

**Lecture by H.E. Mrs. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf  
President of the Republic of Liberia  
On “International Social Responsibility”  
Delivered on the Occasion of the Celebration of the 85<sup>th</sup> Dies  
At Tilburg University  
Tilburg, Netherlands  
Friday, November 9, 2012**

Rector Magnificus, Professor Philip Eijlander;  
The Executive Board of Tilburg University;  
Faculty, Students;  
Members of Parliament and Officials of Government;  
Corporate Leaders and Leaders in Social Responsibility;  
Former Prime Minister Lubbers;  
My Fellow Liberians;  
Ladies and Gentlemen:

Let me say how delighted I am to be in the Netherlands once again, and to be here in Tilburg, a city that is growing in prominence economically, culturally and particularly in the field of education.

Thank you, Tilburg University, for the kind invitation to be your guest of honor and to address this esteemed Tilburg family as you celebrate the 85<sup>th</sup> Dies. It is an honor to be associated with an institution recognized for its research and as the best specialized University in the Netherlands every year for the past five years.

I am especially honored to have been selected this particular year, 2012, as you mark the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of an extraordinary woman, Marga Klompé, the first female Minister of the Netherlands, whose life bore striking similarities to my own – an activist and an advocate for equal rights – and it is a pleasure to be able to speak on a topic that is her legacy and this year’s special theme, “International Social Responsibility.”

Marga Klompé’s work in negotiating the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was inspired by the need to provide a life of dignity for everyone, irrespective of their culture, religion or ethnicity. She argued that societies were becoming more complex, and therefore society had a responsibility to care, so as to protect the dignity of every person. Her message was as relevant then, over sixty years ago, and it resonates even today.

I join in celebrating the life of this courageous woman, who went on to negotiate the Universal Social Security Bill, from which Dutch Society continues to benefit. Marga Klompé had a vision of a society based on institutional structures that promoted the protection and preservation of values which, in turn, created a healthy and tolerant society with a focus on assisting the unprivileged as an entitlement and not charity.

## **INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY**

On the topic of international social responsibility, we would need to speak of the inequities of our world, and what has to be done to mitigate or eliminate them.

Inequities and variation in natural endowment are inherent constants in the human condition. Some of us are taller, stronger or smarter than the average person. Some regions encourage agriculture, horticulture and aquaculture much more than others. These differences occur naturally, and it would be unfair to begrudge any person or region for their naturally occurring advantages.

We know, however, that the moral strength of any society can be gauged on how it treats the most vulnerable – the children, the elderly, the disabled and the poor. On this scale, our global society has made strides, but is still wanting. There is so much more to do, and it is in this context that international social responsibility takes shape.

Over time, some of us are able to build on our advantage and become even stronger. Hard work, persistent effort, effective planning are all qualities that some possess much more than others. In societies where the individual's rights are protected, and stability and security maintained, people thrive. We must always respect and applaud such success.

We must also note that power seeks power, and history is replete with instances where advantages, whether naturally endowed, legally or illegally acquired, are wielded against the public interest, and short-term benefits accrue to but a few. Ultimately, however, this happens to the long-term detriment of the collective good.

The 2008 financial crisis is one example. The disproportionate influence and advantage of a small group of people threatened the entire global economy. Even in a country like Liberia, which is not directly connected to international finance, we felt the resulting credit crunch when investment and remittances declined. Another instance of the institutionalization of an advantage that works against the greater good is the role of women in society. One example that comes to mind is the stubborn discrimination against women across all societies: the obvious wage gap between men and women for performing the same job; the smaller number of women in positions of public trust; the absence of a choice of a career; and the wholesale obstruction of 50 percent of the world's population from equal participation in political, economic and social life.

With time these inequities become institutionalized to such an extent that its beneficiaries no longer even notice them. Only its victims see them and care, since they must live with the consequences daily. Your role – my role – is to work to end these disparities. Our

responsibility is to reform our institutions, organizations and entities – local, regional, national and international – so they reflect the equality of persons for which we all strive.

At its most basic, international social responsibility is concerned with the development of the human person. A major thrust is to ensure human development and security through empowerment and sustainability, along with greater equity and productivity. The end result of international social responsibility must be to promote and preserve a peaceful world order, protect the environment, and bequeath to succeeding generations a more stable and a more humane international system.

International social responsibility is made necessary by multiple issues, the most important of which is the vast gap that exists between the rich and the poor within countries and between countries. We live in an unequal world that is increasingly becoming even more unequal. We live in a world where it is now possible for individuals to pay tens of millions of dollars for recreational trips to space when millions of school children still walk miles to unlit classrooms that do not even have enough chairs and desks, and some are forced to sit on the floor. That we are comfortable with such a world, that we will sit on the sidelines and let this continue, is blight on our collective conscience. Through international social responsibility, we move outside the margins of society to include those who have been excluded.

Let me highlight, though, some of the good news: Between 1990 and today, we have made tremendous progress in reducing some of the inequities within and between our societies. I can provide anecdotal evidence of how empowered women have become in my country. When I travel in the countryside, and I see how women are far more assertive in taking part in discussions in their communities. They tell me that they no longer sit down and let the men decide. As I travel across Liberia and Africa, I am both amazed and humbled by the number of young women whose options for future aspirations have expanded. Today, they say boldly, we want to become President; we want to be a Prime Minister. To those young people we say, indeed, international social responsibility is beginning to take root.

The 2012 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) Report also gives cause for hope. It notes that three important targets will be met well ahead of the 2015 end-date. Even more heartening is the observation that “while challenging,” meeting the remaining targets is well within our reach, if governments do not waver from their commitments.

The Report notes that, for the first time since records on poverty began, the number of people living in extreme poverty has fallen in every developing region, including our own sub-Saharan Africa. Preliminary estimates indicate that the proportion of people living on less than US\$1.25 a day fell in 2010 to less than half of the 1990 rate, and during the same period over two billion people gained access to improved drinking water sources; the share of slum dwellers in urban areas declined; and improving the lives of at least 100 million people.

In revising its poverty statistics, the World Bank observed that, when one takes into account increased population between 1981 and 2005, global poverty rates have fallen by about 25 percent. Unfortunately, this is not as encouraging as it sounds since these aggregate numbers do not account for differences between regions. China's large population and impressive progress over the period skews the aggregate number. During that period, China's poverty rate fell from 85 percent to 15.9 percent, or by over 600 million people, accounting for about 50 percent of the decrease in global poverty. We applaud this reduction, the lives of at least 100 million people having been improved, and those improvements keep mounting. Yet, I say, the numbers are disappointing, and the pace of improvement is still unacceptable.

Over 3 billion of our fellow human beings still subsist on less than US\$2.50 daily. More than a billion children live in poverty, and tens of millions lack access to adequate shelter or safe drinking water. At this pace, it will be difficult to halve extreme poverty in some of our lifetimes.

Allow me to use my own country as an example of why and how such a pace is frustratingly slow. Liberia's current population is about 4 million. Our vulnerable employment rate exceeds 60 percent, as most of our labor force lacks the kinds of skills that would make them marketable. Our infrastructure is weak, making transactional cost prohibitively high for small businesses. The price of capital remains high, resulting in high interest rates, short lending periods and, consequently, high default rates which, in turn, further increase lending and transactional costs.

Most of the world's poor live in countries like Liberia. If we are to reduce poverty, then aid is not enough. It has never been enough.

When I came into office in 2006, the National Budget of our entire country was US\$80 million – perhaps something equivalent to some of the budgets of your universities. Our Central Bank reserves were a mere US\$5 million. It didn't take a rocket scientist to tell us that US\$80 million would not meet all of the vast the needs of a collapsed economy and destroyed country.

We have made great progress, but even that must be seen in context. Our National Budget today has climbed to \$687 million, a great leap from the 2006 figure. However, the cost of paving the road that links the center of our country to its southeast will cost US\$405 million; and restoring our large hydro-electric generator will exceed US\$250 million. Countries like ours – with high unemployment, little or no infrastructure and small resource envelopes – are host to the world's poor, and if we are to reduce the inequities that exist in our world, how we see these countries, and how we engage them, will have to change.

Please note that it is not for the lack of resources that these disparities exist. The aggregate unreported wealth of individuals in tax havens is equal to the combined size of the United

States and Japanese economies. This is about US\$21 trillion, all of which, according to the Tax Justice Network, is held by 100 million people. But just listen, of this \$9.8 trillion is held by just 100,000 people.

This is not an attempt to criticize the success of those who have piled up the billions, but an opportunity to show the stark inequalities that still persist in our world – where a country with under 4 million people cannot afford paved roads and entire populations are cut off from the rains during six months, and 100,000 people are able to hold about \$9.8 trillion dollars in unreported earnings. We have all heard the statistics, but they warrant repetition. It is important to keep in mind that every statistic represents a life – a child, a mother, a daughter, a father.

International social development must address human development. I believe that the UN System is correct when it observes that human development encompasses more than the rise and fall of incomes. We need to create a global environment that allows people not only to develop their potential but to also lead productive lives. I also believe that the UN membership is correct to move beyond the old policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign State, to intervention in the interest of a repressed people, under the policy of the Responsibility to Protect.

According to the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), poverty reduction will occur as a result of the rate of growth and change in income distribution. This is within countries and between countries. We must also note that reduction in inequality and income differences will help spur poverty reduction. If we want to end acute poverty, if we want to improve opportunities for all of the world's people, countries and regions, international social responsibility must address these inequalities.

## **CONCLUSION**

Let me close by saying the new dynamics of population growth, developed country stagflation and financial stress suggest that the world is at a crossroads. We must either adopt new policies and strategies to bring the world's poor nations into the competitive and contributive arenas of development through the exercise of international social responsibility, or we face the reversals of prosperity in the richer nations of the world.

The time to act is now.

The time to bring about women's equality is now.

The time to address poor education in children in poorer nations is now.

The time to bring international responsibility to all nations in an interdependent world, where everything you do, and say, also has ramifications for us, is now.

And every time we succeed or fail, you feel the consequences.

The new Global Development Agenda, now being formulated, the one in which I participate as co-Chair, in going beyond the Millennium Development Goals to formulate an agenda

that, indeed, will be global, coming from rigorous global consultations, will reflect an agenda and an objective that says we cannot allow our people in the world to be poor.

Poverty must be eliminated.

We must formulate this.

We must demand this.

We must insist on it.

And we must act on it.

I thank you.

**Statement by H.E. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf  
Upon Accepting an Honorary Doctorate Degree from Tilburg University  
Tilburg, Netherlands  
Friday, November 9, 2012**

Dear Friends:

Let me, again, express my sincere thanks and gratitude to the Rector, who visited us in Liberia and who initiated what we see today. I also express thanks to the Executive Board, the Faculty and staff of Tilburg for the opportunity to join in celebrating this 85<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this institution. May you grow from strength to strength!

You honor me by bestowing upon me, along with two notable academicians, Professor Emeritus Sir Partha Dasgupta and Professor Guido Vergauwen, the distinguished Doctor Honoris Causa Degree, recognizing me for leadership and for my interest in education and social responsibility. I humbly accept this distinction, on behalf of the people of Liberia.

I eagerly accept this Honorary Degree, knowing that from this day forward, the relationship between our country and this university will never be the same. For from today, my country's largest institution for tertiary education, the University of Liberia, represented here by its President, Dr. Emmet Dennis, and this renown university, at Tilburg, will enter into an Understanding that will bind us, forever, in the field of education.

In a little while from now, our representatives shall sign a Memorandum of Understanding, and an implementing Letter of Agreement, establishing mutually beneficial scientific, technological, educational and other relations. Activities will include: a Master's degree scholarship scheme; a Teach the Teachers Program, fostering collaborative faculty and student exchange; and an exchange of scientific and educational literature produced by either or both institutions.

Just imagine what this partnership will do for a country like Liberia. Just imagine the hope that it will bring to young children whose fathers and mothers have never had an education. We continue to work tirelessly to rebuild our systems, our educational system, but capacity remains one of our biggest constraints. However, we hope that this relationship, under the leadership of the Rector and the President of our University, will help us to improve the quality of education so that our capacity is enhanced and our partnerships will be strengthened.

Liberia and its children and teachers are the beneficiaries of this new adventure. How will Tilburg benefit, you may ask us? It is our fervent hope that through this collaboration, this university, with its dedicated faculty – you in this room – will be able to learn from our experience; will be able to take some of those experiences, no matter how difficult, in the research and analysis that will lead to interventions, that will lead to better approaches and policies, to be able to preserve world peace. You will also do so in the spirit of the visionary Marga Klompé, as global citizens. We would like to thank Professor Dr. Mirjam van Reisen, the Endowed Chair of Marga Klompé on International Social Responsibility, for contributing to and promoting her legacy in favor of international human rights and justice, social welfare and social responsibility.

I thank you, Mr. Rector.