



KEYNOTE ADDRESS

BY

**HIS EXCELLENCY DR. JULIUS MAADA BIO
PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF SIERRA LEONE**

AT THE

**FORTY-EIGHTH SESSION OF THE GOVERNING
COUNCIL OF THE INTERNATIONAL FUND FOR
AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT (IFAD)**

ROME, ITALY

FEBRUARY 12, 2025

EXCELLENCIES,

DISTINGUISHED GOVERNORS,

PRESIDENT OF IFAD, MR. ALVARO LARIO,

HONOURED DELEGATES,

DISTINGUISHED LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

1. It is a great honour to address this distinguished gathering of leaders, experts, and stakeholders committed to transforming agriculture and rural development.

2. I extend my deepest gratitude to the **International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)** for inviting me to participate in this important discussion on **"Catalysing Investment at the First Mile."**

3. This theme resonates deeply with Sierra Leone's journey toward sustainable development and shared prosperity.

4. The **"first mile"** represents the heart of our rural economies — smallholder farmers, fisherfolk, and rural entrepreneurs.

5. These individuals remain the bedrock of food systems and national economies despite limited resources and structural challenges.
6. The theme also captures the essence of what we strive for — creating meaningful and lasting change at the very foundation of our food systems.
7. For more than 40 years, **IFAD's** locally led development model has helped rural communities take control of their futures.

EXCELLENCIES, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

- 8.** Our food systems are under immense pressure, facing unprecedented global challenges.

- 9.** Economic uncertainties, conflicts, climate change, and entrenched inequalities continue to impact our rural communities disproportionately.

- 10.** These crises not only expose our long-standing systemic issues but often aggravate them.

- 11.** Rural areas, often seen as the "**last mile**", are, in fact, the starting point — the "**first mile**" — for achieving global food security and sustainable development.
- 12.** Rural communities are the backbone of Sierra Leone's economy, yet they bear the brunt of climate change and are most affected by various shocks.
- 13.** Smallholder farmers make up more than 90% of our agricultural workforce, with women representing over 70%.

- 14.** Their contribution is invaluable, yet they face significantly greater challenges than men in accessing finance, resources, and time, limiting their full potential.
- 15.** Recent crises have underscored the urgency of our situation and the need for immediate action. We cannot afford to continue on this path.
- 16.** As leaders, we can all agree that targeted investments have the power to transform livelihoods.

17. It is our responsibility to prioritise empowering rural communities, especially women and youth, to take the lead in driving this progress.

18. With the right support, rural populations have the potential to sustain themselves and their communities, significantly contribute to national food sovereignty, strengthen global food security, and create opportunities in rural areas for the next generation.

EXCELLENCIES, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

- 19.** In Sierra Leone, under my flagship **FEED SALONE initiative** launched in 2023, my country has embarked on an ambitious journey to transform its food systems.

- 20.** We have embraced a private-sector-led approach that positions agriculture as the engine of economic growth.

- 21.** We aim to completely overhaul our food systems to achieve food security and inclusive economic growth for current and future generations.

- 22.** Our goal is to restore pride in farming, as it once was when Sierra Leone was a significant exporter of rice, coffee, cocoa, and other crops.
- 23.** To achieve this, we rely on the support of our international partners, who have pledged over **USD 1 billion** for the next five years.
- 24.** We are grateful for your support. While this may sound substantial, it falls short of what is needed to realise our ambitious agriculture sector goals.

25. In the months ahead, we aim to turn these pledges into concrete actions.

26. Your commitment and actions are crucial to mobilise additional resources and ensure the success of our transformative agenda.

EXCELLENCIES, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

27. We have taken giant steps toward food self-sufficiency in Sierra Leone by ramping up local rice, onions, and egg production and cutting our reliance on imports by **US\$10 million** in 2024.

28. We have also invested in rural infrastructure, a neglected sector, including building new roads, bridges, and irrigation systems and improving access to mechanisation services and storage facilities.

29. These initiatives are crucial to giving smallholder farmers the tools they need to thrive and embrace agriculture as a business.

30. Access to agricultural finance remains one of our greatest challenges.

31. To tackle this, my Government have already facilitated over **US\$28 million in agricultural financing**, empowering women and youth to take the lead in transforming our food systems.

32. This year, we will redouble our efforts and aim for even greater progress.

33. Our ultimate goal is to establish an **Agriculture Lending Bank** that will catalyse innovation and growth and unlock the full potential of Sierra Leone's agrifood systems.

EXCELLENCIES, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

34. We recognise that meaningful transformation begins at home, but we also want our efforts to make waves beyond our borders.

35. Sierra Leone is proud to be part of global alliances that advocate for a systemic approach to food and amplify the voices of smaller nations in shaping the global food systems agenda.

36. As co-chair of the **Alliance of Champions for Food Systems Transformation**, alongside Brazil and Rwanda, Sierra Leone is leveraging this platform to advocate for equitable and sustainable food systems.

- 37.** It has enabled us to share our experiences, learn from others, and rally global support for innovative solutions to food insecurity.
- 38.** We are also proud to have recently joined the flagship **G20 Global Alliance Against Hunger and Poverty** under Brazil's presidency.
- 39.** This Alliance places food security and poverty alleviation at the centre of global development agendas.

40. Through this Alliance, we are committed to advancing key policy priorities, including scaling up our home-grown school feeding programs.

41. Last year, in partnership with our stakeholders, we provided nutritious meals to over 500,000 school children across Sierra Leone, ensuring better health and education outcomes for our future generation.

42. These Alliances reflect Sierra Leone's ambition to benefit from international support and contribute meaningfully to global solutions.

43. We want to show that even small nations can lead boldly and inspire impactful change in global food systems.

EXCELLENCIES, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

44. Partnerships are essential for countries like Sierra Leone, providing the support and collaboration needed to turn potential into meaningful progress.

45. Our longstanding partnership with **IFAD** has been instrumental in empowering our rural communities.

46. Together, we have worked to lay a strong foundation for advancing food systems, with **IFAD** consistently proving to be a steadfast and committed ally on this journey.

47. Collectively, we are driving transformative programs valued at over **US\$ 270 million**.

48. These include the **Rural Finance and Community Improvement Programme**, which has over **US\$ 65 million** in funding and delivers vital financial and technical

support to empower farmers to overcome challenges and succeed.

49. Similarly, the **Agricultural Value Chain Development Project**, with over **US\$ 102 million**, has significantly enhanced productivity and established sustainable value chains for crops like oil palm, cocoa, and rice across nine districts.

50. In 2025, we will implement the **Livestock and Livelihoods Development Program**, a **US\$ 105 million** initiative co-funded by **IFAD**.

51. This Program aims to transform the livestock sector, benefiting nearly half a million people in rural farming communities by reducing poverty, improving food security, and enhancing nutrition.

52. Sierra Leone remains an **IFAD-committed** partner. Our participation in **IFAD's** replenishment cycles shows our determination to advance sustainable agriculture and improve rural livelihoods.

53. Our pledge to IFAD13 reinforces this dedication and strengthens the coalition with Member States to scale up our investments in food systems and rural communities.

EXCELLENCIES, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

54. In light of the challenges we face, our coalition must become even stronger.

55. We need to do more because we cannot continue to respond reactively to crisis after crisis. The time for action is now.

56. Instead, we must build resilience and preparedness by making the right choices and investing in local food systems.

57. This is the moment to leapfrog traditional barriers and accelerate first-mile investments, adopting innovative solutions that drive meaningful progress.

58. I urge global partners to significantly scale up investments in rural economies, ensuring that resources directly benefit the communities where they are most needed.

- 59.** We must also leverage **South-South Cooperation** to share knowledge, scale impactful solutions, and foster innovation across borders.
- 60.** Strengthening multilateral partnerships is equally crucial to addressing the root causes of food insecurity, poverty, and climate vulnerabilities.

61. Finally, we must leapfrog outdated financing models by embracing innovations in agricultural funding, such as establishing agricultural lending and insurance schemes.

62. These are essential for unlocking the potential of smallholder farmers and driving sustainable transformation.

EXCELLENCIES, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN

63. Now is the time to invest in a resilient future.

Sierra Leone remains committed to its partnership with **IFAD** and, as a member of our impactful coalition, to advancing its shared vision of empowering rural communities.

64. As we deliberate during this session, **let us walk the talk** and turn our shared aspirations into more visible outcomes for our rural people, ensuring no one is left behind.

65. Thank you, and I look forward to fruitful discussions and impactful outcomes from this **48th session of the IFAD Governing Council.**