

**Welcome Address by
H.E. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
At the Ministerial High-Level Meeting between
Liberia and Sierra Leone on
Water, Sanitation and Health
Wednesday, March 21st, 2012**

Colleagues from African Ministers' Council on Water (AMCOW) and WaterAid;
Distinguished Partners from the Development Community;
Members of Local and International Civil Society Organizations;
Dear Colleagues:

Let me begin with a warm welcome to all of you who are here to participate in this Ministerial High-Level Meeting on Water, Sanitation and Health (WASH). We must be proud that we have achieved, to a large extent, the targets set at the global level for access to safe drinking water. These targets seemed unrealistic in the year 2000, but with hard work, dedication and cooperation, a large measure of success have been achieved.

However, as we gather on this World Water Day, we cannot pat ourselves on the back so much because we are quickly reminded that 783 million people still lack access to safe drinking water, and that 300 million of that staggering number live in sub-Saharan Africa alone.

Along with this lack of safe drinking water for millions of people, the targets for providing access to safe sanitation – which is crucial in tackling killer diseases in developing countries – is one of the most off-track targets among the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Regrettably, it is predicted that globally, this target will not be reached until 2026, and that at the current rate of progress, we in Africa will not achieve these targets in more than 150 years! Clearly, we have a great challenge to be able to do better!

The human and economic losses caused by the lack of safe drinking water and poor sanitation defy the imagination and must be brought to a manageable level and urgently. According to *The Lancet*, the world's leading general medical journal, diarrhea is the biggest killer of children in Africa, and is responsible for 17 percent of all under-five child deaths in our two countries, Liberia and Sierra Leone.

In Liberia and Sierra Leone, the statistics show that we are making some progress. Access to sanitation in Liberia is at 17% compared to two years ago; 17% is not great progress. Likewise, access to safe water is at 68%, compared to 63% two years ago. At the same time, sanitation wise, according to the reports before us, in Sierra Leone has increased from 11% two years ago to 13%; still not good enough. Sadly though, in the same period there has been a decrease in access to safe water from 55% to 49% in Sierra Leone. Both Liberia and Sierra Leone, countries emerging from conflict, have made gains compared to other countries like Niger and

Burkina Faso whose sanitation level Liberia surpasses; but yet we lag behind other countries such as Mali and Nigeria. With access to sanitation, Sierra Leone is on par with Ghana at 13%. As relates to access to sanitation, Liberia is ahead of both Mali and Niger which are at 56% and 48%, but lags behind Ghana and Burkina Faso which are at high levels which are at 82% and 76%. Sierra Leone remains ahead of Niger at 48%. All of these statistics are just meant to bring us all to focus again as we try to look at a score card in a comparative way as a means of being able to urge us to do more in our two countries.

In short, the statistics tell us that we are making progress in our two countries, but that we must multiply our efforts if we are to meet the MDG targets. In your work, I challenge you to also look at innovative and sustainable technologies that can survive in rural areas without costly maintenance.

We know that investing in water and sanitation can bring huge returns. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that economic return of US\$9 for every US\$1 invested in sanitation. GDP losses for not investing in sanitation can be as high as 5 percent.

Under the Sanitation and Water for All (SWA) partnership, our government undertook key initiatives and hosted a multi-donor joint mission that resulted in the development of a Compact on Water and Sanitation, which we have adapt and mainstreamed into our Poverty Reduction Strategy. This Compact underscores our commitment to the project and lays out a roadmap for progress over the next two years.

In addition, we will, with urgency, establish a Water Supply and Sanitation Board to ensure that WASH is given an institutional home and is accorded its proper place among our political objectives.

While this meeting is primarily focused on investments, it is important that we also look at investment in human terms: for instance, the single mother who spends the whole day looking for water for her household and so cannot get to the market to sell her goods and earn money to send her children to school. This shows the vicious circle of poverty which we must end.

We urge you to discuss this matter in the light of planning and monitoring systems, accountability mechanisms, effectiveness of services and, most importantly, policy frameworks and how well they are supporting national development efforts. Please also consider what options exist for a joint approach, given our common borders and membership of the Mano River Union and in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

We also encourage our development partners to make the most of this forum to lay out their plans, raise concerns and suggest plausible solutions to ensure that their support is results-based and contributes to achieving our PRS objectives.

I now declare this High-Level WASH Meeting open, and wish you success in your deliberations. I will see you for a little bit longer and then ask your indulgence for me to depart and I will see

you again tomorrow when you conclude the session and will have a report on the outcome and recommendations that you will be giving us to go forward. I am convinced that the outcome of this Meeting will show to the world that we are all seriously committed to doing the best we can in improving the lives of our citizens in the areas of Water, Sanitation and Health.

Thank you again for coming and being a part of this meeting.