

**Statement to the Eighth OMEP Africa Regional Conference &
The First Liberian National Early Childhood Development Conference
Delivered on Behalf of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
By Education Minister Etmonia David Tarpeh
SKD Sports Complex
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Good morning. It is with great pleasure that I address this First National Liberian Early Childhood Development Conference and the Eighth Africa Regional Conference of the World Organization of Early Childhood Education. I welcome delegates from many parts of the world and my education colleagues from Liberia.

We are here to celebrate our collective achievements in fostering early childhood development and ensuring its priority among our education initiatives. Access to high-quality early childhood education is among the smartest investments for the future. Research demonstrates the critical importance of this area to develop a child's full potential. Comprehensive development services foster the child's academic, social, and cognitive skills to enable full participation and contribution to society. Numerous economic studies document the high rate of return on investment in the early phase of our children's development. We need to recognize and actualize the potential of our greatest natural resource – our children.

We should fully utilize this opportunity to recognize transferable achievements, exchange ideas and learn from each other in our community of practice, and plan for ever greater accomplishments and continued hope for the future of our society. As a member of the High-Level Panel charged by the UN Secretary-General to look at what happens following the initial target year of 2015, I am aware of the importance of our youngest and most vulnerable youth. We need your collective wisdom, shared successes, new ideas, and experiences to ensure the continued priority of this vital area. When the Millennium Development Goals end, we must renew our focus on those investments that will guarantee a healthy start for all children.

We have enacted *The Education Reform Act of 2011* that created our Bureau of Early Childhood Education within the Ministry of Education. We have joined in the commitment to early childhood development. We have seen the outcomes of neglect in early years, the savage consequences of inopportunity and conflict, and the implications of a lost generation. Although we recognize the revelations about brain development and academic outcomes, we also know the consequences and difficulties of a post-conflict society. We have a special urgency to our need. We need to assure this next generation that life will be better and that Liberia is on its way to better opportunities and improved life circumstances for all.

In Liberia we have adopted the *National Inter-Sectoral Policy on Early Childhood Development*. This Policy emphasizes cross-agency and cross-sector planning that involves all aspects of a child's development. This includes not only education, but also health, nutrition, protection, gender, and future employment. Many of you here today may have contributed to this Policy in Liberia.

We need to ensure we fulfill the promise. This entails the transformation of early learning systems with better coordination, clearer learning standards, and meaningful education and training for early educators. It includes participation in this process of health experts, social services, and community development specialists to enrich the context of early experiences. Our programs represent an unprecedented opportunity to focus on early learning and development systems in our communities and build a more unified approach to supporting young children and their families. Our overarching goal is to make sure that more children, especially those with high needs, enter schooling ready and able to succeed.

We must not forget that helping a child also helps a family, a community, and the society overall. It increases high school participation and graduation, reduces grade repetition, reduces need for special education, and eventually contributes to reduced crime and delinquency and teen pregnancy. These contributions reduce our costs over the life of the child and add to the investment in other areas of societal needs. The benefits of this investment in early development extend to community and national development. We recognize these implications and we have moved policy and focus to early childhood development. Now we have to do it better and better, increasing access to programs and possibilities, and making sure that parents and communities are aware of these rewards for their family and community.

I challenge this learned group to seriously deliberate on what has happened and what can happen. Let's improve on an impressive record of Early Childhood Education accomplishment. Let's improve on ECE accomplishment in our country and our region. And let's improve on coordinating our investments and expertise to provide continued improvement to our ideas and activities in this area.

I look forward to your discussions and recommendations. These will contribute to the international dialogue on the next phase of Development Goals. I wish you well and my hopes will be with you for success in this meeting and for our future endeavors. Let's move ahead together.