

Memorandum

To: His Excellency President Ernest Bai Koroma

From: Honorable Mary Robinson, President, Realizing Rights

Subject: Congratulations on the Launch of the Free Health Care Initiative and Recommendations for the Future

Date: 29 July 2010

We are meeting at a truly historic moment. Sierra Leone's recent launch of the Free Care for Pregnant Women, Lactating Mothers, and Children Under the Age of Five is important not only for the people of this nation, but also globally as a model of leadership and initiative in this critical area. Your leadership and the commitment of your government to promote health equity and to prioritize women and children serve as a powerful example for the international community.

Recognizing the significant challenges faced by Sierra Leone, I would particularly like to commend you and your government on your commitment to maternal health and access to reproductive health services. I also applaud your efforts to promote transparency in the implementation of health policies; to address corruption in the delivery of services; and in recognizing the importance of strengthening health workforce capacity.

It is clear that a major step forward had been taken. As you well know, as we celebrate this great achievement, it is critical that implementation also meets with success. The Ministerial Leadership Initiative for Global Health (MLI), a project of my organization Realizing Rights, working in partnership with the Results for Development Institute and the Council of Women World Leaders, and I are committed to supporting you and your government in realizing your health care priorities. To reinforce your accomplishments to date in maternal health and to address the very real challenges ahead, I offer the following recommendations:

1. **Continue to promote maternal health as a human right and address it with a holistic approach.** As maternal health programs and policies are implemented, a focus on human rights is critical. Human rights provide a compass to ensure that the systemic barriers to maternal health are addressed. These barriers include lack of access to quality health services, education and earning opportunities, poor nutrition, child marriage, unequal rights for women within the household and nation, and gender based violence. Moreover, ensuring access to family planning services is essential as an effective strategy to reduce maternal mortality as well as from an economic perspective, particularly related to the impact of an increasing population.
2. **Build upon the lessons learned from the launch of the Free Care program.** Your leadership and the efforts of the Ministry of Health and Sanitation demonstrated the value of clear goals and a hard deadline to galvanize action to make the Free Care launch a reality. This leadership was coupled with strong internal processes to coordinate the

successful roll out of the program. MLI is committed to working with your government and specifically the Ministry of Health and Sanitation to continue to increase the capacity needed to lead and manage the complexities of initiatives such as Free Care.

3. **Strengthen the quality and capacity of service delivery provision.** I applaud the recently announced Basic Package of Essential Services. Recent increases in the number and improvements in the quality of maternity wards and other health facilities throughout the country also demonstrate significant progress. However, it is essential to continue to focus attention on the strengthening of the quality of service provision. Now that user fees have been removed for certain populations, you are poised to address the next challenge of ensuring access to quality services in order to truly improve the health of your citizens, particularly women and children.
4. **Continue to advocate for long-term health financing to ensure health care access for all.** I recognize that you face many competing budgetary priorities. I hope you will continue to make the health sector a top priority of your government. Ensuring the long-term financial sustainability of health care must remain a central priority. This includes ensuring there are mechanisms to sustain free care through government and donor commitments. MLI is committed to supporting the government in developing a long term financing strategy and advocating for long-term predictable funding to enable access to health care for all. MLI stands ready to support your long-standing commitment to move towards universal health coverage through long-term financing mechanisms, like health insurance.
5. **Address the Issue of Health Worker Migration**
I am deeply aware that the critical shortage of health workers in Sierra Leone is a central impediment to the government's efforts to improve maternal health outcomes. I also recognize the fact that over 50% of Sierra Leone's physicians serve the population of wealthy OECD nations. Our work has recently resulted in adoption of the WHO Global Code of Practice on the International Recruitment of Health Personnel by the 193 member states present at the 63rd World Health Assembly. The WHO Global Code is the broadest possible expression of the challenges associated with health worker migration; it importantly also articulates specific ethical norms around supporting health systems, particularly health workforce, in source nations. We look forward to working with your government to mobilize long term support for the training and retention of health workers from destination countries whose populations benefit from Sierra Leone's health workers. We are additionally committed to helping support your government in strategic planning for long-term health workforce challenges, including in terms of capacity building in under-resourced areas, prospects for civil service reform, and planning for financial sustainability of health worker salary increases.

Sierra Leone faces considerable and urgent challenges in improving maternal health and saving women's lives. Yet there are many opportunities to build on the progress and momentum that your government has enabled in recent years. I would personally like to applaud your achievements and leadership and to emphasize our commitment to supporting your efforts and continuing to work with you to improve the health of women in Sierra Leone.