



**KEYNOTE STATEMENT BY HIS
EXCELLENCY, JULIUS MAADA
BIO, PRESIDENT OF THE
REPUBLIC OF SIERRA LEONE
AT THE LAUNCH OF THE SOCIAL
SAFETY NET PROGRAMME -
KENEMA, 27 FEBRUARY 2020**

Honourable Ministers of Government, Honourable Members of Parliament, Members of the Diplomatic Corps, Development Partners, Revered Paramount Chiefs, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, Good morning.

Let me, from the outset, thank the great people of Kenema for the very warm welcome they have accorded me and my entourage. Kenema has always been very close to my heart for way too many reasons. So for me, this is yet another homecoming.

We have aligned our national development goals and strategies with international aspirations on ending poverty. We believe that our development must be inclusive, and sustainable within a resilient and stable economy and democracy.

We are impatient with current data which informs us that a child born in this country can only attain 35% of his/her capacity by the time he/she reaches age 18. We acknowledge, but we are equal to the challenge with our development partners, that we can tackle rising levels of extreme poverty and youth unemployment.

We recall that in the New Direction manifesto, the SLPP committed to reviewing and implementing policies and laws that improve inclusion and access for the most vulnerable of citizens.

In that manifesto, we also committed to revisiting the administration and implementation of the Social Safety Net Programme and, in totality, address the real felt needs of our poorest citizens who are most at risk.

On the margins of the recent AU meeting in Addis Ababa, (at a meeting organised by OXFAM on poverty and inequality), I reiterated that inequality and poverty constitute the greatest

threats to peace and national development. I challenged all of us to engage in thoroughgoing conversations on how to break intergenerational cycles of poverty and inequality. I shared my government's bold and intentional agenda under the following broad rubrics

DATA

We believe that relevant and accurate data (especially data disaggregated by age, gender, socio-economic class, and region) will inform better policy making. We also believe we can better target and anchor Social Safety Net interventions and microcredit distributions with accurate data.

ECOSYSTEM STRENGTHENING AND INTERVENTIONS

I argued that Sierra Leone is no longer the epicentre of civil wars, natural disasters, disease pandemics and corruption. I announced we had taken progressive action to foster national cohesion and expand civic participation, including repealing the odious criminal libel laws.

We have revamped public institutions and we have designated 2020 a year of delivery for all Ministries Departments and Agencies.

We have great success in domestic revenue mobilisation, restructuring public financial management, and clamping down on fraud, waste and abuse. We do so because it is good for governance and it is good for the pro-poor economic policies of our time.

We are actively reviewing laws and policies that constrain business and we are looking to diversify and expand the economy.

We have invested heavily in education across board and we believe the outcomes of our human capital development initiatives will not only mitigate the impact of the risks and vulnerabilities among the poor in the medium to long term, we believe it will create the right platform and environment for inclusive development. So free quality education, free healthcare, expanded school feeding programmes, greater access to outpatient health services are all good for our poorest populations.

The Medium Term National Development Plan establishes a sound framework for social protection initiatives. Across all districts, there is a special focus on people living with disabilities.

Government has already established the Social Insurance Scheme which replaced a dysfunctional civil servant and armed forces pension scheme. We have increased pension payments and initiated the provision of social cash transfers to the aged and vulnerable.

We are expanding citizen registration and financial inclusion. We are expanding telecommunications infrastructure and telecommunications-based financial and other services, building roads and bridges to otherwise inaccessible places, and expanding rural off-grid electricity using renewable sources.

Our strong commitment to and advocacy on battling teenage pregnancy, teenage sexual exploitation, and gender-based violence has been demonstrated in our overhaul of the Sexual Offences Act. Now we have a tougher law with stiffer penalties to protect women and girls especially poor girls.

In higher education, we are supporting automatic grants for girls studying STEM disciplines and TVET education is gradually being expanded to various districts. I recently formally launched the Kambia TVET.

With all of these and more interventions, we hope to level out perceived poverty and inequality disparities and build a skilled labour force with greater earning powers who will also engage in entrepreneurship, and increase national productivity.

Our Social Safety Net programmes are meant to strengthen livelihood systems through job creation schemes for the poorest, skills development initiatives, and micro-enterprise schemes.

I am pleased to announce the first phase of the Social Safety Net Project (with the support of the World Bank, UNICEF, DFID). We have provided predictable income support for almost 183 thousand beneficiaries – used equally for better quality nutrition (40%) and school expenses (44%) while about 12% was used for investing in productive activities or coping with unexpected events.

So there is a net allocation to investments in the health, nutrition, and education of children. Government further advocated with the World Bank for an additional 30 million USD in order to expand the Social Safety Net Project to 16 districts in the country and to further strengthen the key building blocks of the country's basic national safety net system.

There is also additional funding set aside as an emergency preparedness fund. This additional funding will provide quarterly income support of Le 450 thousand per household targeting 210,000 persons including at least 13,000 persons living with disabilities, for a period of three years. This intervention will increase the access of poor households to basic services such as health, education, and nutrition.

This Additional Financing will deepen the impact of the Safety Net Project with respect to human capital development outcomes. We expect that it will close gaps, promote behaviour

change by increasing demand for health and education services, expand inclusion to the disabled, and improve crisis mitigation and response systems.

So as NACSA commences the expansion of the Social Safety Net Project nationwide, I expect you will administer the programme effectively at all levels. I expect that you will predicate decisions on seeking technical assistance and capacity building on lessons learned and on deficiencies that you directly experience. This will assist us to build better and affordable systems.

I expect that you will collect, collate, and analyse accurate data on the distribution and impact of this Social Safety Net project. A dedicated research and data team will build a copious body of knowledge. That knowledge base will drive policy and help us structure interventions and scale priorities.

My government's wage, tax, and pensions policies have been driven by the need to close income disparities and put more money into the hands of the poorest and the most vulnerable. While we work on building a diversified and resilient economy, we recognise that we are not totally safe from the impact of unforeseen economic turbulence or pressures and climate change. World Bank agreed to set aside 4 million USD for emergency preparedness. It would help to map out the most at-risk populations so that our response to their needs in times of disaster is targeted and speedy.

Finally, and most importantly, the implications for childhood nutrition, expanded access to healthcare, support for access to education especially for poor girls are all most important for the future of this country.

We aspire to a country where old age, disability, gender, and socio-economic class can no longer dictate the limits of our capacity and achievement.

We aspire to a country where we will keep the poorest children in school, prevent malnourishment and stunting, support their healthy growth and development so that they not only realise their full potential by age 18, but also go on to become skilled, healthy, and resourceful adults.

I THANK YOU.