



**KEYNOTE STATEMENT BY HIS EXCELLENCY, DR.  
JULIUS MAADA BIO, PRESIDENT OF THE  
REPUBLIC OF SIERRA LEONE AT THE FORUM ON  
THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION, BINTUMANI HOTEL,  
FREETOWN - 11 DECEMBER 2020**

Honourable Ministers of Government,  
Honourable Members of Parliament,  
Members of the Diplomatic and Consular Corps,  
Development Partners,  
Education Sector stakeholders,  
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,  
Good Morning.

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1. Like school headmasters of old, let me start with announcements. First, I want to say how proud I am of Dr. David Moinina Sengeh, the Minister of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, Presidential Adviser, and Chief Innovation Officer for the bold initiative of radical inclusion and access to education for all, he has joined me in being recognised globally as a HeforShe Champion.
2. He has also made the covers and pages of the highly regarded *New African magazine* as a “radical disruptor from Sierra Leone,” one of 100 most influential Africans for his remarkable work in giving youth and especially young girls much brighter prospects. We, as a nation, are very proud of the great work you are doing in the service of education, science, technology, and innovation.
3. Also early this week, I was in The Gabonese Republic at the invitation of my brother, President Ali Bongo Ondimba. I came back with a wholesome view of what is possible with good natural resource governance, economic diversification, and what they call human investment strategy (with a 96% primary school education rate).
4. There is a confluence of views on the notion that for a nation to achieve accelerated economic development, it must invest in its citizens and boost local productivity. In Sierra Leone, we have articulated in both our New Direction manifesto and Medium term National Development Plan that the right pathway to a future of security, prosperity, and sustainable development is through investments in human capital development (quality education, food security, and affordable quality healthcare). We have reiterated that by investing in education, we are investing in the future of this nation.
5. Ministers of Government, development partners, civil society, and education stakeholders (including our private sector partners) have all underlined my Government’s strong commitment to providing accessible and inclusive quality education to every Sierra Leonean child. I recall particularly a statement by Madam Alice Albright during her visit to Sierra Leone in January 2019 about why it matters to invest in education. She asserted that “You invest [in education] for one simple reason – a quality education transforms lives, builds communities, and grows economies.” Thank you,

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Madam Albright for staying engaged with Sierra Leone and further expanding investments in Sierra Leone through the Global Partnership for Education.

6. The Minister of Basic and Secondary School Education has already fully discussed the vision and the mission of the sector as well as some of our key achievements over the last two years.
7. To facilitate more access to education, my Government pays billions of Leones in fee subsidies for over two million children right across Sierra Leone, constructed new schools and refurbished and furnished existing schools, approved over 3,000 more schools, and constructing early childhood development centres for the first time in all parts of Sierra Leone. This is in addition to more WASH facilities, school buses, free school feeding in most parts of the country, accelerated learning centres, and (since 2018), the payment of examination fees for all candidates taking the NPSE, BECE and WASSCE examinations.
8. For comprehensive safety in our schools, my Government has developed comprehensive safety guidelines and protocols, provided sanitary pads for girls in schools, and recruited over 150 inspectors to monitor compliance with our comprehensive safety policies.
9. We have also developed a radical inclusion policy that provides more access ramps, more assistive learning devices and technologies for special needs learners, prescription glasses, and solar lanterns for learners and more.
10. With respect to quality learning and teaching, we have rolled out a new and comprehensive curriculum, developed digitalised data collection hubs, and promoting effective teaching through mentoring and professional development. We have completed a nationwide school catchment analysis and we will soon review and amend the Basic Education Act 2004 to account for new and prospective developments in the sector.
11. As I have stressed before, our free quality school education programme continues to be predicated on its five core elements:

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- a. ACCESS – ensure that every student regardless of economic status and especially gender and disability gets access to quality education,
  - b. QUALITY AND RESOURCES – provide adequate school infrastructure, teacher training, teaching materials, learning resources, and training in delivery methods,
  - c. RETENTION – Keep children in school through student-centred interventions including nutrition programmes, general WASH programmes, comprehensive safety, community engagement (especially in changing cultural attitudes to girl-child education, early marriage and disability), and strengthening strategic partnerships with donor and international institutions whose programs promote retention and persistence in school,
  - d. COMPLETION – Implement policies that will reduce drop-out and attrition rates or absorb those populations in TVET and alternative skills training programmes; and,
  - e. POST-COMPLETION – Provide career and skills-training pathways consistent with the unique development needs of our country.
12. The Minister of Technical and Higher Education has also made the argument that at the vocational and tertiary levels, our institutions must be centres for comprehensive capacity building and they must be locally relevant to our national development and yet globally engaged.
13. He has outlined initiatives to improve access to TVET and tertiary institutions, review policies that will clarify curriculum objectives and improve learning outcomes in various delivery modes, develop capacity through global partnerships and research, review existing acts and governing policies, improve financial management and quality assurance, and implement various infrastructural and technology projects that will substantively improve the quality of our TVET and tertiary institutions and make us regionally, if not globally competitive. With the new student loan scheme that is being finalised, we intend to provide universal access to higher education while still supporting the most-needy students with Government grants-in-aid.

14. There are challenges, no doubt, even as we work treble hard to transform education in Sierra Leone. As I have already noted, we are contending with challenges of infrastructure – mainly classrooms and furniture. The burgeoning numbers of new learners puts inordinate pressure. I have stated that two-shift schools and overcrowding are not ideal for achieving learning outcomes. I therefore call on development partners and the private sector to support in this critical space. Recently, the private sector fully financed the construction of the Dr. Kadi Sesay Secondary School for girls, appropriately named after an outstanding academic, role model, and champion for women's rights and girl-child education. Development partners have supported the provision of furniture and WASH facilities. More support and collaboration can never be enough and we are grateful for your continued support.
15. There is a seeming dearth of skilled Maths, English, and Sciences teachers, if the data from test scores, especially in the rural areas, are anything to go by. How do we retrain, recruit, and support our teachers in order to improve literacy, computational skills, and learning outcomes in STEM disciplines? These are bigger questions that seemingly go beyond teacher recruitment, retention, and professional development. Development partner collaboration on these questions with education leaders and stakeholders, I believe, should hash out a solution to that challenge. So for instance, the best science, Maths, and English teachers tend to stay in the urban areas. If they are on government payroll, then can they be rotated to serve rural school locations for 1 to 2 years at a time? Also, can we ensure that we narrow the gap between urban and rural areas in the distribution and availability of learning resources?
16. Over the last two years, we have raised or adjusted salaries and substantially improved and added on new benefits for teachers. We have also recruited and put on payroll over 4,000 more teachers. I want to challenge all of us to think outside the box on how we can add to the teacher workforce without further expanding payroll.
17. Beyond support from development partners, there is more we can do. So for instance, I am informed that in the last two

years, my Government has provided 5,451 grants-in-aid as compared to the last government that provided 3,349 in their last two years. So obviously, we have given access to more than 2,000 more Sierra Leoneans than our predecessors in just two years. But those are 8,800 Sierra Leoneans benefitting from the Government grants-in-aid over the last four years. According to the Basic Education Act 2004, “students in tertiary institutions who are given grants-in-aid by the Government or a local authority shall undergo national service for a maximum period of three years after graduation.” Now, national service, according to this law, means “service to the State in any field of work relevant to the student’s area of study to be done preferably in the district of his birth.” This is legally binding and contravention is punishable. So if you have ever received Government’s grants-in-aid you owe the state three years of service. But the argument I want to make is why can graduates who are recipients of Government grants-in-aid not complement teacher numbers especially in rural areas for three years after graduation?

18. This also brings me to another challenge – teacher unions. I am a great supporter of collective bargaining, labour unions, and I believe in paying a fair wage for the great sacrifice and hard work of teachers. My idea of a teacher union is not one that dabbles in national politics and persistently disrupts student learning with labour actions or threats of labour actions. I believe their primary role is to collaborate with government to champion education reform, advocate for and participate in providing more professional development, support curriculum reforms, and propose more innovative ways of improving student learning outcomes and test scores in transition exams and in our tertiary institutions. We should have more positive engagements based on honest negotiations as partners, not just threats or confrontation, disruption, and extracting demands no matter what. I think unions should be a force for good change moving forward because only in that way can the positively influence the future of education in Sierra Leone. I do not see why performance pay schemes should not be considered so that personal and institutional effectiveness are rewarded.
19. We are also contending with the mismanagement and misuse, in some cases, of subsidies to schools. Be reminded that

my Government maintains zero tolerance for corruption and we will vigorously pursue and prosecute all suspected and alleged cases of mismanagement and misuse.

20. This probably segues into another key issue that we should clarify – the role of community leaders, chiefs, and management committees in supporting education service delivery, monitoring, evaluating, and providing feedback loops at all levels. I want to thank PC Edward Sam Mbawa III of Gbanie Kandor Chiefdom for his exemplary leadership in blowing the whistle on teachers on Government payroll who have been collecting salaries but not been teaching at their assigned schools. I want to exhort paramount chiefs and local council leaders to emulate this and help the Government deliver on its promise on education.
21. So too do we as citizens and parents bear a civic responsibility to report, provide feedback, support, and propose ways in which our children can be educated better at our local schools. Ultimately, it is in our best interests as parents and communities to ensure that our children get the best education on offer.
22. A week ago, at the Milton Margai College of Education and Technology (soon to be Milton Margai University of Education and Technology), I made the argument that the objective of education for development is to train a highly skilled workforce that will participate meaningfully in the fourth industrial revolution and the global economy. I emphasised that training, reskilling, and upskilling are precursors for entrepreneurship, innovation, manufacturing, and economic transformation.
23. So the question falls back to us: with all these investments in education, what skillsets must a productive Sierra Leonean have over the next twenty-five years? I repeat, what skillsets must a productive Sierra Leonean have over the next twenty-five years?
24. This calls for deep and candid reflection on our current educational system, and a radical re-think or a possible flexible localisation of ideas and policies that may have worked in other countries that are now on the path to rapid economic development. The future of education in Sierra Leone will define

the future of this nation. So this dialogue today is indeed a defining moment in our nation's history. To define that future, we should define the roles of each actor in shaping the future of education in Sierra Leone.

25. To my mind, the future community stakeholder ensures that he/she is fully involved and engaged and fully participates in decision-making about the education every child receives in his or her community. Future parents bear primary responsibility for the success of the learner. They must divest themselves of all discriminatory social and cultural norms that hamper access to and the success of their children or wards. They must be fully vested in the entire chain of education delivery, curriculum design, monitoring and measuring learning outcomes, providing frank and timely feedback to administrators and teachers, and actively monitoring what education is best for their children and wards.
26. The future education administrator, to my mind, goes beyond merely sitting in the principal's office. His or her role spans from defining the mission of his or her school, coordinating the work of staff and faculty in meeting that mission, effectively managing resources and delivery educational services, working closely with community stakeholders, to implementing appropriate in-service training for staff, measuring institutional effectiveness, maintaining reliable and relevant data, and coordinating the work of experts and external partners. It could also include how to leverage new possibilities, policies, partnerships that will enhance the effectiveness of their institutions. Proven, bold, innovative – anything that works and serves the mission of the institution should be considered. That's my idea of the future education administrator.
27. I also want to challenge us to consider transitioning to my idea of the future teacher, the future of teaching, and the future learner. For several generations, we have transmitted the teacher-centred, chalk-talk, homework-based, rote-memorisation, and regurgitation in final exams in which the learner is expected to reproduce everything that he or she remembers. Classrooms are organised to reflect that rigid and inflexible approach to learning. Students are regimented and the only role they play is to tell again the teacher what the teacher tells them – sometimes on pain of

beating and punishment if the learner dares not remember. We cannot totter into the fourth industrial revolution using pre-historic teaching methods.

28. That must change if we are to catch up with the best in the rest of the world. Students have nimble minds that are expansive and creative. They are open to new technologies, have more inquisitive minds, can integrate and evaluate multiple knowledge or information streams, and are most productive when they work interactively with others. They are also global citizens and their outlook on life is essentially multipolar. We therefore have an obligation to review our curriculum to reflect the realities of the new world in which we find ourselves if we should thrive as a nation. The curriculum should emphasize what I have discussed as the 5Cs - comprehension, critical thinking, computational skills, creativity, and civics. With regard to civics, let us understand that the future student is able to reason with empathy on otherwise thorny social issues, is able to navigate cultural and racial differences, and can operate in a multicultural world. So the future learner is most marketable when he/she is proficient in a second or even third international language such as French, Mandarin Chinese, Russian, or Spanish.
29. Our teaching techniques must also keep step with teaching techniques elsewhere in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Classrooms should be flexible, flexibly arranged, possibly technology mediated, more interactive, and should be learned-centred and collaborative. There should be more emphasis on problem-solving, practical knowledge, activity-based, and skills and values development. The future teacher should therefore be adequately trained, be innovative, be communicative, be tolerant and patient with learners, and be structured and organised. This obviously places new demands on institutions that mediate and measure teacher training, teacher development, teacher support, and also those that measure institutional effectiveness and learning outcomes. But these are necessary inconveniences to which we must adjust in order to develop education in this country.
30. So let me conclude by arguing that if we embrace and think innovatively about the foregoing, propose and implement the necessary holistic changes to our system of education, Sierra

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Leone will be the envy of her peers and will be in pole-position to face the challenges of globalisation, reap the benefits of the fourth industrial revolution, and participate meaningfully in the future global economy.

**I thank you and God bless Sierra Leone.**