

**Speech of Dr. Raghuvansh Prasad Singh, Minister of Rural Development, Government of India on
Inaugural function of 16th General Session of AARDO Conference in Hotel The Ashok, New Delhi on
6th January, 2009**

H.E. Mr. Pranab Mukherjee, Minister of External Affairs, Government of India

His Excellency Dr. Adel Safar, President of AARDO,

My colleagues Mrs. Suuryakanta J. Patil and Mr. Chandra Sekhar Sahu, Ministers of State for Rural Development, Government of India

Dr. Rita Sharma, Secretary, Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India

His Excellency, Mr. Abdalla Yahia Adam, Secretary General, AARDO

Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Observers, Members of Diplomatic Corps,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is indeed a distinct honour for me to be amidst all of you on the occasion of the 16th General Session of the Afro-Asian Rural Development Organization (AARDO) Conference. On behalf of the people of India and on my own behalf, I welcome all the distinguished delegates to this historic city of Delhi. We have assembled here at a very crucial juncture, when the world economy is going through one of the most painful and severe recessions in recent times. Indeed it is my firm belief and conviction that greater thrust and focus on rural development in the member countries would pump-prime our economies and provide the much needed fiscal stimulus to stem the tide. The development of rural areas and improvement in the quality of life of rural people has been of primary concern in the economic planning and development process of our countries where majority of our population live in rural areas. This Conference is being organized here in accordance with India's commitment to promote the spirit of South-South cooperation, which has been a significant component of India's policy since independence. We strongly believe in strengthening the horizons of cooperation and collaboration in different areas with all the countries as well

as international and regional organizations with the objective to improve living conditions of the masses. Most of the Asian and African countries share a history of colonial exploitation. In the post colonial era, reconstruction was found to be useful and also helped cement our close relationship with the countries of Asia and Africa.

2. In fact, India's relation with AARDO is not of recent origin. India is one of the founder members of the Organization along with Malaysia, Libya, Egypt and Japan as India had hosted the first Afro-Asian Conference on Rural Reconstruction in 1961 under the dynamic and visionary leadership of India's first Prime Minister, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru. This historic meeting led to the creation of an institutional arrangement which resulted in the formation of what is now known as Afro-Asian Rural Development Organization. Since the inception of AARDO in 1962, India has been continuously playing a significant role in its core activities. India has been the host to the AARDO Secretariat since its inception. The Government of India, besides providing the building to house the Secretariat, has extended diplomatic immunities and privileges that are available to other UN agencies and international organizations based in India.

3. India has been actively contributing to the technical activities by regularly conducting training courses for AARDO-sponsored candidates in its apex 'Centres of Excellence' under the auspices of ITEC (Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation). At present, the Government of India offers 50 fellowships every year to the nominees from AARDO member countries in the field of small-scale industry development, fertilizer quality control, information technology, sustainable development, women's empowerment, textile designing and a host of allied subjects. Besides, AARDO member countries get exposure to various Indian rural development institutions and study centres from time to time under the study visit and field level training programmes. India has also been providing the services of its experts working in the field of agriculture and rural development to AARDO member countries as and when required. India has had the privilege to host a number of AARDO's international workshops.

4. I will also take this opportunity to thank AARDO as the Organization has provided training fellowships to many Indian officials who have been trained in other AARDO member countries like Japan, R O Korea, Malaysia, Egypt, etc. Many Indian officers have participated in AARDO's international workshops and seminars and thus got an opportunity to share and learn from AARDO member countries' experiences.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

5. As you may all be aware, the Government of India has hosted the historic Inter-Ministerial Summit of AARDO in January 2007 at New Delhi on Rural Development: Afro-Asian Perspective. The summit resulted in the adoption of the "New Delhi Declaration". The Declaration, signed by the Member Countries has been the guiding spirit for AARDO as well as its member countries in implementing their developmental activities.

6. I would also like to share with you, the Indian experience in rural development. Rural development has been a primary concern and by enhancing budget over the years the focus of our Government is inclusive growth and paradigm shift in approach towards improving the quality of life of the rural people, as about 70% of the people are living in rural areas. This can be gauged from the allocation of funds for the rural development programmes which has been enhanced from Rs.519.00 billion in 9th Plan to about Rs. 1141.00 billion in the 10th Plan and Rs. 2617.00 billion in 11th Plan outlay. Funds to the tune of Rs. 374.00 billion were made available to the Ministry during 2007-08. For the financial year 2008-09, the allocation of the Ministry has been enhanced to Rs. 678.00 billion. The Government is committed to achieve Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of poverty alleviation and rural development well before the target year of 2015. I am sure that the other AARDO Member Countries will also endeavour to achieve these goals within the agreed timeframe.

7. The focus of my Ministry is both on inclusive growth and poverty alleviation through wage and self-employment schemes as well as through augmentation of rural infrastructure and provision of basic amenities.

8. Under the 'Bharat Nirman' (Building Rural India) initiative, a time-bound business plan is being implemented to augment key infrastructure in the rural areas like roads, electrification, water supply, irrigation, housing and telecommunication by 2009.

9. 'Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojna' (PMGSY), a key component of the Bharat Nirman, provides connectivity to unconnected habitations, for their better access to the employment opportunities, educational and health facilities. Up to October, 2008, construction of 181 thousand Kms of rural roads has been completed.

10. 'Indira Awaas Yojna' is another component of Bharat Nirman to provide houses to the rural poor. Till date, 19 million houses have been constructed under this programme.

11. Rural drinking water is also a component of Bharat Nirman which supplements the efforts of State Governments in ensuring safe drinking water supply.

12. Government of India also attaches utmost importance to rural sanitation through Total Sanitation Campaign (TSC). The objective of the programme has been to improve the quality of life of rural people and to provide privacy and dignity to the people, especially women. As a result of the above initiatives taken the coverage has increased substantially from 21% in 2001 to 59% till date.

13. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), 2005 provides for the enhancement of livelihood security of the households in rural areas of the country by providing at least one hundred days of guaranteed wage employment in every financial year to every household. I am happy to share with you that from 1st April, 2008 this programme have been extended throughout the country and all 615 districts in

the country have been covered. This flagship programme supplements employment opportunities in rural areas as well as strengthen grass root process of democracy, transparency and accountability in governance. During 2008-09, upto November, 2009, 32 million households were provided employment and about 2 million works were taken up. The assets created result in sustained employment for future growth and self-sufficiency. The wage disbursement under the programme is done through a wide network of banking institutions and post offices to ensure transparency.

14. The main scheme to provide self employment through 'Swarnjayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojna' (SGSY) to rural poor is a holistic programme covering all aspects of self employment such as organization of poor into Self-help Groups, training, credit, technology infrastructure and marketing. So far, 3.17 million SHGs have been formed under the programme and approximately over 11.17 million swarozgaries have been assisted with credit and subsidy. I am happy to mention here that out of these 6.2 million are women.

15. Land is a natural resource base and its efficient utilization is vital for economic growth and development of rural areas. My Ministry attaches utmost importance for development of rainfed/degraded/wastelands by increasing their productivity following the principles of equity, transparency and community empowerment. Fund allocation for watershed programmes has been increased 5 times during last one decade.

16. In the area of Land Reforms, 12.6 million tenants have been conferred ownership rights or their rights have been protected. About 5 million acres of surplus land have been distributed to about 5.56 million beneficiaries. In addition, about 15.3 million acres of government wasteland have been distributed to the poor. We have also formulated an ambitious programme namely, the National Land Records Modernization Programme (NLRMP) for computerization of land record system. The programme aims to cover all districts in the country within a definite time frame.

17. While the specially designed programmes focus on overall development of rural areas and alleviation of poverty, the Ministry of Rural Development also has Welfare and Rehabilitation programmes for the benefit of old and destitute members of rural families living below poverty line. This programme is known as National Social Assistance Programme and provides subsistence to the targeted beneficiaries by a minimum monthly pension and a gratuity to such families who have lost their bread winners. The programme has presently coverage of 14.3 million persons.

18. Government of India, as a measure of inclusive growth, has also launched the National Rural Health Mission to provide effective health care to rural population through out the country. The public spending on health through this mission is to enhance from 0.9% to about 3% of our GDP. The main focus of the programme is on reduction in infant mortality and maternal mortality rate, universal access to public health services, prevention and control of communicable and non-communicable diseases, population stabilization, revitalization of traditional medical systems, etc.

19. Another major initiative taken by the Government of India is through the programme of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan for universalization of elementary education in a time-bound manner. Free and compulsory education to the children in the age group of 6-14 years is the main objective of this programme which will cover 192 million children in 1.1 million habitations.

20. I am sure, similar schemes for rural development and poverty alleviation are being implemented in AARDO member countries. This Conference would provide a valuable opportunity to all of us for sharing our experience with regard to the key challenges that have to be addressed for their effective implementation in the next triennium.

21. The ground realities are ripe to contemplate comprehensive and cohesive insight to fathom sustainable development endeavours. The research and training functions in these countries should

provide appropriate solutions for grass-root level problems. A collaborative arrangement among the link institutions of AARDO member countries in training and research would help in learning from successful experience and also availing of expertise by the member countries which will pave the way for identification of solutions to the existing and also emerging problems. The new millennium offers a great opportunity as well as challenges to developing countries in Asia and Africa. These two continents are the important regions needing huge investments and latest technology.

22. As Member Countries are aware, Government of India contributes US \$ 106,000 annual contribution for the activities of AARDO. With a view to taking AARDO to the new frontiers and substantially expand the scale and scope of its activities, we propose to make an additional contribution of Rs 30 million (around US \$ 600,000 at current exchange rates, at the rate of Rs 10 million per annum and US \$ 200,000 per annum) during the triennium 2009-2011. I wish to mention that this additional contribution is proposed to be utilized for capacity building of the Member Countries through training in the Institutions of Excellence in India as well as exposure visits to areas where successful and innovative models of rural development and poverty alleviation have been implemented. I do hope this initiative on our part will further strengthen and foster the developmental efforts in the Member Countries and help them to tackle their own developmental challenges with higher degree of competence and professionalism.

23. I assure this august body that India will do its level best for enhancing cooperation among member countries by offering all possible help in order to achieve the noble objectives of the Organization.

Thank You, Jai Hind.