



**KEYNOTE STATEMENT BY HIS EXCELLENCY,
DR. JULIUS MAADA BIO, PRESIDENT OF THE
REPUBLIC OF SIERRA LEONE AT THE SIERRA
LEONE INNOVATES: TECH SUMMIT,
BINTUMANI CONFERENCE CENTER,
FREETOWN - TUESDAY 11TH JUNE 2024**

**Honorable Vice President
Ministers of Government
Members of Parliament
International Delegates
Representatives of MNOs and ISPs
Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen
Good Morning**

1. It is a great pleasure to be here at this inaugural meeting of the **Sierra Leone Innovates: Tech Summit**. This ground-breaking summit serves as a platform to bring together the various actors of our technology and innovation ecosystem, to share ideas and forge new paths for the future.

2. Our world today is going through an unparalleled transformation as a result of the outpouring of human intelligence and ingenuity in the field of innovation and technology, catalysed by the advancement in computer science.

3. Ladies and gentlemen, the Fourth Industrial Revolution is already at hand. As a nation, we cannot afford to just stand-by and watch as mere end-users. Rather, we must leverage the opportunities availed to us to enhance service delivery.

4. This summit offers an invaluable opportunity for us to recalibrate our collective achievements in technology and innovation and to chart our shared vision for a brighter and a more prosperous future for Sierra Leone and the region in the digital world.

5. Technology and innovation are not mere scientific discoveries aimed at mesmerising us with cutting-edge gadgets. Rather, it is

about positively using these tools to revolutionize our institutions and empower our citizens.

6. However, we should not be oblivious that the rapid advancement in computer science, technology, and innovation also presents an eminent threat to social cohesion, human security and our personal space and privacy.

7. With the advent of diverse social media tools, Artificial Intelligence (AI) software, automated systems, and high-tech robotics; the world seems to be in a constant state of flux. The line between reality and fictional creativity, is daily becoming distorted and indistinguishable.

8. Ladies and gentlemen, Sierra Leone like many other countries in the region stands at the crossroads of unprecedented opportunities but equally faced with daunting challenges. Since we cannot alienate ourselves from the global digital ecosystem, we must position ourselves to explore the opportunities that these innovations and technologies present.

9. In that regard, it is imperative that we make timely strategic decisions and investments to ensure that we can reap the benefits of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. This is my expectation of the **Sierra Leone Innovates: Tech Summit.**

GOVERNMENT POLICY INITIATIVES

10. Ladies and gentlemen, let me take you through some of the critical steps my government has taken to achieve this vision of exploring the advantages of our digital environment. Foremost, as a government, we recognize that we have a critical role to play in

creating a conducive environment to foster innovation; we have embraced this opportunity.

11. In 2018, my government established the Directorate of Science, Technology, and Innovation (DSTI) with a clear mission of leveraging emerging technologies to support the government in delivering its National Development Plan. It is cardinal in my government's plan to use technology and innovation to accelerate service delivery.

12. In 2019, we launched the National Innovation and Digital Strategy (NIDS); a 10-year plan that embraces the concept of a Country-as-an-AI-Lab. The intention is to position Sierra Leone as a hub for AI and data science research, innovation and technology, and to promote a digital economy that will positively impact citizens.

13. In my second term of office, my government has gone further to identify Technology and Infrastructure as one of the Big Five Game Changers in the new Medium Term National Development Plan, 2024 - 2030.

14. We have also established a Ministry of Communication, Technology and Innovation, to drive this strategy and to collaborate and coordinate other like-minded agencies and private sector institutions to build upon this foundation for the future.

PROMOTING EDUCATION

15. To become competitive in the digital space and global job market, we saw the need to invest in our human capital, to ensure that our citizens are equipped with the requisite knowledge and skills to meet the demands of the global digital economy. These

skills are essential to fostering a culture of creativity, critical thinking, and lifelong learning.

16. In my first term, my government prioritized Free Quality School Education as the flagship of our Human Capital Development Agenda. Today, I am glad to report that Sierra Leone is one of the few countries in the region where female students in any STEM program are guaranteed a full tuition-free education up to university level.

17. Ladies and gentlemen, to promote digital literacy at all levels of society, my government aims to connect every school in Sierra Leone to internet facility through our partnership with the Giga Project. About 450 schools have already been selected for connectivity over the next three years.

18. We have also invested in integrating technology into the curriculum and providing students with hands-on experience in fields such as software engineering, robotics, and data science.

19. Additionally, we have prioritized the establishment of digital learning hubs in various pilot communities in the country that serve as safe spaces for youths that are not in formal education, to improve their access to basic digital training skills.

DIGITAL GOVERNMENT SERVICES

20. Ladies and gentlemen, in tandem with the policy initiatives put in place to expand the digital space, we are also endeavouring to integrate multiple government services into a unified platform, which will empower citizens to access a range of government-supported services through a single interface.

21. In 2018, Sierra Leone through the Bank of Sierra Leone became the second country in Africa to launch a FinTech Sandbox programme. This has provided an enabling regulatory environment for new and innovative financial technologies to be deployed and tested before launch into the marketplace. Through these efforts, we have witnessed an increase in the uptake of digital financial services, improving financial inclusion and contributions to our economic development.

PROMOTING DIGITAL INCLUSION

22. Ladies and gentlemen, we do not intend to leave anyone behind in this journey. To fully maximize the opportunities that technology and innovation have to offer, it is crucial that every Sierra Leonean regardless of their background or location, have the opportunity to actively connect to the digital world through access to mobile and internet services.

23. Towards this goal, we have invested heavily in expanding our network infrastructure both in the capital city of Freetown and in rural areas. Today, Freetown enjoys an outstanding 85% coverage of fiber and we have expanded the national terrestrial backbone and access network to 14 out of 16 districts.

24. Together with our private sector partners, the Ministry of Communication, Technology, and Innovation has set a target of achieving 100% 3G and 70% 4G mobile coverage by the end of next year, whilst also increasing rural connectivity. Complementary to this, two of our mobile operators last year announced the pilot rollout of 5G coverage.

25. Ladies and gentlemen, the official launch of Starlink in Sierra Leone at this summit underscores our commitment to the process

of enhancing connectivity and providing every Sierra Leonean with the opportunity to access the wealth of information and opportunities available online.

26. I am also delighted to announce a \$50 million grant facility from the World Bank in support of our Digital Transformation Project. This will significantly contribute to the expansion of our broadband infrastructure, upgrade our network and resilience frameworks. This project will also enhance digital literacy skills for both the public and private sectors as well as deliver key digital government services.

EMBRACING EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES

27. Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, as a government, we are eager to embrace and experiment with emerging technologies and innovations to address our socio-economic challenges and development aspirations.

28. In 2020, we launched the first-ever drone corridor in West Africa and have successfully piloted a Medical Drone Delivery Program. We are currently in the process of developing a surveillance drone program that could impact various other sectors such as agriculture, fishing, mining, and the environment.

29. I therefore urge the delegation of Ministers of ICT from various regional countries, our development partners and all those later participating in the closed-door roundtable, to be bold and open to the spirit of collaboration, for the collective benefit of all.

OUR TECH CITY

30. Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, this Summit creates an ideal platform for us to share our current national innovation and entrepreneurship agenda – the **Feili Tech City Project**.

31. The Feili Tech City Project is borne out of our vision to build a state-of-the-art hub for the brightest and most innovative minds to converge and create solutions for our challenges. This hub will strengthen the technology ecosystem and provide facilities to incubate and accelerate programs to support the transition of start-ups from ideation to commercialization.

32. The City will foster the development of new technologies, products, and services that will serve as catalysts for sustainable development, promote economic diversification and reduce our over reliance on the traditional sectors. With a keen focus on digital skills outsourcing and tech industrialization, the City is projected to create thousands of jobs, and further provides access to the global digital job market, that may offer our citizens new career paths.

33. We are committed to implementing business-friendly policies and regulations that will encourage innovation, promote access to finance, encourage market expansion, and provide networking opportunities.

34. This will provide a conducive environment with a view to attracting foreign companies, start-ups, venture capitalists, and investors to fuel further innovation and economic activity.

35. My government is also committed to seeking public-private partnerships that will leverage the strengths and resources of both sectors. This will generate pool resources and promote deeper

collaboration thereby reducing duplication and ensuring efficiency gains.

36. Esteemed ladies and gentlemen, you are all partners in this progress. This summit is not just meant for celebrating what we have achieved. This summit is a clarion call to action for what we must continue to strive to achieve. We are not only accountable for what we do; we are also accountable for what we say we will do.

{Madam Minister, be reminded that you have just signed an additional performance contract for yourself and team}

37. Ladies and gentlemen, leadership is not unfamiliar to us; Sierra Leone was once the beacon of hope in Africa for higher education, boasting of one of the first universities in the sub-region, the illustrious Fourah College. Today, we want to reclaim that spirit of academic excellence by playing a leadership role in the new frontier of technology and innovation. We must ensure that every Sierra Leonean is primed to participate in the digital revolution, and to contribute to the global digital economy.

38. To the entrepreneurs and researchers seeking to push the boundaries of knowledge, I encourage you to dream big, and to innovate ground-breaking solutions that could address the challenges we face in our region. Government can facilitate by creating the enabling environment, but the solutions to emerging challenges such as climate change, food insecurity, human security and unemployment are going to be yours. This is the most invaluable partnership of our immediate future, citizens and government coming together to solve complex problems to alleviate poverty through social innovation.

39. To the investors, venture capitalists and finance institutions looking for the next big opportunity, I encourage you to invest boldly in our young innovators and to believe in the potential that Sierra Leone holds.

40. To all government Ministers and Heads of Agency, I challenge you to collaborate and think in a new way to ensure that we deliver on our commitment to developing an environment where innovation thrives and open our institutions to the efficiencies and ease of doing business that technology can offer.

41. To the members of our international delegation, both in the public and private sectors, share your ideas, your experiences and join us on this exciting journey.

42. To our private sector and development partners, this is a call to action. As we strive to build a city dedicated to fostering technology and innovation, I call for your support to ensure that this hub serves as a conduit for economic diversification, sustainability, and inclusive growth. Please walk with us to build a city where we can further blur the lines between reality and the virtual world. Together, let us leverage and exploit technology to catapult Sierra Leone into middle income status. This is the opportunity that can serve as the bridge between our current state and our aspiration for a dignified and prosperous life for every Sierra Leonean citizen that can also contribute to the global economy.

43. I thank you all for being here today. We look forward to your unwavering commitment in this journey. Let us work hand in hand, shoulder to shoulder to turn this vision into reality and make Sierra Leone a beacon of innovation in the world.

44. This is a very big dream. Let us muster the courage, let us ignite the spirit of hope and bravery, and let us build a future where our children's children can dream and soar in a brighter, more prosperous, and innovative future.

With a deep sense of pride and bated excitement about what a tech forward Sierra Leone could mean for the accelerated development of our people, I boldly take this step into our future to unveil and launch the Feilei Tech City Project.

Thank you.