

# SOCIAL SAFETY NET HOSPITAL SECTOR 1



## **STATEMENT BY HIS EXCELLENCY, DR. JULIUS MAADA BIO, PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF SIERRA LEONE AT THE LAUNCH OF THE SOCIAL SAFETY NET WAGE BILL SUPPORT TO AFFECTED EMPLOYEES IN THE TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY SECTORS, RADISSON BLU MAMMY YOKO HOTEL, FREETOWN – 13 AUGUST, 2020**

Ministers of Government  
Members of Parliament  
Members of the Diplomatic Corps  
Tourism and Hospitality Stakeholders  
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,  
Good morning.

Various speakers have bemoaned the loss of revenue, loss of jobs, the virtual standstill in the tourism sector, and all the sundry frustrations and associated fears since COVID struck. There is general unease that we are on a slippery slope to probably never recovering that sector for as long as COVID 19 persists. For those persons, the glass is half empty and emptying fast.

This morning, I would rather take a contrary view and talk about the glass being half full. We are making progress. We have made great progress in just two years. We are making that progress because we believe that this sector is critical to our development as a nation. This is why we are here today to support that sector.

So I want to start by challenging us all to build upon the optimism that we expressed in the New Direction manifesto that we can make tourism a key growth sector of our economy. We believed then and we believe now that while showcasing the great beauty and heritage of our nation, we could create jobs and get substantial revenue.

We argued that we could do so by (i) improving the policy and legal environment; (ii) developing tourism sites and products; (iii) developing tourism infrastructure; (iv) improving, promoting, and marketing our country's unique image as a safe site for great tourism experiences; (v) developing skills that serve the tourism sector, and (vi) diversifying our tourism products.

I have since then reiterated that commitment in my State Opening of Parliament address.

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We have also recalled in Cluster 2.3 of our Medium Term National Development Plan that by properly harnessing the vast array of natural, cultural, and historical resources, we can create jobs and increase revenue from the sector.

We have started addressing key sector challenges early. With the support of the World Bank, we are developing a Strategic Tourism Development Master Plan, a National Tourism Marketing Strategy, an Island Tourism Development Policy, a Tourism and Wildlife Development Policy, an Accommodation Standards and Classification Manual, and an Investor Perception Survey among other initiatives.

We spearheaded and mainstreamed gender equality and “Women in Tourism” advancement programs thereby opening up opportunities and garnering support for women within the tourism and hospitality workforce.

The National Tourism Census conducted by the Ministry and Statistics Sierra Leone has, for the first time ever, given us access to comprehensive data on the sector. My Government’s targeted marketing and promotional campaigns through participation in international trade fairs, exhibitions, and expanded digital marketing have all supported our singular aspiration to develop our nation’s great tourism potential.

Our nation is at peace. Development Partners have strengthened their relationship with the sector and have included the sector in their development plans. They have lauded our policy initiatives to ease the burden of travel to Sierra Leone such as the elimination of GST on airfare and the implementation of the visa on arrival.

International tour operators have showed a more than keen interest in Sierra Leone tourism. To recount some of our successes over the last one year, we received a group of 300 Danish tourists; the cross-border Budapest-Bamako Rally with over 700 participants terminated here; and a significant number of African-Americans, Gullahs, traced their ancestral roots to Sierra Leone.

Tourist arrivals surged up by 40% to 107,000 arrivals and tourists spent an estimated US\$63 million in the Sierra Leone economy. Bed capacity and occupancy increased with new tourism facilities and the Lumley beach stretch has been developed by locals, creating thousands of jobs for Sierra Leoneans. There is also increased domestic tourism and increased interest in domestic tourist sites from waterfalls to islands and nature reserves and habitats. Recently, the Mambo Waterfalls has become a site of fascination and recreation.

**So when I say the glass is half full, I want us to celebrate the great successes we have had in just two short years**

There is no gainsaying that the global COVID-19 pandemic has led to greater uncertainty for the sector. With temporary bans and restrictions on international commercial travel, tourist visitor flows have ebbed considerably. The recurrent impact on hotel occupancy, on the small businesses that serve the tourist sector, on workers who have been laid off or furloughed because of fiscal constraints, on new investments in tourism infrastructure, have all been devastating. Local communities,

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Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises that make up the predominant number of businesses operating within the sector are projected to be impacted the most.

The honourable Minister has mentioned the fine technical details of my Government's Quick Action Economic Recovery Programme. As I have indicated elsewhere, part of the logic that informed the social safety arm of our QAERP programme was that we wanted to design financially sustainable, fit-for-purpose social safety nets that would protect the most vulnerable/most affected in our communities, and cushion the impact of COVID-19.

I am informed that the Ministry has collaborated with the National Tourist Board and the Hotel and Tourism Association to collect and collate data on tourist establishments and workers in that sector – from hotels, beach bars, casinos, nightclubs etc.

Based on the data collected, I am therefore pleased to announce that **my Government has allocated Four billion, Eight hundred and eighty-three million, Eight hundred and forty thousand Leones (Le4,883,840,000.00) to the hospitality sector as Social Safety Net Wage Bill support.** This is a three-month wage compensation package that will serve a total of 2,363 workers in the hospitality sector.

This amount is meant to mitigate the impact of the pandemic and reduce the economic burden on workers in the tourism. It will be distributed equally and fairly right across the entire country to every Sierra Leonean who was registered, irrespective of region, ethnicity, and gender. So whether you are in Makeni, Port Loko, Bo, Kenema, Kabala, Freetown, as long as you fall within the bracket earlier described by the Honourable Minister, you will receive your fair and equal share.

Our future interventions will be designed for purpose and guided by data. We stand with and we will keep supporting the hardest hit workers in the hospitality sector because you are critical to the diversified national and inclusive economy we want to build.

We have reopened the international airport subject to advice from healthcare experts and following preventive healthcare protocols.

We therefore entreat tour and airline operators to tell our friends that our sandy beaches, lush evergreen forests, unique wildlife, alluring waterfalls, serene islands, profound historical sites, marvellous cultural artefacts, sumptuous cuisine, and wonderful people are still here in Sierra Leone. We look forward to receiving our friends soon.

I am informed that UN World Tourism Organisation experts speculate a possible recovery in international demands in 2021. We must prepare for that and we have been doing fairly well. Nearly five months into this pandemic, we have a 79% recovery rate and mortality figures are under 100. We intend to maintain all local health protocols, but I also urge sector leaders and stakeholders to be attentive to

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global trends and global protocols for reopening tourism. I urge the tourism industry in Sierra Leone to use data to forecast and monitor trends.

But more importantly, I urge the sector to prepare to be competitive with sub-regional markets and use the lessons and opportunities presented by this global pandemic to usher in those changes that will give us, as a country, a competitive edge.

I urge the Ministry to engage others MDAs and the private sector to set, monitor, and enforce standardised service and compliance charters and international standard hygiene protocols right across the hospitality sector.

We have learned that the more nimble a market is, the more resilient it is. Let us develop a new model of sustainable production and consumption in the hospitality sector. Let us develop and serve new hospitality products and think outside the box in creating new market access. Let us expand into areas of cultural and creative hospitality from handicraft, to festivals, music, theatre, ecotourism, nature/sports/medical and wellness tourism, to other innovative all-year round offerings. There are new opportunities in domestic tourism. Sierra Leoneans and neighbours can know, enjoy, and love more about the rich and vibrant beauty that our country offers. A diversified market with diversified products and services can only be good for our economy and for inclusive and sustainable development.

As we all know, your product is only as good as you market it at home and abroad. There is a market for young persons at home and especially abroad. Let us harness the full potential of digitalisation and social media to invite millennials and other such younger persons who will be first to travel for sunshine and adventure in spite of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

But this opens us new opportunities for upskilling and re-skilling for the tourism and hospitality sector. Useful skills such as new product and service development, informational and promotional marketing through various media, market intelligence, data and data prediction algorithms, and other such digital skills demand that Sierra Leoneans use this lull in tourism to think deeply about developing tourism and hospitality based training opportunities.

My Government's flagship is Human Capital Development and we stand ready to fully support these reskilling and upskilling initiatives. Let me conclude by urging the industry to develop new business-models, embark on innovation and digitalisation, diversify and adapt their tourism products, and implement best practices to promote the hospitality industry during this "new normal". Indeed, the cup is half full and by by our actions, we will make it full and make tourism and hospitality contribute immensely to our economy.

With these remarks, I formally launch the Social Safety Net Wage Bill Support.

**I thank you.**