Keynote Address by
Professor Abraham Kidane
Economic Advisor, Ministry of National Development

Distinguished Guests

It is my pleasure to have this opportunity, on this United Nations Day - indeed 70th Birthday – to make a few remarks on the topic: Transitioning From Millennium Development Goals to Sustainable Development Goals: What Does It Mean For Eritrea. The Government is preparing its Millennium Development Goals Progress Report 2015 that would be completed and ready for access in a relatively short period of time.

Therefore, in the following few minutes I would like to give you a glimpse into what has been achieved so far in the Millennium Development Goals agenda and how Eritrea will transition to the Sustainable Development Goals.

The Millennium Development Goals Agenda (MDGs) that was heralded by the United Nations in year 2000 formally ends in December 2015, and will be succeeded by the Sustainable Development Goals Agenda (SDGs) beginning January 1, 2016. As you know, development is a dynamic process that should not have a beginning and ending dates. However, I believe that value has been added by the segmentation of the development effort into fifteen-year periods that would enable countries to monitor their progress. The MDGs have enabled nations to speak the same development language, compare experiences, learn from each other’s best practices and innovations, and to march further and together in quest of sustainable development.

As you know, economic growth is a relatively simple concept in that it seeks to enhance quantitative changes from human activity involving factors including capital, technology and organizational and managerial inputs. In a given year, an economy’s growth can be measured as change in gross domestic product (GDP) and GDP per capita. Economic growth is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for development.

Development on the other hand is improvement in quantities produced as well as qualitative improvement in the lives of all the people including their social, cultural, political and economic lives. It embodies self-fulfillment and self-esteem, ownership, self-reliance, shared prosperity, dignity, equality, social harmony and safety, social justice, participation in political, social and cultural affairs, access to information, independence of thought, etc.

Eritrea’s development aspirations and agenda evolved over the years. They are not a product of world-class experts in the confines of a think tank, nor are they the blueprints of a successful nation worthy of emulation. They reflect the hopes and dreams of Eritreans present and long past, and they embody interests of posterity. They are an expression of the wishes and desires
of residents of hamlets, villages, towns and cities on the trail that led to full national liberation. And they reflect the aspirations of Eritreans in the Diaspora. They were first articulated in the trenches behind the fighting forces for liberation and vetted fully among the general population following liberation. One can quickly skim through key Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) documents including the declaration of establishment of National Union of Eritrean Women (1979), Proceedings of the Second Congress of EPLF (1987), the Labour Law (1991), and the Charter and the Macro Policy (1994) and understand the roots of the national development policy and programs. Needless to say, these milestones in the evolution of Eritrea’s sustainable development agenda precede the declaration of the Millennium Development Goals declaration in 2000. Eritrea’s development plans and programs are firmly rooted in the calls for gender equality and empowerment of women; eradication of ignorance; rapid, stable and sustainable development; regionally balanced development; eradication of poverty and hunger; widely shared prosperity; inclusive and participative work ethics; development of an open economy; public and private partnership; protection of the environment; and enhancement of democracy and justice.

Ladies and Gentlemen, bundle the above, if you will, with the elements of development that I enumerated earlier when I presented the concept of development, and you have Eritrea’s brand of sustainable development. It is only fortuitous that the main tenets of the UN MDG and SDG goals coincide or bode well with Eritrea’s principles and aspirations of development. I say the MDG and SDG frameworks bode well with the Eritrean brand of development because they were heralded well after these principles had been inscribed in Eritrea’s policies and programs of reconstruction, rehabilitation and sustainable development.

Among the main strategies of the Government are development of agricultural infrastructure; water resource harvesting and development; human capital development; mainstreaming of women’s issues; expansion and improvement of economic infrastructure including transportation, communications, electrification, and tourism; pro-poor social safety net, social infrastructure including education, healthcare, social security, care of veterans and survivors; conducive administrative and legal environment and security; peace and social harmony; and self-reliance and ownership of programs.

Having given you a capsule context of Eritrean development programming, let me now brief you on Eritrea’s performance in the MDGs. There are as you know eight MDG goals: They are (1) Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger (2) Achieve universal primary education (3) Promote gender equality and empower women (4) Reduce child mortality (5) Improve maternal health (6) Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases (7) Ensure environmental sustainability, and (8) Develop a global partnership for development.

As I mentioned earlier, the Government is in the process of completing the preparation of the
MDGs 2015 Report that will eventually be accessible to the general public and development partners. For now, I would like to say that Eritrea has made progress in all the MDGs, and efforts will be accelerated to achieve the remaining goals as an integral part of the nation's development plans and programs.

I should add that, so far and to my knowledge, no developing country has achieved all the MDGs. The hardest nut to crack is Eradication of Extreme Poverty and Hunger. It is the most formidable challenge to all developing countries. In a few African countries, notably Kenya, Central African Republic, Mauritania, Nigeria and Zambia, the percentage of poor increased rather than decrease in the period of 1990-2010. Unfortunately too, global economic and financial instabilities, regional conflicts, and environmental issues including climate change have exasperated the problem. As poverty in all its forms is the nucleus of all development challenges, Eritrea is determined to surpass the MDG goal on poverty and hunger and thereby achieve eradication by 2030.

So far, Eritrea’s most notable success is in the area of public health. Based on 2010 data, and unequivocally corroborated by the relevant United Nations agencies here and in New York, Eritrea was declared the first and only African country to achieve all three Millennium Health goals ahead of the target date of 2015. In acknowledgement of this unique achievement, the United Nations applauded Eritrea by a side event during the 69th Session of the General Assembly in September 2014. All member countries of the UN were invited to the event to learn from innovative practices that resulted in Eritrea’s success. The achievements so far required the participation and cooperation of the people, the Government, and development partners. Government realizes that there are yet great challenges to be overcome in all sectors, and that they can be overcome by continuing the steadfast and widely participative approach that has characterized the national development effort.

The successes recorded thus far occurred despite several formidable challenges. Among them are resource limitations, inadequacy of statistical systems and global economic and financial instability. Furthermore external encroachments on the nation’s fiscal and political space, unjustified and mean-spirited sanctions, misinformation, provocations and threats of war, and the continued and illegal occupation of sovereign Eritrean territories by neighbouring Ethiopia have been distractions and impediments to peaceful development.

The SDGs can be considered in part as a continuation and expansion of the scope of coverage of the MDGs. Here too, eradication of poverty occupies centrality. As well it should. Of the 17 goals, at least three goals and 25 targets revolve around ending hunger and eradicating poverty in all its forms. At least four goals and 38 targets address the critical issues of environmental degradation, climate change, terrestrial ecosystems, exploitation of marine resources, management of forests, desertification, land degradation, loss of biodiversity, and the need to adopt sustainable modes of production and consumption. Two goals and 19 targets address the issues of education and gender equality; one goal and 8 targets deal with water resources; one goal and 13 targets deal with health for all ages; one goal deals with access to modern energy; two goals and 20 targets with growth, employment, innovation and industrialization; and one goal and 10 targets deal with inequality. Whilst most of the SDGs are linked to the MDGs, they extend the scope and depth of engagement. For instance they address inequality not only within...
nations but also among nations, they aim at enhancement not only of child and maternal health but also better health for all ages.

All of the SDGs, we believe, are congruent with Eritrea's development aspirations. The Government has been on target especially as it pertains to poverty eradication, eliminating inequalities of opportunity between genders, and disparities between segments of the population and among cities and regions of the country. The Government's commitment to achieve these goals is unswerving. Eritrea continues to incorporate these goals in its development plans and programs. And to maintain momentum, the government has identified focal persons within public agencies and established committees to review and monitor progress. Several of the SDGs require not only domestic commitment but also adequate bilateral, regional and global cooperation. To that end the Government will work with development partners that share its commitment and support its programs.

Ladies and Gentlemen: Allow me to conclude by reflecting what I personally noted right after liberation in 1991. Under-five year children died at the rate of 151 per 1000, life expectancy at birth was 43 years, and approximately 15 per cent of the entire population had access to clean and safe water. Today, child mortality is only 48 per 1000 live births, life expectancy at birth is approximately 63 years, and over 70 percent of the population has access to safe water. We have some ways to go, but we have also come a long ways.