

**Your Excellency, members of the CARD Steering Committee,
ladies and gentlemen**

In a few weeks Sierra Leone will have been independent for 50 years and on behalf of all CARD stakeholders I convey our congratulations and best wishes to you, your government and to the people of Sierra Leone.

As we approach that auspicious milestone it is entirely appropriate that we should be assembled in Freetown to reflect on the progress of rice development in the country, in West Africa and across the continent.

It is appropriate because the history of rice development mirrors that of the nations and regions in which the commodity is so important to the welfare of the people.

Especially in this country which has about the highest annual per capita consumption of rice in sub Saharan Africa at 104 kg

We all know, from Sierra Leone's National Rice Development Strategy (NRDS), that:

- About 70 percent of Sierra Leone's 4.9 million people in 2004 are living below the poverty line, with 52% surviving on less than US\$1 per day
- And 26% of the people are not able to afford the minimum daily calorific requirements.

At 50 years post independence these statistics are extremely painful but we will gain very little from dwelling on them.

We must learn from our failure to improve them to avoid repeating our mistakes but we cannot avoid them if we continue to apply the same thinking.

We must think out of the box and take every advantage of modern scientific, technical and policy advances.

Above all we must not be paralysed by immediate fears of food commodity shortages and price rises into only pursuing apparently safe options.

The looming food price crisis is a perfect storm that policy makers at all levels, in both the public and private sector, must take head on with a determination to make rice producers and the other actors in the rice value chains the saviours of the economy, not the victims of its failure.

Your Excellency

Sierra Leone's NRDS is a framework for significant increases in rice production with the specific objectives of:

1. Ensuring an increase in the sustainable productivity and production of rice in Sierra Leone
2. Promoting appropriate post harvest handling, processing and marketing of rice
3. Developing appropriate infrastructure for rice production and marketing
4. Improving the capacity of stakeholders and institutions involved in the rice sector

The strategy for increasing rice production is two pronged:

- (a) increase in area cultivated, mainly in the lowlands capacity
- (b) increases in productivity per unit area in all ecosystems.

Your Government's goal is to achieve rice self sufficiency by 2013 and the implementation of the NRDS is expected to result in the production of over 3 million tons of rice in 2018.

This will require the following key interventions:

1. Rehabilitation and construction of feeder roads
2. Provision of infrastructure including: markets, irrigation schemes; post harvest processing of produce at farm and village level including drying floors, crop stores, rice hulling and milling machines
3. Efficient provision of agricultural services
4. Provision of credit to small farmers, input suppliers and marketers

As co-chair of the CARD Steering Committee and Executive Director of FARA I commend these goals and offer whatever support we can provide to help your government achieve them.

And this applies equally to every country that has developed its NRDS.

Your Excellency,

Implementing the NRDS presents huge challenges.

When we reflect on how little we have been able to achieve in the past, it would seem to be far too ambitious, a pipe dream, a merely rhetorical statement to create the illusion of progress.

But we must not allow ourselves to be deluded into falling into that trap.

This CARD Steering Committee must take responsibility for keeping the NRDSs realistic and on schedule.

We must identify their weak points and raise awareness of them and articulate what must be done to strengthen them.

In my view the most critical weakness in all the NRDSs is the disconnect with the private sector.

They are replete with comments on what should be done to encourage the private sector and what is expected from it.

For example the Sierra Leone NRDS states that Government must restrict its interventions to broad policy formulation and stimulation and support to private sector engagement in production and marketing.

That the Government is aware of the key role of the private sector in accelerating agricultural development through production, processing, marketing, storage, transport and export services.

That the Government's increasing public investment is geared to provide leverage for the acceleration of private investment.

That the Government will encourage and support the private sector to produce, to the maximum extent possible, the seeds that are required for farmers' use, and so on.

It states that all activities and components of a commercial, market responsive nature, and in which the private sector is willing to invest to serve all or part of the national needs, shall be the responsibility of the private sector.

Your Excellency

These are all good intentions but the NRDS is entirely silent on the private sector's response to these responsibilities.

Where are the views of the smallholders who constitute the greatest part of the private sector?

Where is the evidence of buy-in from processors and traders?

How much is the private sector prepared to invest and in what aspects of the industry?

In particular there is no indication of how the Government will avoid repeating the failures of the Structural Adjustment Programmes, which just assumed that the private sector would rush in to fill the vacuum caused by reducing public sector capacity?

Your Excellency members of the CARD Steering Committee

I have used my own country's NRDS as an example but everything I have said applies to all the NRDS.

In other words, I am challenging all of us to conduct a detailed and realistic review of how to bring the private sector on board to help us learn their true demands and needs and what they can actually offer to ensure the achievement of the NRDS objectives.

It will not be easy, but we must engage the private sector, because we will not succeed if we continue planning in our public institutional ivory tower.

Your Excellency

Let me return to where I started.

In a few weeks the people of Sierra Leone will be celebrating 50 years of independence

I believe that your government's commitment to the national NRDS and to rice development in the Mano River Union and across the continent signals a strong commitment to improving the welfare of the people of our country and our continent.

I congratulate my colleagues in CARD from JICA, the other Development Partners, AGRA and particularly the National NRDS Task Forces on their achievements to date

However, I take this opportunity to remind them that the vast majority of the people are engaged in the private sector and the rice industry is extremely important to their food security and prospects for employment and prosperity.

And I am asking my colleagues assembled here to consider how the private sector can be brought on board

And to ensure that the roles, needs and commitments of the private sector are much more clearly articulated in the next iterations of the evolving NRDS.

Thank you