

Statement by
Her Excellency Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
President of the Republic of Liberia
“The Role of Agriculture in Post-Conflict Recovery:
The Case of Liberia”
Symposium on Global Agriculture and Food Security
Global Agricultural Development Initiative
Mayflower Renaissance Hotel
Thursday, May 20, 2010

Moderator (*Dan Glickman, former Secretary of Agriculture*);

Honorable Thomas Vilsack (*Secretary of Agriculture*);

Dr. Rajiv Shah (*USAID Administrator*);

Mr. Marshall Bouton (*President Chicago Council on Global Affairs*)

Ms. Catherine Bertini (*Symposium Co-Chair*)

Members of Congress Present;

Development Partners;

Distinguished Guests;

Ladies and Gentlemen;

Friends:

I thank you, Mr. Mouton and Mr. Glickman and the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, for the kind invitation, and the opportunity to join so many of you in this room and the several other key personalities to speak at this important Symposium on the role of agriculture in the post-conflict recovery of my country, Liberia. You will note that I am wearing green, symbolizing the agriculture potential of my country.

In 2006, Liberia started the long road back from a civil conflict that decimated the country's infrastructure and institutions, a situation compounded by a population that fled to the urban areas, leaving the land unproductive.

In the past four years, under the four pillars of our Poverty Reduction or "*Lift Liberia*" Strategy, we have restored growth to an average annual 7 percent, tackled a \$4.9 billion external debt overhang, made strong progress on consolidating peace and national security, reactivating our mining, agriculture and forestry sectors, promoted the institutions of good governance and the rule of law, and rehabilitating infrastructure to extend basic services to our 3.5 million population.

Yet the challenges remain awesome and our nation fragile in the face of raised expectations and the several stumbling blocks, including the 2008/2009 global financial crisis, that have slowed the pace of recovery and reform.

Poverty continues to be the most significant determinant of food access in many parts of Liberia although 70 percent of the population depends on agriculture. Recognizing that agricultural growth is more effective in reducing poverty than any effort in any other sector, our Government is placing emphasis on this strategic sector both in terms of exports and food security at home.

Our policy goal in the sector is to revitalize operations and activities that contribute to sustainable economic growth and development; to provide food security and nutrition; and to increase farmers' employment and income – all aimed at measurably reducing poverty.

While our commitment to agriculture is unequivocal, I must acknowledge that public financing of the sector is still woefully inadequate. The share of our national budget allocated to agricultural institutions and activities rose from US\$3 million in 2006 to US\$7 million in 2009 but this still represents a mere 2 percent of our budget.

Moreover, I can say, quite candidly, that despite the policies and strategies, our population is still highly vulnerable to chronic food insecurity, stemming from physical and human capital constraints, poor natural resource and farm management practices, and poor health and nutrition practices.

We are, nevertheless, intensifying our efforts to achieve the desired results. To grow the economy, we embarked upon a "Back to the Soil" Campaign that resulted in significant increase in food production, particularly of our staples as rice and cassava. Rice production, for example, increased from 85,000 metric tons in 2006 to about 200,000 metric tons in 2009 – a 43 percent increase. The increase in food production has led the World Food Programme (WFP), for the first time, to purchase locally produced rice for use in its school-feeding program.

The programs that supported the results have also trained 30,397 farmers, providing them with new farming methods, and provided 15,000 vulnerable farmers and 169 farmer groups with seed rice. Our success would have been even greater if more farmers had been able to use lowland areas where yields in rice production is highest compared to other ecologies, and where rice could be cultivated two or three times per year.

The reluctance of farmers to use fertile lowlands is due to the health consequences resulting from the prevalence of schistosomiasis and other water-borne diseases which multiplied during the long period of our civil unrest. We continue to mobilize support from our partners to help clean up these fertile lowlands for cultivation of rice to ensure self-sufficiency.

It is very clear to us that agriculture has the potential to become a major source of employment, most especially for the thousands of our citizens, especially women and youth who, as casualties of the war, lack essential skills, but who can learn to farm the land. Our objective is to consolidate them into a productive and dynamic entity for national development. Jobs in the farming sector are one of the means of accomplishing that aim.

If Liberia can grow its own food and be self-sufficient – and we have the potential to do so due to the large territorial farmable soils, the tropical climate and abundant water resources – the country would then be insulated from the effects of the soaring global food prices, which we experienced in 2008.

This is why, in 2009, we developed and validated the Liberia Agriculture Sector Investment Program (LASIP), which is guiding our Ministry of Agriculture and our development partners in better coordinating activities aimed at Liberia's agricultural development.

This Program is in line with our development agenda, as well as the framework of the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Program (CAADP). It is encouraging that the major donor agencies have committed their institutions to using this framework as a viable vehicle to provide assistance to African countries in the development of their agricultural sectors and to ensure food security.

We believe that with consistency in efforts and resources, our agriculture sector is transitioning from “emergency” to “development”, which includes sustainability and improved livelihood. At the core of this transition is the transformation of smallholder agriculture into a sustainable diversified, income-generating sector that is well integrated into markets – one in which commercial agriculture provides support and incentives to small farmers.

To achieve this objective, our public sector agriculture investment priorities between 2010 and 2013 include food and nutrition security; competitive value chains and market linkages; institutional development; and land and water development.

In an emerging market-driven economy like Liberia's, a large share of the actual development of agriculture is carried out by the private sector through their involvement in different facets of production, processing, servicing and trade. Government's role in this regard is to provide the enabling environment for the private sector to thrive.

My Government recognizes the importance of private sector-led growth in the productive sector, and has therefore entered into concession agreements with investors for development of the agriculture sector. These agreements give agriculture investors the right to undertake productive activities in areas of their choice, and to work with smallholders through out-grower arrangements supported by the public sector.

Private-sector investment is picking up in our country, and various projects will produce a stream of income for Liberia in the years to come. We are pleased to note that as of March 2010, committed private-sector investment in agriculture in Liberia totaled US\$1.1 billion. This includes a US\$847 million investment for the cultivation of rubber and oil palm by the Malaysian firm Sime Darby Berhad. Investments from the large plantation sector, which include out-grower schemes, will result in thousands of jobs and exports, but it will take time to show results.

We believe that once the private-sector investments in palm oil, rubber, rice and logging come fully "on line," our Government will be able to receive more resources from the exportation of products from these investments. This will enable the Government to invest more in agriculture, allowing us to move toward the Maputo Declaration promise of a minimum of 10 percent budget allocation to the sector.

We recognize that increased budgetary support alone will not be sufficient to achieve and sustain the required transformation of Liberia's agriculture sector. Therefore, we continue to work with partners, especially the United States, to help Liberia to "kick start" the process of stabilizing the country and the agriculture sector through the "Food for the Future" program, launched recently by USAID.

Of critical importance is investment in infrastructure, most critically farm-to-market roads, investments in transportation, particularly the port.

USAID/Liberia's Food and Enterprise Development Project (FED) is a vehicle to support Liberia's agriculture development agenda focusing on improving rural infrastructure, primarily rural farm-to-market roads, and our Ministry of Agriculture's capacity to promote the dissemination and adoption of improved agricultural technologies and practices. This is exactly the right program and the right time for Liberia.

Moreover, we applaud the initiatives of the Obama Administration, presented here today by Dr. Rajiv Shah, the “Global Hunger and Food Security Initiative,” and the “Feed the Future Initiative.” What is most appealing from the Liberian perspective about these U.S. initiatives is that they encourage the participation of key groups, including farmers, civil society organizations, especially women, and they also promote strong regulatory policies, governance and accountability.

We see this new initiative as a compliment to the Millennium Challenge Corporation, which recently qualified Liberia as a threshold nation in that it supports home-grown strategies and rewards governments that invest in their own people and govern responsibly.

Liberia is pleased to have been selected as one of 20 target countries, and hopes and will strive to achieve status as an investment plan country.

In closing, permit me to commend the excellent work of your in-country representatives – the U.S. Embassy and USAID – who support our goals in the development of Liberia’s agriculture and rural sector in promoting sustainable peace.

We strongly believe that with our commitment and hard work, together with your continuous support, we can, indeed, bring stability and we can bring prosperity to the Liberian people, to a nation once characterized as a failed state. We can become a post- conflict success story building upon our agriculture activities.

I thank you.