



**BROADCAST TO THE NATION BY HIS EXCELLENCY, DR.
JULIUS MAADA BIO, PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF
SIERRA LEONE ON THE COMMEMORATION OF THE
INTERNATIONAL DAY OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES.
3RD DECEMBER 2020.**

Fellow Sierra Leoneans:

Today is December 3, the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, a day set aside by the United Nations since 1992 to celebrate the achievements and contributions of persons with disabilities to the development of their respective communities.

It is a day on which we re-commit to promoting the rights, dignity, and well-being of persons with disabilities in all spheres of society and national development.

The theme of this year's commemoration -- "**NOT ALL DISABILITIES ARE VISIBLE,**" -- encourages all of us to focus on spreading awareness and understanding of disabilities that are not immediately apparent. These include mental illness, chronic pain or fatigue, sight or hearing impairments, diabetes, brain injuries, neurological disorders, learning differences, and cognitive dysfunctions, among others.

In our Medium Term National Development Plan, we have made specific commitments in Cluster 5, - "Empowering Women, Children and Persons with Disabilities," - that we will pursue a comprehensive programme for persons with disabilities that is driven by the principle of "Leave no one behind" and consistent

with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals Agenda 2030.

Fellow Sierra Leoneans, we are working to create a more inclusive and equitable society for all persons with disabilities and we have made some progress.

As a country, we have submitted the first country report on the status of implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities to the Committee of Experts on Disability. We have presented our country's progress report on the Charter for Change Commitments on Disability to the Global Disability Summit.

As a Government, we have worked with partners to scale up investments in mental health care infrastructure, equipment, medical supplies, staff training, and service delivery. As part of our radical inclusion approach to education, we are developing comprehensive strategies to support all learners with cognitive and physical disabilities. My Government has also provided grants to Organizations of persons with disabilities and Special Needs Schools for effective service delivery to learners with special needs.

The National Commission for Persons with Disability and the Ministry of Social Welfare have conducted the first ever accessibility audit of some Government buildings. The report lists accessibility challenges and possible strategies for addressing those challenges. This year also, my Government has increased budgetary allocation to the National Commission for Persons with Disability to implement activities that will better the lives of persons with disabilities.

My Government has expanded the Social Safety Net Programme to cover persons with disabilities. In addition to providing social safety support to persons with disabilities during the short lockdowns, my administration has also implemented a Closing-the-Gap Project to address the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on persons with disabilities

I have directed the Ministry of Social Welfare to fully study the root causes and patterns of street begging among persons with disabilities, and to develop a comprehensive strategy to tackle the issue. We believe that through skills training, financial inclusion, and economic empowerment programmes those citizens can earn dignified and sustainable incomes.

We will undertake public communications campaigns to urge Sierra Leoneans to recognize and uphold the rights of persons with disabilities. We will adopt a multi-sectoral approach to mainstreaming disability rights and concerns in government programmes and services. We will also work with the private sector. Together, we should work to identify and dismantle all structural and cultural barriers that deter persons with disabilities from actualising their full potential.

We call on persons with disabilities to denounce violence and use peaceful grievance redress mechanisms to resolve conflict. We urge them to take advantage of and own opportunities created by Government and development partners.

On this day, let me thank partners that continue working with my Government on disability issues: all United Nations Agencies, especially the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP); OneFamilyPeople; Handicap International; Humanity; Inclusion; Enable the Children; Westminster Foundation for Democracy, and a number of other organisations. We recognise and appreciate your great work to empower our citizens with disabilities.

We are determined to build an inclusive nation where all persons are empowered and supported to be all they can be and contribute their fair share to our nation's development.

I thank you and God bless Sierra Leone.