



**OPENING REMARKS BY HIS  
EXCELLENCY, DR. JULIUS MAADA BIO,  
PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF  
SIERRA LEONE AT THE AU SIDE EVENT  
ON BUILDING MOMENTUM FOR  
ROUTINE IMMUNISATION RECOVERY  
IN AFRICA - MEDIUM CH3, SUNDAY,  
-19<sup>TH</sup> FEBRUARY 2023**

## **Excellencies Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,**

1. I commend the organisers of this timely meeting to take stock of the progress we have made towards reducing vaccine-preventable deaths and illnesses, and to also galvanise momentum towards achieving universal immunisation.
2. Sierra Leone remains committed to achieving the Immunisation Agenda 2030 as well as the African Regional strategic Plan on immunisation. We believe that it is possible to achieve the national and global immunisation targets including eradication and elimination goals. Progress in meeting immunisation targets, we believe, is a driver for equitable health outcomes for children, mothers, and the population as a whole.
3. The COVID-19 outbreak in Sierra Leone had a negative impact on my country's immunisation performance. COVID-19 public emergency restrictions, initial concerns about the safety of healthcare facilities, rumours and misinformation about vaccine safety, all prevented or limited access to immunisation services. Between March and May of 2020, there was a significant reduction in routine immunisation coverages. DPT3 dropped from 92% coverage in January 2020 to 74% in April of the same year.
4. However, due to the robust COVID-19 outbreak response, and our strong routine immunisation systems as well as the well-established primary health care structures, the drop in immunisation coverage only lasted for a few months.
5. By June of 2020 immunisation coverage had recovered to pre-COVID-19 levels. The immunisation coverage for other immunisation antigens also followed a similar pattern.
6. My government's immunisation programme is embedded within the country's primary health care system. The period 2021 and 2022 saw the consolidation of the gains in the immunisation system. This period saw a stable and high immunisation coverage for key antigens; 93% and 94% for measles and 96% and 94% for DPT3 for the period 2021 and 2022 respectively.
7. The Ministry of Health and sanitation introduced new vaccines in the past decade. These include the Rota-virus vaccine in 2016, pneumococcal vaccine in 2018, changed from the measles to the Measles-Rubella Vaccine in 2019 and

as part of the polio eradication initiative introduced 2 doses of Inactivated Polio vaccine (IPV) into the routine immunisation program.

8. As part of the ambitious national cervical cancer elimination strategy, in October 2022 we introduced the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) vaccine as a strategy to eliminate Cervical Cancer by 2030. Over a 2-week period, 183,218 girls aged 10 years were vaccinated nationwide using a combination of school-based and community outreach strategy.
9. In Sierra Leone, 20% of under-five mortality is due to malaria. The new malaria vaccine, planned for introduction in 2024 will reduce hospitalisation for severe malaria and all-cause mortality in under-5 children.
10. By January 2023, over 73% of the eligible population had been fully vaccinated for COVID-19. We are now incorporating COVID-19 vaccination into our routine immunisation program. We are capitalising on resources from the COVID-19 vaccination support from partners and additional Government resources to strengthen our routine immunisation systems.
11. As part of our commitment to the Immunisation Agenda 2030 and the African Regional Strategic Plan on Immunisation, we have paid all the co-financing requirements for vaccine supplies including an advance payment for 2023 despite the economic challenges that my country faces.
12. We have committed \$ 806,238 for 575,370 doses of routine vaccines (DPT, PCV, MR, Rota, Yellow fever, HPV) and allocated funds for 1 million doses of the new malaria vaccine in the 2023 budget.
13. In line with the Gavi 5.0 strategy that emphasises country ownership, government has also committed funds in the 2023 budget to start paying for traditional vaccines (BCG, oral Polio, Tetanus-Diphtheria for pregnant women).
14. We believe as a government that the returns on investment for immunisation are very high for our progress towards meeting the SDGs. This is reflected in our national immunisation policies, our integrated service delivery programme, and our commitment to working with multiple stakeholders in order to expand coverage.
15. We are committed to making Sierra Leone a healthy and safer place for our children and our people.

I thank you for your kind attention.