



**REMARKS BY HIS EXCELLENCY, DR. JULIUS
MAADA BIO, PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC
OF SIERRA LEONE, AT THE LAUNCH OF THE
NATIONAL PAYMENT SWITCH. FREETOWN:
THE BANK OF SIERRA LEONE STAFF
RECREATION COMPLEX, KINGTOM.
WEDNESDAY, 3RD MAY 2023**

The Honourable Vice President,
Madam First Lady,
The Honourable Chief Justice
Ministers of Government,
Former Members of Parliament,
Members of the Diplomatic and Consular Corps,
The Acting Governor,
Deputy Governor and Members of The Board of The Bank of Sierra Leone,
Heads of Commercial Banks
Heads of Government Departments and Agencies
The Private Sector,
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,
Good morning.

1. I am delighted to be with you this morning. Indeed, delivering on our manifesto promises does not stop simply with the dissolution of parliament. We are still busy.
2. In our New Direction manifesto, we pointed out that during the tenure of the last APC government, there were “insufficient technological resources, a weak interbank market, [and] the lack of payments mechanisms” within the banking sector. That, to our minds, was a major barrier to building an inclusive and diverse economy.
3. As various speakers have indicated, for a long time, and even now, the majority of transactions are cash-based. Those can be risky, tedious, and inconvenient. For other instruments of transaction, settlements among banks could be time-consuming and expensive.
4. No doubt, some bespoke technology solutions have been developed by some commercial banks for their own uses. Mobile companies and FinTechs have also developed some digital solutions. The problem is that these are not all interoperable. So, whereas these digital solutions ease problems with financial transactions, they do not solve problems holistically.

5. At several points, we have all complained about the significant hoarding of cash among some key stakeholders in the economy, and at a lower level, among the informal sector, the rural, the unbanked, and the underbanked populations.
6. I must mention that our APC predecessors tried but failed in their efforts to implement this project. But we have been able to complete and implement this project because we are driven by an unflinching commitment to strengthen the role of the private sector and to strengthen the banking and financial services sectors in our inclusive economic growth agenda.
7. I want to thank the World Bank for sharing our vision and for their very generous support in implementing this project in Sierra Leone. I also want to thank the leadership of the Bank of Sierra Leone, stakeholders in the banking sector, and the technical consultants who have supported this project to its conclusion.
8. Today, we are taking another major step forward. As the acting Bank Governor has intimated, in this era of the fourth industrial revolution, we are deploying and leveraging the power of technology to ease the rapid flow of millions of financial transactions within and across borders in seconds, through a single interface.
9. This new technology, as pointed out already in the technical presentation, facilitates interconnection and interoperability among the channels of various players in the financial landscape. This would include commercial banks, microfinance institutions, mobile money operators, and Financial Technology Firms (FinTech).
10. As highlighted, the payment system is cost-effective and it will lead to increased commercial activities. Banks can now issue more cards and other digital financial tools so that citizens can now use Point-of-Sales systems, Automated Teller machines, online commercial portals, and more. This system will process transactions from all bank customers, regardless of the type of card used, and route them to a central switch for settlement at the Bank of Sierra Leone.

11. Even people in rural areas where is no bank or no physical financial service structure can now have access to financial services. Through electronic card payments or other digital financial tools, those rural populations can do their financial transactions without having to endure time-consuming and expensive trips to the nearest financial services center.
12. On the supply side, payment services provide a source of revenue for banks and other financial organizations. This drives up their profits and, I am hoping, will be incentive enough for them to develop more digital financial tools that citizens can use. Those who provide financial technology services and also those who provide communication products and services will also have new markets.
13. On the government and business sides, this technology will also lead to efficient and cost-effective tax collection. It will support reduced human intervention and improved data collection. As we know in Sierra Leone, the lower the level of human interaction with money, the less likely it is for revenue collectors to be corrupt. With data, government agencies such as the NRA will spend less time and money assessing and collecting taxes from businesses.
14. But I am even more excited about the National Switch because it will enable this government to deliver public services in a more effective and efficient manner. Social welfare payments, including pension and welfare benefits, can now be disbursed directly into the accounts of beneficiaries through the National Switch. This ensures timely and secure delivery and also maintains an electronic footprint of the transactions.
15. Additionally, the National Switch will facilitate the adoption of e-commerce and e-government services that will provide citizens with easy and convenient access to a range of public services. Citizens would not need to incur the additional expenses of travel and other such inconveniences to access those government services. Citizens in Sikunia, Gbalamuya, Koindu, and Gendema can access government services and benefits at little to no expense.

16. But closer to my heart is the enormous potential of how this national switch provides Sierra Leone with a foothold in the global investment space. As developing countries take on a more significant role in world trade, Sierra Leone is opening up to global trade and investment in a competitive manner. Considerable evidence shows that more outward-oriented countries tend to consistently grow faster. Sierra Leone cannot afford to miss out on this any longer. Sierra Leone stands to gain enormously from eliminating such remaining trade barriers as difficulties in making payments. I am optimistic that this national switch will make us even more competitive in the sub-region.
17. Ladies and gentlemen, the various phases of implementation have already been announced by the technical teams and the acting governor. I encourage banks to become members of the National Payment Switch as soon as possible and to work closely with the Bank of Sierra Leone to implement the various phases of the project. I am informed that the Switch is live and there are already inaugural members. As of today, I am informed that it will be possible to make withdrawals from any ATM or POS or make payments for goods and services from a bank account at any time. Hopefully, we will have a hands-on demonstration soon.
18. I expect that in anticipation of phase II of the project, innovators and FINTECHs are already engaged in designing digital financial tools that will facilitate instant payments from mobile phones through bank accounts, and to also make cash transfers between mobile money operators. I expect that there will be a natural progression to Phase III when the international gateway will be fully open to Sierra Leoneans to use their locally issued cards anywhere in the world of transactions. I am informed that this will be possible within six months.
19. In an age of cybercrimes, I expect that the Bank of Sierra Leone has fully considered issues of security. I am sure that the Bank will work with other banks and financial institutions to also resolve issues of loss and fraud to users of the National Payment Switch.
20. Let me close by stating how excited I am about Sierra Leone further embracing the digital era. With this launch, Sierra Leone joins

the rest of the world in making digital payments the bedrock of trade and investment. In the sub-region, we stand out as one of a few countries that have the potential to upscale with innovative systems and increase transaction turnover.

21. Indeed, the National Switch will play a pivotal role in enhancing the efficiency of our financial infrastructure. I am therefore honoured and most delighted to officially commission and launch the "***Salone Payment Switch***". It is fast, easy, and safe. In Krio, it is "***Salone Payment Switch.***" "***Payment wae nor get yagba: fast, izi en safe***"

I thank you for your attention.