

Mr. Chairman, Your Excellency The President, The Hon. Vice President, Cabinet Ministers, Members of Parliament, The Mayor of Freetown, The Chair of the UN Theme Group on HIV/AIDS, UN Agencies, The American Ambassador, Bilateral and Multilateral partners, People living with HIV, members of the fourth estate, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, on behalf of the National AIDS Secretariat, and on my own behalf, I wish to take this opportunity to thank you all for the time you have taken off your busy schedules to join us in commemorating World AIDS Day and at the same time, the launching of our National HIV/AIDS Strategic Plan for the next five years (2011-2015) by the Chair of the National AIDS Council, His Excellency the President, Dr. Ernest Bai Koroma., your presence here is a testimony of your commitment to work with the National AIDS Secretariat in rolling back the AIDS epidemic in our country.

I am sure the AIDS epidemic needs to be introduced to anyone of us gathered here. It is an epidemic that knows no boundaries, social, economic or religious. It is an epidemic that attacks women and men, an epidemic that brings blame, rejection and division into families and communities.

The spread of HIV/AIDS in our country is very unique. We are now experiencing a low prevalence among the general population. This means we have time to contain the epidemic, but time is running out. In the next five years, if we are complacent to contain the epidemic, the social and developmental gains we have achieved will be lost.

To meet the challenges that this will require increased commitment and sustainable and collective efforts among all stakeholders including community and religious leaders, business leaders, the media and PLHIVs.

Mr. Chairman, Your Excellency, Hon. Vice President, Cabinet Ministers, Members of the Diplomatic Corps, UN Agencies, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, I would like to share with you how Sierra Leone has tried to address the HIV/AIDS epidemic and our future plans.

In 2006, The Government of Sierra Leone and its partners developed a 5 year National Strategic with six key priority areas:

Prevention of new infections, care and support to PLHIVs, human and legal rights of PLHIVs, decentralized implementation of HIV/AIDS programmes, research, monitoring and evaluation, key sectoral responses.

These priority areas are in line with the principles of Universal Access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support services.

Following the midterm review of this Strategic Plan in 2008; five key pillar activities were identified in 2010 to guide the national response. These five pillar activities will contribute towards the goal of Zero New HIV Infections in Sierra Leone.

The patterns of the transmission of HIV in Sierra Leone are dynamic and have been changing over time. It is probable that the main risk factors and drivers of the epidemic may have changed over time. In order to adapt to the changing behaviour patterns that put people at risk of infection, the National AIDS Secretariat with support from UNAIDS, UNICEF, WHO and others conducted a study on the mode of transmission to describe the current status and drives of the epidemic and identify the sources of new infections.

The results of the study led to the development of the new Strategic Plan to which His Excellency is about to launch. This New Strategic Plan has very ambitious targets as a means of making Universal Access to HIV Prevention, Treatment, Care and Support a reality as well as the country's goal of achieving zero new infections. In addition, the set targets are also in line with the Millennium Development Goals of halting and beginning to reverse the spread of HIV infection. In spite of this, many challenges still lie ahead. But collectively as a group of partners we are to the challenge.

Recent statistics, classify Sierra Leone as being one of the 56 countries that has stabilized and beginning to reduce the incidence of HIV by 25% as evidenced by the MDG Award to Sierra Leone by the United Nations MDG Awards Committee in September, 2010.

The Secretariat recognizes the high level of commitment you have been demonstrating in your concerted efforts as partners to further contain the epidemic in our country and I urge you to continue to do so.

I want to assure your Excellency that we at the Secretariat are also committed in meeting the country defined targets by 2015. Realizing this is essential to achieve the Millennium Development Goal 6 of halting and reversing the spread of HIV.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank our numerous partners in particular the Global Fund, World Bank, German Government through the German Development Bank/KfW, UN Agencies, CDC, and other bilateral and multilateral partners for their moral, technical and financial support. Together, I believe we can do more than what each of us can do individually.

I thank you for your attention and God Bless us all.