



START YOUR AUTO QUOTE >

10.7% average price decrease  
for Mass. drivers

[guardian.co.uk](http://guardian.co.uk)

## Liberia aims to become an inspiration to others

President Johnson Sirleaf explains how she's helped one of the world's poorest countries make great strides with two millennium goals

Annie Kelly  
The Guardian

When 60 countries from around the world pledged their commitment to the new Millennium Declaration in 2000, Liberia wasn't included in the handshakes and photographs. The small west African state was at war, in the grips of a bitter and bloody civil conflict that had killed hundreds of thousands of its own people and decimated its fragile economy.

Eight years on, the scars remain. Liberia is still one of the least developed countries in the world. Informal unemployment hovers around the 85% mark, access to health services, clean water and sanitation remains limited, and 76% of the population lives on less than \$1 a day.

In 2006, a new government headed by former World Bank and UN director Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Africa's first elected female head of state, pledged to rebuild Liberia's economy, heal the deep rifts caused by political corruption and tackle the chronic poverty faced by many of its people.

As well as starting a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to address crimes committed during the later stages of Liberia's long civil war, Johnson Sirleaf has also put in place a poverty reduction strategy founded on pillars of enhancing national security, revitalising the economy, promoting governance and the rule of law and rebuilding infrastructure and social services. The millennium development goals that came out of the Millennium Declaration are the foundations on which this strategy is being built.

Speaking to the Guardian by telephone from Liberia, Johnson Sirleaf acknowledges that a history of persistent bad governance and an almost total lack of institutional capacity have chronically undermined Liberia's chances of hitting any of the targets.

"When the world agreed to the millennium development goals, we were seeing our country regressing developmentally," says Johnson Sirleaf. "Since then we've been trying to catch up."

Liberia's first progress report, in 2004, acknowledged that, in the past: "Decision-making and management processes were neither participatory, transparent nor accountable. Consequently, there had been violations of human rights, pervasive system failures and lack of strategy for sustainable socio-economic development."

Despite this bleak analysis, Liberia's progress since 2004 - namely around education and HIV - has been significant. Enrolment in primary education has jumped from 44% to 80% since 2006, with girls making up the majority of new attendees.

"We have also made great strides in other goals, especially goal 7 - we have increased access to safe drinking water by 25% and sanitation by 15%," says Johnson Sirleaf. "I believe we will succeed in halving HIV/Aids. There are many goals we will realistically not meet, but this doesn't mean we are not retaining our focus on all."

Johnson Sirleaf credits a focus on rebuilding the institutional infrastructure as key to these recent successes.

"After the war, we recognised that we just didn't have the skills for effective implementation of a poverty reduction strategy," she says. "We need to coordinate national efforts to build skills, training and education with strong partnerships with international implementation agencies. All of this will take time, but we're already seeing the progress that governance and building firm monitoring systems can have."

But serious challenges remain. Despite its best efforts to rebuild, Liberia is battling against the tide of rising food prices, threatening to engulf the efforts of many developing countries to tackle poverty.

"This was not a problem anticipated at the time the goals were formulated and I do believe there should be the introduction of

some new indicators to deal with this crisis," she says. "We have a target of halving hunger, but now there needs to be a specific focus on the support of food production, otherwise food shortages could undermine all attempts by developing countries to progress towards hitting poverty reduction targets."

Coming from so far behind, does Liberia stand a chance of achieving its aim of doubling its progress towards the millennium goals? "Any chances we have of hitting any of the targets is good policies and effective partnerships," she says. "It's a big challenge but one I hope we can meet. I am hoping that we will come to be seen as a test case in just how much can be achieved if the will and the resolve is there."

guardian.co.uk © Guardian News and Media Limited 2008