

**Opening Statement by
H.E. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
at the
2nd Annual Micro, Small and Medium Sized Enterprises
Conference and Trade Fair
Monrovia, City Hall
Tuesday, April 29, 2014**

Ms. Arancha Gonzales, Executive Director of the International Trade Centre;
Mr. Frank Ajilore, Resident Representative for Liberia at International Finance Corporation;
Ambassador Deborah Malac of the United States;
The Dean and Other Members of the Diplomatic Corps;
Ministers, Officials of Government;
Political Leaders, Business Leaders;
Media Representatives, the Private Sector;
Our Dynamic Medium and Small Sized Enterprises;
Ladies and Gentlemen:

Let me first ask you to join me in a moment of silence to the memory of the Chairman of the National Transitional Government of Liberia who passed recently. Thank you.

I like to join previous speakers in welcoming the over 500 participants represented here – the Medium and Small Sized Enterprises (MSMEs), banks, microfinance institutions, multinational corporations – to this Second Annual Micro, Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (MSME) Conference and Trade Fair. We consider this an important event because it allows us to celebrate the private sector’s role in generating jobs, raising income and helping us to transform the Liberian economy.

We recognize and applaud the hard work and dedication of the host Ministry, the Ministry of Commerce and Industry and its partners – USAID Liberia, ITC, IFC, the Government of Japan, Building Markets, IBEX, the Marketplace, Global Communities, and BSC Monrovia, and a whole range of them. We are confident that this year’s conference which involves their participation and their

organization will build upon last year's success in constructing a platform for MSMEs in our country.

We commend all of you, the participating MSMEs, for your presence demonstrates your commitment to your business and to the wider prosperity of the sector. Martha Henries, owner of Zoquoi Farms, who makes high-quality organic foods should be here. I asked the Minister where is she since I'm supposed to recognize her? He said she's outside in the palaver hut arranging her goods; but we look forward to going out there and joining Martha to look at her products and some of the new things that she will be putting on display today.

Among the entrepreneurs who have recently registered for the first time is Alphonso Kamara. I don't know if Alphonso is here? Oh there he is. He's the owner of Environmental Service Enterprise. He started as a community waste collector, and now I'm told holds major contracts with NGOs, the United Nations and the government. Mr. Kamara, your performance sets an example to all upcoming entrepreneurs, and we want to just applaud you for all that you've done - your innovation, learning and business acumen.

The success of Micro, Small and Medium Sized Enterprises is fundamental to the future of our Liberian economy. Across Africa, MSMEs have always been the main drivers of innovation, job creation, and growth. It is reported that Nigeria's SMEs account for 95 percent of formal manufacturing activity. The Ambassador is here; she will go and check that out. In Senegal, they contribute some 20 percent of national value-addition; and in South Africa, the SMEs sector is reported to provide more than 55 percent of employment.

Here at home, the number of formal SMEs remains small, but continues to grow each year. According to our Minister, we have over 10,000 formally registered businesses (this not small for a small country), over 6,000 of which were newly registered. Taking into account the informal sector, MSMEs comprise the lion's share of job creation and growth across almost every sector.

Agriculture is a prime example of this trend. Our greatest blessing is the water in our rivers and the soil beneath our feet. Recently I visited Lofa County,

often referred to as “the bread basket of Liberia.” I met farmers who showed me their products, from a chicken hatchery to the Lofa cloth woven by various cooperatives from Kolahun to Voinjama. I also met with entrepreneurs of the Lofa Women’s Weaving Center in Voinjama, who have been growing cotton, spinning it into thread, dyeing it, and weaving beautiful, quality country cloth. Samples of this cloth can be seen around this hall; myself included. The women told me that there’s a high demand for this product, but they lack the capacity to expand their operations to meet this demand.

This is why the spotlight of this year’s conference is on the Agribusiness Experience in Liberia, focusing on cotton to cloth; rice: from swamp to market; and cassava: from root to multiple products. This year’s theme is a call to action for Liberians to realize the benefits from producing and manufacturing agricultural goods for local consumption as well as for export.

This week’s conference is also a chance to communicate with your government on how we can better serve you. Last year’s gathering highlighted key challenges faced by the MSMEs in becoming successful: the lack of financial management skills, technical knowledge, managerial expertise; difficulty getting goods to market because the trade infrastructure is lacking; lack of access to the long-term financial products which are necessary to build a successful business, especially in agriculture.

We listened, and we’ve been trying to respond to this call. So I’m happy to announce several new policies to support locally owned MSMEs through programs that encourage private sector development and job creation, especially for women and young people.

Today we launch the **Liberia National Trade Policy 2014-2019** and the **Liberia National Export Strategy 2014-2019**. These two documents outline government’s strategy for creating inclusive growth through trade competitiveness.

The Trade Policy is government’s overarching strategy for steering the country towards regional integration into ECOWAS and multilateral integration into the World Trade Organization. Let me say we have a very strong commitment to government’s accessing the World Trade Organization because it has multiple benefits and open markets create new opportunities not only domestically but regionally and internationally. So we are on the fast track in joining all other West African countries that have already gone

through this process successfully. We think it will open opportunities for Liberian business to access markets within the ECOWAS region and beyond.

To support these businesses, the National Export Strategy will provide support to six key sectors where we have the best opportunity to generate export diversification: rice, oil palm, rubber, cocoa, cassava, and fisheries. Through implementing this strategy, we expect to create a vibrant and diversified export basket and open new markets and opportunities for business owners.

We want to thank the ITC for their help. Ms. Gonzales, you're here; we had a big conversation about the partnership we can have to identify specifically some of those businesses that we can move along into the value chain where they get into exports. You've helped us to draft those strategies. We'll like to and urge support from our partners who have been a part of that effort.

Secondly, we want to announce the proposal for the **National Small Business Empowerment Act and the Bureau of Small Business**. This new Act will legally ensure implementation of the commitment made in my January Annual Message that small Liberian-owned, including Liberian women-owned businesses are granted 25 percent of the government's public procurement opportunities, and that the Ministry of Commerce and Industry is equipped with a service centre to help businesses to qualify to access these markets.

This time, it's a law. It's one thing to have a policy; it's one thing to have a strategy; but if you don't make it enforceable, it becomes mere words. So, this time it's a law. The government will have a unit to support those to understand the law and then we are to enforce that law. We now hope that with this, anybody who does otherwise will be acting illegally and can be subjected to the rule of law and the punishment that is contained therein. Please let us now say that the Minister is going to enforce this law. He's asking for a one-year moratorium on tax clearance. [You noticed I said he's asking for] because that has to be cleared with the Minister of Finance, but we will promote that because usually the process calls for a tax clearance before you can buy goods. So by granting that moratorium doesn't free you from the taxes but it gives you chance to be able to make the procurement and then to come back later and meet your tax obligation.

I'm also pleased to announce the first project under the **Liberia Innovation Fund for Entrepreneurs (LIFE)**. We have been talking about this LIFE Fund for a long time. Finally, we want to thank the Government of Japan for putting up the resources to get this started along with that which the Government through Liberia Bank for Development and Investment (LBDI) has already committed to do. The first beneficiary of this will be the Lofa Women's Weaving Center in Voinjama, Lofa County. These women, through this facility, will have access to a modern facility where they can practice their craft to weave their cotton into the high-quality Liberian fabric that you see around – the country cloth as we call it.

We're also preparing to open a **Made in Liberia Trade Store, called the Liberian Marketplace**, on the Boulevard, near the Bella Casa Hotel – another entrepreneur who himself has done very well in the entertainment business. We're bringing the market closer to him and to his clients where they will be able to come in and see where Liberian products are. This will serve as a permanent location for local businesses to market their products to shoppers in Monrovia. The Minister plans also to launch the Liberian Marketplace website, **LiberianMarketplace.com**, giving local producers access to world markets. We hope that this new store can serve as a demonstration of Liberian capabilities so that it will encourage the development of other locally sourced high-quality retail products.

One year on, I am proud to recognize the owner of another SME, Mr. Fabio Lavelanet of Fabrar Rice. Fabio used last year's MSME Conference to expand the idea of working with small growers to deliver high- value Liberian red rice [what we call country rice] to the local and international market. He is an example of how a small business with big ideas can serve markets both locally and abroad, representing the best that Liberia has to offer.

Let me close by challenging [what I have said over and over] all businesses no matter how small to think big, plan extensively, work hard, be realistic in your goals, improve your products, find new customers, grow your markets. It is a challenge to all of you who have established your business. To make that business grow, it needs to be nurtured with new investment, strengthened with new staff properly trained, and adapted to new ideas. More importantly, it requires you to commit your time, dedication, hard work and honesty.

Through this combination, you can grow your business to generate profit, create jobs and incomes not only for yourselves but for others.

By this time next year, we hope to be able to highlight many more businesses that have found new and innovative ways to grow the private sector; to hear of newly registered businesses, to take advantage of the LIFE fund. We will use the occasion to report on the successes that will be achieved during this period as we move towards the next Liberian Marketplace day.

With this, I'm honoured to declare the second MSME Conference and Trade Fair open, and the National Trade Policy and National Export Strategy launched. Let's all have a good conference.

I thank you.