

**Keynote Address by H.E. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
President of the Republic of Liberia
At Land Commission Program
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You will recall that in my Inaugural Address to the nation I mentioned land reform as one of the priorities of my Government. Toward this end a Land Commission was established in 2009 with the objective to lead the effort for land sector reform in our country. These reforms are intended to promote equal access to land for all citizens, to ensure security of tenure and the rule of law in land dealings, to enhance efficient administration and sustainable management of land, and investment in our land resources.

Land is a basic natural resource upon which all economic activity and the livelihoods of current and future generations depend. It is therefore our common patrimony. The proper administration and management of this national resource is by no means the exclusive responsibility of Government; rather every citizen must play their role in ensuring that this national resource is properly utilized. In doing this we all must ensure that we address the serious challenges confronting the urban land sector.

Our cities are confronted with a large number of specific challenges: the lack of access to basic services, such as safe drinking water and sanitation, is a condition in which many co-exist; the lack of public spaces and the critical need to create public spaces for inclusive and dynamic urban centres that enhance the quality of life; the lack of strategic city-wide planning and zoning that results in unsafe and unregulated building; the increasing dimensions of urban poverty and the numbers of the urban poor leading to an increasing number of slum communities and settlements; the lack of affordable and decent shelter and housing; the urban sprawl which is increasingly transforming previous agricultural land into residential urban spaces

with negative impact on food security in urban areas; and the social and environmental degradation of urban communities.

As a first step to address these critical urban land administrative and management challenges, the Land Commission has convened this First National Urban Conference which for us as a Government and people, should serve not only as a forum to discuss the urban land administration and management challenges, but rather as a beginning for us to identify the immediate and long term solutions to our national urbanization challenges.

Successful cities are those with the vision, the commitment and the resources to bring all actors together(including the slum dwellers), and to institutionalize features of well governed cities: providing opportunities for economic advancement and self actualization, improving services and quality of public spaces, planning for future growth, generating revenues, attracting investment and development.

Our local governments are struggling to respond to the urban challenges in a context of fragmentation of urban functions, of lack of disaggregated statistical data on urban issues needed for proper planning, and capacity constraints. Local administrators are dealing with this rapidly changing environment while trying to cope with the new responsibilities that the decentralization process has assigned to them. Land management reform will impact upon the administration and management of our cities since the on-going decentralization process will eventually transfer responsibility for management of our human, physical and social capital to local administration.

We need to initiate interventions that will mitigate these challenges and focus on the many opportunities that our cities can provide. We need to explore the investment and local economic development opportunities, understand and support sustainable livelihoods strategies, foster partnerships between the public and private sector, and open a more direct dialogue between the citizens and their local government through the development of tools such as for example Citizens' Charters.

While the Government works to develop a clear urban policy, investment in creating sufficient capacity in local Government to implement such policy can start almost immediately. A more efficient and accountable local administration will help develop closer relations with the citizens, and help us achieve harmonious and inclusive cities which aim at improving the welfare and condition of life. This will require sustained efforts, political and financial commitment and citizens' participation in decision making and implementation.

While we commend the individual efforts that our donors and partners have undertaken to date to improve living conditions and standards in our cities, we want to urge them to pursue a more collaborative effort not only among themselves but also to engage constructively with local and national leadership and where possible in direct consultation with the local citizens for whom the development is intended. This is important for enhancing national ownership and building consensus.

We are aware of the effort that the donors and agencies engaged in the land sector have undertaken to improve coordination with Ministries and Agencies involved in the land sector sometimes through the Land commission. We only ask that this mechanism be strengthened and closer collaboration ensued to provide the same kind of assistance for the urban sector.

The Government through the Land Commission is taking the lead in this urban land reform process that will help Liberians reclaim our cities. I thank the Land Commission for bringing us all here and encouraging us to reflect on the status of our urban centres. It is time for us to deal with the fact that by the close of next decade the majority of the Liberians will live in urban areas and we need to be ready.

Let us all commit to promote security of tenure for all our citizens regardless of their status, their religion or ethnicity, so that they will feel safe to invest in the improvement of our urban land. Let us

likewise commit to ensuring that together we develop and put in place the appropriate mechanisms for access to land for the urban poor with special attention to women and youth. Let us commit to renew and restore to their former glory our historical land marks and cherish our urban heritage, enabling us to share these treasures with the world.

Finally, I wish the Land Commission, its partners and all stakeholders and participants here at this conference, fruitful and productive deliberations as you pull your collective and individual resources and capacities together for a sustained national urban dialogue, which can lead to the formulation of policies, laws, regulations and interventions that will promote the transformation of our urban centres into modern liveable cities.

I thank you.