

***“LEADERSHIP TO END WORLD HUNGER”***

**Remarks by**

**Her Excellency Ellen Johnson Sirleaf**

**President of Liberia**

**On the Occasion of Receiving**

**2006 Africa Prize for Leadership Awarded by the Hunger Project**

*New York Hilton Hotel*

*October 21, 2006*

**Dr. Peter Bourne, Chairperson and Directors of the Global Board of the Hunger Project;**

**Ms. Joan Holmes, President and officials of the Hunger Project;**

**Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen:**

I am most grateful to be honored today as recipient of the Africa Prize for Leadership by The Hunger Project. Indeed, I am extremely honored to join the ranks of the sterling group of persons who have received this award including Heads of State such as Nelson Mandela, as well as educators, scientists, women's activists, and grassroots organizers. I want to applaud The Hunger Project for its unswerving and unwavering dedication to ending world hunger, and particularly, for helping the powerless and the poor in Africa, Asia and Latin America to achieve sustainable and lasting improvements in health, education, nutrition and employment.

I bring you greetings from the people of Liberia as I receive this honor, which I do on behalf of the women of Liberia, Africa and world who, in their just and determined struggle, are striving to play more prominent roles in making decisions that affect their lives. While cognizant of the considerable progress being made by women throughout the world to enhance their role in economic decision making and political participation, such as their ascendancy to high public offices in Europe, Latin America and Africa, it is clear that the place of women in our societies has still not reached the level many of us would appreciate and support. In many parts of the world, women remain virtually excluded from leadership and decision making as their tireless efforts to gain access to resources and opportunities continue to be undermined by the reluctance of their societies to pursue and commit to gender equality.

The devotion of The Hunger Project to ending world hunger and your recognition, through the establishment of the Africa Prize, that effective leadership and dedication are needed to improve the well-being of the African people strengthens and reinforces our determination to continue

advocating gender equality and the systematic enhancement of women's access to leadership opportunities. Therefore, as I accept this award today, I want you to know that I do so particularly on behalf of the thousands of market women of Liberia who made great sacrifices to feed and nurture our nation during its fourteen-year war, and continue to do so as we transition from conflict to peace. It is because of these women that I have come to accept this honor in person, and it is to improve their working conditions that the cash award will be used by Measuagoon, the nongovernmental organization which I sponsor.

As the title of my speech suggests, I want to speak to you today about leadership imperatives for ending hunger in the world. You will find, perhaps not surprisingly, that my comments on this subject are colored by the peculiarities of my current preoccupation with helping Liberia regain its rightful position in the world community as a stable and prosperous country. My remarks are also being made in light of the outstanding performance and courage of women at the highest levels of my government and throughout the social, political and economic fabric of many other nations. Ending hunger and improving the quality of life of women are inextricably linked, and leadership to end world hunger represents commitment to improving the quality of life of people who are poor and are more likely to be women.

Women constitute the majority of the poor in Africa. In all manifestations of poverty, women tend to fare worse than men, lacking access to resources such as land, capital, technology, and adequate nutritious food. A recent survey of the food and nutrition security situation in my country, Liberia, confirms this unacceptable phenomenon. It is found that among the six socio-

economic classifications of food insecure groups that were profiled, households headed by women experienced more difficulty in accessing sufficient food through purchases or as a result of their own production.

Ending hunger is perhaps the most pressing and urgent development challenge of our time. It is a daunting task not only because hunger and poverty are intertwined with the plight of women, but because adequate resources exist in the world to banish hunger from our midst today, if only we could marshal the will to focus development assistance and unleash technologies on an issue that knows no boundaries, no political leanings, and no color. It is an issue with such global implications that halving hunger by 2015 is the first Millennium Development Goal. Unfortunately, while opportunities exist to end hunger, the road to achieving global food security is littered with difficulties, particularly for developing countries such as Liberia.

The food and nutrition security survey in my country uncovered another unpleasant and disturbing dimension of hunger. It revealed that almost 40 percent of our children under the age 5 are stunted or too short for their age, 27 percent are underweight or too thin for their age, and 7 percent are wasted or too thin for their weight. Diseases such as malaria, diarrhea and respiratory infections were also found to be widespread. Although reliable data on infant and child mortality are still unavailable, they are likely to be equally heartbreaking when we do have them.

As you know, Liberia is recovering from decades of civil strife and fundamental abuses of human rights. With 80 percent of my fellow citizens living below the poverty line, such a dire hunger and malnutrition situation, while deplorable particularly for women and young people is understandable in many ways. War causes displacement and vulnerability, which together breed poverty, the harbinger of hunger and malnutrition. But the sad fact is that while hunger and malnutrition in Liberia are extreme, they are uncomfortably close in severity to the situation in many other countries around the world, some of whose recent histories have not been marked by protracted civil strife.

Progress in alleviating hunger and malnutrition, attributes of food and nutrition insecurity, was impressive in many parts of the world during the 1960s, 1970, and 1980s. However, recent data from the UN Food and Agriculture Organization indicate that progress toward reducing hunger has been slow in the past decade. During the 1990s, developing countries reduced the number of undernourished people by only 9 million, representing a mere 1 percent of the global population of undernourished people. The story of how large, sustained increases in yields of basic food staples provided the impetus for equally significant reductions in hunger and malnutrition in Asia is well known and documented. The so-called Green Revolution introduced yield-enhancing technology in a context of Government intervention to support farm output prices and subsidize farm input prices alongside major public investments in extension systems and rural infrastructure, particularly roads and irrigation. Also crucial was political leadership and courage at the highest Levels-leadership that shaped strategic priorities and mobilized investments in line with those priorities. Such leadership is badly needed today. The

stakes are extraordinarily high, for food needs in the poorest parts of the world are likely to double over the next quarter century.

But the world of 2006 is a very different one from that of 1965 when the Green Revolution entered the world stage. Forces such as globalization, market liberalization, privatization, urbanization, HIV/AIDS, population growth, civil war, terrorism, climate change and the shifting proprietary nature of agricultural technology are redefining many of the problems facing political leaders in general and food and agricultural policy makers in particular. The kinds of policy solutions required are also very different. I would argue that now there is, more than ever before, a pressing need for clarity in strategic objectives, priorities, and investments and I want to propose six strategic priorities that leaders throughout the world must consider if objectives such as the Millennium Development Goal of cutting hunger in half are even to be approached, let alone achieved.

History suggests that the first strategic imperative is the need to spur agricultural productivity growth, with a focus on commodities on which the poor and hungry are most dependent. In addition to the major staples, livestock products, oilseeds, and some fruits and vegetables are obvious priority commodities. The promise of modern biotechnology in spurring productivity growth in the region cannot be ignored. However, the role of this branch of science in the economic transformation and sustainable development of impoverished areas is subject to increasing debate and controversy. Countries in search of yield take-offs must seize the biotechnology agenda for themselves. They must seek to make informed choices and establish

policies and strategies to diligently and judiciously respond to developments associated with biotechnology. Developing appropriate bio-safety frameworks and intellectual property rights regimes is crucial.

The second strategic recognition is that productivity growth without significant improvements in market functioning is counter-productive. Physical impediments to agricultural trade and exchange related to poor infrastructure remain high in areas inhabited by impoverished and hungry people. Such impediments point to the need for major investments in roads, railways, and telecommunications. In the absence of such investments, the scope for cutting hunger via sustained agricultural productivity growth is likely to remain extremely limited.

The third strategic building block is the importance of growth in non-agricultural sectors. Such growth in non-agricultural sectors provides not only crucial off-farm employment and income opportunities for rural populations, but it also generates demand for agricultural products. Targeted investment to promote linkages between agricultural and non-agricultural sectors, and to spur growth in both sectors, is therefore critical.

The fourth strategic element is the need to recognize and exploit opportunities for regional cooperation. Hunger and malnutrition have roots and expressions that often cut across borders, implying the need for trans-boundary perspectives and responses. In Africa, the African Union and NEPAD are providing valuable high-level political leadership and coordination in this arena through initiatives such as the Africa-wide Early Warning System, the African Regional

Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction, and the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme. Such efforts must be strengthened and expanded.

The fifth strategic challenge and one that is very close to my heart, is to end not only hunger but the gender bias in food insecurity. Women have demonstrated considerable leadership at the family level, in communities, and in economic spheres; they are now boldly stepping up the conditions of civil strife and conflict. War consumes lives. War consumes resources. A central challenge facing political leadership the world over is how to fashion peaceful societies under conditions of extreme and growing diversity and ever-increasing pace of change. Answers must be found, for solutions to all other strategic imperatives, including the five I have mentioned today, vanish if the peace imperative is not met. In Liberia, we have no choice but to face these challenges squarely, however difficult, entrenched and intractable they may be. No one who has lived in or visited my country in the past fifteen years will deny the physical destruction and the moral decadence that the civil war has left in its wake across the nation. The individual sense of deprivation is immense. In spite of these difficulties, we are challenging our people to join us in a quest for economic renewal, to participate in a new beginning based on the premise that although our country is endowed with abundant natural and human resources, the task of reconstructing its devastated economy is awesome, for which there will be no quick fix.

Our strategy, therefore, is to make quick and visible progress that reaches significant number of our people, and to gain momentum, consolidate support, and establish the foundation for sustained economic development. This, we believe, will encompass four pillars:

- Enhancing and reforming national security;
- Revitalizing the nation's economy as a basis for shared growth;
- Putting into place appropriate structures of governance that are underpinned by rule of law; and
- Rehabilitating the nation's badly conflict-devastated infrastructure and delivering basic pro-poor services and facilities.

This emerging Poverty Reduction Strategy Program views agricultural transformation as an essential intervention to ensuring pro-poor growth and the uplifting of women. We plan to accomplish this feat by increasing the productivity of our smallholders, strengthening our institutions, building the capacity of our human resources, providing production materials and inputs to our war-affected families, encouraging private sector investment, and making nutritious food available and accessible to all segments of the population.

I am convinced that effective leadership to end hunger in my country and throughout the rest of the world will demonstrate the commitment and dedication of governments and organizations such as The Hunger Project, to meeting the needs and aspirations of all people for a better quality of life.

Today, I appeal to each and every one of you to help us achieve our goals. Improvements in peace and security in our country, and steps we have taken to end corruption once and for all,

are beginning to yield dividends that are being used to better the lives of our people. Regrettably, these resources that are the result of better security and improved governance are a trickle compared to the immediate needs and high expectations of our people. I need your assistance to help Liberia address these and all other root causes of conflict, especially those relevant to agriculture and food security by, among other things:

- Rehabilitating our agricultural research and extension services;
- Restoring essential services such as our agricultural marketing and credit systems;
- Providing quality planting materials and production inputs to communities and populations affected by our conflict, particularly our ex-combatants;
- Mobilizing private capital to spur growth in the agricultural sector;
- Investing in education, health, infrastructure and other complementary sectors; and
- Creating immediate employment opportunities in the sector, particularly for women and youth.

Let me close by recalling and reiterating the pledge I made to my country and the world on January 16, 2006 to give Liberian women prominence in all affairs of our country and empower them in all areas of our national life. We have made remarkable progress in this direction and we remain committed to doing more. We are continuing to support and increase the writ of laws that is restoring the dignities of women and we are enforcing, without fear or favor, the law against rape. We also have launched a national girls' education program that is providing scholarships to girls, recruiting and training more female teachers, and offering life skills training.

We know we cannot stop here until women throughout the world take their rightful places in a gender-blind environment, which includes freedom from hunger, violence and dehumanization as is the situation in Darfur, Sudan. I therefore want to restate and underscore my recent appeal to the United Nations General Assembly in this regard, not to sit by idly while thousands of people, mostly women and children, are in acute peril. We must not, I repeat, we must not allow a second Rwanda. The General Assembly must exercise Chapter 7 authority and send in a peacekeeping force as authorized by the UN Security Council. The life of one child, one woman, or one man is too precious, too sacred, and one too many to lose to hunger or violence I want to thank Joan Holmes, Peter Bourne and all those who are making the ideals of The Hunger Project resound throughout the world. The people of Liberia are grateful for the recognition you have bestowed on me.

I thank you.