

**Welcome Address by Dr. Ms. Rita Sharma, Secretary (Rural Development),
Government of India,**

H.E Dr. Raghuvansh Prasad Singh
Union Minister of Rural Development
Government of the Republic of India

H.E. Mr. Fahd Salim, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
of the Syrian Arab Republic, representing the President of
Afro-Asian Rural Development Organization

Her Excellency Ms. Suuryakanta J Patil
Minister of State for Rural Development
Government of India

H.E. Mr. Chandra Sekhar Sahu
Minister of State for Rural Development
Government of India

H.E. Mr. Abdalla Yahia Adam,
Secretary General
AARDO

Hon'ble Ministers

Excellencies, Members of diplomatic corps

Distinguished Delegates and Invitees

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am truly honoured and feel deeply privileged to have the unique opportunity to welcome this distinguished galaxy of participants from Asia and Africa to the 57th Session of the Executive Committee of the Afro-Asian Rural Development Organization. Excellencies, your presence here today marks another important milestone in the long journey of cooperation and common endeavour between our countries, in the cause of rural development. It is a journey that started way back in 1961, as a result of the dynamism and vision of our first Prime Minister, Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru.

AARDO from its infancy in the 1960s has grown and evolved as an Organization reaching its adolescence with the current membership of 30. It holds the promise of a more glorious adulthood and maturity as we expect several more countries to join our fold in the future. The current AARDO member countries represent about 2.2 billion of the world's population.

Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen,

The 21st century is often described as the Asian century. We as founding members of AARDO wish to see the 21st century as the century of Asia and Africa, with the people of the 2

continents working together to promote, sustainable equitable and environmental-friendly development. In other words, working towards “poverty history”.

Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen,

As we embark upon the 57th Session of the Executive Committee to be followed by the 16th General Session of the AARDO Conference, I am reminded of the famous words of Mahatma Gandhi, when he said, and I quote

“I will give you a talisman,
--- Recall the face of the poorest and weakest man who you may have seen,
and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him.
Will he gain anything by it?
Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny?”

As we begin our deliberations here today, I feel we shall in no small measure, live up to Gandhiji's Talisman. For we shall discuss and find ways and means to improve the lives of the poorest, the weakest of the rural communities, those who have the least control over their lives and destiny. Mahatama Gandhi is the historic link between the two great continents that are linked by AARDO. For the people of India, Africa is also the land of awakening of the Father of our nation, Mahatama Gandhi. The birth of an independent nation, India in 1947, in turn provided powerful support to the forces of nationalism and decolonization in Africa. The emergence of Ghana as the first independent country in Sub-Saharan Africa in 1957 was followed by the tumultuous decade of sixties, seventies and eighties culminating in the end of apartheid in 1994 in the same very land that had created the Mahatama.

There is much to be gained in sharing our development experiences.

- In India, we have sought to strengthen food security of poor rural households by legally guaranteeing 100 days of wage employment and enhancing household income.
- We have sought to empower the rural poor through social mobilization into self-help groups which can engage in productive, income generating micro-enterprises.
- We have sought to develop human resources by investing in skill development and capacity building, especially the rural youth.
- We have sought to protect the elderly and vulnerable sections of the rural poor, through social safety nets and old-age pensions and risk management through life and health insurance.
- We have sought to improve the quality of rural life by strengthening infrastructure by investing in roads, housing, sanitation and clean drinking water, rural electrification and social infrastructure and education and health.

Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen,

Rural development itself is undergoing changes and facing ever new challenges as it copes with increasing biotic and abiotic stresses, with climate change adding further to the abiotic pressures on the natural resources on which the rural poor depend for their livelihoods.

The guiding spirit of the Delhi Declaration issued after the Inter-Ministerial Summit of AARDO member countries in January 2007, provides the impetus for greater and more focussed action. Both Asia and Africa have the benefit of young populations. It is by investing in creative energies of our rural youth that the potential of partnership will be fulfilled.

Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen,

I take this opportunity, once again, to welcome you all to the 57th Session of the Executive Committee. I have no doubt that the Executive Committee Session will prove to be a valuable opportunity for reviewing the current policies and programmes for rural development in Asia and Africa and to learn from the collective wisdom of the delegates present here.

I welcome you once again and wish you a most pleasant stay in this historic city of Delhi. I wish also to take this opportunity to wish you a very happy new year.