

**Statement delivered at a symposium in commemoration of World Aids Day held at the Atlantic Hall, National Stadium, Freetown on Tuesday, 01<sup>st</sup> December, 2015**

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Courtesies.....

HIV/AIDS has posed a devastating effect on nations especially in sub Saharan Africa. These effects have led to the breakdown of social and economic structures thus posing a debilitating effect on securing livelihoods especially for young people who have been infected with HIV/AIDS. The efforts of peoples and nations to curb its spread have culminated to the institutionalization of systems and procedures at various levels of governmental and non-governmental interventions. With increased levels of partnerships and support based provisional engagements, we have as a nation transcended to a point where the fight against the epidemic has become a national concern with glaring evidence of victim-led participatory and integrated approach. This in itself has helped to break the cycle of stigmatization that it posed and thus built a greater percentage of survival confidence. As a nation, we must build on the gains that we have made in order to push for the realization of the theme of this year's commemoration.

The theme of this year's commemoration "Fast track to end Aids: Get Tested for HIV" signifies the urgent need for nations to step up their actions not only to prevent or control Aids but to STOP or put an end to it. This is a clarion call, a call to action which recognizes that health is rooted in the social structure as well as the environment; it requires and promotes maximum community and people-led self-reliance promotion and participation in fast tracking to end the menace.

Community and people-led participation in the planning, operation and control of primary health care, making the fullest and judicious utilization of national and other resources, and to this end developing appropriate and standardized education and self-regulatory mechanisms for communities and people to participate will in no small way help to put us on the fast track to put an end to HIV/AIDS.

The need to increase youth, community and people-centered specific health services including peer education health projects such as fast tracking an end to

HIV/AIDS campaigns, youth action projects such as safer sex talk-shows, counseling projects, youth health clinics and drop-in projects for family planning, young women's advice health centres, youth disability projects, units, wards and service designated for the treatment of youths can all contribute to the realization of the theme for this year. Once this is achieved, ladies and gentlemen, it can provide a safer and greater assurance for the end of transmission.

Improving sexual and reproductive health is a challenge especially where it seeks to ensure that youths and people generally can have sex safely without the fear of sexually transmitted diseases. Unfortunately, the absence or lack of implementation of policies and programmes to address the specific reproductive health needs of especially young people must be speedily addressed. Unprotected sex among young people can be attributed to rising fertility and unprotected sexual activity among others which have various socio-economic and medical consequences.

Voluntary testing and counseling is crucial. Young people especially must make use of this opportunity in order to enable them to be well informed about their status and reduce the risk of STDs including HIV/AIDS. Although most STDs apart from HIV are treatable, the stigma attached to STDs still needs to be overcome. It is therefore imperative that our health recovery strategy prioritizes the establishment and improvement of youth friendly services, livelihoods opportunities to reduce the economic constraints and ensure that young people benefit from the available STDs/HIV/AIDS services. However, all of these cannot be achieved without the willingness and supportive role of the young people themselves. If HIV is to end, it has to start with YOU.

The history of HIV/AIDS has deepened our sense of human misery and the global response in the fight against it has continued to pose a huge challenge. The realities and challenges of this pandemic can only be dealt with if cautious and conscious precautionary measures are instituted, strengthened and maintained. It is no stretch of the imagination that almost every person in this symposium is knowledgeable about HIV/AIDS. We are all filled with experiences in one or the other about this menace but what is left is the enhancement of our individual and collective capacities to do what it takes to bring it to a final halt. We have as a nation strived together to fight Ebola, we must also as a nation strive harder to fast track our efforts to bring HIV/AIDS to an end. But this goes with attitudinal

and behavioral change because even if we have all the centers for testing and possible treatment, if we as agents of change are not ready to follow the rules of the games, our efforts will never yield fruits.

The EVD outbreak has thought us a lesson as a nation. The high percentage of pregnancies recorded shows that we are still at a higher risk, meaning that the use of condoms is still a very huge challenge. This is a pointer that the possibilities and tendencies of transmission during that time were growing at an exponential rate.

The irony of ending HIV/AIDS rests in our preparedness to undergo a free test. This year's commemoration requires us to reposition ourselves and make use of the available service delivery mechanisms which includes doing the free HIV test to enable us to know our status, seek to know the fundamentals of preventative and control measures and help to scale up the behavioral practices that are associated with ending the menace. This includes Abstinence, Be Faithful and the use of condom. This is fundamentally relevant for our young folks, students and others in and out-of-school youths among whom sex has become a way of life. We must ensure that we do not revert to the belief that our young folks held in time past that HIV meant "American Intention to Destroy Sex. We all have our roles to play as parents, teachers, business people, traditional and religious leaders, activists, etc., and if we fail to perform the roles that are required of us, be assured that posterity will judge us.

The factors that enable us to contribute to Fast Track To End HIV are no secrets. The Ministry of Health and Sanitation or the HIV Aids Secretariat all by themselves cannot end this menace. It is YOU, ME, WE and US.

The Ebola (Health) recovery plan must encapsulate this provision to ensure that the building of hospitals and primary health care facilities are adequate enough to provide essential health care not only in the form of treatment but also in the form of knowledge building and adaptive and safer practices and skill share with all relevant partners.

Ladies and gentlemen, I hope that this day will instill a sense of discipline in all of us to re-position ourselves and work collectively to Fast Track To End HIV/AIDS in Sierra Leone and the world at large. **I thank you very much.**