Statement by His Excellency, Dr. Julius Maada Bio, President of the Republic of Sierra Leone at the High Level Presentation of the Secretary General's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation.

"Digital Challenges and Opportunities that Governments Face"

WEBEX and UN Web TV, 11 June 2020

Your Excellencies,
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,
Good afternoon from Sierra Leone

Let me, from the outset, thank His Excellency, Mr. Antonio Guterres, Secretary General of the United Nations, for this invitation and acknowledgement of my country's deep investment in innovation and technology. We are also grateful for his recognition that although we are a small country, our vision is firmly embedded in the wider global vision of digital cooperation.

In Sierra Leone, we are wrestling with challenges that are not unique to other countries in Africa. We are working to develop our digital infrastructure and connectivity and we believe that with this, we can further enhance digital penetration. So in the last one year, we have increased mobile cell phone penetration by 7.6% to 87%, and we have increased internet penetration by 8.1% to 25%.

Over the last one year, we have expanded the capacity of the national fibre backbone from 1G to 10G and this has led to an increase in the use of the National Fibre Network by Mobile Network Operators (MNOs), Internet Service Providers (ISPs), and Ministries, Departments, and Agencies (MDAs).

We have completed the 5km cable from the SALCAB Cable Landing Station to Bintumani. That has further strengthened the network. I am also pleased to announce that the network is now fully managed by the SALCAB local team

We will build on this over the coming year as we seek to roll out the National Fibre Backbone Phase 2 that will cover 14 new towns. We have finalised the E-Governance Network and we are making tremendous progress on network architecture as a whole.

We are still contending with low levels of digital literacy across the country and especially in non-urban areas and we are mindful of the persistent threat of digital/cyber security. But that, to my mind is the raison d étre for such international engagements – to learn and discuss best practices and solidify cooperation agreements and productive partnerships that will help our small countries deal with these issues.

But even before becoming President, I was firmly focused on leveraging digitalisation, science, technology, and innovation for national development. My arguments were simple.

First, our world is heavily interconnected by information and communications technologies and digital citizenship must be inclusive both within and across borders.

Secondly, we believe technology is an accelerator of development. Various digital technologies can drive various sustainable development goals especially in view of the limited and unequal progress in most of our nations towards achieving the SDGs. Especially, we believe that by harnessing the advantages of Goal 9 (industry, innovation, and infrastructure), we can make significant progress on delivering, measuring, and optimising on other goals from education, entrepreneurship, agriculture, healthcare, transportation, and more.

We also believe that a digitally enabled Government is a more efficient government. We can eliminate time and process inefficiencies, corruption and red tape, and other service delivery inefficiencies that have held back development in our country.

But there is a bigger imperative – that for Sierra Leone to participate fully in the future global economy and the Fourth Industrial Revolution, Sierra Leone needs a clear and nimble

strategy for using innovation, technology and digitalisation for inclusive development.

Our aspiration therefore as a nation is not only to be digitally inclusive in compliance with international and regional guidelines but to use innovation and digitalisation both as solution and as a critical driver for efficient governance and national development.

So upon assuming office, one of my first decisions was to establish the Directorate of Science, Technology, and Innovation in the Office of President. I appointed the first Chief Innovation Officer to drive our key initiatives and foster productive relationships on digital cooperation. Within the last 18 months, we have made tremendous progress.

We launched a National Innovation and Digitization Strategy as an overarching document. Embedded within the strategy are three key clusters – digital governance, digital identity, and digital economy

We have also ensured that development planning and policy-making, resource allocation, monitoring, and evaluation are driven by accurate and relevant data. Often, we render complex data as 3-D models. We have created various up-to-date, comprehensive, and geo-referenced data hubs that are central to key government priorities in the areas of education, the economy, healthcare, access to justice among others.

We are also increasingly using digital technology and innovation for automating governance processes – budget processes, revenue collection etc. This technology-mediated processes are more effective, more transparent, and more streamlined.

We are also using science, innovation, and technology in the areas of resource governance with a view to bringing more sanity and transparency in that sector. We have recently completed a national airborne geophysical survey through which we have acquired high-resolution, high-precision data sets that will be used to drive the development of that sector.

By automating processes, we are making it easier to register, start, and do business. We are also using forms of digitalisation to support entrepreneurship and business.

The basis of an inclusive digital economy is a national digital identity platform. This is based off a biometric permanent civil registry. We have strengthened our civil registration and vital statistics systems. Through partnership with KIVA and the UN, Sierra Leone developed the first block-chain digital ID platform in Africa. This will enhance financial inclusion, public safety, service access and delivery right across board when fully implemented.

We are eager to also explore new technologies and new possibilities. Our Drone Corridor Project that we launched last year in collaboration with UNICEF will put new technologies to the service of our development aspirations. Drones will support everything from healthcare (especially maternal health), agriculture and food production, the environment (by monitoring green cover loss), education, and more.

We recognise that to take full advantage of all these opportunities and possibilities, we must enhance digital literacy in schools. My Government supports free quality basic and secondary education for all Sierra Leonean children with up to 21% of national budget. Government also supports STEM education in higher education and TVETs. There is more planned internet connectivity to schools and we will soon convene a national forum for the future of education.

We have deployed home-grown technological solutions to support the Ministry of Health and the Emergency Operations Centre in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic from Health Information systems, a Situation Room for real-time data on disease management and surveillance, and E-passes for regulating inter-district travel restrictions.

But Sierra Leone has also concluded a number of International Partnerships. We are part of such larger global initiatives as GRID 3 – a Geo-referenced infrastructure and Demographic Data for Development initiative that makes it possible to leverage state of the art data science, remote sensing, and data collection technology to make predictions about population distribution.

We also have active partnerships with, among others, Estonia, South Africa, The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Microsoft, MIT, Harvard, Yale, UNICEF, KIVA, that continue to enrich and enhance our national innovation vision.

We are looking to explore new possibilities. We are already using open source technologies, data models, and other content and we are committed to making our datasets and home-grown technology solutions open. We are open to partnerships and cooperation in overcoming challenges of infrastructure and inclusion highlighted at the beginning of this presentation.

Our vision can be summed up in the phrase "Country-as-lab" for science, technology, and innovation – a country eager to cooperate in digital technologies that will drive our development as a nation.

I thank you again, Your Excellencies, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen. Thank you for providing leadership on a roadmap

for digital cooperation. This will make our world and the future of our nations ever better.