



**STATEMENT BY HIS EXCELLENCY,
DR. JULIUS MAADA BIO, PRESIDENT OF SIERRA
LEONE, AT THE HIGH-LEVEL VIRTUAL DIALOGUE
ON LEVERAGING INNOVATIONS AND TECHNOLOGY
FOR FOOD SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION IN AFRICA
- 29 APRIL 2021**

Excellencies,
Distinguished Participants,

1. Let me start by thanking the organisers for inviting me to this event.
2. Let me also thank Dr. Akinwumi A. Adesina, President, African Development Bank Group; Mr. Gilbert F. Hougbo, President, International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD); my friend, the Rt. Hon. Tony Blair, Executive Chairman,

Institute for Global Change; and Alhaji Aliko Dangote, President & CEO, Dangote Group for an enlightening opening session.

3. I identify closely with the general view that we can increase food production and create more economic opportunities for farmers in a sustainable manner. We could do so using technologies to scale and by using food production technologies that are both sustainable and climate-friendly. So, I am especially happy to be here this morning.

4. I also wish to thank Colleague Excellencies for their input. I share their views that the COVID-19 pandemic has further complicated the existing food security challenges that most of our respective countries face.

5. Before now, we had mapped out and contended with the causes of food fragility as comprising climate change factors; traditional smallholder farming practices; limited mechanisation and irrigation; soil quality factors; lack of access to finance; deficiencies of input including fertilizer, improved seeds, extension services.

6. Shrinking economies all over the world and global supply chain disruptions have further aggravated foreign exchange constraints. So, augmenting local food supplies is a challenge given this new reality.

7. These disruptions, therefore, leave us with three key questions: a) How do we cope with pre-existing challenges in the agriculture sector especially given COVID-19 disruptions? b) How do we cope with food supply and nutritional deficits, c) How do we plan new investments that can make our food systems more robust and more resilient?

8. So, this meeting is very timely as we can share ideas and start thinking collectively about how to resolve some of these challenges and thus improve local food supplies, reduce import substitution, and create sustainable jobs for farmers including youth and women in rural areas.

9. In Sierra Leone, we have introduced policy and institutional reforms to transform the agriculture sector. The overarching goal is to empower the private sector to drive the growth of the agriculture sector.

10. We have reviewed the regulatory space to promote large-scale private sector investment while protecting smallholder farmers and consumers.

11. We have elected to expand mechanisation while attracting large-scale investments both domestically and from foreign direct investments. This is supported by expanding access to finance for agribusiness, providing tax incentives for large-scale commercial investments, establishing 14 mechanisation service centres nationwide.

12. To improve access to improved seed and fertiliser, Government has also recently established and staffed the Sierra Leone Seed Certification Agency and the National Fertiliser Regulatory Agency.

13. In the last three years, my Government has made good progress toward the CAADP commitment of allocating a minimum of 10% of government budget to agriculture. In 2018, the allocation was about 2.14%. This progressed to 4.25%, and 6.0 in 2019 and 2020 respectively. The 2021 target is 7%. This expected to increase over the next three years to support the new government shift in policy.

14. I have argued that science, technology, and innovation allow us to leapfrog in development. The same argument holds for agricultural production.

15. To improve yield per acreage, Government research agencies and private actors are working to develop and make improved and adaptable seeds available to farmers.

16. Delayed input delivery has affected smallholder productivity and yield and therefore overall food production. For the first time, Government has established a digital registry of farmers that will eventually be used to pilot an e-wallet system to improve the delivery and inputs (seed and fertiliser) to farmers. This will primarily benefit poor rural farmers who would otherwise have little access to input.

17. Farmers in rural areas have little access to extension services. Government is developing digital e-extension tools, including a mobile-first interactive voice response system and a farmer call center to improve extension service delivery in rural areas.

18. The government sees access to finance as a critical bottleneck for the private sector to thrive in Sierra Leone. As part of this shift in policy, the government has established the Agriculture Credit Facility, to extend credit agribusinesses at a much lower rate, 5%, compared to the market rate of 27%.

19. In addition to this credit facility, government offers duty waivers for inputs used in agriculture production, as well as tax incentives for investment focused on primary production and value addition.

20. So as to not crowd out the private sector, government is also committed to working with NGOs to provide free input to farmers across the country.

21. Government is also working to strengthen domestic value-chains. The school feeding component of the Government's Free Quality School Education project and other institutional feeding programmes will serve as guaranteed uptakers for food produced by farmers. Part of the task, therefore, is to create other uptakers within such agriculture value-chains.

22. I am delighted to hear about the recent successes of the African Development Bank's Technologies for Agricultural Transformation. Sierra Leone is eager to make modern and climate-adapted food production technologies available to farmers with the overall aim to boost crop and livestock production. To that end, Government is ready to collaborate closely on testing and introducing these technologies to scale.

23. My Government is also fully committed to working with the private sector and multilateral development banks to develop and implement investment plans in the sector.

24. Let me conclude by stating that we can meet our objectives of increasing local food production, creating employment, and reducing the impact of climate change using new technologies and increasing private sector investments in agriculture.

I thank everyone for your kind attention and wish you fruitful deliberations.