

Remarks By
Her Excellency Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
President of the Republic of Liberia
At
Stakeholders Consultative Meeting
Formal Launch of the Poverty Reduction Strategy

Cecil Dennis Auditorium,
Ministry of Foreign Affairs
August 20, 2007

Thank you all for being here today. We are heartened to see so many faces from so many segments of our society in one room.

We are a nation rich in diversity. Fishermen, farmers, business people, market women, miners, men, women, young, old, of every tribe, from every county, of every political party. We all have dreams of a better life. We all share the hope of a better tomorrow. We all are interested in peace, in prosperity, in ensuring opportunities for all Liberians.

Our meeting today is about that tomorrow. It is about asking some fundamental questions: What do we, Liberians, want our future to look like? How do we figure out what we want?

This is our opportunity to think big; to be bold; to be leaders. Given how much needs to be done, what comes first? Where do we devote our scarce resources and capacity, while simultaneously building capacity and increasing those resources? We need a plan that makes us stronger as it carries us forward.

It is often said that those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it. There is one thing on which we should be clear: Our future must be different. When we remember the days before the war, we must be honest in accepting that Liberia's past economic successes were not built on broad inclusiveness and equity. We must not repeat these mistakes. We must ensure that Liberia's future does not yield opportunities only for a select few but rather for all of us. Every Liberian, no matter where they live, no matter who they are, should have the foundation and opportunity necessary to achieve their goals and live long, productive lives.

If we are to live this dream, we must put our wisdom and experience together. Pulling our nation out of poverty requires our collective strength. We need to work to build a shared and broad vision. We need to think beyond the relatively narrow pieces of the puzzle we each deal with on a daily basis and focus instead on the vision these pieces can form if correctly joined together.

The first thing we need to do is talk to each other, to listen to each other. That shared project begins today. As the day continues we will learn from the experiences of others and our own experience with our current interim strategy and have an opportunity to engage the working groups who will drive this process forward.

We all need to listen to a broad range of opinions. We need to ensure that we measure each other not by age or status but by the quality of each other's ideas, by the relevance of each other's contributions. In preparing and implementing our strategy, we need to look past our preconceptions and remain open to learning new things.

We need to examine and revisit the strategy of poverty reduction – a strategy that drives home the point that poverty reduction is not a social welfare program or a reinforced and broadened safety road for the poor. Rather that growth, sustained growth. Empowering government is critical to mobilizing the resources required to combat poverty.

Our lofty vision can only be achieved if it is grounded in experience, in smart policies, and in strong data-driven analysis. To that end we need the hard work of technicians and the wisdom to make effective use of the analysis they generate. This is where the working groups come in – thinking together about discrete topics in a comprehensive way. These working groups will develop the means by which we will achieve our goals. To do so, each working group will need the participation of ALL – ALL – relevant stakeholders. For many of you, this may involve participation in multiple groups, regarding multiple issues.

When yet another meeting is called, I ask you to think beyond what else you might wish to do in the moment and remember that we can only be successful if we can benefit from your wisdom, if we can hear your voice in debate with others.

This process may lead you to attend meetings with people whom you might not normally see. This is one of the processes' greatest strengths. The bonds we forge via this process – the links that will begin today and be strengthened through the coming months – can continue to serve us long after this process is completed.

Once we have built a strategy, we will need to implement it. Our experience under the interim strategy has taught us that we need to prioritize, to sequence. We need to have clarity of responsibility, both inside government and out. We need specific, time-bound, realistic, and measurable tasks against which to evaluate progress. We need to focus on specific objectives while remaining cognizant of the larger context.

We also need to be realistic about one central fact: Reducing Poverty is NOT something this government can do alone. It's something we all must do. Neither, unfortunately, can it be completed in the 3-4 year timeframe of the PRS, given our starting point.

But my government can say: We will get the processes in place to ensure that a child born today in Liberia has greater opportunities than we ourselves inherited. It is our obligation to create an environment so that those who wish to succeed will succeed. We need to provide the education, the health care, the infrastructure, the enabling environment, as well as the transparent and fair processes. These tools will allow the true drivers of development, the true agents of change - the people – to do their good work.

To the private sector, we say: Engage us. Work with us. Provide us with feedback. Let us know your constraints, your challenges. Use this process to shape our policies so that we can collectively ensure equitable growth for our nation.

To the members of civil society, we say: criticize constructively. Help us by representing fairly and earnestly groups who might otherwise go unnoticed. You are a crucial link, a channel of communication, a voice for those who have often been silenced.

To the political opposition, let your voice and views be heard. You have got to be in to win. Join us in an endeavor that will be owned by all of us for the benefit of all of us.

To members of the legislature, I ask: Join us in crafting this strategy so that we may be sure that what we collectively dream is truly owned by the people's representatives, so that we may implement together the vision we craft together.

To our development partners, we ask your support in crafting our strategy by providing cross-country experience and technical resources, the tools that will help Liberians build policies that have proven successful in similar contexts. Yet we also ask you to remain sensitive, as you have been, to ensuring that we lead and you support. This is ultimately our process, our nation, our future.

It is our responsibility to ensure that our policies truly empower Liberians. It is yours to assist us in providing the resources necessary to implement those policies. We ask you to consider carefully the process by which we develop our poverty reduction strategy and, if you find it just, equitable, and well-thought out, to then expand on your good and important work as we expand our horizons.

In short, we ask you who have helped us through the beginnings of our post-conflict era to see our shared project through to the finish.

To the Public, I ask: Do not wait for development. Own it. DO it. Make the change in your own community. Make the change in your own life. We will provide the framework; you must provide the energy.

To all of you, I wish to emphasize that this is the beginning, not the end, of the engagement process. Please do not walk away from this room and believe that you have been 'consulted'. If you want your voice heard, you need to speak up. Go to working group meetings. Participate in the broad consultations. Take it upon yourself to be entrepreneurial, to seek out ways to contribute. I ask you not to wonder what you can get from, but rather what you can give to, Liberia's development.

We Liberians have been strong and resilient through our many years of darkness. As we rebuild our society we must remain committed. The heavy burden of building peace and prosperity can only be managed if we carry this weight together. Let us all join together to lift each other and our nation to new heights.

Thank you.