

**Statement by H.E President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf  
At Official Launch of National Policy on Decentralization  
and Local Governance  
Salala Headquarters, Salala District, Bong County,  
Thursday, January 5, 2012**

In 2006, at the onset of my Administration, I made the following pledge to bring the Government closer to the people: “The days of the imperial presidency, of an intrusive leadership, and of a domineering and threatening Chief Executive are over in Liberia.” Today, I reaffirm my commitment to that pledge.

The launching of our National Policy on Decentralization and Local Governance, here in Salala, is meant to send a strong signal, strong and clear, to the Liberian people of my determination to ensure that they are active partners with government in the delivery of services and in the governance of their communities and counties. It is also meant to send a clear and strong message that our country is on course for consolidating and deepening our participatory democracy.

Over the last six years, we have taken numerous important initiatives in decentralization. We established the County Development Funds, which are directly under the control of the county authorities for development purposes. And let me digress to say that there are times when one creative idea can start the process of transformation. When we did our first budgetary review in 2006, and found that through the good performance of the Ministry of Finance we had a US\$1 million budgetary surplus, and we were trying to consider what do we do – build roads, put in electricity or something. Steve Radelet, who was then the Economic Adviser to the President, said to me – just threw the idea out – why don’t you give it back to the people? And that’s how the County Development Fund got started.

And so we’ve gone one step further, to the Social Development Fund contributed by concessions to augment the County Development Fund. We again managed – not so much managed, because the Central Bank and the

Ministry of Finance won't allow that – but at least its use is determined by the people. In fact, we had some mismanagement too.

We have also begun establishing county centers for the delivery of some of our major services that government provides. In the area of education, community colleges will ensure higher education for the local population. Local school boards are already being established in school districts across the country. In the delivery of health care, considerable progress has been made in restoring and establishing health facilities and strengthening county-based health care capacity.

To promote small farmers, County Agriculture Offices are being established. The security sector has plans to decentralize into five regional hubs, one of which is already under construction here in Bong County, to consolidate security and justice services in the counties. The Ministry of Gender and Development has already embarked upon a program to establish offices in the counties and, similarly, postal and banking services have been established in several counties.

Decentralization is a long process. In many countries, processes of decentralization have required decades to unfold. We have laid out this program which will be pursued in phases. (Madam Superintendent, you will not have to be elected next year. I wish you were, but it doesn't work that way.)

Our first phase is to continue to move the delivery of public services out of Monrovia to county centers and to do so in an efficient and coordinated manner to ensure that at the county level we build synergies among the service delivery ministries and agencies of government so that we can serve our people more effectively.

We look to the day, very soon, when teachers will no longer be told to come to Monrovia to attend educational matters; when businessmen will meet all the requirements for starting up and running a business from the counties and will not have to come to Monrovia to register or to do other businesses to carry on; when civil servants – and I think I saw Bill Allen here – will not be told that the processing of their personnel action notices and other documents related to their employment are delayed due to the fact that their paperwork requires approval from Monrovia. We look to the day, very soon, when local authorities will enjoy a certain amount of fiscal authority in raising revenues

to finance local development activities. That first phase is what has started, and I think some of the Ministers who spoke before me – the Minister of Finance, the Minister of Planning and Economic Affairs – have already said to you how that process is underway in what Minister Ngafuan called “baby steps.”

The second phase of this program will involve the sharing of limited political authority with local governance institutions. This will involve – that’s where you come in – the election of superintendents, local councils, and vesting them with authority, thereby encouraging them to do what is necessary, at the local level, without fragmentation that will retard development.

The Governance Commission and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, with support from the Ministry of Planning and Economic Affairs, are already doing relevant studies on the crafting of an appropriate Local Governance Law that will be submitted to the Legislature after proper vetting and Executive approval. And so the legislators that are here, you will have an important role to play if we are going to achieve this objective.

The Law Reform Commission will play an important role in crafting the amendments to the Constitution, because that will also be required for us to carry out some of our local governance goals. We plan to have these amendments prepared for submission to the public through a referendum that will be scheduled at the time of the 2014 senatorial elections so that after that, the Constitution, as amended by the people, will allow for the elections of superintendents and local councils, including Mary Broh.

Let me say here that the efforts to decentralize the delivery of public services in Liberia are not new. Previous administrations have initiated programs of decentralization before. The position of Assistant Superintendent for Development and the County Development Councils are institutions created by the decentralization program of the Rural Development Task Force of the 1970s. Our determination is to build on these ideas and these early initiatives and to learn lessons from them and from similar programs elsewhere in the world.

One of the lessons we learn is that it is important to ensure that local capacity is adequate to support the transfer of public services to local jurisdictions. Failure to have adequate local capacity is often a basis for recentralization. We are endeavoring to avoid this pitfall by engaging our National Capacity

Building Strategy so that it can respond directly to our national developmental needs, especially our capacity needs for decentralization.

The effective delivery of public services in a coordinated manner that builds synergies require adequate public facilities, especially a government center where offices and other facilities are located in easy proximity to each other so that their operations and maintenance can benefit from economies of scale while making their services more accessible to the local population. In this respect, an important part of our decentralization program is to construct government centers in all counties as our resources will allow. We already have one or two, including Grand Bassa. This will be a major undertaking to which we will commit our resources. We will also need the support of our development partners, and with the support of the Ministry of Planning and Economic Affairs and the Ministry of Finance, all of our ministries and agencies with development functions will be working together to come up with a strategy that will enable us to carry this out.

As we today launch our National Policy on Decentralization and Local Governance, we thank all of you, the development partners who have contributed to this work and to our development agenda in general. More importantly, our thanks go to the Liberian people for their guidance, their support, their patience and their participation. It is only through the involvement of people, through their ownership of the processes of development and decentralization, can this become an historic undertaking.

To the members of the Legislative Caucus, other representatives here, ministers, superintendents, mayors, development partners, commissioners, traditional leaders, fellow Liberians, it is my pleasure to officially launch our National Policy on Decentralization and Local Governance. Please read it, and take time and study it.

I wish you all a Happy New Year.