



**OPENING KEYNOTE STATEMENT BY HIS  
EXCELLENCY, DR. JULIUS MAADA BIO,  
PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF SIERRA  
LEONE, AT THE 2021 HARVARD MINISTERIAL  
FORUM. HARVARD UNIVERSITY, 19<sup>TH</sup>  
SEPTEMBER 2021.**

**“Leading in Government to Make a Difference”**

Your Excellency, Jakaya Kikwete, Former President of Tanzania;  
Your Excellency, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Former President of Liberia;  
Honourable Ministers of Government;  
Professor Alan Garber, Provost of Harvard University;  
Dr. Julio Frenk, Chair of the Harvard Ministerial Leadership Program Advisory Board;  
Dean Douglas Elmendorf, Dean of the Harvard Kennedy School;  
Jamie Cooper, Chair and President of Big Win Philanthropy;  
Senait Fisseha, Director of International Programs of the Susan T. Buffett Foundation;  
The Organisers of The Harvard Leadership Forum;  
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen;  
Good evening.

**1.** Permit me from the outset to thank the organisers of the Harvard Leadership Forum and Harvard University. Thank you for the warm hospitality you have accorded me and my delegation since our arrival. It is my second time experiencing Harvard hospitality. This second time is even more splendid. So, I am definitely looking forward to a third invitation and possibly a fourth.

**2.** But I am also reminded of Sister Joan Chittister's observation that "Hospitality is the key to new ideas, new friends, new possibilities." That was the case during my last Harvard visit and it is so again, given the interactions this evening. I look forward to interacting with more people. I look forward to exchanging exciting ideas and discussing new opportunities.

**3.** I am even more overwhelmed by this hospitality because these are not normal times. This convention is happening against the backdrop of the immense tragedy of 4.3 million deaths from the COVID-19 virus across the globe, with over 600,000 of those deaths in the United States alone. Television has brought into our living rooms harrowing scenes of dozens of corpses being put into temporary morgues in New York City, mass COVID-19 cremations in New Delhi, or frail persons choking to death in oxygen masks from Codogno in Italy to London, Paris, Rio De Janeiro, and Cape Town.

4. But the trauma of our present realities may linger on in ways anticipated and in ways unknown. Volumes of world productivity and trade have been shrinking. Development finance and private sector investments have suffered nose-dives. Economies have had to re-allocate resources away from human capital development and development infrastructure to stemming successive waves of COVID-19. The impact of climate change, food insecurity, and poverty have all deepened. The world has clearly become a more precarious and less resilient one since.

5. These problems are magnified even more for the least developed countries. Vaccine inequity, deepening disease burdens, gender and socio-economic disparities, and depleted public service delivery have worsened health, education, and economic outcomes. The work of governance is more complicated now because we, as leaders, are not only saving lives and protecting livelihoods, but we are planning to recover and build back better.

**6. So, what this ongoing pandemic crisis has graphically demonstrated is the central importance of good governance and effective government leadership around the world.**

7. I was honoured to accept the invitation to be here because I believe that the Harvard Ministerial Leadership Program is even more important now than ever.

8. But let me also draw the attention of my Harvard University audience to a happy coincidence. Back in the early 1960s, a young African American scholar who was to become the first tenured African American professor at Harvard University spent 18 months in Sierra Leone doing academic research. His topic was the newly independent African state. His name was Martin Kilson. The book that he published from that research was titled: **Political Change in a West African State: A Study of the Modernization Process in Sierra Leone.** Partly, the book focused on the intersection of power and political leadership in that newly independent African state. 60 years later, the leader of that independent African state, Sierra Leone, is at Harvard to speak about political leadership. So, Harvard has made this small coincidence possible, and I hope to share my very humble but practical thoughts; present the ups and downs of political leadership on a very challenging continent – Africa.

**9.** Let me start this talk tonight by describing a context for politics in Africa. African politics is like hot African porridge. It comprises a variety of slices of different tubers and plantains, meat, spices, and more. **In essence, there is no one term for describing African political leadership systems and styles.**

**10.** There are the peaceful democracies with no insurgencies or imminent threats to peace. There are imperial presidencies – “*L’état c’est moi*” models, non-accountable, non-transparent, and sometimes violent autocracies. We have witnessed state capture, patronage, and clientelism. We have witnessed the overturning of constitutions to create renewed or new leadership mandates. We have also seen those renewed or new mandates being overturned by other unconstitutional means. It is indeed a pot of hot porridge. Like porridge, it is seemingly cool on the top, but simmering hot underneath.

**11. But there is sufficient blame to go around in various places and for various reasons.** Postcolonial and sub-regional power imbalances, corporate interests, lingering and persistent internal political struggles, are all cited for why political leadership is what it is. One would even dare say that structural imbalances within states have not permitted those states to evolve into peaceful democracies.

**But let us focus now on leadership.**

**12.** Often, misconceptions of leadership persist. Leadership is often associated with mere power and authority to act. But to my mind, leadership should not involve the misuse or overreach of that power and authority. **Leadership is an opportunity – an opportunity to serve one’s nation; an opportunity to think critically about what should be done to solve problems that citizens face; an opportunity to think and work alongside other people – other leaders** (Ministers, Heads of departments and agencies), international and local partners, local actors, community members, civil society, rights groups and more.

**13. Leadership is intentional and goal-oriented.** It involves planning, engagement, collaboration, independent or peer reviews and assessments, consultations, building coalitions, managing people, and adjustments and

reassessments. Leadership is not static and predictable. There is no one template for how to optimally use authority and power for the public good. In the African context, how one leads in government is conditioned or shaped by the socio-political context. One is elected to power based on how one articulates one's leadership intentions in a manifesto on existing conditions. One could adapt in various contexts and various situations to achieve sustainable solutions. But at the heart of leadership are the best interests of the public, compassion, and fairness.

**14.** So it is with this mindset that I have selected, assessed, and worked with Ministers in a part of the world where almost everything is a priority. When I say everything is a priority, I mean it literally.

**15. As I have said, the secret to national development in Sierra Leone is in my country's best resource – the only gift that will keep on giving; the resource that boosts economic productivity ten-fold; and, the resource that investment dollars chase – highly educated, healthy, and productive human beings.**

**16.** To my mind, if we are to rebound faster from the impact of COVID-19 on development or if we are to achieve inclusive and sustainable development, we must invest heavily in human capital development. I have conceptualised human capital development as feeding the stomach - food security; feeding the mind - accessible and inclusive quality education); and, taking care of the whole body - accessible quality healthcare. There are cross-enablers in purposeful infrastructure investments, energy and water access, technology and digital access, public service delivery, and good governance.

**17.** But in the COVID-19 period, poverty and hardships have increased with citizens experiencing intense social and economic hardships. Governments are wrestling with constrained budgets, low economic productivity, disrupted supply chains and tourism flows, and mounting costs of mitigating and recovering from the impact of COVID-19. With development and private investment financing at an all-time low, many governments (and Ministers) are faced with making decisions about which investments in the human capital development sectors will produce the best returns.

## **HUMAN CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT**

**18.** But Human Capital Development investments do not happen in a vacuum. Taking care of the whole human being involves policies that reflect empathy, compassion, respect, protection and promotion of rights, fairness, and justice. These key imperatives have informed the majority of our policies. Some of them have involved going against cultural perceptions and traditional beliefs. Some of them have contested entrenched positions held by religious and traditional authorities. In each case, the data was compelling. In each case, the promotion, protection, and development of the whole human being were paramount. Let me share just one or two of those with you.

## **GIRLS**

**19.** Females constitute 52% of the population of Sierra Leone but with far lower comparative outcomes for education, health, food security, career progression, access to resources and opportunities, access to justice, and workforce representation.

**20.** Consider a cohort of 3 girls and 3 boys with identical indicators who are age mates, and who start attending basic primary school on the same day. The data suggests that by the end of 6 years of basic education, there is gender parity, and the girls are higher achievers in the transitional NPSE examinations. However, by the third year of senior secondary school, the chances of retention or completion of Senior Secondary School diminish considerably and only one or none of the three girls may persist in school. With such poor outcomes for girls, inclusive development is impossible.

**21.** So, we pondered the indicative data from the narrow perspective of giving all girls access to education. But then the data showed that by the third year of secondary education, we were losing more teenage girls to teenage pregnancy, maternal mortality, early marriages, or other socio-economic hardships. Our response has been multipronged. We introduced universal access and equity to education right across the board. We introduced a policy of comprehensive safety which included safe spaces for girls in schools. We overturned the ban on pregnant girls in schools and introduced a policy of radical inclusion – every child – pregnant learners, parent learners, learners with disabilities, learners from poor or rural

locations – all have equal access to quality education. So, such corollary policies as teaching sexuality and reproductive health in the curriculum, providing teaching and learning materials, school feeding in the most vulnerable parts of the country all followed up.

**22.** The First Lady also undertook a national advocacy campaign in every part of the country engaging communities, chiefs, women’s groups, youth groups, the security forces and other community stakeholders in the “Hands Off Our Girls” campaign. She has passionately campaigned for girl’s rights and the community’s responsibility to protect girls from teenage pregnancy, early marriage, and sexual and gender-based violence, among others.

**23.** At the national level, we overhauled the Sexual Offences Act and now have stiffer mandatory sentencing minimums of 15 years upon conviction. We also introduced One-Stop centres for Rape at various regional hospitals, and Sexual Offences Model Courts with dedicated judges to fast track the prosecution and trial of cases of sexual and gender-based violence. Conviction rates have dramatically increased.

**24.** We created a stand-alone Ministry of Gender and Children’s Affairs that has since introduced a National Male Involvement Strategy for fighting Sexual and Gender Based violence and other such progressive gender-equity policies. The Ministry also engaged stakeholders and international partners to develop a Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment policy to address the age-old problem of inequality of access to opportunities, resources, and fundamental rights.

**25.** Throughout the COVID-19 period, the Ministry of Finance, the National Commission for Social Action, and the Ministry of Trade have provided access to a combination of social safety net payments, low-interest business start-up and development loans, tax holidays, and credit facilities that benefit women.

**26. Let me also add briefly that one cannot promote human capital development while maintaining laws that threaten human rights, freedoms, and dignity. The guarantee of fundamental rights and liberties enhances and enriches human capital development.** In the last year, we have repealed a 55-year-old seditious libel law that

successive governments had used since 1965 to muzzle the free press, imprison journalists, and clamp down on political opponents. We have since then worked with the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists to professionalise the practice of journalism in addition to providing social security and wage protections for journalists. In our Sierra Leone, no journalist is in prison for the practice of journalism.

**27. We have worked closely with civil society and rights organisations in promoting and protecting fundamental rights and liberties.** We have reduced prison populations and irreversibly abolished the death penalty in Sierra Leone. **Respect for the sanctity of human life is, to our mind, consistent with human capital development.**

**28. But I have always argued that the gains from our human capital development investments can only be maximised and sustained in an ecosystem of good governance, transparency, and accountability.**

### **PRESIDENTIAL LEADERSHIP VISION**

Let me speak briefly, therefore, about how I see the work of the President. As President, I view governance as comprising three key interconnected loops

**29. VISION** – First, as President, I establish a broad vision – a bird’s eye view of what I want to achieve as President. As a Presidential candidate, I had articulated that central, overarching vision of what I broadly think my country should look like. I called it a “New Direction” with the singular vision of “Sierra Leone as a united, peaceful, progressive, dynamic, confident, enterprising, and happy nation where the people have unlimited access to jobs, food, education and health services and where there is equal justice and equal opportunity for all.”

**30. COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY ABOUT THE VISION** -Once the single, unitary vision is established, I then proceeded to lay out the essential strategic elements of that vision. It is how people who are selected for leadership as Ministers should broadly perceive their tasks.



**31.** The notion, therefore, that a minister totters blindly into office on Day 1 does not exist because when they are appointed, they already have a clear, broad mandate.

**32. IMPLEMENTATION, COORDINATION, MONITORING** -This is the final component of what I term the presidential leadership loop. It involves selecting ministers and heads of agencies who one believes can disaggregate the central vision, unbundle it into bite-sizes, plan and implement activities that go toward achieving those goals, work with the right people, consult and collaborate, monitor and reassess their programmes of implementation, and measure the outcomes of their interventions.

### **WHO IS AN EFFECTIVE MINISTER?**

As I indicated earlier in this talk, the African political space is a very unique one and therefore ministers should be aware of the considerations that go into appointing and retaining them, the expectations that come with their accepting their appointments, and outcomes that the President expects from them in their roles. African Presidents do not necessarily look for academic qualifications or specialisations to appoint people as ministers. I don't think non-African Presidents do either. The minister is supposed to provide political leadership for a ministry in order to achieve the vision set by the President. So, these are what I look for and expect as President when I appoint somebody as a minister.

**33. FAST LEARNER** – The minister should be a smart, critical thinker. He/she should expect to not walk into a perfect space and simply oversee a perfect entity where his/her technical staff are optimally trained and experienced to run the ministry. Ministers should expect that in most cases in Africa, the skills mix needed to run an effective ministry does not even exist. There may even be moribund departments or others that are understaffed and non-functional. He/she should therefore reorganise or restructure that ministry into a functional entity and also identify an effective delivery team.

**34.** The Minister should also identify a focus as soon as possible – a focus that is grounded in the overarching singular Presidential vision. They should identify their roles in realising that shared vision, communicate about their roles in pursuing that vision, design and implement their roles, provide

feedback and encouragement to one another, collaboratively discuss and remove constraints where necessary, and review and assess progress on shared benchmarks.

**35.** He/she should identify strategic goals and then consult with me as President. Consultation with the President initiates that feedback loop which forms the basis of regular interaction and consultation. I will discuss this in detail later

**36.** Ministers are also expected to quickly orient themselves to understanding the processes and structures of governance. Successful navigation of those and mastering of the milieu in which that Minister is expected to work are critical for the success of his/her tenure.

**37. POLITICIAN** - Ministers should also understand that their actions and the timing of their actions and interventions have political implications. Ultimately, in Africa, Ministers should work to make an impact, so their president and their government are viewed favourably. The reality is that ruling parties want to maintain their hold on power. Presidents in Africa, therefore, hire Ministers who can get the work done well but also help maintain them in power.

**38. COALITION BUILDER AND NEGOTIATOR** – Ministers are expected to be constantly building coalitions within their respective ministries, across government, with and within communities, with development partners, and with civil society and rights organisations. Even across Government, a lot of cross-sectoral engagement is required for planning, developing, and implementing those interventions. Ministers are expected to be nimble negotiators who can get various parties to work with them to achieve their goals.

**39.** In an ideal world, that is how Ministers should work with their colleagues. They should collaboratively ponder policy statements by their principals, unbundle the policy statement, identify how they should progress to achieve those goals at the centre of that policy statement, design interventions, and coordinate actions to achieve the goals set in that policy statement.

**40. EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATORS:** I expect Ministers to be effective communicators. They should not be afraid to ask the tough questions and the right questions. They should be people who can confront what the data says or the full magnitude of a problem and not hesitate to share that bad news with the President. To my mind, I expect ministers who share bad news to present that bad news as a challenge or an opportunity to fix that problem permanently and in the best interests of the nation. I would expect that before Ministers meet with me, they should have met with their delivery teams to fully discuss the problem so that my conversations with them would be about possibilities and solutions. That is my definition of an effective and competent minister. Ministers should trust you with what they are doing and share with you what they are doing. I expect Ministers to be open and confident, to discuss constraints, challenges, and explore new ideas with me and with their colleagues without fear of recrimination or being judged.

**41. Ministers should also effectively communicate with partners in a way that gets them to buy into a shared vision; in all stages of planning, designing, and implementing that shared vision; and in monitoring and evaluating critical benchmarks.** This could have an enabling and multiplier effect on the work of the minister. Clear communication builds trust and trust means that partners can then go out of their way to mobilise huge resources and technical assistance to support the work of the minister.

Additionally, because of budgetary and resource constraints, Government cannot afford to accomplish all of its wish list. Effective ministers there be constantly on the prowl and should be alive to the development financing interests of international partners. The idea is to identify and align their policy goals and seek effective partnerships. Essentially, the effective minister is attentive to global trends.

Sometimes, all partners need is a perception that the Ministerial leadership is credible and visionary. Partners can quickly form coalitions of interest and put their money to support credible ministerial leadership. At a point, our government was creaking under the huge financial burden of the free quality education programme. No sooner was a new minister appointed than they put together a multi-donor trust fund of \$72 Million USD to support various aspects of education. Other partners and even private sector actors tapped in to support with school infrastructure. We have since then built Early Child

Development Centres, a Girls School of Excellence, and constructed or refurbished over 100 Junior Secondary Schools in four regions of the country. The lesson is simple: visionary and credible ministers attract significant financial and other goodwill and make the work of government easy.

**42.** Effective communication with the public is also important. The minister should tell the public clearly what he/she is about to do, how and when, why it matters, and what the public stands to benefit from that initiative. That culture of transparency and feedback is important to me as President, important to partners, and important to the general public and local stakeholders.

**43.** Ministers should therefore be **most willing to use both traditional media** – community meetings and community radio stations for rural and illiterate populations, newspapers, other print media, television, radio – and **new media which uses digital technologies extensively**. The latter can be done through dedicated and user-friendly websites, Twitter, Facebook, and digital animations and short narratives sent via social media communication platforms. Digital technologies have a wider strategic reach to international partners and younger demographics and Ministers who are willing to effectively maximise the use of both pathways are always very successful. In essence, keep your Ministry and yourself in the news for all the right reasons and at all levels.

**44. FOCUSED LEADERSHIP** -- Obviously, not everyone wakes up upon appointment as Minister and becomes a good leader. Persons who are most eligible for appointment as Ministers may be highly educated but probably not trained for the sort of problem-solving and negotiations involved in political leadership. They may also be unfamiliar with the context of leadership as ministers – the bureaucracies around a seemingly impenetrable civil service or the resource and other constraints we face in governance. **An effective Minister, to my mind, should be able to navigate all of these while staying focused and pursuing the shared vision with empathy, fairness, and a strong sense of service.** They should be able to recognise and transform ineffective institutions, unclear processes, systems of delivery, and personnel capacity gaps and do something about those.

**45. BRINKSMANSHIP AND PERPETUAL WHEELER-DEALER** - As Minister, and even as President, one sometimes gets the most vociferous opposition not from opposition parties but from one's own party. Strangely, some of those opponents to changes in a law or a policy may have been victims of that same law or policy. They would normally see it as their turn to use the law to frustrate and stifle the opposition. The way, I have handled this, as I would expect my ministers to do, is to first acknowledge the grounds of their opposition and the legitimacy of their assertions. I would then, and much as with my Ministers, present and analyse for them the rationale for the change. Obviously, there are different engagement strategies available to us in African politics and I expect my Ministers to consult with me before engaging different stakeholders.

**46. THICK-SKINNED PUBLIC SERVANTS** - Additionally, Ministers should be sufficiently thick-skinned and disciplined. They should be able to stay focused on their goals while managing distractions and tensions that are normal in politics in our part of the world. Internal politics and African opposition generally target the best-performing ministers by fostering bad news or trying to present those persons in a bad light hoping that those persons may get fired by the President. For the opposition, the least an incumbent government achieves or the more ungovernable a country is, the higher their chances of re-election. So, I expect Ministers to stay motivated, no matter what, and continue to pursue excellence in public service in all they do.

**47.** As President, one faces the problem of keeping Ministers focused on their mandates. Ministers can be easily overwhelmed by the sheer volume of work. Also, the reality of serving as a Minister in Africa is that it is a low-pay, high prestige, and overwhelming expectation job. A President can talk a highly experienced and consummate professional into accepting the position of minister. But that Minister soon finds himself/herself saddled by unaffordable social and financial expectations. In some other cases, Ministers may face the risk of being frustrated by public sector governance systems and processes with weak accountability mechanisms. The actions of some others may be shaped by competing challenges they may face in their ministries. Some others may find it difficult to distance themselves from old institutional practices characteristic of the politics of patronage. Disillusionment and demotivation could set in. The President then becomes

the cheerleader-in-chief – a reassuring presence who keeps spirits up and job satisfaction high. A tall order, I'll dare say.

**48.** But I should also add that most leaders -- Presidents and Ministers in Africa -- face the conundrum of who to hire to serve as minister. In an ideal world, one would like to blindly hire the best technocrats in a country, regardless of their party loyalties. But the reality is that ruling parties want to maintain their hold on power. Presidents in Africa, therefore, hire Ministers who can get the work done well but who can also get the politics done very well. The latter could be the underbelly of leadership in Africa.

**49. Let me close with a public disclosure of the obvious. As President, I am first and foremost a politician.** On a daily basis, I am constantly engaged in balancing politics and governance and ensuring that my ministers understand that intricate balance too.

**50.** As a President, and as ministers, one is faced with what I call the politics of governance and the governance of politics. The former entails mobilising the skills sets and ideas that enable one to deliver on the Government's manifesto commitments. The latter entails governing in a manner that enhances one's political dividends. This means ensuring that one is on the right track to be re-elected comfortably. One's success in getting Ministers to understand that intricate balance is critical for the success of one's government in a challenging political context like ours in Africa.

**51.** Evidently, as President, I also contend with problems around cross-sectoral coordination, resource mobilisation to achieve goals, and developing the most effective mechanism for staying informed on the work of each Minister. We are working on a technology-mediated solution that makes this interaction between President and minister seamless and timely. Ministers receive immediate feedback and/or requests for meetings to further discuss how to gain forward traction on projects and policies. A major challenge, therefore, is that, in the face of overwhelming responsibilities and engagements, Ministers – and even myself as President – can lose the focus on delivery. We are making progress with each step. Each step counts every time.

**52. I want to leave you with four key takeaways that, to my mind, can help leaders stay focused and deliver results. A) Vision and agenda setting** must be aligned with the overarching presidential vision; **B) Coalition building** engenders trust and confidence and makes planning, implementation, and reporting mutually owned and therefore successful; **C) Communications** -leadership is about communicating a vision, why people should associate with that vision, and what people stand to gain from the implementation of that vision; and **D) accountability and feedback loops are critical for the success of leadership.**

**53. Ministers present, let me close by urging you to pursue your work with even greater vigour and passion, discipline, transparency, and sense of mission.**

**54. Excellencies, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, let me also commend and thank Harvard University for contributing their prestige, convening power, and expert faculty to this important endeavour.** Thank you, Harvard University.

I thank you all for your kind attention.

Thank you