



**STATEMENT BY HIS EXCELLENCY, DR
JULIUS MAADA BIO, PRESIDENT OF THE
REPUBLIC OF SIERRA LEONE AT THE
BRINGING THE CONVERSATION ON
FOUNDATIONAL LEARNING AFRICA
CONFERENCE, FREETOWN CONFERENCE
CENTRE - 6TH FEBRUARY 2023**

Ministers of Government,
Honourable Members of Parliament,
Members of the Diplomatic and Consular Corps,
Development Partners and Education Stakeholders,
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,
And my most amazing school pupils,
Good morning:

1. Let me again welcome all of you our guests to the beauty and excitement of Freetown you have enjoyed thus far. I encourage you to indulge and I am happy to tell you that we have more to offer than you have experienced.

2. But more importantly, I am excited to welcome all of you to this inaugural Foundational Learning Exchange here in Freetown. Here, over the next two days, we will interact with development partners, education foundation stakeholders, policy and lawmakers, administrators, teachers, and students to discuss the all-too-important matter of foundational learning.

3. Together with our partners in UNICEF and World Bank and with the support of the Hempel Foundation, we are happy to host you here in Freetown. I am indeed honoured that Sierra Leone is the very first African country to host the inaugural foundational learning exchange (FLEX) among African countries.

4. As a country, we identify closely with the vision statement from the UN Secretary-General on transforming education, in which he called for students to be able to learn. Through the Freetown Manifesto, we are building regional support for transforming education. I co-chair the UNESCO High-Level Steering Committee on SDG 4

5. We are also one of the first signatories of the commitment to action created by the World Bank and UNICEF and launched at the Transforming Education Summit. I hosted the spotlight session on Foundational Learning alongside the President of the World Bank and the Executive Director of UNICEF. As a global champion for transforming education and meeting our SDG 4 goals by 2030, I have also selected foundational learning as a focus.

6. But let me share that here, in Sierra Leone, our work in education is underlined by four simple principles.

7. Firstly, we believe that education is a fundamental right and not a privilege. This is reflected in our policies, practices, and what proportion of our national budget we allocate to financing education.

8. Secondly, we believe that in the exercise of that fundamental right, access to education must be universal, equal, comprehensively safe, and radically inclusive of all genders, abilities, pregnant, rural-dwelling, all ages, and all socio-economic backgrounds.

9. We have added one million more learners, especially girls, achieved gender parity in basic education, and registered higher achievement outcomes for girls.

10. We also cater to specialised learning and teaching materials and provide hot school meals in poor and deprived areas. We have proved that gender parity is possible; girls are high achieving learners; with free education, from pre-primary through university, for girls who study STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Agriculture – in our unique case--, and Mathematics) disciplines, unprecedented numbers of girls have enrolled in these STEAM courses since the introduction our flagship free-quality school education programme.

11. Thirdly, we believe that we can train our highly resourceful and talented teachers and school administrators at the highest levels, partner with our communities, leverage technology, and predicate a rich and innovative curriculum based on five key competencies (the five “Cs”) -- Creativity, Comprehension, Critical Thinking, Computational Thinking, and Civics.

12. Finally, we believe that education is not a cost; it is an investment. It is the best investment we can make for an inclusive and sustainable future for our country. There is a recognition among global leaders that SDG-4 remains the best accelerator for achieving all the Sustainable Development

Goals. My arguments on the global stage have been informed by these fundamental principles.

13. At meetings in Paris, New York, and virtually, I have argued that if we collectively position education at the top of our agenda, we can take bold actions to address the global learning poverty and thus transform education.

14. UNESCO's #BornToLearn campaign underscores that all children enter the world eager to learn. Too many do not get the chance. It is unacceptable for children to grow up in the 21st century deprived of the tools of literacy and numeracy undergirded by socio-emotional skills.

15. Especially in sub-Saharan Africa, it is estimated that the majority of 10-year-olds are not fundamentally numerate, and they cannot read, comprehend, and correctly answer questions about what they read.

16. To my mind, this persistent learning poverty in sub-Saharan Africa in particular predates this single global disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. For years, learning losses have been caused by years of chronic political and social instability, underinvestment in education planning and financing, and the lingering but ever-pronounced impact of climate change on societies and economies.

17. We therefore must address learning loss and learning poverty at the foundational levels. If we fail to get this right, we will be depriving our countries and our continent of a whole generation of nation-builders.

18. At a very personal level had I not learned to read, write, and be numerate at age 10, I would, in all probability, not have been President of Sierra Leone today. That is the difference education can make. With foundational learning, therefore, we can give every child a fighting chance to contribute to his/her fair share of the nation-building process.

19. And that is why we are meeting here today at this foundational learning exchange. We want to accelerate progress toward meeting SDG4. We want to start a tradition of learning from one another's experience in improving foundational learning in order to accelerate that progress toward the SDG-4: Quality Education.

20. We want to listen to the best practices for improving foundational learning on the African continent. We want you as leaders of the education sectors in your respective countries to engage on the realities and technicalities of foundational learning -- the reality that most children do not get the basics, and that most education systems are not attuned to delivering the basics.

21. We want to explore and share ideas for evidence-backed solutions for foundational learning say, for instance, Sierra Leone's Education Innovation Challenge (EIC) and Sierra Leone Education Innovation Challenge (SLEIC).

22. We want to have thoroughgoing conversations on how our education sector plans and partnership compacts can all emphasise the centrality of foundational learning to our education sector strategies. Can we benchmark our progress on foundational learning indicators? Can we re-align education financing with achieving those indicators?

23. We want to share models of partnership to support foundational learning including compacts with development partners, private foundations, technical experts, and implementing partners, many of whom are present at the summit. I think it is possible to expand these conversations to academic institutions and research institutions so that our policies and plans are supported with shared and validated data.

24. We want to explore and build on south-south exchanges with bilateral visits to other ministries of education in the global south in order to promote collaboration, share evidence, and ensure mutual, peer accountability.

25. At the highest levels, as Heads of State, we must demonstrate buy-in and commitment to a rigorous approach to foundational learning. I am hopeful that the communiqué that concludes this exchange speaks to all of the foregoing concerns.

26. We have no time to waste. 2030 is just a few short years away. If we do not act now, we will lose the next generation of nation-builders. So I want this exchange to be frank, open, honest, and realistic both about how

to tackle the factors that have held foundational learning back, planning, financing, and how to make progress on our goals.

27. We have a long journey ahead of us. But let us begin that journey here, today. With proper investments in education, the 21st century will be Africa's century. If we lay the foundations for educating a new generation between now and 2030, the continent can enjoy decades of unprecedented growth based on human capital development.

28. Welcome again to Freetown. Thank you for your kind attention, and I wish this inaugural foundational learning exchange fruitful deliberations.