

**Statement by H.E. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
At Land Commission Land Rights Policy National Validation Conference
Centennial Pavilion
Tuesday, May 21, 2013**

Fellow Liberians;
Partners and Friends of Liberia:

This Land Rights Policy, for the first time in our history, extends ownership rights to the vast majority of our citizens residing in rural communities who, for the most part, continue to observe and be governed by traditional customs and norms.

Along with private, public and government land, which have now been clearly defined for the first time, this Policy creates a new category of customary land, and provides for all four categories the full bundle of rights associated with ownership, such that customary lands are as equally protected as private land.

The recognition and granting of ownership rights to rural communities creates enormous potential for economic empowerment of local communities, which fosters economic growth within these communities. Such local economic growth is essential for sustaining our robust decentralization goals.

We should all be mindful that with every right come responsibilities. In the exercise of these rights, particularly regarding the new category of customary land, rural communities and their leaders must ensure that all members of their communities enjoy the benefits of the natural resources and their land. We should all be mindful that the Government is, indeed, obligated to ensure that all of our rights are protected and that the Government, working with communities, has a major responsibility and role to play in managing and administering lands within the Republic. As clearly stated in the Policy document, “The Government is responsible for managing concessions on Customary Land in the public interest and in a manner that fully recognizes and protects the Customary Land rights of communities.”

We are fully aware that implementing the recommendations of this Policy poses major challenges, especially with regards to customary land. Extensive education and information campaigns will have to be undertaken throughout every corner of the country, in all districts and clans, to educate our citizens about their rights and responsibilities as outlined in this Policy.

The Government must ensure that support is provided to rural communities to enable them to undertake border identification and delineations of community land and the

preparation of deeds. This right goes beyond just the Policy. It now means that those granted the rights will get a legal document – their deeds – so their rights are fully protected. Support must also be provided to assist communities establish legal entities for managing community land and to strengthen their governance arrangements to make them fully responsible and accountable.

While addressing inequities of the past, this Policy provides a clear vision of where Liberians want to go with their land sector. As such, none of the principles or recommendations will be applied retroactively to change prior actions of Government.

The implementation of this Policy will require the repeal and revision of some existing laws, the restructuring of some existing institutions and the creation of new institutions.

By clearly defining the various categories of land and accompanying rights and responsibilities, the Policy will assist in the development of appropriate legal mechanisms and procedures for the resolution of the numerous contentious land disputes.

Finally, we are extremely proud that this Policy is Liberian owned and driven, and that it has involved broader participation from all sectors of our society. As we look forward to its implementation, we will strive to ensure that this Liberian ownership is fully maintained.

While committing the full support of our Government in implementing this Policy, we will continue to seek the support of our international partners who have worked so well with us to make this happen. We wish to register our thanks and appreciation to all of them – all of our partners who have provided financial, technical and material support to enable the Commission to undertake this exercise, as well as to support the overall activities of the Commission.

I also want to thank you, the citizens of Liberia, for your enthusiasm, for your participation, for your involvement, and for your endorsement of this process.

Let me turn to the Land Commission and say, as the Commission Head, Dr. Brandy, said, the real work is just beginning. A policy only sets the desire, the objectives, the pace. It's the implementation of that policy that will make the difference in the rights and the lives of the people.

Besides the Community Land Rights, which to a large extent support long delayed rights and equity of our rural dwellers, you'll have to deal with urban land. We also have to tackle this long-standing issue of large acres of land being held by a few people. We also have to ensure that the rightful owners also have the rights to the land to which they are legally and lawfully entitled.

So, you've got your work cut out for you. As we try to right the historical wrong, we must all be prepared to be a part of this process, to work for this change, to support the reform process that has brought us to where we are and to make sure that this new Liberia, of which we all speak and which we all want, indeed will ensure the rights to private land, to public land, to government land, and to community land.

Thank you.