its strength to meet its immediate security and socio-economic needs.

In spite of this progress, substantial effort is needed to accelerate progress in poverty reduction, the health MDGs, as well as access to safe drinking water and sanitation. As a post-conflict country, Liberia faces enormous challenges moving ahead. Overcoming structural and financial impediments is critical.

However, we will not allow these impediments to deter us. We plan to build on the progress made, using it as a platform to accelerate the MDGs processes.

To achieve the MDGs in the next five years, our activities must be targeted. We have had 10 years of strategies, policies, plans and action. We know what has worked and what is yet to work. Now, it is time to use the emerging evidence in Liberia and within Africa to catalyze the MDGs' implementation.

Liberia is transitioning from nation building to development, assembling long-term development strategies and short- and medium-term implementation and funding plans. We will have to make sure that the money matches with national efforts to hasten achievement of the MDGs.

Our Government appreciates the synergies among the MDGs; making progress in one Goal often speeds up progress in others. While we recognize their interdependence and deem all eight Goals to be relevant for human development, we have identified the following among them as key priority areas:

- Eradicating extreme poverty and hunger;
- Achieving universal primary education;
- Promoting gender equality and empowering women; and

- Reducing child mortality, maternal mortality and malaria rates.

Economic growth is vital to reduce poverty and finance the MDGs. We seek to catalyze investment in natural resources infrastructure to stimulate economic growth and MDGs' implementation. Our targeted areas for infrastructure development include energy, roads, and water and sanitation, where little progress has been made during the last 20 years. We intend to expand spending on infrastructure and target systemic inefficiencies. However, we will require an additional \$250 million annually to meet our social targets.

We also seek to invest in human resources to strengthen public and private institutions. For without appropriate organizational designs, systems and people, the best plans will not work. With severe human resources gaps in our government, it is imperative that we explore and learn the innovative practices that have helped other countries to grow and advance the MDGs.

We intend to focus on problem-solving as the means to accelerate progress in achieving the MDGs. The proposal and push for the eight MDGs was based on the belief that these problems can be solved. Because of our limited resources, we will focus on solving those problems identified as impediments to meeting targets and goals.

We must ask the right questions and foster an understanding of cost-effective answers. At times, and with the best intentions, we proceed with high-cost solutions when low cost will do; we foster overt bureaucracy when system flow is required; and we worry about the curtains when the roof is leaking. To this end, the MDGs Acceleration Framework is very relevant to Liberia with a view to identifying core bottlenecks and local solutions.

Our Government is supporting its assertions with the necessary budget. However, as already mentioned, our resources are limited. We will, thus, continue to look to development and private partners for help in areas that advance growth and the MDGs and, subsequently, decrease aid dependency. We need development partners' cooperation and collaboration both technically and financially to advance on the MDGs.

Such support is manifested through budget support. Recent experiences have shown that general budget support promotes better development results. Administering projects that are budget-supported build capacity, thereby allowing programs to become part of the system and sustainable. Most importantly, it alleviates conflicting interests, transaction costs, parallel services, fragmentation of projects and results, and the undermining of government achievements.

As our Government expands its focus and support for the MDGs and usage of national systems, it will continue to provide the environment for success with increased technical capacities and transparent country systems. We hope this will lead to innovations that are relevant, nationally owned and managed, and are successful in accelerating achievement of the MDGs.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen:

Accelerating progress is possible in Africa when strong government leadership, effective policies and institutional capacity for scaling up public investments are complemented by financial and technical support and an enabling policy environment from the international community and non-governmental partners.

I thank you.