

GLOBAL RESPONSE TO PRESIDENT ELLEN JOHNSON SIRLEAF STATE OF THE NATION ADDRESS TO THE LIBERIAN PEOPLE

Greetings Fellow Liberians! The Global Organization for a Better and Accountable Liberia (GLOBAL) takes this opportunity to respond to the “State of the Nation” address delivered by President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

We begin by saying a special thanks to Hon. Saah Joseph who through his personal effort, dedication to country, and service to his fellow Liberians became the face of the fight against Ebola in Liberia. GLOBAL wants to say a special “Thank You” to Hon. Joseph.

We extend our thanks to all healthcare workers, health officials, international partners, and ordinary citizens for the strong efforts in reducing the number of new cases over the past several months. But we must not forget that lives were lost due to a Lack of leadership, not being proactive enough, and a lack of investment in our healthcare system.

GLOBAL believes that the “State of the Nation” address delivered by President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is nothing more than promises and empty narratives that have been repeated again and again without tangible improvements in the lives of average Liberians.

Here are the facts...

First let us look at the legislative agenda.

The president is unclear about the impact of her proposed legislations for 2015. There is no quantification of jobs, impact, or the change the proposed legislation will make. Compounding matters too is the president’s fondness of promising without fulfillment. For the third time in a row, she has promised to submit the draft legislation consistent with the “Table Mountain Declaration” which will decriminalize freedom of expression. Obviously, from actions taken by Madam Sirleaf’s government to the ineffective and recalcitrant execution of the Freedom of Information Act, it is clear that this government does not believe in freedom of expression and has no serious intent to repeal all the repressive laws, statutes, and decrees implemented by the dictatorial PRC government.

Next, is the dual citizenship bill which is being promised a second time. While GLOBAL believes that dual citizenship has many positives than negatives, we strongly suggest measures must be put in place to protect Liberia from those prospective dual citizens who will pursue corrupt practices rather than invest in the future of the country.

Implementation is poor with regards to the legislation passed and those proposed by this administration. A clear example is the criminal conveyance law which is already on the books - that one cannot sell property he or she does not own. A full implementation of our land records system is required to enable easy validation of property ownership. Implementing such a system is not only beneficial to land owners, but it will also provide confidence in the economy. Banks

will trust the system and allow individuals to borrow against their property, a clear path to development.

Let us now turn to the economy.

Economy

As Robert M. Solow stated in 1956, three factors contribute to the health of a nation: the rate of investment in capital; the growth rate of the labor force; and the level of technology. All of which are missing in Liberia. We are capable of generating the appropriate rates and levels through government stimulus, enablement programs, and public/private partnership to get our stagnant and shattered economy moving again.

Take for example, Liberia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). It is reported that the growth rate rose from 5.3% to 7.8% from 2005 to 2006. In 2007, it was reported at 9.5% and fell to 8.1% in 2013. If Liberia's GDP is the primary indicator we are going to use to determine the health of its economy, then the result of this growth should have an impact on the lives of the average Liberian through employment and wage increases but it has not.

The President suggested that to "reach the long term average growth rate of 8%, radical changes will be required in the structure of our economy for increased investments in the productive sector of the economy and in our governance structure and processes." However, nothing she proposed represents a radical change.

Fast forward, now by the President's own admission, the growth rate is presently sinking into the negative zone. The growth rate was already projected to decrease to 5.9% in 2014 from 8.1% in 2013. So to blame the economic decline purely on Ebola when we were already experiencing serious economic issues due to mismanagement is misleading.

Another concern is inflation which has risen from 7.65% to 9.9%. The rise in inflation is a sign that the current economic and monetary policies are not working. Inflation is a poor man's tax because it leads to an increase in prices for the necessities of life such as food and transportation which are the main expense areas for poor families. This is critical since 80% of the population live on less than \$1.25 a day.

If there is one area we do agree with the president it is that recurrent expenditure continues to crowd out the fiscal space required for economic expansion. We have heard that since 2006, but radical approaches to increase the fiscal space has not been discussed or even attempted by Madam Sirleaf's government.

The President cautioned exercising restraint in contracting debt in one voice but in the next, she expressed pleasure with the Legislature on the ratification of several financing agreements. In concert with such action, Liberia is again spiraling into debt. Liberia's debt rose from \$628.45

million to \$759.46 million in one year. What's striking about this is the rise in debt isn't reflected by a rise in the key areas of development such as employment, education, healthcare, infrastructure development, or human development.

Now, the president blames the economic failure on a number of things and has made promise to push hard for diversifying the economy beyond two primary commodities. Would you be surprised if we were to tell you that the president made this exact pledge in her 2008 Annual Message? Well, she did. GLOBAL's position is to invest in agriculture and build the middle class by creating the necessary infrastructure for credit and granting access to capital with government's enablement through mechanized farming.

GLOBAL believes that none of this is possible without adequate strategic planning, being results oriented, with clear deliverables and metrics to measure success and outcomes. We are convinced that conducting meaningless retreats does nothing to impact the livelihood of the average Liberian and is not value added. Instead, the only benefits are to those attending the retreat themselves. We recommend that a better use of tax payers' dollars is to study Rwanda's model of economic development as lessons learned. Rwanda's fifteen years of genocide makes its story similar to Liberia. Yet, the country has done so much to lift its people out of abject and utter poverty.

Another salient point is a lack of political will to fight crime and to deal effectively with the issues addressed by the TRC. Adding to this is the income disparity between lawyers in different sectors. Lawyers in the financial sector are more fairly compensated than those in direct prosecution at the Ministry of Justice.

Now let's look at healthcare.

Healthcare

It is common knowledge that the country's healthcare sector has been in a free fall for decades. An assessment conducted by the World Health Organization in 2005 with donor assistance from European Commission, Finland, and UNHCR resulted in funds to coordinate health sector actions, strengthen disease surveillance and early warning systems in nine counties, amongst others.

It is this administration's lack of understanding of the problem, poor implementation skills and failure to make healthcare a strategic priority issue that accounts for systematic failure in Liberia healthcare system. Instead, the answers have been for the elites to travel to foreign countries (Ghana, America, etc.) and attend their medical needs while the average Liberian dies from misdiagnosis, wrong prescriptions, unregulated medication, poor healthcare facilities, and inappropriate care. The evidence of systematic failures has been marked by frequent demonstration by healthcare workers.

To understand the magnitude of Liberia's healthcare crisis, it is estimated that Liberia has 0.4 doctors per 10,000 persons (4 doctors per 100,000 persons). Last year the president "boasted" of over 173 Liberian doctors while this year she admits to 168 doctors for an estimated population of 4.2 million. Where is the growth? If we agree with her that the African average is 2.6 doctors per 10,000 inhabitants, with a 3% net population growth rate, Liberia will have an estimated population of 6.74 million in 2030 and will need to have approximately 1,752 doctors to meet that average. Where is the president's plan to produce 105 new doctors every year for the next 15 years?

Additionally, our healthcare spend per person parity is lower than the neighboring countries including Guinea and Sierra Leone. The inadequacies of government spend problem towards addressing Liberia's healthcare needs revealed itself in its refusal to provide basic necessities like rubber gloves, sanitizers, personal protective equipment (PPE) in the fight against Ebola. Rather, government relied on the international community. This resulted in the refusal of health workers to perform as desired and exponentially increased the spread of the disease and impacted lives. The government had a combined donor and own healthcare budget of \$140,365,563 for the 2013-2014 fiscal year, essentially pre-Ebola. Yet, when Ebola came we realized we had a shell of a healthcare system.

Education

Like the economy and healthcare, Liberia's educational system is exactly what the President has called it – "a mess." Yet, instead of articulating a clear educational vision for the country and aligning the right resources to fix the problem, she makes it a blame game while in essence the 'buck stops with her' (coined by U.S. President Harry S. Truman).

Nine years ago, when Madam Sirleaf came to power, the high school graduates of the last couple of years who have performed so miserably on public exams were 4th and 5th graders. Are we to assume that the quality of education has dropped so precipitously since Madam Sirleaf came to power?

Like healthcare, Liberia had a well-documented Education plan. Even after the roll out of a heavily funded national education policy captioned "The Education Sector Plan of Liberia – A Commitment to Making a Difference", in collaboration with at least 10 international donors (UNICEF, EU, IRC, OSIWA, Plan International, SCUK, UNESCO, USAID, World Bank, World Food Program), the education system seems to have gotten worse with no end in sight.

To show the interest this government has in education according to the CIA Fact book a meager 2.8% of total GDP is spent on education. The result, 25,000 students who sat the University of Liberia entrance in 2013 failed in both subjects. Furthermore, in 2014, according to AllAfrica.com only 15 of 13,000 students successfully passed the University of Liberia entrance exam. Most students lack basic literacy and numeracy skills.

This government's failure to tackle the learning deficit and make it a strategic priority will deprive a whole generation of opportunities to develop future leaders, reduce poverty, and provide shared opportunity for all to partake in the national bounty.

The president is again not telling the people of Liberia the truth. Her claim of "5,181 schools (3074 public and 2107 private), with enrollment of 1,500,000 students (800,000 boys and 700,000 girls) throughout the country" is misleading. According to the Education Statistics for the Republic of Liberia National Statistical Booklet 2013, there are 2,849 physical schools and 6,105 schools by levels (2,544 early childhood, 2,785 primary, and 776 secondary). Private schools (private, religious/mission, community, and other) constituted only 26.2 of all schools in Liberia. Public schools made up 73.8%.

With regards to enrollment, it is estimated that the total school going age group population (age 3-17) was 1,733,105 children. Those enrolled between ages 3 to 17 were 786,325, a gross enrollment rate of 45.37%. Those enrolled at the right age were 303,119, an age group enrollment of 17.49%. Unfortunately, the president focus is on enrollment rather than retention or dropout rates.

Dropout rates in public primary schools were over 21% for all grades and especially worst for students in first and second grade. It is estimated that this is about 32.1%. Dropout rates in public secondary schools are less severe between the seventh and eighth grades (13.5%) and between the eighth and ninth (16.0%) grades. The dropout rates jumped sharply between the ninth and tenth grades to 26.5% and slowed to 21.8% and 20.8% in high school. We need to find the underlying issue for student dropouts rather than offering financial bribes to one gender.

GLOBAL believes that the president's recommendation of offering "financial support to all girls willing to remain in school until the completion of high school" to solve the problem of "education of girls who do not go beyond middle school and are at risk of exploitation" is superficial and does not holistically address the problems these young ladies face neither does it account for the significant number of boys who dropout.

Statistically, there is no significant difference between the dropout rate for boys passing from grade 9 to 10 which is 27.8% and those of girls which is 24.4%. As you can see, boys have a higher dropout rate.

With regards to improved conditions for our nation's institution of higher learning, in 2014, the President promised that "Proposals will be made in the next budget to start this process of full relocation from the politics of Capitol Hill to the knowledge center of Fendell." This address barely mentions the University of Liberia except for a proposed governance amendment bill and to prove that the "quality of education has declined even further" as evidenced by failure in the entrance exam taken by students at the University of Liberia.

Madam President, as one Facebook poster stated, “How can Liberian University students be competitive with their peers when they go through college without the use of computers or laboratory equipment?” This is year 2015, not the 1960; the President’s speech never referenced technology and only mentioned computer once in reference to the transition of NGO registration “from a manual computer based system to an online registration process.” Madam President our students are being left behind. Our quality of education is extremely poor as you have stated. GLOBAL suggests a very strong focus on curricula, content, equipment/accessories, facilities, and inclusion of technology in the update of the “Comprehensive Education Reform Program.”

Now, let’s talk about Liberia’s youth.

Liberia’s Youth

In January 2014, our President said: “To address youth unemployment in particular, the Liberia Youth Employment Program (LYEP), in which the government will invest US\$75 million over the next five years, was launched. It has provided one-year employment for over 3,000 youths who are currently supporting various city corporations in improving waste and sanitation in 26 cities in the 15 counties. As part of a scaling up of the LYEP, plans are under way to fund the technical and vocational training component of the LYEP in next year’s budget.”

Madam Sirleaf, you claim that we have 68%, of our population, an estimated 2.72 million youths, between the ages of 15-25. That is patently wrong. The current plans of Liberia Youth Employment Program (LYEP), Maritime Authority Beach and Waterways Program, supporting technical and vocational education at institutions and within concessions, or the Economic Empowerment of Adolescent Girls and Young project do not approach a solution to even 10% of the youths. We call on you to commission a National Youth Employment Policy that will take a holistic and futuristic look at the problem of youth employment with a strong inclusion of economic diversification especially in the areas of agriculture, infrastructure development, and tourism/hospitality where GLOBAL believes Liberia can immediately create numerous opportunities for its youths.

Liberianization

Madam President, based on the success of the Executive Car Wash, in your 2014 speech, you promised “... the construction of three such facilities (car wash) with the support of NOCAL.” To date, we have not seen one. We applaud the passage of the Small Business Empowerment Act (SBEA). We hope that education about the act can be fully communicated to all Liberians to provide them the opportunity to take advantage of what is rightfully theirs.

Additionally, we applaud the efforts at “Liberianization” and building pride among Liberians. The “Wear Your Pride campaign” and the “Eat Your Pride Campaign” are praiseworthy. We look forward to the “Buy Your Pride Campaign” that will force government purchasers on goods and services to bias towards Liberian businesses.

Rule of Law

Impunity is a way of life under this administration. Since 2006, the General Accounting Office (GAO) has conducted a total of 103 audits out of which only a miserable seven (7) have been reviewed by the National Legislature. Of the seven, five have been submitted to the President with recommendations for action and there is no indication that the President has acted on any of these recommendations. Adding to it, the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC) report submitted to the President five years ago, with the intent to fight impunity and bring peace and stability to the country has been ignored by the administration notwithstanding the fact the commission was created and mandated by the terms of the Comprehensive Accra Peace Agreement (CAPA) and enacted into Law.

It is alleged that Government security institutions themselves have become parties to crimes. An example is the recent case of the National Security Administration (NSA) alleged extortion of money from Korean investors. Just over a year ago, it was also alleged that the President's escort vehicle was being used for drug trafficking.

In a system where the three branches of government should be distinct to ensure separation of powers, effectiveness, and where the citizens' rights are protected, it is common knowledge that the judiciary works only for the influential and high bidders. This is evident that Liberia has become a country of power and influence peddling rather than a country of laws. This government lacks the political will to fully scrutinize individuals and agencies under its control because of widespread patronage.

Today there are approximately 143 legislative instruments that are either not brought to the floor or remain in hidden files. There are no follow-up action between the Executive and Legislature to put these vital bills through the enactment process in the interest of the Liberian people.

Under President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf we have witness false imprisonment of journalists and resignation of key officials of government most recently the Minister of Justice because of frustration over the President willful interference in the application of and refusal to abide by the laws of the land.

Infrastructure

While we applaud the government for road construction, that sector has been plagued with rampant corruption with no transparency and accountability. With 9,350 kilometers of unpaved primary, secondary and feeder roads, we implore the President to bring sanity to the infrastructure sector and ensure that our funding works for us. We truly hope that the President's resolution that "26th celebration this year shall be in Greenville and Barclayville" will not be unfulfilled promised and a cancelled Independence Day celebration.

It would be more appropriate and preferable if the President quantifies pronouncement like: “Development and operational activities at the three major seaports – Monrovia, Buchanan, and Sinoe, made impressive progress in terms of ships serviced and revenue generated” or “RIA will be modernized” rather than blame Ebola.

GLOBAL suggests seeking alternative means to electrification, especially through solar power. The technology is available and works in many other parts of the world very effectively.

GLOBAL is truly befuddled when we read Madam Sirleaf saying “Honorable Legislators, today we have been able to provide 67% of our population with clean water.” How is that possible? Back in 2007, Mr. Tulay, then head of the state-owned Liberia Water and Sewage Corporation (LWSC), confirmed that “The facility is only pumping 30 % of the pre-war 18 million gallons of water daily.” Now that you claim we are up to “6 million gallons a day” which is 33% of prewar supply, how can you claim 67% of Liberians are provided with clean water? Rather if you said 67% of Liberians have improved water sources that would be a bit more palatable but such declaration does not speak to the reality of the Liberian people when it comes to water and sanitation.

GLOBAL proposes a decentralized approach to providing clean drinking water for Liberians. This is a no brainer since Liberia has one of the highest annual average rainfalls per year in the world and a high water table too.

Corruption

The president’s statement that “Corruption is a vampire of development and the obstruction of progress. I ask that we all commit to fighting this devil that destroys our principles and our pride; that makes us slaves to vested interests.” Hollow, weak, and unconvincing. It’s obvious that the president has surrendered to corruption with how she confers super power of being a vampire and a devil while we are mere humans who are slaves to this vice. No Madam President, GLOBAL wants you to muster to courage to fight corruption, not leave it to the supernatural. This should be public enemy #1,

Conclusion

Therefore, to conclude, GLOBAL believes that the annual message delivered by President Sirleaf is nothing more than a catalog of empty promises, an incessant blame game, and a blatant ploy to misdirect the Liberian people from the fiascos and letdowns in this administration. We have an administration riddled with poor management, poor governance and a complete indifference to the Rule of Law. As a result, over 80% of the citizenry live on less than a dollar (\$1) per day whereas foreigners who masquerade as business partners to our political leaders are thieving in our country at the expense of the citizenry and local entrepreneurship.

The massive drop we see in GDP, or the measures of our productivity, shouldn't be blamed purely on Ebola. As a matter of fact, the positive growth rates referred to over the years were not manifestations of any ingenious economic policy; it was simple a reflection of the return to normality after the forced departure of President Taylor. The new breath of civility saw businesses start to reopen, multinational companies return to Liberia, government institutions and NGOs increased their activities, and import and export rapidly accelerated together showing rise in productivity and geometric progression in GDP rate.

It was not a result of any sustained economic policy.

To President Sirleaf's credit, these increased economic activities can be attributed in part to her successful marketing of and rebranding of Liberia to the International community and to Diaspora Liberians who on account of that contributed to the increase in economic activities in Liberia and support of remittances

After many, many years into her Presidency however, electricity, an essential vehicle for industrialization and development, remains a scarcity. Notwithstanding after boastfully claiming of 16 billion in FDI most working age Liberians remain unemployed. Liberian businesses where they exist are still rudimentary and majority of the population still live on a \$1.25 per day.

Do you believe, for one moment, this crisis would have lasted as long as it did if we had a leader who took the Ebola virus as a serious threat from the onset? Remember, on Saturday April 5th, the President give a press conference in Rome, Italy where she stated, **“There's no need for panic... the 'Ebola' situation has been managed very well by the Ministry of Health.”** Instead, we found out that it was mismanaged very well by the Ministry of Health.

The massive drop in our GDP is a result of an economy that relies essentially on its exports of natural resources and does little to foster increased local participation in the economy. So, when the exporters left, our GDP collapsed. There is an acute shortage of creativity and integrated thinking in our leadership circles. Our government is not proactive; for the most part it is reactionary.

In 2008, the President promised to build Liberia's infrastructure and set the stage for economic diversification...” what happened?

In her 2013 annual message, the President was profound in discussing Liberia's ranking on Transparency International's 2012 Index (TII). At that time, Liberia was ranked 75th (out of 176 countries), nothing to be proud of, but what can I say, she promoted it.

In her 2014 annual message, the President did not touch on the same index. Why? Well, because Liberia ranking fell from 75 to 83. Last year, Liberia fell even farther on the corruption index. Liberia has fallen from 83 down to 94 – you will find countries like Burkina Faso with a higher ranking than Liberia.

Recommendations

▪ Economy

1. Government's economic strategy must focus on wealth creation rather than poverty reduction.
2. The government must promote entrepreneurship and create a mechanism to give local investors, not only friends and family, more access to capital. Government needs to ensure that Liberians and Liberian business are fully integrated in substantial part of the productive activities in which multinational companies that were granted concessions are involved. This is how we create employment and wealth for the citizenry
3. Government must take small businesses beyond the start-up phase and work with them to grow.
4. Government must create incentive to attract Liberians with knowhow and capital to return home and invest. Let us setup Urban Enterprise Zones. UEZs are excellent medium for boosting local participation, economic growth and development through tax incentives and limited regulations to engender mass citizen participation.
5. Like Rwanda, Liberia long-term development goals should be embedded in its Vision. Let us transform Liberia from a low-income subsistence-based economy, to a knowledge-based, service-oriented economy with a middle-income country status by say year 2020.

▪ Healthcare

1. Conduct a comprehensive healthcare assessment to understand Liberia overall healthcare needs.
2. Invest in developing and training the next generation of Liberia healthcare workers.
3. Use healthcare models that have been successful in other countries like Cuba and Israel.
4. Finance and support education in Science and Technology by providing scholarships..

▪ Education

1. Hire and retain the right talent with the skills to get the job done.
2. Make education a strategic priority and assign measurable action plans.
3. Design an accountability system that align actions and use interlocking scorecards to measure success.
4. Foster creative leadership and the mental rigors to make timely, risky decisions.

▪ Rule of Law

1. Respect the separation of power that exists between the three branches of government.
2. Appoint and recommend judges that respect the Rule of Law and would put the Liberian people first.
3. Strengthen the governance mechanism to consolidate gains in social development and accelerate growth while ensuring that they are broadly shared to mitigate risks to erode the country's hard-won political and social stability.