



**KEYNOTE ADDRESS DELIVERED BY HIS
EXCELLENCY, JULIUS MAADA BIO,
PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF SIERRA
LEONE AT THE HIGH-LEVEL PANEL
DISCUSSION ON REDUCING INEQUALITY
ON THE SIDELINES OF THE 33RD AFRICAN
UNION HEADS OF STATE AND GOVERNMENT
SUMMIT**

Your Excellency, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, Good Afternoon.

Let me first thank OXFAM for their great work to reduce social and economic disparities and to enhance the quality of life among the world's citizens.

You have persistently challenged us, world leaders, to think through problems of development, set goals, outline and pursue commitments to attaining those goals, and to also measure outcomes. Thank you.

To my mind, stable governance and development must be inclusive and sustainable. These aspirations are central both to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals and the Africa Union's Agenda 2063.

But both are unattainable if we fail to address inequality and poverty.

And so with this year's summit dedicated to "Silencing the Guns: Creating Conducive Conditions for Africa's Development," it is but fitting to have this deeper conversation around the two most cited causes of bloody insurgencies on the African continent – inequality and poverty.

So I want to start with two key questions that, to my mind, are germane to this conversation – questions that have guided my government's thinking about inclusive and sustainable development and therefore informed our bold and intentional agenda as a government:

1. How do we break cycles of intergenerational poverty and persistent inequality in my country – where poor parents give birth to poor children who in turn go on to beget even poorer and unhealthier children?

2. How do we generate sustainable development within a peaceful, stable, and resilient milieu? How do we take pole position as a nation, (to borrow a metaphor from motorsports), in this new global economy so that our children are competitively more educated, healthier, and better prepared?

Let me say at the outset that Sierra Leone sees its 2018 ranking (153/157) in OXFAM's Commitment to Reducing Inequality Index (CRII) as an incentive to undertake further progressive action to address thorny development questions.

So let me explain how we have mapped out our bold agenda to tackle the problems of poverty, inequality, and national development.

Eco-system strengthening

Ours is a stable and open democracy that we are strengthening even further with a permanent commission for peace and national cohesion while opening up even more spaces for civic participation and dialogue.

We are no longer the poster child of failed state struggling to shake off multiple stigma of bloody civil conflict, disease pandemics, natural disasters, and corruption.

We have restructured and revamped public institutions.

We have strengthened public financial account management and closed off loopholes for fraud, waste, and abuse of public funds.

We have clamped down hard on corruption because we see corruption as an existential threat. The Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) has acknowledged our sustained progress in the control of corruption and our multilateral partners who had abandoned the previous administration have reengaged.

By cracking down on tax fraud and illegal duty waivers, and consolidating revenue collection, we have increased domestic revenue mobilisation. We have introduced progressive tax codes that minimise the tax burden on the lowest income earners while substantively increasing the minimum wage and pensions right across board.

We are improving the ease of doing business in Sierra Leone from registration, operations, to aftercare and I co-chair the National Investment Board because we believe greater levels of investment in our economy will open up more opportunity for our citizens.

We are diversifying our economy in order to make it more productive and more resilient. With a long compendium of business incentives, we are encouraging greater and new investments in tourism, fisheries, infrastructure, agriculture and agriculture value chains, renewable energy, and even in old sectors such as the extractives where datasets from an airborne geophysical survey show great prospect.

We will continue to review laws and regulations that constrain business and national development.

My argument, essentially, is that inclusive and sustainable development is possible only when we expand and grow the economy within a stable

democratic space with the right laws and policies that facilitate and support that development.

Data

We recognise the power of data and we make it central to our planning and policy making as a government. Relevant and accurate data (disaggregated by gender, region, age, socio-economic class, disability etc as necessary), we believe, helps us ask the right questions, identify the right problems, assess the full dimensions to those problems, and plan bespoke solutions that are both effective and sustainable.

So education resources on providing safe spaces or WASH facilities for girls, for instance, can be better targeted and better spent in solving that problem.

Micro-credit or social safety net interventions for the most vulnerable can be better targeted with data. We have increased and expanded cash transfers to the most vulnerable households

Planning

We have developed a fully-costed Medium Term National Plan that lays out our development priorities in neat clusters.

Central to that national development plan is the flagship programme – Human Capital Development that proposes elevated investments in quality education, quality healthcare, and food security.

Specific Human Capital Development Interventions

A nation's greatest resource is its human capital. A well-educated and healthy population is a future skilled and resourceful population that will propel our nation along the path of sustainable national development.

As a consequence of my government's heavy investment (21% of Annual Budget) in free quality education policy, 2 million children (most of whom could not afford the \$20 school fee) are now in school.

We have created safe spaces for girls in school and we have passed a new Sexual Offences Act to protect women and girls from rape and sexual and gender-based violence.

I have also engaged women's civil society groups to discuss how we can collaborate on bigger questions beyond education and SGBV to women's constitutional and human rights, representation, and all historical and cultural forms of discrimination.

The First Lady's vigorous campaign against early child marriage, sexual exploitation of girls, and other seemingly entrenched cultural attitudes (including taboos on menstruation) that lead to the exclusion of girls from school has resonated across the country.

My government (through the Minister of Basic and Secondary School Education) has set up a taskforce to guide policy on radical inclusion especially on teenage pregnancy.

Students also receive free teaching and learning materials, bus transportation, and in some districts, receive free school feeding.

Children whose parents are teachers, police officers, soldiers receive free tertiary education and women who enrol to study STEM disciplines in college automatically get scholarships.

We have maintained the government's grants-in-aid programme but we are also looking at new financing models that will grant even more access to students from poorer homes who would otherwise not receive a university education.

These interventions level out the perceived poverty and inequality disparities for acquiring an education.

Ultimately, we believe that a skilled labour force is attractive for foreign direct investments and entrepreneurship, and it increases national productivity.

In our aspiration toward inclusive development, we have also deployed block-chain technology to develop a national digital identity platform that will support financial inclusion and access to credit.

We are developing rural renewable energy mini-grids to expand access to energy and to improve on the quality of life in otherwise inaccessible off-grid areas. These rural mini-grids support additional development imperatives in healthcare, education, entrepreneurship, and agro-value chain development.

We also continue investing in training, recruiting, and retaining more nurses. We have introduced a free national ambulance service and we are building more Peripheral Health Units and Community Health Centres to expand healthcare to hard-to-reach places.

We are thoughtfully planning to improve access (geographical and economic) to ante and postnatal care for women and to address nutrition and stunting among under-fives.

The expansion of outpatient healthcare services is consistent with our vision of having a healthy population within the next five years.

Inasmuch as our plans, policies, and interventions touch on the three clusters of social spending, tax reforms, and labour rights evaluated by OXFAM in their Commitment to Reducing Inequality Index, our effort is to develop a broader, more comprehensive, and more holistic ecosystem that is conducive for inclusive and sustainable national development.

When the new datapoints reflect our investments and progress through 2019 and into 2020, we are confident of making progress on the index.

But more importantly, we would be much gratified that we would have taken one more little step in changing the lives of Sierra Leoneans and narrowing gaps on poverty and inequality.

I thank you.