

# Pursuing prosperity

INTERVIEW WITH **H.E. ELLEN JOHNSON SIRLEAF**

PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF LIBERIA



**ELLEN SIRLEAF** studied at Madison Business College, the University of Colorado and Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, where she obtained a Master's Degree in Public Administration in 1971. She became the 24th President of Liberia in 2006 and the first elected female Head of State in Africa. She is serving her second term as President after winning the 2011 presidential election. Prior to this, she served as President of the Liberian Bank for Development and Investment (LBDI), Vice President of Citigroup's Africa Regional Office in Nairobi, Senior Loan Officer at the World Bank, Vice President for Equator Bank, and Director of the UNDP Regional Bureau of Africa.

**You have been appointed co-Chair of the High Level Panel on the post-2015 Development Agenda. To what extent do you see yourself as a representative of Liberia, of Africa, and indeed of women in general?**

First of all, let me say that I am representative of women; that is the priority. There are other women on the panel of course, but the fact that a woman was chosen as a co-Chair I think speaks volumes about what we think the new global agenda should be, and that women's leadership should be enhanced through the agenda that will be formulated. Second, I am a representative of Africa, and there I see myself, along with the other African panel members, with a responsibility to ensure that the African position and the African voice are represented strongly in the deliberations, and are reflected in the agenda that is presented to the UN Secretary General. Having an HLP meeting in Monrovia itself sends a very strong signal. Monrovia does not have all the comforts to which many of the panel members are accustomed, but the city is going through an economic transformation. So, we are able to see, through the example of Liberia, the progress that can be made, but also the serious challenges that exist, particularly for poor countries. The fact that we brought eminent international people here also gave confidence to the world that Liberia is a safe place to do business. Liberian people also saw that Liberia is now taking its rightful place in the equality of nations. For us this was clearly one of the high points of our national evolution.

**What was achieved at the initial High Level Panel meetings in London and Monrovia, and what do you hope to achieve at the next meeting in Bali?**

We have had already three meetings of the High Level Panel; the first one was at the Rio+20 conference, when the panel met to exchange ideas on the progress of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). They needed to ensure that we continue to work aggressively to achieve the goals and to get the framework for the next meetings. The framework covers three basic areas: economic growth; social equality; and environment sustainability. In London, we focused on the social issues: ownership of economic transformation; equity issues; youth, addressing youth development, particularly youth employment; ownership, to ensure that countries stick their destiny to their own hands; and

again making sure that environmental issues which go beyond the MDGs are taken into account, even as we try to build upon the progress and successes of the MDGs. The Monrovia meeting, which was held between 30th January and 1st February, focused on economic transformation. We talked about the very rigorous consultative process that has been ongoing in all of the regions. We talked about resource management. We identified further the role of civil society and the role of the private sector in economic transformation. We came up with a document that tries to combine what the Rio+20 conference achieved as well as what the High Level Panel in terms of the framework will be putting forth. Now we look forward to the next meeting in Bali, in which the main emphasis will be on environment and sustainability, thereby capturing the three themes that were characterised at the outset. And, as you may know, there are 27 member of the High Level Panel, three of which are co-Chairs: Liberia, the UK and Indonesia.

**You were recently in London for the HLP meeting, during the course of which I understand you strengthened ties between Liberia and the UK. Can you give us an idea of where those relations stand at the moment?**

I'm very pleased to say that the relationship between Liberia and the UK is now on an upward trend. It used to be a very strong relationship before our coup d'etat in 1980, then in 1991 the UK closed its embassy because the situation in the capital was one of war. When the current government took over they put an officer in charge to begin to rebuild the relationship, and now there's a commitment to have a full ambassador resident in Liberia in the next few months. Throughout our period in office the UK has helped us in our debt relief programme and has supported the Security Council in its agreement to provide security through peacekeeping forces. They have supported our civil service reform and contributed to our infrastructure fund. We're still building that relationship because they did not have a mission here for many years, with all UK activity being handled out of Freetown in Sierra Leone.

We were fortunate to have had two major investment seminars in which there was a large participation of UK business entities. British Airways has now started a service between Monrovia and London. We also expect

UK entities to look at the possibility of working in our embryonic manufacturing sector, as one of our prime policies is to add value to our vast natural resources. We want to see the UK continue its support for governance and the rule of law. And we really want to sit down and come up with a bilateral programme that is mutually beneficial.

**How would you describe Liberia's economic progress since you came into power in 2006?**

I hope that everyone, after studying our experience, will say that our progress has been no less than remarkable. We started off by instituting a Poverty Reduction Strategy that identified four pillars: Peace and Security; Economic Transformation; Governance and the Rule of Law; and Infrastructure and Basic Services. In the area of Peace and Security we have trained a completely new army, and we are still in the process of professionalising through training the rest of our security forces: the police, immigration, etc. We still have a UN peace-keeping force here, but the transition programme has now been agreed and the draw-down of those forces has already started. We expect by the year 2015 or so the UN force will be down to minimal numbers and the preparation for their exit will be well in place as our own security forces take over the responsibility for the safety of the nation. Economic Transformation – we started by beginning to re-open some of our productive assets, our mining sector, our agricultural sector, our forestry sector, some of which had suffered from UN sanctions over the years. We got those sanctions lifted and that has enabled us to start the process of transformation, as a result of which our growth, which was negative before 2006, has now averaged about 7.5 per cent over the past six years. And we're hoping to better that as more of the private sector investment – which has totalled some US\$16 billion over the years – will now become operational, thereby creating jobs. Our Fiscal Regime has been largely improved, and we were able to quadruple the size of our budget since we took over. In the area of Governance and the Rule of Law, Liberia today is considered an open society where freedom of expression is such that we have already received an award from the International Media Associates. But more importantly, our civil society is being strengthened to be able to play a meaningful role as a constructive critic of the government, and as a partner of the government in promoting the rights of individuals – rights to land, rights to basic freedoms, rights to education. Our biggest, perhaps less than satisfactory area, remains the fight against corruption, because it is so entrenched as a result of the deprivation

of the past three decades, when people only survived through living on their wits. And by wits I really mean extortion and impropriety – particularly financial impropriety. But again we have taken action, firstly by increasing compensation, particularly in the public service, to reduce their vulnerabilities, and by building institutions such as our General Auditing Commission, and the Anti-Corruption Commission. We joined the Liberia Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (LEITI) and I must say we're one of the first African countries to become compliant, by installing systems that remove private discretion in the discharge of financial duty. We also instituted our Code of Conduct, which our legislature did not pass – it was done by Executive Order. The Declaration of Assets included in that Code of Conduct is an ongoing process. When I say perhaps less than satisfactory, it's because the judicial side of our battle against corruption leaves much to be desired. We do have an independent court system and the Executive cannot interfere with it, but our judicial system needs a lot of training, a lot of new talent, and that process is still ongoing. The penalty for corruption has not yet met our full objective and that's something we are still working on. In the case of my fourth pillar, Infrastructure and Rule of Law, we introduced public sector electricity for the first time in the capital city over the past decade or so, and today we are expanding that service. And water – clean water – because again the pipes, and all the wires were destroyed. We're in the process of rebuilding, and people now have access to piped water. Not sufficiently, but at least the expansion of the system is ongoing. Likewise our school system, the rebuilding of schools, the training of teachers. In our health sector, again reconstructing our hospitals

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Waqās Ahmed, Head of Special Projects at FIRST, with President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf



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and clinics, building new ones, restoring the access to basic healthcare which enables us to give free service to children under five years old in all rural areas. I think we've come a long way.

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**Aside from corruption, which you've identified as a major challenge, what other challenges do you envisage the country having to face in the years ahead?**

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The development of infrastructure. And this is why, in our new 2030 Vision which was launched last month we have focused on power, ports and roads. Over the years, as I said before, there was no electricity, and our ports had not been maintained. They all deteriorated. Over time Liberia's climate has had intense rainfall so the roads were washed away during the rainy season, and we had to keep rebuilding them every year. We need to ensure that we have permanent, paved roads – that's one objective, particularly the major roads that carry people and services across the country. And also the building of feeder roads, which is important for our agriculture sector as we begin to place more emphasis on agriculture, particularly small farmers, as a means of ensuring food security.

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**Which economic sectors would you highlight as having the most potential here in Liberia, and which will you be prioritising in the coming years?**

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Power. Energy. Because we cannot move to the next stage of development from being an exporter of primary products to adding value and kick-starting the manufacturing sector until we have the power, cost-efficient power, to do so – not only for our own Liberian businesses but also for many of the foreign operations that have been able to invest and obtain concession agreements. Also agriculture, food security, and roads. Now, I know we get questions sometimes – why not education and health? These are also important. But we emphasise

power,  
roads and

agriculture because we see these as facilitators for our education and health services. Without power we can't get the schools to function to modern standards, including distance learning. Without reliable power, our hospitals and their equipment become totally dysfunctional. If we don't have the roads the farmers cannot get their produce to market. And that creates a disincentive for production expansion. So, we see the inter-relationship between these elements and, even though we name two or three priority sectors, they have huge beneficial effects on the social sectors.

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**The obvious investment opportunities here from a foreign investor's perspective have traditionally been in the mining, agricultural and energy sectors. Which other sectors do you feel can be attractive?**

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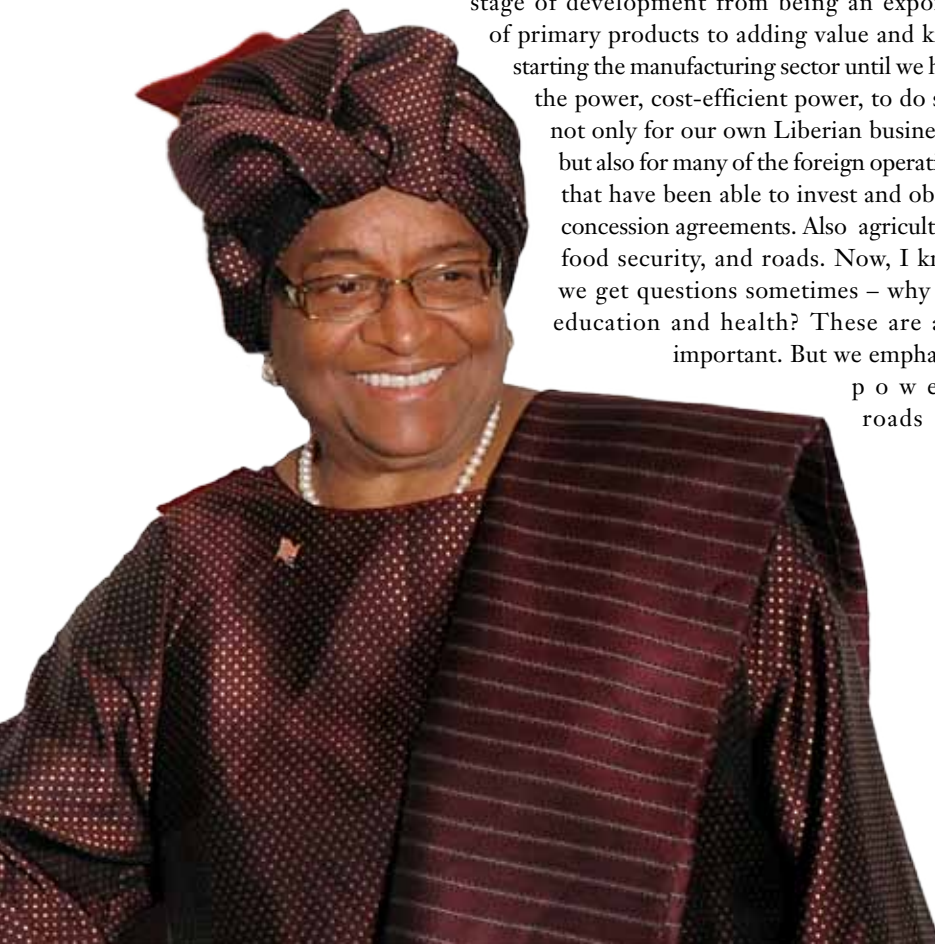
Fisheries. Liberia has over 300 miles of ocean and the possibility to return to pre-war days when Liberia was an exporter of fish products. Again, adding value in all sectors: forestry, moving from the export of logs to producing furniture, plywood and other equipment. Even in the mining sector – for many years in Liberia iron ore has been our main mineral resource, but being able to produce rudimentary steel products has been a fleeting goal and that's something that we need to pursue. I should mention that if we are going to achieve our goals of value addition in the forestry, agriculture and mining sectors, we've got to address some major problems. Land reform is a big area. I'm quite sure you've seen some of the international comments about large concession areas that have displaced certain people. We are working on a land policy that will address that; making sure communities have full rights to their land, and consultation with them, would provide benefits in those cases where important large-scale operations through concessionaires have to continue. We have diamonds and gold. Our diamond sector is part of the Kimberley process, but the difficulty there is that we do not have the human resources to be able to manage the entire country, much of which is forest, and to prevent illegal mining. So those are some of the areas where we still need to improve.

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**How has your personal background – your experience working with international organisations and having studied in the best institutions overseas – assisted you in your position as President of Liberia?**

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It has been of critical importance. Working internationally in development has enabled me to get a much broader perspective on the different development challenges and interventions that are necessary to promote development. Having worked in international organisations such as the World Bank and the United Nations has also given me not only a





broad perspective but expansive contacts that prove very useful in my own presidency. But I've also worked extensively at home in previous governments, in junior and senior capacities, and that has given me much more knowledge and a feel for the Liberian situation. What has been difficult is the fact that Liberia became so dysfunctional because of the war. Its economy had collapsed. Its talent, particularly the leading brains of our country, had all left and we're only now trying to get them back. So the progress we've made, though I maintain it is remarkable, has been difficult and it has taken much longer than we had hoped, because of the capacity issue and because we have so much to build on. Every area you can think of required rebuilding. Though we've got quite a lot of support from our partners and our own resources have quadrupled, the need far exceeds the resources, and so it means that our challenges remain and we must continue to work.

**To what extent do you believe international organisations like the World Bank, the IMF and the United Nations have a significant role to play in Liberia, and in Africa in general?**

I think their role is a necessary one. The Liberian experience suggests that were it not for the strong partners we have, both bilateral and multilateral, we would not have made the progress that we have. There is no way we could, with the US\$80 million budget that we had in 2006, have been able to do what we have done in six years. In many cases, the aggregate external support that we received far exceeded our own national resources. They have played a role also in our training and education, technical assistance, and the return of organisations such as the Peace Corps have all been part of what has enabled us to make the achievements that we have. I know that people are very critical of aid but in our experience – and I dare say that experience is borne out by many other African countries, particularly the poor countries – without that support we wouldn't be able to do what we do. The experience is not totally as we would wish, because there are many times that partners determine their own priorities, but we're now getting to a place where we're strong enough to say to them 'yes, we want that continued partnership

and support but it must be consistent and harmonise with our own national development priorities'. There are times when institutions such as the World Bank, that provide significant resources, particularly for infrastructure development, have processes that do not take into account the fact that you're dealing with a post-conflict, fragile state that cannot wait for three years to be able to start the building of a road when the commitment is made. So, we are working with them but we tell them the road between commitment and cash is much too long. Generally our partners have been supportive however, both financially, materially and morally.

**You received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011. How does it rank among your many accolades, positions and awards, and what does it represent for you, for women, and for Liberia?**

The Nobel Peace Prize, as I see it, was given to me as a symbol of rising women's leadership, and so I always say that that prize was not for me, it was for the women of Africa and the women of the world. The fact that three women were given the prize at the same time was, to us, a message from the Nobel Committee that women can achieve, women can take strong positions, women can be leaders, and this is exemplified in the three different areas represented by the three women who were honoured. For me, it's another prize, another recognition, but I did not see it as personalised. What it enables me to do is to continue to work and make sure that I set an example in what I do in Liberia and in Africa, because I will be watched, I am watched, I am monitored in everything I do and say, because I represent the expectation and aspirations of women, particularly in Africa.

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President Sirleaf wins the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011 together with compatriot Leymah Gbowee and Yemeni activist Tawakkol Karman