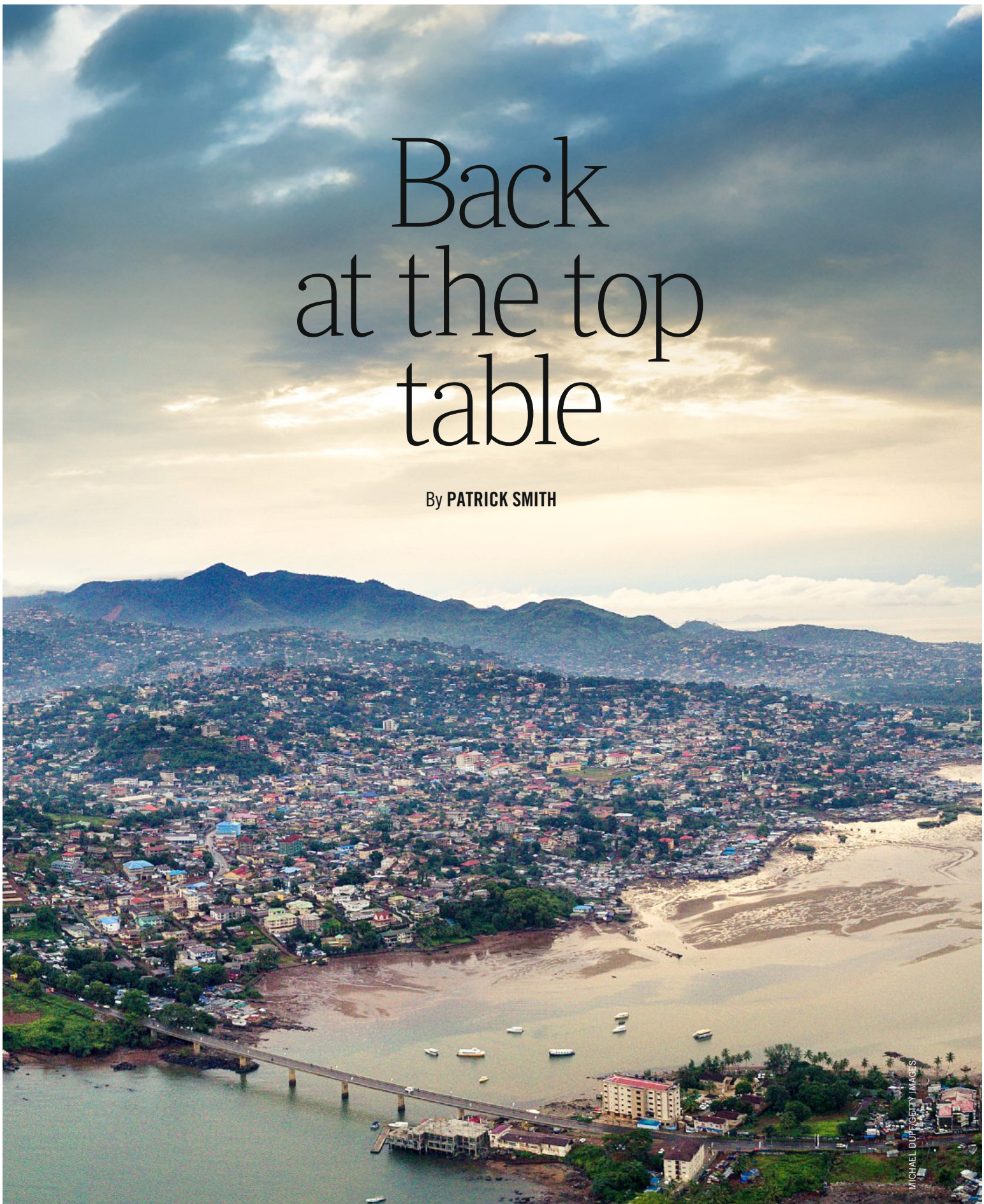


Back at the top table

By **PATRICK SMITH**



MICHAEL DUFFIGLEY IMAGES

Having successfully led Sierra Leone's coup in 1996, embracing multi-party politics and ensuring the country's transition back to civilian rule, can Julius Maada Bio bring stability to West Africa a second time?

There is a kind of political symmetry in the emergence of Sierra Leone's Julius Maada Bio as chairman of the Economic Community of West African States on 22 June 2025. It is three decades since he first landed at the centre of regional politics. Then he owed his profile to the coup d'état against the youthful and mercurial military leader Valentine Strasser.

An important qualifier to this timeline is that Bio held multi-party elections after his putsch, handing power to former UN official Ahmad Tejan Kabbah in February 1996. Bio then flew to Washington to study for a masters in political science at the American University.

ECOWAS trials

But the civilian interregnum was short-lived. Within a year, Kabbah was deposed by Major Johnny Paul Koroma who dissolved all political parties and suspended the constitution. Koroma combined despotism with incompetence, and insurgents led by Foday Sankoh were soon launching attacks near Freetown.

Enter ECOWAS and its military wing, ECOMOG. With soldiers from many West African states, ECOMOG tried to shore up security in Sierra Leone and neighbouring Liberia. For five years, ECOMOG, alongside troops from Britain and a UN peacekeeping force, more or less held the line in Freetown until the rebels agreed to disarm.

The contrast with 2025 is telling. Today, ECOWAS member states are struggling to agree on a political programme, let alone cooperate in

a regional security force. Military-ruled states – Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger – have quit the political secretariat of ECOWAS and abjure any security collaboration with it.

The ECOWAS leaders who picked Bio to chair the organisation may be hoping that his military history – and his midwifing of a transition, albeit unsuccessful on the first attempt, to Kabbah – might help him open negotiations with the junta leaders in the Sahel.

If he doesn't succeed on the political front, Bio may encourage some coordination across the region between senior military officers drawn from the juntas and the civilian-ruled states.

In May, Ghana's President John Dramani Mahama said any attempt to nudge the junta leaders towards civil rule could be counter-productive. He argued West Africa's coastal states should offer serious and unconditional assistance to the juntas to fend off the insurgents – most backed by Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State group – that are ramping up attacks on civilians and soldiers across the region.

If as chairman of ECOWAS Bio can restart military cooperation with the juntas, it would hugely boost the fight against the insurgents, as argued here by Lansana

The Bio government is targeting farming as a means to drive growth and jobs

Gberie, Sierra Leone's ambassador to the UN in Geneva (see page 116). Thanks to figures such as Gberie and its other top diplomats, Sierra Leone has played an outsized role on the international stage.

It has a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council and is leading calls for the reform of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Its tortuous history of transitioning from military rule and civil war to multi-party politics has given it a voice in multiple fora on peace-building and national security.

Economic growth

Most of Bio's efforts for his second term, which ends in 2028, will focus on his national agenda.

Leading on promises to expand education and public health his first term, Bio is now trying to drive economic growth, especially on agricultural development, long neglected in the country.

The economic message is clear. The country's exports of bauxite, diamonds, iron ore, rutile and timber fill the foreign exchange coffers but depend critically on pricing in the terminal markets or on long-term trading contracts with China, India and South Korea.

Many Sierra Leonians are still working in subsistence agriculture where investment, innovative technology and new logistics networks are urgently needed. The Bio government is targeting farming as a means to drive growth and jobs but is struggling with long-held prejudices against it as a career choice.

One of Africa's biggest rice producers, Sierra Leone saw its farmers being pushed out by smuggled imports from south-east Asia. As elsewhere in West Africa, the tide is turning to benefit local farmers in Sierra Leone. Massive investment and mechanisation is needed to out-compete the Asian producers across the region. ●●●

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A bustling road in Freetown, Sierra Leone

PATRICK MEINHARDT / AFP

●●● Some of these farm programmes are bearing fruit as seen in the uptick of GDP growth; it's forecast to hit 4.7% this year from 3.8% last year, according to the IMF. It adds that inflation should fall to 12.9% partly due to higher local output of foodstuffs.

Fresh investment in the mining industry has also helped. The government is yet to score a win in its quest for a major mineral processing project, despite the country's valuable resource base.

Tough love

Last year, the IMF approved a three-year adjustment programme worth \$250m in support of the government's 2024-2030 national development plan. Its classic monetarist strategy involves sharply cutting money supply – from 63.4% in 2023 to 8.8% last year – and pushing up interest rates by 7.7%.

Alongside unemployment rates, high inflation and spiralling debt servicing costs worry Freetown's economic team. By keeping interest rates high, they want to see inflation return to single figures.

The sharp depreciation of the Leone currency – to \$1=25,989 leones (estimated) in 2025 from \$1=Le14,048 in 2022 – has

complicated the battle against rising prices due to the high level of food and fuel imports.

The IMF also warns of the risks of debt-distress, especially with lower growth and higher interest rates in the international economy. The local economy's vulnerability is exacerbated by falling foreign reserves, now covering less than two months of imports.

Running a tough macro-economic policy under IMF conditionalities reduces the Bio government's space to maintain its push on social investment.

Under its flagship education programme, it ended fees for 1.5 million Sierra Leonians. Education's share of the budget rose to 21% by 2019 compared to 12% the previous year – more than 75% of school-age children, or about 3.5 million, are now enrolled, according to Conrad Sackey, an education minister. That is a million more than when the government started the programme

The success of the education programme will be judged by its practical relevance

in 2018. Sackey says the focus now is on enrolling the remaining 500,000 children who are out of school, adding that another 12,000 teachers have been recruited.

Booster shots

In the medium term, the success of the programme will be judged by the quality of education and its practical relevance in the predominantly agrarian economy: how expanded educational provision can translate into better job opportunities.

Also on the government's credit list are commissioning hospitals in Jembe, Port Loko and Kono, as well as a paediatric centre in Freetown. Access to electricity covers about 31% of the people, up from 16% in 2018. However, the IMF has flagged serious losses made by the state-owned power company, pressuring the government's efforts to cut the budget deficit.

The broader message here is just how dependent the Bio government will be on better management and national economic growth. Amid the ructions in geopolitics and the international system, battening down the hatches and shoring up national revenue earners will be crucial over the next three years. ●

REPUBLIC OF SIERRA LEONE



SIERRA LEONE: WHERE HISTORY MEETS WILD BEAUTY

Sierra Leone is quietly carving out a niche as a destination for travellers in search of more than a safari brochure. With its unspoiled rainforests, haunting historical sites, and famously warm hospitality, the country offers a deeply rewarding—and still largely underexplored—travel experience. Perched high on Mount Aureol, Fourah Bay College stands as a proud symbol of African academic achievement. Founded in 1827, it was the first Western-style university in sub-Saharan Africa. Visitors to this iconic site are rewarded not just with sweeping views of Freetown's bay but also a sobering sense of history. Alumni such as Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther and Christian Frederick Cole—the first African to practise law in England—stand as reminders of the formidable intellects nurtured here, often against the odds.

**THE COUNTRY
OFFERS A DEEPLY
REWARDING—AND
STILL LARGELY
UNDEREXPLORED—
TRAVEL EXPERIENCE**

Freetown itself is a city shaped by returnees—freed slaves from the Americas who settled here in the late 18th century. The Cotton Tree, Bunce Island and the Sierra Leone National Museum all speak to this legacy. Bunce Island, a former slave fort accessible by boat, is especially poignant: its ruins speak volumes to those attuned to the weight of history.

Yet the country is not a museum. Beyond the capital, nature takes over. Tacugama Chimpanzee Sanctuary, just outside Freetown, rescues and rehabilitates chimps orphaned by poaching and deforestation. Guided tours and eco-lodge stays offer a close encounter with Sierra Leone's conservation efforts.

Wildlife lovers are spoilt for choice. Gola Rainforest National Park—one of West Africa's last primary rainforests—offers immersive treks through dense foliage teeming with rare species. Further afield, Tiwai Island shelters pygmy hippos and over 135 bird species, while Outamba Kilimi National Park promises canoe rides through untamed savannahs and sightings of elusive creatures such as the bongo and colobus monkey.

Those seeking relaxation will find it at River Number Two Beach or on Banana Island, where snorkelling, diving and languid afternoons are the order of the day. More



Sierra Leone's beaches are renowned in the region for their beauty and accessibility

intrepid travellers may prefer Turtle Islands, or hiking in the Wara Wara Mountains and Mount Bintumani, where local communities often welcome visitors with storytelling and traditional music.

Sierra Leone is also positioning itself as a business and eco-tourism hub, particularly in agribusiness and mining. But its greatest asset may well be its people—hospitable, resilient, and deeply proud of their land. Best visited in the dry season (November to April), Sierra Leone is ideal for a 10–14 day trip—enough to take in the country's rich mix of heritage, biodiversity and coastlines still blissfully free of crowds.

JAMG - PHOTOS ADOBE STOCK



AGRICULTURE

The farm road to self-sufficiency

Sierra Leone's smallholder and larger farmers are driving the push to secure the country's food supply

By **LAURA-ANGELA BAGNETTO**
in Port Loko and Makeni

On the road north out of Freetown, Sierra Leone's bustling capital, the urban streets give way to lush rural countryside, exposing the backbone of the country – its farmers.

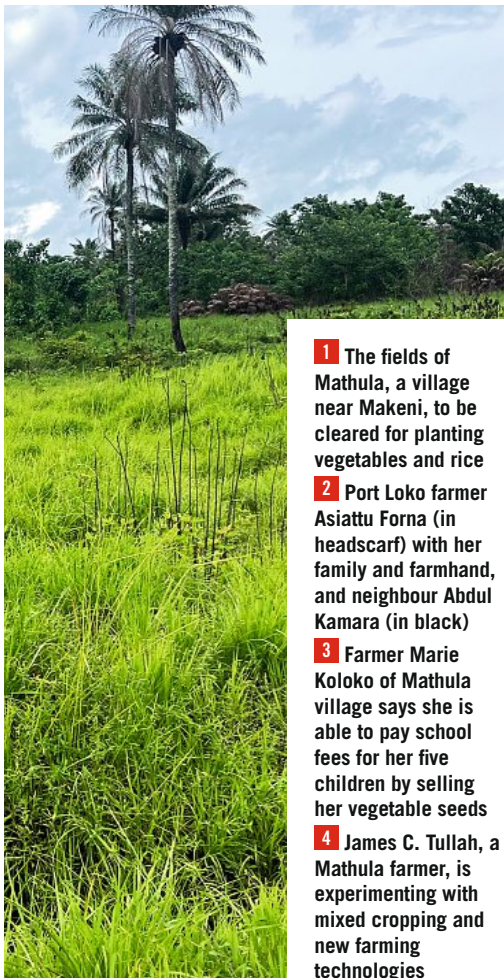
In Port Loko, some 85km from the capital, farmers are gathered in the agricultural offices of the National Federation of Farmers, Sierra Leone (NAFFSL).

"Port Loko is considered the breadbasket," says Bambay Tisseh, Port Loko district secretary. "These are the champions. These are the farmers," he says with a sweep of his hand, motioning towards men of various ages, many wearing hats and caps. It's a mixed group of so-called master farmers, who have large plots of land, and the more common smallholder farmers.

Since Sierra Leone's civil war ended in 2002, leaving 50,000 dead and displacing over half the population, agriculture has slowly recovered. The agriculture ministry lost nearly all infrastructure, and the transition back to self-reliance has been rocky, compounded by Ebola and Covid-19.

Beyond issues like pests, soil erosion and climate change,





1 The fields of Mathula, a village near Makeni, to be cleared for planting vegetables and rice

2 Port Loko farmer Asiattu Forna (in headscarf) with her family and farmhand, and neighbour Abdul Kamara (in black)

3 Farmer Marie Koloko of Mathula village says she is able to pay school fees for her five children by selling her vegetable seeds

4 James C. Tullah, a Mathula farmer, is experimenting with mixed cropping and new farming technologies

farmers have access to highlands and inland valley swamp (IVS) land ideal for rice.

“At least 60% or 70% [of rice] is eaten at home while 30% is sold,” says farmer Lansana Conteh. Still, Sierra Leone imported 480 tonnes of rice in 2022. Efforts to reduce imports are ongoing.

Feed Salone

There are sparks of promise. “Even the price of rice, imported rice, is continuously falling, implying that the majority of people are focusing on domestically produced rice,” says local official Tisseh.

“The government is using rice cultivated in the country to support the correctional centres, school feeding programmes and even the military,” says Conteh.

Feed Salone is the Agriculture Ministry’s flagship programme that aims to secure the country’s food supply. Malnutrition is a daily threat: the UN World Food Programme notes that 26% of children under five experience stunted growth, and 20% of the

country’s population during last year’s lean season (July-October) needed emergency food assistance.

The government enrolls small-holder and larger farmers to grow crops to supply Feed Salone, paying for their crops.

But not all the farmers have been included, says Abdul Karim Kamara, a rice farmer in New London, near Port Loko. “The minister should make more effort to help more farmers work with Feed Salone,” he says.

Kamara is in the programme and grows rice. He invites us to his swampy fields, where we meet his neighbour and farmer, Asiattu Forna, 45, who has five children and an aged husband to feed. She grows peppers, tomato, okra, cucumber and rice.

“We sell more than we eat,” she says, looking at her small field next to Kamara’s larger one, adding that the family eats one meal a day, but sometimes they have to go without. “Finance is difficult here,” she says, adding that she needs to borrow money to grow her crops. ●●●

Can Sierra Leone save the coffee world?

A ‘Made in Sierra Leone’ approach for alternatives to Arabica coffee is what scientists at Kew Gardens, the UK, are currently working on. The java stalwart is in peril, as climate change and other factors have decimated the global crop. Introducing stenophylla, one of the world’s 123 other species of coffee. Cited in a dusty tome in Kew, scientists from the botanic gardens in London went searching for the elusive “lost coffee” that hadn’t been seen growing in the wild since 1954, finding it in the east of Sierra Leone, near the Liberian border. Its unique flavour when roasted, which imitates Arabica, has given hope to coffee drinkers. And farmers in Salone can rejoice too, as stenophylla is climate resistant and can be grown in lowlands, unlike Arabica.

It is being grown and tested in small batches in various parts of Sierra Leone, in the hopes that the country’s fledgling coffee industry can meet demand with high-yielding, superior flavour, sustainable stenophylla crops. “In the next couple of years, we want to quickly start moving that into commercial production,” says Agriculture Minister Henry Musa Kpaka. (See page 94)



SOUTH INDIA
COFFEE COMPANY

PHOTOS: LAURA-ANGELA BAGNETTO

●●● World Bank statistics from 2021 indicate that only 28.9% of Sierra Leoneans over the age of 15 have bank accounts; women and rural residents are unlikely to have accounts, which makes finances and savings more of an informal community structure.

Local agricultural liaison Aminata Kamara says loan repayments are often made in crops rather than cash. Smallholders might repay a loan with crops worth 10 times the amount, disadvantaging them significantly.

Market access remains challenging, says district official Ibrahim Bangura, with farmers forced to sell at low farmgate prices due to poor road infrastructure. Improved access through International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) projects awaits funding.

MADAM incentive

About 100km north, MADAM, a local NGO founded in 1991, helps farmers improve income and nutrition through better practices and crop diversity.

Edward Conteh, head of programmes, says agriculture employs two-thirds of Sierra Leone's workforce, contributing over half its GDP. Yet youth migration to urban areas is rising, affecting productivity, which is why government makes efforts to mechanise farming, he says.

In Mathula, Makeni district, Mohamed Kamara, MADAM's project manager, calls the farmers to gather in the centre of the village to talk about crops. Their area has upland and IVS land – they grow vegetables and rice, as well as carry out small-scale forestry projects.

Widowed farmer Marie Koloko supports five children by cultivating varied crops. Although a drought recently destroyed her rice, diversified crops sustain her family.

"I can contribute 5 leones to the community's savings, settle



5 In Mathula, Makeni, local NGO MADAM helps farmers to maximise their rice paddy yields as well as make room for vegetables to diversify their crops

household affairs and pay school fees," she says. After training in seed preservation, she improved earnings, hiring labour for farming. Sierra Leone's 2022 Customary Land Rights bill enables women to inherit land, securing family livelihoods. The law has uplifted women's economic role.

In Port Loko and Makeni, agriculture officials say that women farming is on the rise. Women are more likely to pay for labour that they cannot do themselves, contributing to the local economy.

"It makes sense if you want to empower people in the field of agriculture to target more women than men," says Conteh. "About 60% of our target beneficiaries are women. We are very intentional about targeting women."

With two wives and six children to feed, James C. Tullah, a farmer in the Mathula community, aims

for the bigger money-making crops – pineapple and oil palm – but also struggles. "Yes, I get income from them, but the income is not stable because I have to pay the school fees for my children," he says, noting that the cassava he recently planted died.

"One of my problems is drought. I cultivate in upland and IVS, but have problems cultivating upland," Tullah says. MADAM tries to discourage farmers from growing crops upland, which is more labour-intensive and not worth the energy, says Mohamed Kamara, MADAM's project manager.

Comparing harvests

Tullah says he appreciates what MADAM has done for the community in terms of new skills, tools and seeds, but he wants to see the results of the next harvest before making any decisions.

"We were practicing mixed cropping – cultivating different crops on the same piece of land. We were also doing intercropping – after growing these crops, we put other crops there," he says.

The local NGO encouraged the community to cultivate different

'It makes sense if you want to empower people in the field to target more women'

crops on the land, so if one crop fails, other surviving crops will keep food on their tables.

“We are now going to compare the harvest of how we produced before this time and what MADAM has taught us to decide what methods we will use in our daily farming activities, year in and year out,” says Tullah.

Behind their homes, fields stretch far into the distance, reflecting the promise and potential of Sierra Leone’s agricultural revival.

Kamara walks between the plots, proudly pointing out starter plants for cashews, a crop with strong market potential. Further out, preparations are underway on a rice paddy, aimed at enabling year-round cultivation.

Fish and spicy peppers

Fishponds are also planned, which will allow farmers to diversify income sources and enhance resilience. This eagerness for innovation reflects a broader drive to improve local living standards.

Kamara is particularly enthusiastic about another forthcoming initiative involving the cultivation of habanero peppers, also known as scotch bonnet. Sierra Leoneans use these spicy peppers liberally, and Kamara sees significant economic opportunity.

“The peppers grow quickly – ready in one to two weeks,” he explains, pointing to nearly ripe peppers in a model greenhouse. “Farmers supplying sauces to restaurants in town, which are usually quite expensive, could secure their livelihoods.”

Yet, challenges remain. Conteh agrees that farmers face significant difficulties and that poverty is still widespread. “We continue battling food insecurity,” he says. “However, if we compare the periods immediately after the war and during Ebola to today, we see improvements. Progress is slow, but tangible.” ●

A hearty stew to feed the nation

Nigeria’s President Olusegun Obasanjo used to liken successful agricultural reform to making a stew. The ingredients need to be just right, and the way that they are combined – the proportions, the cooking method – all contribute to a great meal.

So, too, with agriculture. It is a complex recipe of inputs, skills, infrastructure and finance. The Feed Salone strategy, launched in 2023 by President Julius Maada Bio, is Sierra Leone’s flagship initiative to transform the country’s agriculture sector and achieve food sovereignty.

A list of Feed Salone’s key goals:

- **Boost agricultural productivity:** Significantly increase the output of key crops and livestock to fuel inclusive economic growth and raise the sector’s contribution to GDP.
- **Achieve food self-sufficiency:** Reduce dependence on food imports, particularly of staple crops like rice, onions and poultry, and ensure that the country can feed itself sustainably.
- **Create jobs and empower communities:** Generate employment opportunities, especially for women and youth, by modernising agriculture and supporting agribusinesses.
- **Reduce hunger and malnutrition:** Alleviate food insecurity and improve nutrition by increasing the availability and accessibility of nutritious, locally produced food.
- **Increase export earnings:** Develop value chains for export-oriented crops such as cashew and cocoa to bring in foreign exchange and boost farmers’ incomes.
- **Build resilient food systems:** Strengthen climate resilience and sustainability in agriculture through climate-smart practices, mechanisation and improved infrastructure.
- **Promote private sector participation:** Encourage private investment and facilitate access to finance for agribusinesses and smallholder farmers. ●

President Julius Maada Bio, left, holds a fish during the harvest at his farm in Mafintha





REPUBLIC OF SIERRA LEONE



President Bio has spearheaded efforts to bring Sierra Leone back to the top table (seen here with Nigeria's Tinubu at the ECOWAS handing over ceremony)

CONVERSATION WITH
Juluis Maada Bio,
PRESIDENT OF SIERRA LEONE

**“WE NEED MORE
PAN-AFRICAN
COLLABORATION”**

Sierra Leone's President Julius Maada Bio argues for a more assertive Africa at the top table – while rebuilding the country's agricultural base.

Julius Maada Bio has now been president of Sierra Leone for seven years. First elected in 2018, he secured a second and final five-year term in 2023, as mandated by the country's constitution. Shortly after his first election, *The Africa Report* met Bio for an interview in Brussels, published in our January 2019 edition. He spoke with fervour then about his flagship free education programme — a passion rooted in personal experience.

The last of 33 children born to a Paramount Chief in Bonthe District, Bio seemed destined for a life of rural subsistence. It was his elder sister, Agnes Bio — who passed away last year — who helped him escape that fate, enrolling him in school and setting him on a path that would lead to a career as soldier, peacekeeper, military leader and, eventually, civilian president.

His enthusiasm has not waned, but his focus in this second term has shifted.

Agriculture and nutrition now dominate his agenda through the Feed Salone programme. Bio is not simply a policymaker — he is a practitioner, owning rice farms, fishponds and livestock.

"We started off in the first term with education, it was our flagship," he told *The Africa Report*. "Education, food security and health are components of what we call human capital development ... when you bring all that together in the right proportions, you give citizens the universal key to be productive anywhere in the world."

But the scope of the president's ambition has widened.

In January 2024, Sierra Leone secured a seat on the UN Security Council — only the second time since independence. From that platform, Bio has taken on broader causes: Security Council reform to accommodate African countries, arms control, civilian

President Maada Bio has been a strong advocate for a more inclusive reform of the United Nations



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IT IS WRONG FOR ANYONE TO THINK OF AGRICULTURE AS NOT BEING PRESTIGIOUS. IF I AM ASKING PEOPLE TO EMBRACE AGRICULTURE, I SHOULD LEAD BY EXAMPLE.

protection in conflict zones, environmental protection, and women, peace and development.

The country's global profile — and his — has risen. When *The Africa Report* arrived in Freetown for this interview, Bio was in the UK, addressing the Oxford Union on the Common African Position for UN reform. A week after his return, he was off again — this time to France, joining António Guterres and Emmanuel Macron at the UN's third Ocean Conference, focused on protecting marine biodiversity and advancing Sustainable Development Goal 14.

President Bio has recently assumed the rotating chairmanship of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), taking over from Nigeria's President

Bola Tinubu following his election at a summit in Abuja on 22–23 June 2025. His appointment comes at a moment of deep regional turbulence, with Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger having withdrawn from the bloc, and insecurity and political instability on the rise. Upon taking office, Bio warned that the region stood "at the crossroads", beset by terrorism, armed conflict, and the erosion of democratic rule. Nearly half of ECOWAS member states have experienced coups or attempted putsches in the past decade. He called for an overhaul of the region's collective security architecture, including the revitalisation of the ECOWAS Standby Force, and pledged to restore constitutional order, deepen regional integration and rebuild the credibility of the bloc's institutions.

Why did you choose agriculture as your flagship policy this term?

This time, because of limited resources and the many competing needs we face, I chose agriculture. It employs 60% or more of our population. I believe it will create more jobs, address food security and malnutrition, and provide broader rewards for the economy. That's why I moved from education to food security, while still paying attention to critical areas like infrastructure. Agriculture gives us the greatest return on investment, not only economically but in terms of dignity.

REPUBLIC OF SIERRA LEONE

How do you shift public perception of farming, which many see as low-status?

It's wrong for anyone to think of agriculture as not being prestigious. As human beings, we eat throughout the day. Food security – and all the arrangements that go into it – is critical. It's often seen as hard, manual labour: using a machete, wearing torn clothes, tilling the soil by hand. But today, we have modern methods. I can jump into a tractor and plough many acres of land. And I believe that if I'm asking people to embrace agriculture, I should lead by example. So I'm involved in all types: animal husbandry, poultry, cattle, plantations – cocoa, coffee, cashew – and now I'm adding avocado. I want to show, not just tell. You can earn thousands of dollars or pounds with a small piece of land. You don't have to risk your life crossing the Mediterranean. I grew up on a farm. I respect it, I love it. There's nothing like using your own produce. It's not just a profession – it's a source of pride.

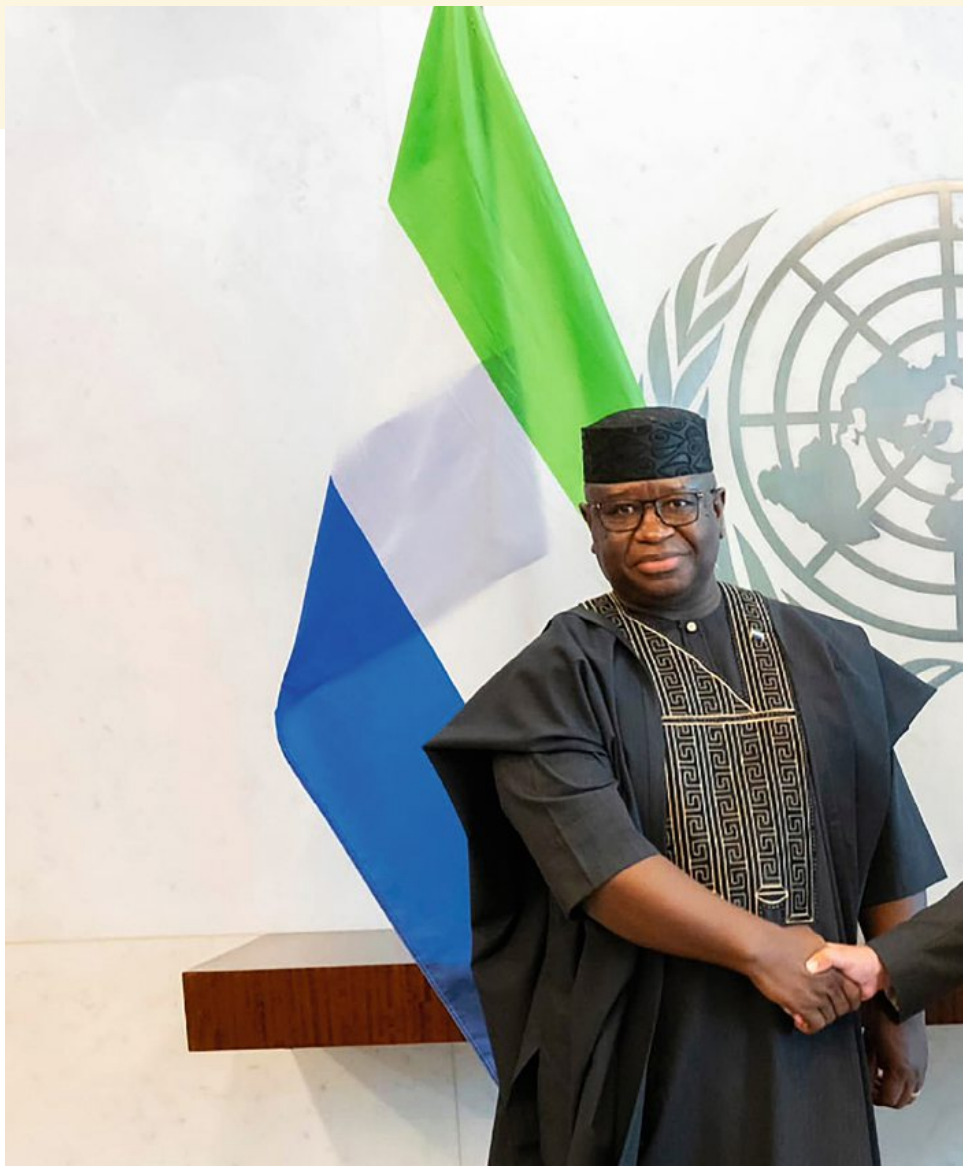
Do you also work in fisheries?

I do. I'm also doing aquaculture. The global catch is getting smaller, and our waters are polluted. So I started fish farming – to demonstrate that it's doable, that you can live off it. I run demonstration farms and I bring young people and children to see what's possible. That's why I spread myself across different areas of agriculture. I want people to learn. It's important to show that food doesn't have to come from far away – it can come from our own waters and our own hands.

Beyond agriculture, what's the biggest domestic challenge you face?

Mindset – and a lack of resources. We inherited an economy that had nothing. Development partners had pulled out. Even the IMF left. We had to rebuild trust with those institutions. Now, our domestic revenue only pays salaries and recurrent expenses. If we want to open up this country for large-scale transformation – roads to remote areas, energy to power growth – we need capital. That's how other economies developed. But international financial institutions aren't structured to favour Africa. The way our

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**THESE SYSTEMS
DON'T SUPPORT
INDEPENDENCE.
WE SPEAK OF
'SOVEREIGN EQUALITY';
WE WANT TO BE
TREATED AS EQUALS,
NOT AS DEPENDENTS**

budgets are structured doesn't allow us to invest in the long term.

So you believe the system is still stacked against Africa?

Yes. We've been asking for reform – of the IMF, the World Bank, all of them. Their terms are not good for us. They label Africa "risky" – unless it's about resources. These systems don't support independence; they drip-feed us to keep us just alive. That's why we speak of "sovereign equality" – we want to be treated as equals, not as dependents. There's a perception that Africa is a continent of problems. But if you look closely, we are also a continent of solutions – full of young people, natural resources and potential.

You're leading Africa's campaign for UN Security Council reform. What's the strategy?

I coordinate a committee of ten African heads of state and government. We're pushing the P5 and the world to accept Africa as permanent members of the Se-



IMAGINE IF THE 54 COUNTRIES OF AFRICA ALL ECHOED THE SAME MESSAGE -- THE WORLD WOULD HAVE TO LISTEN

President Bio with UN Secretary-General António Guterres, and with France's Macron



curity Council. This isn't just a request – it's a demand. Africa has 1.3 billion people and 54 independent nations. Yet we have no say in the body that makes decisions about global peace and security – many of which affect Africa directly. It's undemocratic, and it must change. We've been part of the UN from the beginning – why are we still outside the most powerful room?

What kind of response are you getting from the permanent members?

Silence. Strategic silence. They don't want to share power. But we're making progress. At UNGA 79 last year, it was acknowledged that Africa's demand is justified and should be prioritised. The US even issued a statement in support. But this is still a club of big boys – and they don't see us as big enough yet. We need to be persistent and united.

REPUBLIC OF SIERRA LEONE



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Building African prosperity will require African countries to understand what is needed to 'transform and export value, rather than export raw materials' (President Bio seen here with IMF Managing Director Georgieva Kristalina)

IT IS OFTEN EASIER TO FLY TO EUROPE THAN TO A NEIGHBOURING COUNTRY. IF WE HAD A RAILWAY FROM DAKAR TO LAGOS, PEOPLE WOULD TRAVEL AND TRADE EACH DAY.



© STATE HOUSE SIERRA LEONE



Sierra Leone has managed to successfully restructure its relationships with the Bretton Woods institutions (President Bio seen here with World Bank President Ajay Banga)

Have you considered a boycott of UNGA?

I've suggested it. Africa makes up more than a quarter of UNGA. If we didn't show up for a year – or used every single speech to talk only about representation – it would make a difference. But unity is hard. Some countries back down due to special relationships. That's why we must speak with one voice. That's what I'm pushing for. Just imagine if 54 countries all echoed the same message – the world would have to listen.

Are you seeing more Pan-African collaboration?

We need more. For example, I was speaking with Senegal. They have gas, we have iron. Why not smelt our iron here and sell it to the world? Why should we send it to China, buy it back at three times the price? The technology exists – blast furnaces, energy, everything. It just takes willpower. That's the kind of synergy I'm advocating. Africa should not just be a source of raw

materials – we should be a continent that transforms and exports value.

Why is it so hard to trade within West Africa?

Infrastructure. It's often easier to fly to Europe than to a neighbouring country. Getting to Mauritania might take two days – sometimes you have to go to Europe first. If we had a railway from Dakar to Lagos, people would travel and trade every day. Language shouldn't divide us. We go to London, they go to Paris – and we don't even know each other. We need to move from dry diplomacy to real interaction. We're already trading – we send cooking oil to Senegal – but it takes two days. With a highway, it could be fresh, same-day delivery. We need to rethink what "neighbours" really means.

Some argue corruption is Africa's main obstacle. Do you agree?

It's overstated. Yes, we have corruption. But look at the West – COVID scandals

in the UK, lobbying in the US. If we steal and they keep the money, they're partners in crime. President Buhari once asked: if Nigerians are fantastically corrupt, who's holding the money? Western banks. Corruption exists everywhere – it's just better dressed elsewhere. If we're going to address corruption, let's address it globally – including the safe havens.

Your cabinet is widely praised. How did you build it?

It takes time to find people with the same vision and commitment. Smart people alone aren't enough – they can be hard to manage. I look for people with the country at heart. People you can inspire, mentor, and keep focused. You also have to manage personalities, get them working together. That shared purpose is key. I spend time with ministers, not just to direct but to listen. I believe in leadership by presence, not just policy. It is intentional, because we have huge capacity gaps here and in Africa as a whole. I can be speaking grammar the whole day, where I want to go. But if out of this office, I don't have people who will take that grammar to the ground, then I become a noise maker.

Who inspires you?

Nelson Mandela. After all he went through, he came out and chose peace. He served just one term – that's rare. He had the power to stay on but stepped down. That's true strength. I also admire Kagame. Look at what Rwanda has become. That took vision, resilience, and discipline.

How do you relax?

Music – classical, jazz, Afrobeat, sometimes rock and roll. I read, I talk to experienced people, and I visit my farms. Watching my fish jump when I feed them is therapeutic. I'm not there when they're harvested – but I enjoy the peace they bring.

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JAMG - PHOTOS DR

INTERVIEW

Henry Musa Kpaka

‘Sierra Leone wants to feed itself’

With only 15% of the country’s fertile land cultivated, the Agriculture Ministry faces a huge task – boosting productivity to feed 8.4 million people in a nation still recovering from civil war more than 20 years later

By LAURA-ANGELA BAGNETTO in Freetown

The country, nourished by seven major rivers and abundant inland valley swampland, has ideal conditions to produce enough rice, a staple food, yet it continues to import substantial amounts. “In his second term, President [Julius Maada] Bio really wanted to be very deliberate and determined,” Agriculture and Food Security Minister Henry Musa Kpaka tells *The Africa Report* from his office in Freetown.

Bio backs Feed Salone, a national programme focused on enhancing agricultural productivity to ensure food security. Launched in 2023, the initiative has increased yields by investing in farmers through seeds and essential inputs. “It’s crucial we rely less on imports for our main staple – rice. Achieving food sovereignty is a clear goal set by the president,” says Kpaka.

Reducing imports

Introducing modern technology to smallholder farmers has improved productivity. Kpaka, an economist by training, emphasises boosting staple crop production, particularly rice, to strengthen Sierra Leone’s economy. “It’s understandable to import items we don’t produce, but we must urgently reduce imports of items we can grow ourselves.

Importing weakens our currency and purchasing power,” he says. The country’s GDP nosedived during the Covid-19 pandemic, while inflation skyrocketed.

Imports of other key foods such as eggs, onions and chicken have also declined, reflecting the programme’s broader economic

benefits. “Feed Salone boosts the economy by preventing foreign reserves from being spent on imported food,” Kpaka adds.

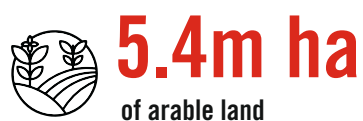
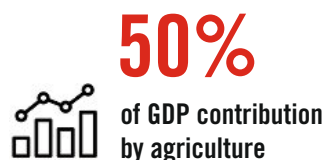
Changing attitudes to farming is also vital. Since the civil war ended in 2002, Sierra Leone has struggled to regain pre-war agricultural yields. The conflict destroyed perceptions of farming as a profitable business.

“Before the war, people with oil palm, cocoa or kola nut plantations proudly sent their children to university with earnings from agriculture. Post-war recovery created dependence, with people accustomed to receiving aid.”

Boosting locals

Creating food processing infrastructure, especially for rice, is central to the plan. Many smallholder farmers either consume their rice or store it as seed, limiting its visibility in markets. “People often ask where our rice is. Sierra Leone’s annual demand is about 1.2 million metric tonnes, and we import about 350,000 tonnes. Around 65% of our rice consumption is locally produced.”

Feed Salone’s investment in farming inputs has increased local rice availability, driving prices down. According to the UN’s latest World Food Programme





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‘IT’S ABOUT TRANSFORMING LIVES ECONOMICALLY THROUGH AGRICULTURE, THE BACKBONE OF SIERRA LEONE’S ECONOMY’

(WFP) quarterly report, rice prices have declined nationwide. Kpaka plans to expand rice processing, packaging and marketing in major towns like Freetown, Kenema, Koidu and Makeni, increasing awareness of local produce.

The initiative is also enhancing school feeding programmes. While the WFP historically imported 90% of the food served to schoolchildren, Kpaka notes that 40% now comes from local

sources, aiming for 50% by 2026 and full local sourcing by 2030.

Cassava production is another growth area. Sierra Leone has achieved higher yields by using improved varieties. Traditionally processed into *garri* (flour) or *fufu* (dough), cassava production is set to expand with \$40m support from the Islamic Development Bank, enabling manufacture of cassava flour, starch and chips locally. “It’s essential we process

cassava visibly for consumers to recognise it as Sierra Leonean produce,” says Kpaka, adding: “We want locals fully involved in these agricultural value chains.”

While cassava predominantly serves domestic markets, certified organic cocoa remains an export commodity. Sierra Leone exported nearly 20 million metric tonnes of cocoa over the past two years. Kpaka highlights recent expansion efforts, planting 3,000 hectares of new cocoa varieties last year and aiming for another 2,000 hectares this year.

Key initiatives

The Agriculture Ministry has also partnered with the European Union on a €35m (\$40.28m) project supporting sustainable food and agricultural development. The EU is directly

funding production activities, notably focusing on tackling infant malnutrition.

Oil palm cultivation is another key initiative. Sierra Leone, a net exporter of vegetable oil, has two companies converting raw oil palm into processed oil, ending the need to import. “Oil palm is a high-value cash crop for us,” he says.

Kpaka’s office will soon release updated agricultural growth figures, expecting results exceeding previous years. “It’s not just about crop production; it’s about transforming lives economically through agriculture, the backbone of Sierra Leone’s economy.” ●

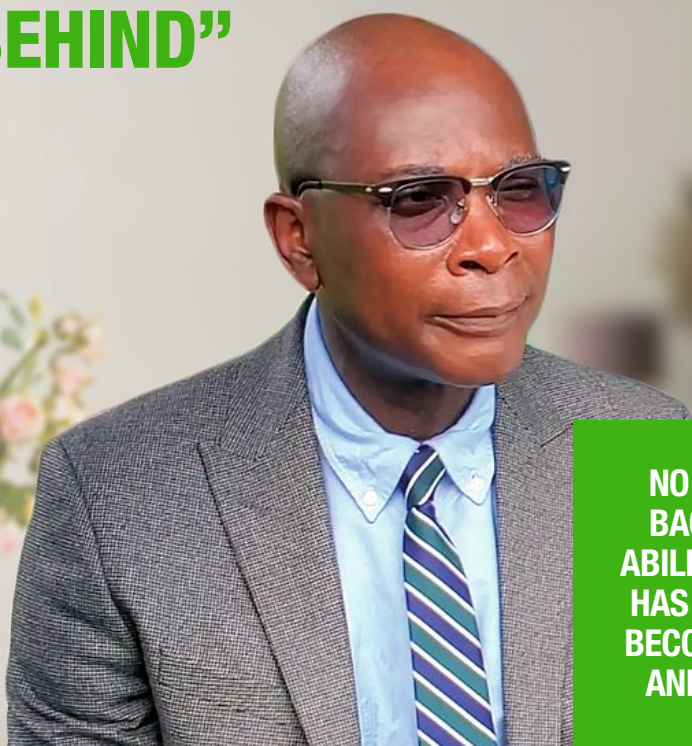
REPUBLIC OF SIERRA LEONE



CONVERSATION WITH

Conrad Sackey,
MINISTER OF BASIC AND SENIOR SECONDARY
EDUCATION OF SIERRA LEONE

**“WE MUST LEAVE NO
CHILD – AND NO PLACE –
BEHIND”**



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**NO MATTER THEIR
BACKGROUND OR
ABILITY, EVERY CHILD
HAS A FAIR SHOT AT
BECOMING A USEFUL
AND EMPOWERED
CITIZEN**

What scale are we talking about in terms of the school-age population?

We currently have around 3.5 million young people in the system, and we've added roughly a million more since 2018. That rapid growth reflects how seriously we take education – but it also brings serious challenges.

What proportion of children are in school?

Around 75% of school-age children are now enrolled, but we're focused on reaching the remaining 500,000 who are still out of school. Some of these children dropped out due to pregnancy, early marriage or being expected to support their families. Others have never entered the school system at all – often because of disability or social exclusion.

How are you trying to bring them back into education?

We're using a mix of strategies. Those who left school are being offered a fast-track, accelerated learning programme that condenses six years of primary education into three. For those who never enrolled, we're setting up community learning hubs. Older learners will also receive vocational and literacy training, to equip them for real-world jobs. We're working with partners like the Qatari foundation Education Above All to support these efforts.

Conrad Sackey, Sierra Leone's Minister for Basic and Senior Secondary Education, on how the country is rethinking access, equity and quality in its schools.

What brought you into this role?

I'm an educationist by training. I spent about 30 years working in the UK before returning home five years ago. Initially, I chaired the Teaching Service Commission, which manages teachers across the country. Now I'm the Minister for Basic and Senior Secondary Education – which is distinct from Technical and Higher Education, handled by a separate ministry.

What's your personal vision for education in Sierra Leone?

It's very simple: no child and no place should be left behind. And I separate those two deliberately – because in Africa, where you're from still shapes your opportunities. We're committed to making sure every child, no matter their background or ability, has a fair shot at becoming a useful and empowered citizen.



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Sierra Leone offers free education – but can the country afford it?

It's not easy, but we've made it a national priority. About 20% of the national budget goes to education – one of the highest allocations on the continent. With additional contributions from other sectors, like agriculture (which supports school feeding programmes) and health, it's closer to 21%. But it's not just about money – it's about political will.

What are the biggest logistical challenges?

As we bring more children into the system, we need to build more classrooms, improve school infrastructure, and train more teachers. Sierra Leone is also among the countries most vulnerable to climate change, which means we're also renovating schools damaged by floods or storms.

What's the state of the teaching workforce?

Our official target is one teacher for every 40 pupils. But when you look at the number of qualified teachers, the ratio is closer to 1:70. That's why we're retraining thousands of teachers and improving recruitment. Over the last five years, we've hired more than 10,000 new teachers – 4,500 of those just last year. And we've launched a leadership training programme for school heads, with 300 trained so far and a target of at least 3,000.

How are girls performing in the system?

We've seen remarkable progress. It's

now illegal for girls to be married before 18, which has helped improve retention. We've achieved gender parity in primary and junior secondary school, and we're close to parity at senior secondary level. In fact, this year's West African Senior School Certificate Exam results showed girls outperforming boys – the ratio was about 58:42.

Is the education still modelled on the old British system, or have you made it more locally grounded?

Historically, yes – it was very British. But we've introduced civic education to make the curriculum more Afrocentric. It helps students understand their history, culture and responsibilities as citizens of Sierra Leone.

What happens to students after secondary school?

Many go on to university, but we're also building up an apprenticeship programme for those who want to take a vocational route. We want every young person to leave school with a viable path ahead – whether it's further study or employment.

You worked in education in the UK. What did you bring back with you?

One key takeaway is behaviour management. In the UK, where corporal punishment is banned, you're trained in positive reinforcement techniques. We've also banned corporal punishment here and are now training our teachers in the same methods – focusing on respect, encouragement and constructive discipline.

SIERRA LEONE'S EDUCATION PRIORITIES

1 Ensuring Free Quality School Education (FQSE): The government's flagship policy guarantees free public education from pre-primary to senior secondary, including exam fees, significantly boosting enrollment and accessibility for all children.

2 Strengthening Foundational Learning and Inclusion: A key focus is on improving literacy and numeracy, especially in early grades, alongside a commitment to «radical inclusion» that ensures education for marginalized groups like pregnant girls, children with disabilities, and those in under-served areas.

3 Investing in Teachers and Technology: The government prioritizes enhancing teacher development, welfare, and recruitment, while also integrating technology and innovation, including AI literacy, to improve learning outcomes and prepare students for the future.

What about exam integrity? Are you seeing the same problems that affect other West African countries?

Unfortunately, yes – exam malpractice is a widespread issue. But we're tackling it head-on. I'm about to introduce a new WAEC (West African Examinations Council) Bill to Parliament, and once passed, we'll launch a national pledge campaign involving students and schools to combat cheating and raise standards.

What are you most proud of since taking office?

One thing that stands out is the introduction of four different curricula. Most countries struggle to manage even one. We now have separate curricula for early childhood, basic education, senior secondary, and civic education. We're building a truly responsive system.

It sounds like a lot is changing, fast.

Yes – and the better we do, the harder it gets. But that's the kind of problem we welcome. Education is Sierra Leone's future, and we're determined to build a system that reflects our ambitions.

INTERVIEW

Mohamed Juldeh Jalloh

‘We have broken records in reducing maternal mortality’

The responsibilities of the vice president of Sierra Leone have been broadened with President Bio putting his deputy in charge of improving education and healthcare, as well as attracting private investors

By **DONU KOGBARA** in Freetown

Vice President Mohamed Juldeh Jalloh is an unusual kind of politician. Loyal to his boss and self-effacing, Jalloh prefers to let his work do the talking. When *The Africa Report* met him in his offices in Freetown on 26 May, the vice president was at the frontline of the battle against a fast-spreading outbreak of mpox. Cases averaged around 100 a day, affecting all 16 districts of Sierra Leone, with 15 confirmed fatalities and over 3,000 positive cases.

As vaccines ran out, Jalloh mobilised health workers and officials to educate communities on preventive measures. The government launched appeals to donors for more vaccines, which began to arrive shortly after. Cases dropped and by the second week of June, the outbreak seemed to be coming under control.

The position of vice president is traditionally seen as ceremonial and marginal. Not so in Jalloh's case. Under President Julius Maada Bio, the office of the vice president has been substantially strengthened. Jalloh was assigned serious responsibilities and portfolios upon taking the post seven years ago. He has been effective in his job, and President Bio has

increased those responsibilities. The key portfolio Jalloh began with was overseeing the Ministry of Internal Affairs, including chairing the Police Council and helping provide oversight of internal security.

Dousing insurgency

What was seen as Jalloh's sterling moment of achievement was in coordinating the response to the bloody insurgency in August 2022. President Bio was travelling and Jalloh held fort until Bio, who had been alerted to the uprising, promptly returned to the country. The situation quickly stabilised.

More responsibilities followed. He now oversees the Ministry of Health and Sanitation, and decentralisation efforts as chairman of the Inter-Ministerial Committee on Decentralisation.

“My responsibility is to ensure that devolution and decentralisation take place and work,”

‘I CAME INTO THIS POSITION WITH VAST GOVERNANCE EXPERIENCE FROM SEVERAL NATIONS’

Jalloh said. “I also oversee the international benchmarking portfolios.” Crucially, the vice president also provides oversight for the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative.

Jalloh led the negotiations that led to Sierra Leone's selection by the US Millennium Compact Challenge (MCC) as a partner country for a \$480m compact agreement, much of that to improve the energy sector. Implementation of the project has slowed since US President Donald Trump took office.

Jalloh, who speaks fluent French, holds a PhD from the University of Bordeaux in France and was employed by the UN's multidimensional peace-keeping mission in Mali before being picked as Bio's running mate. Jalloh also worked for the UN Office for West Africa as the Sahel adviser to the special representative of the secretary-general, as well as in Kosovo.

Despite his technocratic background, Jalloh says he is a politician at heart and was always committed to the Sierra Leone





THE STATE HOUSE SIERRA LEONE

People's Party, under whose platform he became vice president. "That is our party," he tells *The Africa Report*. "It is a generational thing, the political party to which my uncles, my parents, my elder brothers all belonged and to which they were deeply committed. I have been active in that party since I was at university [Fourah Bay College]."

Jalloh was also active in civil society as a democracy and development advocate. "I worked for the Campaign for Good Governance, a local civil society organisation here in Sierra Leone," he says. "That gave me a broad outlook on the governance challenges in Sierra Leone. So, I came into this position with vast governance experience from several countries, as well as a deep understanding of the politics of Sierra Leone, which I studied in depth at university."

In giving him serious responsibilities and portfolios, he adds, President Bio took this background into consideration.

The vice president points to several key achievements of Bio's government, particularly in the health and education sectors.

'WE ARE TRAINING OUR MIDWIVES TO HELP ENSURE SAFE BIRTHS'

An increased budgetary allocation led to the recruitment of more than 8,000 healthcare workers, including nurses and doctors.

"When the Sierra Leone People's Party took over in 2018, maternal mortality in this country was 1,078 per 100,000. Within two years, we were able to reduce that to 773. In five years, we had it reduced to 334. In other words, we have been able to save the lives of more than 700 mothers. And that's a record in sub-Saharan Africa."

Infant mortality has also decreased substantially. "We trained more midwives to develop their capacity for safe births. And we created a national ambulance system to make sure that in every chiefdom and in every village, we have an ambulance to take pregnant women to the nearest facility."

The achievements in education or human capital development, Bio's flagship programme when he came to power, are also important to Jalloh. "The president decided to dedicate around 22% of our GDP to education, and we have now enrolled nearly one million Sierra Leonean children in school, in just six years," he says.

"We have increased the number of girls going to school and keeping them in school. Now we have a parity of girls and boys in school all over the country. Indeed, we have more girls today in junior secondary schools than boys, and the girls are doing better in public exams," Jalloh adds.

Enticing private sector

"We have more girls in science faculties in this country than at any other time since independence. This is a result of the education policy," he says. "And then we have recruited more teachers, around 8,000 additional teachers. We have built more classrooms in this country ... We are satisfied that within the next 20 years, in every village you go in this country, nine out of 10 young people will be able to read and write."

In this second term, Jalloh said, the president has promised to create 500,000 jobs: "It is not just a manifesto promise but it is something that we are working hard on. The key to job creation is the private sector. And how do you encourage the private sector? You create an enabling environment for private investors to come and invest in critical areas like agriculture, like infrastructure, like energy. We are working to create such an enabling environment – governance and the kind of policies you put in place. You have to give [businesses] electricity. We are working very hard to do that." The administration has three years left to accomplish its goals. ●

REPUBLIC OF SIERRA LEONE



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CONVERSATION WITH

Fatima Mahawa Sandi,
DEPUTY EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE NATIONAL
INVESTMENT BOARD IN SIERRA LEONE

**“WE’RE NOT JUST
HERE FOR THE BIG
FOREIGN INVESTORS”**

Fatima Mahawa Sandi, Deputy Executive Director of Sierra Leone’s National Investment Board, on reforming business processes, investor interest from China to the Caribbean, and why NIB aims to be the antidote to bureaucracy.

What exactly is the National Investment Board, and what role does it play?

The NIB was established by an Act of Parliament in 2022 to streamline investment in Sierra Leone. We’re a one-stop shop, designed to eliminate red tape and help both foreign and local investors navigate the system more easily. Previously, businesses had to go ministry to ministry to get things done. We consolidate that effort into one institution. We’re made up of four directorates: the Sierra Leone Investment and Export Promotion Agency (SLIEPA), the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) Unit, the Business Registration Unit, and the Corporate Affairs Commission. Our role spans from business registration to aftercare – making sure investments not only come in but thrive.

Many see the NIB as something for major international players. How do local businesses fit in?

That’s a misconception we’re working to change. Yes, our mandate includes boosting foreign direct investment (FDI), but we’re equally focused on domestic SMEs. One of our goals is to connect local businesses with foreign investors – but that requires nurturing and developing those local enterprises to meet international standards.

What are some of the key challenges you face at the moment?

We’re in a transitional phase, especially around business registration and facilitation. Previously, it took just 48 hours to register a company. With changes to the system, it’s taking longer, and we’ve had pushback from the public. To address that, we recently hosted a public-private dialogue to explain where we are, where we’re heading, and what mechanisms we’re putting in place to restore confidence and efficiency.

**OUR FLAGSHIP
PRIORITY IS
AGRICULTURE: NOT
JUST GROWING CROPS,
BUT BUILDING AN
ENTIRE SUPPLY CHAIN
AROUND PROCESSING,
TRANSPORT AND
EXPORT**

You mentioned infrastructure earlier. Can you give an example of a major investment priority?

One high-profile ambition is building a bridge across the Sierra Leone River to link the capital, Freetown, with the international airport in Lungi. It's the kind of project that symbolises our broader aim: to modernise the country's infrastructure and unlock economic growth. We're working closely with the Chief Minister, Dr David Sengeh, as well as the Sierra Leone Roads Authority. They've compiled a list of investment-ready road projects that we'll showcase at an upcoming roadshow. This will be held in Sierra Leone but include a virtual component for international participants. We're hoping His Excellency the President will deliver the keynote to signal strong political backing and build investor confidence.

What does success look like for you in terms of the country's investment vision?

Everything we do aligns with the National Development Plan and the President's "Five Big Gamechangers." Our flagship priority is agriculture – not just growing crops, but building an entire supply chain around processing, transport, and export. That's where the real economic transformation will come from.

Which sectors are generating the most interest among investors?

Technology and infrastructure are clear frontrunners. We're also focusing on tourism, though not all tourism projects are quite at the bankable phase yet. That's why we're working with development partners like the UK's FCDO – to bring those projects up to speed.

So part of your job is not just attracting investment, but getting projects to a place where they can attract it?

Exactly. We need people who are willing to take on projects in their early stages and help shape them into investable ventures.

Are you seeing much interest from African investors, or is the capital mostly coming from outside the continent?

We've had some encouraging signs from within Africa. A South African logistics company is already active here, and Nigeria's Fly Salone airline is operating in our airspace. But most of the larger-scale investment interest continues to come from China, the UAE, and the Americas.

How would you characterise the Chinese presence in Sierra Leone?

They're certainly playing a significant role. China remains one of the most active and consistent investors here.

What about the mining sector? Is that part of your portfolio?

Not at this stage. Mining is very capital-intensive and heavily regulated, and while it's important to Sierra Leone's economy, NIB is still a young institution. We're focusing initially on sectors where we can have a faster, more direct impact.

How do you engage the international community? Do you travel to pitch projects?

We've been involved in numerous bilateral meetings and outreach conversations. Creating an investor-friendly environment is a top priority, and we've made progress. For

example, British International Investment has committed about \$100 million here and is open to doing more – particularly in tourism.

What concrete steps are you taking to make Sierra Leone more investor-friendly?

We're making it cheaper and simpler to start a business. One big move is building an online registration system, so investors can launch a company from anywhere in the world. You won't need to fly in to register – you could be in the Bahamas and still get your business set up here.

A common complaint from foreign investors is difficulty navigating African bureaucracy. How are you addressing concerns about corruption?

That's part of the reason NIB exists. By offering a single, streamlined point of entry, we reduce opportunities for rent-seeking. Corruption is a real issue across the region, but the current government has made tangible progress. By centralising processes and making them more transparent, we're limiting the discretionary power that fuels corruption in the first place.

What's your message to potential investors?

Sierra Leone is open for business – and not just to big-ticket players. We want meaningful, long-term partnerships that help develop our economy and uplift our people. We're putting the systems in place to make investment easier, faster, and more transparent. The time to get in is now.





FOREIGN DIRECT INVESTMENT RADAR

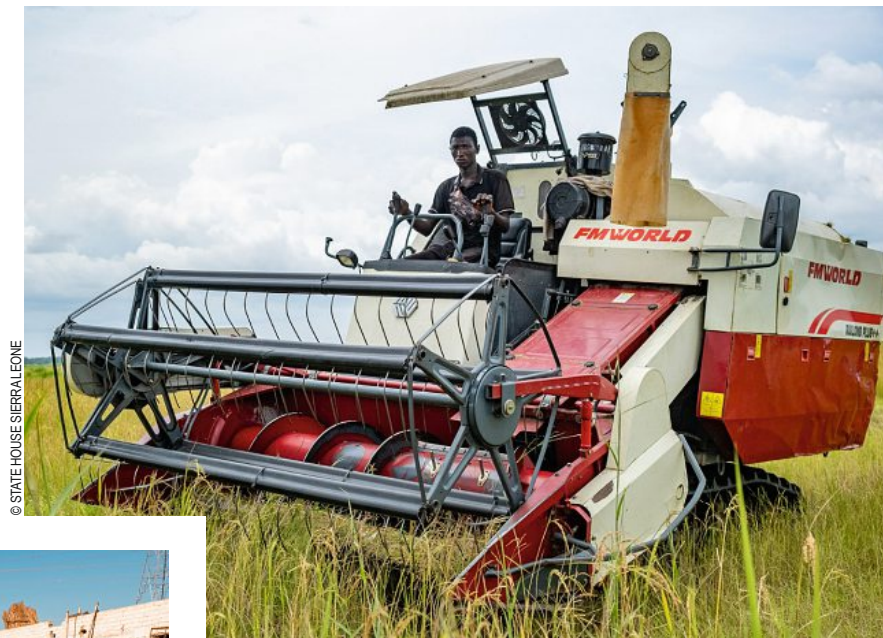
SIERRA LEONE IS OPEN FOR BUSINESS

Five key sectors on Sierra Leone's Investment Map

1

Agriculture and Agribusiness:

The «Feed Salone» initiative prioritizes food security, aiming to transform Sierra Leone into a net food exporter. Investments are sought for mechanized commercial agriculture, particularly in rice, cocoa, and palm oil, alongside value addition and agro-processing facilities. A notable project includes a \$12 million IFC loan in April 2025 to Pee Cee Holding Ltd. for large-scale, irrigated onion farming.



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2

Energy:

Sierra Leone is strongly committed to an energy transition, focusing on shifting away from fossil fuels. Key projects include solar mini-grids under the Salone Off-grid Renewable Energy Acceleration Initiative (SOGREA), supported by the EU, aiming to expand rural electricity access significantly by 2027. The World Bank's Regional Emergency Solar Power Intervention Project (RESPITE) also targets solar mini-grid installations in 28 communities.



**FROM THE NEW
ROAD INVESTMENT
PROGRAMME TO THE
PRESIDENTIAL FEED
SALONE INITIATIVE,
SIERRA LEONE
HAS WORKED TO
OPEN SECTORS TO
INVESTORS**

3 Infrastructure:

SLIEPA promotes investment in critical infrastructure to enhance connectivity and economic development. This includes opportunities in roads, bridges, ports, and telecommunications. The government encourages Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) for these projects, emphasizing improved transport networks to link production centers with markets, and enhanced water supply and sanitation systems.

4 Mining and Natural Resources:

Leveraging its rich mineral deposits, Sierra Leone seeks investment in diamond, gold, bauxite, and iron ore extraction. The country is also planning an upstream oil licensing round by October 2025 to attract exploration and production investments in its offshore oil and gas potential. Value addition to mineral resources is also a focus.

5 Tourism:

Recognizing tourism's potential for economic diversification, SLIEPA is actively promoting investment in the hospitality sector and ecotourism. Recent initiatives include the launch of bidding processes (May 2025) for newly developed tourism sites like Leicester Peak Viewing Deck, Tacugama Innovation Centre, and Bureh Beach Surf Club. Opportunities exist for luxury resorts, eco-lodges, and cultural heritage site rehabilitation.

RECENT INVESTMENT SUCCESS STORIES

MINING

Marampa Mines invests to expand production to 3.75m tonnes of high-grade iron ore annually

AIR CONNECTIVITY

Freetown International Airport has received a \$150m expansion from Turkish contractor Summa Group

CEMENT

Maccem Industries is expanding operations with a 0.56Mta cement plant, with IFC to invest \$24m

PORTS

The Nectar Sierra Leone Bulk Terminal inaugurated its 3rd berth in December 2024

LOGISTICS

Banana Island Port - this ambitious \$2bn project, backed by the Gento Group, would be Africa's deepest port

BALANCING ACT

Ibrahim Stevens

‘We need to be efficient in managing forex’

Sierra Leone’s central bank governor on inflation, foreign exchange, fiscal firewalls and the country’s financial inclusion strategy

By **NICHOLAS NORBROOK**

Ibrahim Stevens, the central bank governor, is calm and candid. The numbers are improving – but the structural issues remain daunting.

“Sierra Leone has come a long way,” he says, pointing to efforts to stabilise an economy once battered by soaring inflation, a plummeting currency and dangerously thin reserves. “In October 2023, inflation was at 54%. By April 2025, we were down to single digits.”

This is no small feat in a country where monetary tools often compete with fiscal imperatives, and where the legacy of aid dependence is giving way to a more precarious era of self-reliance. “The exchange rate had been excessively volatile. For the past 18 months, it has been remarkably stable.”

Delicate redenomination

When Sierra Leone’s foreign exchange reserves fell below two months of import cover, alarm bells rang – not just in Freetown, but in Washington. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) flagged it as a systemic weakness. Stevens credits tighter fiscal coordination and market reforms. “We sat with the Ministry of Finance and said: We need to be super-efficient in managing our foreign exchange flows.”

The central bank also stepped into the market, buying dollars from commercial banks and smoothing regulation. “In the

past year, we’ve allowed lending in foreign currency under strict rules. We updated laws, and we’ve avoided surprising the market with abrupt changes.” Confidence, he says, is as important as the reserves.

There was also the delicate currency redenomination – dropping three zeros and switching to the new leone (NLE). “I introduced a deliberate policy shift in November 2023 by providing the assurance that

people will not lose their money and the Bank of Sierra Leone will always exchange at face value,” says Stevens. “We were able to collect 99% of the old currency. We will continue to exchange the old currency for the new any time it is presented at the Bank of Sierra Leone. This helped prevent dollarisation during the transition.”

Still, foreign currency dominates. While banks are long on leones, depositors continue to hedge



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in dollars. “Yes, there has been an increase in foreign currency deposits, but I don’t believe it’s a monumental shift,” Stevens says.

Forex lending is tightly controlled, he says – permitted only with central bank sign-off, and only to borrowers with foreign income. “It’s limited to mining firms, hotels and similar businesses.” The aim is to put idle dollar deposits to productive use while slowly rebuilding trust in the leone.

Treasury bill yields remain stubbornly high – around 26% – even as inflation falls. Stevens agrees this blunts the impact of monetary tightening, but says the correction must be gradual. “You can’t have real interest rates 20% above inflation. But a sudden drop would disrupt the banking sector.”

One source of the problem is government debt. “Over a third of bank assets are in government securities,”

Stevens notes. “It creates systemic risk. We’re in discussions with the IMF to reduce this exposure, but it must be managed carefully.”

Symbiotic relationship

The IMF has called for an end to fiscal dominance. But how insulated is the central bank? Monetary policy is independent, but in practice, coordination is key. “We’re fiscal advisers. We sit on a joint cash management committee. There is a symbiotic relationship.” Under the IMF programme, monetary and fiscal levers must align. “We take an independent stance, but with full awareness of the fiscal environment.”

That stance is evolving through reform. A five-year monetary operations strategy aims to improve clarity and modernise policy tools. Yet Sierra Leone faces what Stevens calls a paradox: “We have a forward-looking Monetary Policy Committee, but we still use quantity-based targets to meet IMF benchmarks.” This can create contradictions between interest rate moves and the liquidity actions required to implement them.

There are also some very encouraging signs. “Our interbank rate tracks the policy rate closely. “So at least the corridor system is working.”

At 3.1% of GDP, credit to the private sector is anaemic – largely

due to crowding out by government borrowing. Stevens says this must change: “The economy won’t grow if the private sector doesn’t grow.”

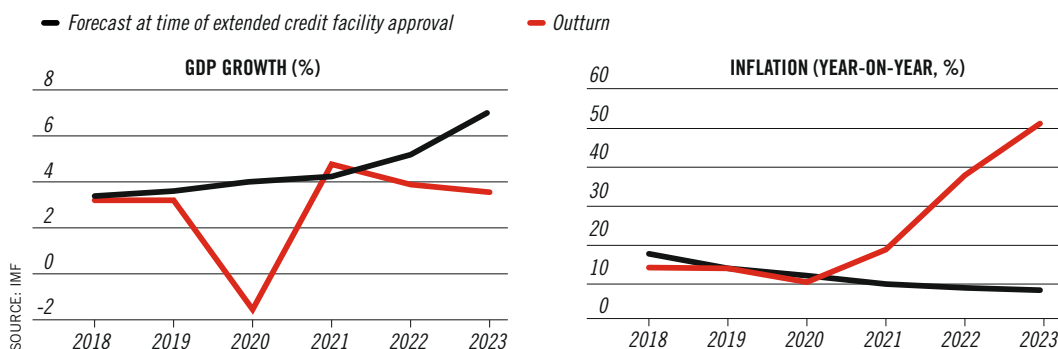
The bank is leading Sierra Leone’s financial inclusion strategy, in its second phase, with improved access supported by fintech regulation. “We had the first regulatory sandbox in West Africa in 2017. We’ve promoted mobile money, addressed gender bias in lending, and supported Covid-era facilities.” He also cites progress on the credit registry and collateral reform, though “we need to do more”.

On exchange rate management, Stevens is measured. “We operate a flexible, market-driven regime. Banks quote at any rate they choose. We publish a daily weighted average – nothing else.” But the real effective exchange rate has appreciated, raising concerns about competitiveness. Stevens admits price discovery starts in the informal market. “Research shows the parallel market sets the tone. It’s not ideal, but it’s not new.”

He sketches the exchange rate’s erratic history – stable for years, then jolted by shocks: War, Ebola, Covid. “When markets trust the regime, the rate holds – until the next crisis.” Stevens doesn’t downplay the risks, but he is not defeatist. “We’re not out of the woods. But we’ve made progress, and that progress matters.”●

‘WE TAKE AN INDEPENDENT STANCE, BUT WITH FULL AWARENESS OF THE FISCAL ENVIRONMENT’

GDP AND INFLATION SEVERELY IMPACTED BY COVID-19



REPUBLIC OF SIERRA LEONE



CONVERSATION WITH

Dr Denis Monina Sandy

SIERRA LEONE'S MINISTER OF WORKS



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**“IF WE FINISH THE
TIKONKO–MATRUJONG
ROAD, I’LL CONSIDER
MY JOB DONE”**

Sierra Leone’s Minister of Works, Dr Denis Monina Sandy, speaks about the government’s infrastructure drive, the politics of road-building, and why completing one key corridor would mark the pinnacle of his tenure.

Minister, you’ve spoken of roads as a central priority. Why do they dominate the government’s infrastructure agenda?

Roads are the arteries of national development. For President Bio and for me, reliable road connectivity is the foundation for everything else – trade, agriculture, access to services, and regional integration. When I took office in August 2023, there were gaps in both infrastructure delivery and asset management. The President made it clear: the second term had to deliver on the ground, especially on roads.

What has been achieved so far?

Quite a lot. Take the Wellington–Masiaka highway: it’s now a four-lane road – two in each direction – with proper tolling and safety features. It’s about 60 kilometres and represents the kind of modern infrastructure the country needs. Then there’s the road from Bo to the Liberia border via Pujehun and Jendema. That’s been transformed. What used to be a rough, time-consuming journey is now a smooth, Class A route. You can drive it in under 90 minutes.

You’ve mentioned a particular stretch – the Tikonko–Matrujong corridor – as personally important. Why that one?

That corridor connects Tikonko, Sirabu, Petima, and Matrujong – a vital route for the southern region. It’s not just about movement. It’s about opening up economic opportunities for local communities. People will be able to move goods to market faster, reach health services, travel for work – and return the same day. That road is my personal goal. If we can finish it by the end of this administration, I’ll consider my time as Minister a success.

How far along is it?

As of now, about 33% of the Tikonko–Sirabu stretch is complete. The contractor, Pavifort, has established a quarry, and work is progressing steadily. Another segment, between Kwentima and Matrujong, has six kilometres of asphalt already laid. We’re

pushing the contractors to accelerate, but as you know, road-building takes time – it's machinery-heavy, weather-sensitive, and resource-intensive.

What about the much-discussed Lungi Bridge project – is that going ahead?

It's a strategic project, no doubt. The President is very keen on it. The bridge would link the airport directly to Freetown, removing the dependence on boats and ferries. We have a Chinese company, through ATEPA, that's shown strong interest. They've signed an MOU and are currently conducting feasibility studies. The challenge is financing – it's a \$1.2 billion project. They're seeking guarantees, perhaps linked to mining revenues, but the financial model is still under review by the Ministry of Finance. So, it's on the table, but not yet ready to break ground.

Why not use tolling to recoup the investment, as you've done with Wellington–Masiaka?

Tolling is part of the plan, yes, but for a project of that scale, investors often want more secure guarantees – some kind of assurance of returns over time. We're exploring a blend of models. The key is to structure contracts that are bankable, transparent, and enforceable regardless of political changes. That's what gives private investors confidence.

And what are your primary models for financing all this road work?

It's a mix. Government alone can't shoulder

ROADS ARE THE ARTERIES OF NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT. FOR PRESIDENT BIO, RELIABLE ROAD CONNECTIVITY IS THE FOUNDATION FOR EVERYTHING ELSE

the burden – roads are capital-intensive. On flat land, it's about \$550,000 per kilometre. In rugged terrain, it can go up to \$900,000. So we rely on concessional financing from partners like the African Development Bank and BADEA. Then there are PPPs – for example, Chinese firms come in with capital, and we agree on tolling or revenue-sharing mechanisms. All agreements go through Parliament, ensuring legal protection for the investor and long-term viability.

How do private partners get paid back?

Mainly through tolling. We have three toll stations on the Wellington–Masiaka highway, and the system is working well. In some cases, we also explore road user charges or budget allocations over time. We offer long concession periods – 20 years or more – to allow investors to recoup their money. I like to call it a BOOT model: Build, Operate, Own (by government), then Transfer. At the end of the concession, the asset belongs fully to the state.

Let's talk rail. Is there a plan to revive national railways?

Yes, and the Transport Ministry is leading on that. A Cabinet paper has been passed, and

a rail authority has been constituted. Currently, we have two lines in operation, but both are exclusively for mining companies. The goal now is to develop a public-facing railway for passengers and freight. When that happens, the Ministry of Works will be involved in technical oversight – standards, design, and infrastructure quality – but the operational lead lies with Transport.

Beyond roads and rail, are there other infrastructure plans your ministry is contributing to?

Not directly. Port infrastructure, energy, and agriculture all fall under other ministries. But we coordinate. For instance, the President is deeply involved in energy planning – you could say he's the de facto Minister of Energy. And we know that road access is critical for all these sectors, whether it's farmers getting goods to market or expanding port logistics.

And finally, what will success look like for you by the time this term ends in 2028?

If we complete the Tikonko–Sirabu–Matrujong road and the Kailahun–Boidu stretch, I'll consider my time worthwhile. Those are transformative corridors that will improve lives directly. I want to be remembered as the Minister who focused, stayed on task, and delivered real results – no fanfare, just finished roads. This job requires you to be both – technically grounded and politically smart. The President expects results, not excuses. His leadership pushes us to think fast, be innovative, and deliver. That's what I try to do every day.



JAMG - PHOTO: SEE NOTE

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CLEAN BREAK

Powering the future

Sierra Leone's short-, medium- and long-term plans to end energy poverty through renewable sources and boost clean cooking have been fast-tracked by the Mission 300 compact, aiming to connect four million new users within five years and raise electrification from 36% to 80%

By **DONU KOGBARA**

In his office in Freetown, Kandeh Yumkella, chair of the Presidential Initiative on Climate Change, Renewable Energy and Food Security in President Julius Maada Bio's government, is outlining an audacious plan to end his country's crippling energy poverty.

"Since independence, we've been stuck with just 270 megawatts for a population of 8.5 million," he says. "President Bio wants to change that – fast."

Sierra Leone is among the most energy-poor countries in Africa. Only 36% of the population has access to electricity and outages are frequent, sometimes occurring several times within an hour.

Clean cooking access is even more dire, with less than 1% of Sierra Leoneans using non-polluting fuels. But under President Bio, and with Yumkella at the helm, a new direction is taking shape – one that blends short-term recovery with long-term transformation.

The government's energy plan is built around short-, medium- and long-term phases. In the immediate term, efforts have focused on quick wins like restoring broken-down generators, reconnecting idle capacity and scaling up solar installations.

"We're bringing back 25MW just from repair work," Yumkella says. "That's already happening."

By the end of this year, another 46MW of solar energy is expected to come online, followed by an additional 40MW in the first half of 2026. These will partly replace the country's costly reliance on a Turkish floating power plant running on heavy fuel oil (HFO), supplying 50–60MW to Freetown at a steep \$1.7m a month.

Shift to solar

"We can't afford that barge anymore," Yumkella says bluntly. "It's eating money meant for schools and hospitals."

The shift away from high-cost, high-emission sources is central to the plan. The government aims to triple capacity in Freetown within a year by combining repaired fossil plants with new solar projects and cheaper regional power imports from Côte d'Ivoire via the Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea (CLSG) interconnector project.

Medium-term plans include a 100MW gas-to-power plant financed by US partners. Scheduled to come online by 2027, it will provide much-needed baseload capacity and enable further reduction of HFO use. "Gas is part of the transition," says Yumkella. He envisions Sierra Leone becoming a regional LNG hub by leveraging its deep-water ports to store and distribute fuel.

Empowering people

Energy is not just about megawatts; it's about human development. In remote communities, Yumkella's team is pushing ahead with decentralised solutions – small solar mini-grids to power schools, clinics and agricultural processing.

"Some villages only need 100kW," he says. "That's enough to light homes, run a health centre and power a rice mill."

With European Union funding, Sierra Leone is set to launch 50 mini-grid sites in June. Bio aims for 200 such installations before leaving office. "You can't grid the whole country overnight," Yumkella adds. "But you can light up lives quickly with renewables."

The health sector is already seeing gains. Nearly 400 primary health care units have been solarised and Freetown's Connaught Hospital recently switched on a dedicated 1MW system. "This is what energy

HIGH-LEVEL TARGETS

Indicator	Baseline 2025	Target 2030
Electricity connectivity rate	6% (p.a.) 2018–2025	20% (p.a.) 2025–2030
Electricity access rate	36%	78%
Access to clean cooking	1.5%	25%
Share of renewable energy	46%	52%
Installed generation	271MW	1.12GW
Private capital mobilised	\$615m	\$935m

SOURCE: SIERRA LEONE MISSION 300 COMPACT



Kandeh Yumkella is the chairman of Sierra Leone's Presidential Initiative on Climate Change, Renewable Energy and Food Security

access means: safe surgeries, functioning fridges for vaccines, better care.”

Perhaps the most ambitious part of the agenda is linked to Mission 300, an initiative that seeks global cooperation to bring power to 300 million Africans by 2030. Sierra Leone has a national compact to connect four million new users within five years and raise electrification from 36% to 80%. Drafted in record time by a team led by Yumkella, it is backed by the World Bank, African Development Bank, Rockefeller Foundation and others. It carries a \$3.6bn price tag. “We didn’t wait for consultants,” says Yumkella. “We wrote it ourselves.”

Mission 300 compact

The plan includes two new national transmission corridors – north and south – to eliminate the grid’s current overreliance on a single east-west line. It also aims to scale up clean cooking access to 25%,

Aid alone won’t solve [our energy deficit]. We’re focused on attracting investment

through LPG distribution and solar cooking programmes. “This isn’t just a women’s issue,” he says. “It’s a public health and economic development issue.”

As a former UN energy czar, Yumkella has deep links with multilateral institutions. He says that trust and technical credibility have helped Sierra Leone punch above its weight in securing financing. But he’s quick to add: “Aid alone won’t solve this. We’re focused on attracting investment.”

This mindset is paying off. The Mission 300 compact is actively marketed to private partners, with the first billion dollars expected to be raised by early next year. Larger

goals include powering mines and factories, and becoming a net exporter of energy to neighbours like Guinea. “We’re right in the middle of West Africa,” he says. “We have a geographic advantage. We can build here and sell in every direction.”

Yumkella ran against Bio in 2018 and was an opposition leader in parliament. Now, he runs the energy portfolio for the president. “He told me, ‘Kandeh, I’m going to squeeze all that UN knowledge out of your head before you leave.’”

It’s clear this isn’t just a technical job, it’s a legacy project. “We’re building not just for today, but for the next generation. That’s what leadership is about.”

As Sierra Leone races to shed its status as one of Africa’s most energy-starved nations, Yumkella is determined to keep the pace. “Power is the foundation of everything. And now we finally have a plan.” ●

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Fatima Maada Bio, First Lady of Sierra Leone

CONVERSATION WITH
Fatima Maada Bio,
FIRST LADY OF SIERRA LEONE

**“GIRLS ARE AWARE
OF THEIR RIGHTS
NOW”**

From her office in Freetown, Sierra Leone's First Lady offers a rare and revealing interview, delving into the personal experiences that shaped her fierce advocacy for women. Her insights span local empowerment initiatives to her drive for a stronger African voice on the global stage, reflecting a determined effort to reshape her nation's future.

You are best known for your pro-women initiatives. Where does your passion for female empowerment come from?

I have always believed that women have suffered more than enough and have given their share to society and received almost no appreciation. I grew up in a Muslim polygamous family where my sisters and I had no say. Your future as a girl had been programmed by men. When your father speaks, you don't argue. You have to obey. And I grew up watching my sisters one by one drop out of school to be married off at very tender ages – 12 or 13. For me that didn't sit well. Every time one of my sisters leaves the house for marriage, I'm counting down the days to when will it be my turn. I knew that was my fate. I knew I could do nothing about it because it was a norm and the culture.

My father's wives were terrified of their husband. But when it was my turn, the civil war came to our hometown and we had to run and the only way my mum could save me was telling me to run off on my own instead of taking me with her. She was willing to lose me rather than let me be in a lifeless marriage.

In her own way, she was a rebel?

A silent one, yes. Because it happened to her. And she didn't want that to happen to any of her own children.



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The Hands Off our Girls campaign has changed lives



© STATE HOUSE SIERRA LEONE

UNAIDS appoints Fatima Maada Bio as a champion for young girls

How did you feel at that point?

Were you scared? I was terrified. I had always lived with my parents. But I also felt liberation. And along the line, I managed to find my own way and didn't see my mum again for 4 years.

And how did you survive during that time?

There is no pleasure living without your parents. I came to Freetown to live with an extended grandfather, an imam. Because I was very prayerful, I was his favorite. Eventually, I had the opportunity to go to the UK and finished my education. After university, I started to work.

So your concern for women is driven by your early experiences and your observations about how the society as a whole treated women.

Society sees evil and says nothing.

Some men have been jailed for molesting females – there is progress.

Oh yes, the girls are aware of their rights now and they speak up and are not afraid to say no. 90% of the underage girls in Sierra Leone today will tell older men who approach them that "I am Fatima's daughter".

Let's talk about your comments – when you visited Harvard University – on Africa's dependence on external forces. Are we not responsible?

I believe that we are our own problem. We've come of age. We should not be fearful because there's nothing they [fo-

I INTRODUCED THE 'HANDS OFF OUR GIRLS' CAMPAIGN - THE MOST SUCCESSFUL CAMPAIGN OF ITS TYPE, NOT ONLY IN SIERRA LEONE, BUT SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA.

reigners] can do worse than what they're doing. They are not giving back to our society. So basically they are just amassing slaves and giving back nothing. They are not changing lives, touching lives in a positive way. They use our people to do all the [dirty] jobs, then bring so-called experts who come from abroad and do nothing but get most of the pay.

I hear that you were really fighting for some miners.

We're still fighting. I believe that the mining companies are abusing us and not treating us with the respect that we deserve. I don't think they see us as partners. They see us as a liability and they just want to take and go. And want us to shut up and say nothing because they are in charge. Since I am not a government official, I feel that I'm free to talk about this problem.

What can be done about it?

I would advise government, which happens to be my husband, to call back all

our mining licenses and revisit all of the agreements to make them more beneficial to our people. We should not be getting handouts from these mining companies. They are taking things that we don't even know. They don't declare everything. I'm not a miner but I come from a district that produced the biggest diamonds. I believe wherever you have one mineral, there are at least 2 or 3 other minerals there. So why are they not processing all of these things in country? Why must they take them out instead of giving them to us so we can develop our country?

Please tell me about your work as head of the Organization of African First Ladies for Development.

I've just been elected. We had an election in February and I beat the first lady of Nigeria. But she is part of my steering committee and we work together. What we need to do under my leadership is let the world see us as partners. We are not voted for, but the work we do also affects the outcome of what our husbands do. If we don't help our husbands, if our husbands fail, the failure affects us and our children. And even though I am not a member of my husband's cabinet, if anything goes wrong, the first lady is often blamed! But we are never given credit for anything that we do. And it is time for that to change.

Tell me about your pet project.

I introduced the Hands Off Our Girls campaign. Now, this campaign has become the most successful campaign of its type, not only in Sierra Leone, but sub-Saharan Africa. And it's known at the United Nations and all over the world.

REPUBLIC OF SIERRA LEONE

So how do you institutionalize it and make sure it outlives you?

We've already got two United Nations resolutions. We have November 18, which I personally presented at the General Assembly and asked the United Nations to vote for a day that will be dedicated for rape victims globally where they can congregate and choose whatever they want to do, whether it is prayer or something else. It is called **World Day for Healing for Women**. It was voted for by 158 countries. And then I went back to the United Nations and presented a case for justice for rape victims, which is about member states not making victims pay their legal bills. So that also was voted for and adopted.

Internationally, we have made our mark from this small office here in Freetown. But because my office is not part of government, it's not institutionalized. But I've managed to do a lot under this office. Just four months ago, I went to parliament and presented a case to ban early marriage and it was passed the same day. Now, it is illegal to marry a girl under the age of 18. I have won many awards for my work, but it's not about awards. I want to protect girls for real. It is not a political gimmick. It's from the heart.

What is your biggest dream for the future?

A lot of people are speculating. A lot of people are assuming. That I will run for office. But I have not made up my mind yet. For now, I just want to focus on my husband's agenda and help him succeed.

Apparently, it is normal for ordinary people to show up and request meetings with you if they have a problem... even if they don't have appointments.

I am the People's Person. I am easier to see than a Minister. They come with many problems – housing, police harassment, and so on. If I can help them myself, I do. If I have to call someone on their behalf, I will. Sometimes, it is to tell people to leave them alone. Sometimes, it is students who want to go to university but can't afford the fees. I have a team that deals with people



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who need me. They know all they need to do is come to the gate. This year alone, I am paying for 213 students.

**I AM THE PEOPLE'S
PERSON. I AM EASIER
TO SEE THAN A
MINISTER**

How do you relax?

I love to swim. But I don't do hobbies at this age, really. When I was an actress, I was a party girl. I went out a lot. But you get to that point in your life where those are not the things that you enjoy anymore.

What sort of movies did you do?

When I was in England, I collaborated with some of the Nollywood actors and actresses. And we did some films together.

Would you call yourself a feminist?

I don't know whether I would say I'm a feminist. But I am an advocate for justice. And I also help men. I hate... I don't like bullies. I don't like anybody using their position to intimidate others or take credit for work done by others.

The world can be a better place if we just see each other as equal, equal partners. If we are not timid and we are not scared that the rise of a woman is the downfall of a man. And I don't think any woman had ever said we want to get rid of men.

We're just saying the table is big enough to accommodate all of us. So, you know, that's my own belief. And I believe when you have a man and a woman on the table

making decisions, the outcome of those decisions are always positive ones.

Because men and women bring different things to the table?

Yes, because women see things differently, men see things differently. So when you have these multiple ideas, you have a huge knowledge to choose from. It's not one-sided. You can imagine going to Parliament to talk about FGM (female genital mutilation). And it is the men who talk about FGM. What do they know about FGM?

So, who's your hero or heroine?

If my mother did not give me that chance to run, I won't be here. And she's still alive. Oh, yes and she knows I love her. But then, my mother could have given me that lifeline but if I didn't meet my husband... No other president has given their wife the opportunity that this one has given to this wife. You know, my husband has been my partner in everything.

Even though I'm not part of his government, I can watch things from the outside and he is a great teacher and he's not worried about somebody else's glory.

He gives the platform and forces you to own your own platform.

What we were used to here in Sierra Leone before now was first ladies who only had to look good. It wasn't about work. My husband has allowed and encouraged me to be a member of our party and productive. He is a democrat.

And he has transformed our party. For the first time now, when we go to elect the women's leader, it is only women who choose their leader. Before now, the women's leader was chosen by men and didn't even need to be nice to women!

I'm blessed to have my mother and super blessed to have my husband.

CATCHING UP

Sierra Leone looks to China for fish export help

The fisheries minister seeks China's help to jump-start the country's aquaculture business, which will stem the tide on illegal fish trading and net foreign exchange

By **HONORÉ BANDA**

A \$55m China-backed fishing grant inked by Sierra Leone in 2018 may finally be coming to fruition, with fish export certificates, a port and help with creating an aquaculture business, according to Sierra Leone Fisheries Minister Princess Dugba.

"They gave us the fish certificate for us to be able to export our fish and fishery products to China," says Dugba, who in April met Chinese Vice Minister for Agriculture Zhang Zhili for talks in Beijing. "We have almost concluded the process; there is a lot of paperwork."

There are hopes that the deal with China will help curb illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, which has severely undermined Sierra Leone's marine

resources for nearly four decades. Foreign fleets – primarily Chinese – routinely operate in restricted zones, falsify catch data and evade detection by disabling transponders and rotating vessel registrations.

Recognised globally as a form of transnational organised crime, IUU fishing targets high-value species such as bonga, snapper and grouper, fuelling illicit profits while depriving Sierra Leone of an estimated \$30m annually. These losses erode government revenues and threaten food security for 80% of the population who depend on fish as their main source of protein.

Fish exportation would give a big boost to Sierra Leone's fisheries industry, which has floundered, even though it provides 12% of the nation's GDP. The European Union

does not import fish from Sierra Leone, nor has it signed an EU Fisheries Partnership Agreement – Dugba says this is one of her priorities. Sierra Leonean fishermen told *The Africa Report* that Senegalese traders come to buy fish and then sell it to the EU. "They come. They buy our fish and take it to Senegal. They repackage it and send it to the EU," says Dugba. "Our fish is very delicious."

Building a port and contributing to boosting aquaculture are part of the Chinese grant, says Dugba. It is earmarked for promoting aquaculture, creating fish-breeding ponds and a port near Freetown.

Fish farming

Tourism operators criticised the Chinese and Sierra Leonean governments when the deal was signed in 2018, concerned about a fishmeal plant's impact on nearby beaches, which the Chinese and Sierra Leone governments denied.

"They will come in, build the jetty, and then they will build an office for the fisheries [ministry] ... They will build a fish market and then there will be another facility," Dugba says. She is optimistic that the Chinese grant will draw others to Sierra Leone – there is a 252-acre swath of coastal land nearby, ready for fish-related industry. "We want to attract investors to come in and build – maybe cold storage facilities, processing plants, a place where you can repair your boats," she says, adding that they are looking at building factories there, too.

Dugba says that she asked the Chinese to help jump-start aquaculture projects and create farmed fishponds. "They have given us the green light, so we are going through diplomatic channels to see how best they can help us," she says. There is also an experimental aquaculture site in Bo, in the south, that the ministry is looking to expand. ●



Sierra Leone
Minister of
Fisheries
Princess
Dugba

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INTERVIEW

Brima Koroma

‘We’ve pushed for dramatic reform’



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National Petroleum Regulatory Authority’s director general outlines infrastructure gains, pricing reform and plans for a national oil company under President Bio’s watch

By **DONU KOGBARA**

At a quiet table in Freetown’s Radisson Blu, Brima Baluwa Koroma sets out an ambitious vision: transforming Sierra Leone from a fragile importer of petroleum products into a reliable regional hub. “When President Julius Maada Bio took office in 2018, the sector was in disarray – few players, minimal infrastructure, no investor appetite. He gave us a mandate to change that.”

This came down to three priorities: Open the market to more competition, expand and modernise downstream infrastructure, and tighten tax compliance. In all three, the National Petroleum Regulatory Authority (NPRA) has pushed through dramatic reforms. Chief among these is a huge increase in storage capacity. “Sierra Leone had only about 120,000 tonnes of fuel storage, and half wasn’t working properly. Today, we have 284,000 tonnes. That’s over 80% growth.”

The retail sector has grown in tandem. In 2018, the country had

around 200 filling stations. As of April 2025, that number was 506 – a surge Koroma attributes to renewed investor confidence and a more transparent licensing regime.

The NPRA was upgraded to oversee everything from imports and distribution to retail pricing and public access. To improve nationwide coverage, the NPRA opened offices in Makeni, Koido and Port Loko. Downstream revenues jumped from 484bn leones in 2018 to Le2.5trn by the end of 2024. “Every payment goes directly into the consolidated revenue fund.”

Working with the World Bank and IMF, the NPRA commissioned a review into the country’s fuel pricing formula, which led to a new

‘SIERRA LEONE CAN BECOME THE REGION’S PETROLEUM BACKBONE’

system in 2024 “that reflects reality and benefits consumers”. Koroma envisions the government playing a more active commercial role in the sector by creating a national oil company to serve as a strategic player and help stabilise supply and pricing, as well as assist in managing forex requirements. With strategic exports of LPG to Guinea and diesel to Liberia already under way, he sees Freetown becoming a hub for West Africa.

The right tools

“We’ve increased competition, from three importers to eight, but we also need safeguards,” he says, pointing to global supply shocks during Covid and the Russia-Ukraine war. “You can’t leave a politically sensitive commodity like fuel entirely to the market.”

For now, Sierra Leone’s fuel imports come primarily from European suppliers, refined in Geneva or the Netherlands. ConexEnergy handles aviation fuel. Domestic refining remains out of reach and pipeline infrastructure is fragmented, but long-term, Koroma wants to see inter-connected pipelines and a strategic stockpile.

“We have a chance to become the region’s petroleum backbone but we need the right tools to get there.” ●



Sekou Amadou BAH
CEO, Orange Sierra Leone.



Orange Sierra Leone firmly believes that investing in digital infrastructure is the backbone of inclusive growth.

In line with the company's purpose — to improve the daily lives of the people of Sierra Leone through responsible and enriching digital experiences — great effort has primarily been focused on transforming the network, expanding rural coverage, democratizing access to very high-speed broadband, and accelerating digitalization.

Over the years, we have consistently invested an average of 30% of our annual revenue into digital infrastructure, expanding our network to nearly 600 sites nationwide. Last year, more than 50 million dollars was invested to modernize the network: today, all sites are equipped with 4G and fully 5G-ready. In addition, Orange SL have defined an ambitious rural coverage strategy, with the deployment of deep rural sites in the most remote areas of the country. To enhance network resilience and security, Orange Sierra Leone has invested heavily in infrastructure, with two state-of-the-art data centers — one in Freetown and another in Bo, which cost several millions of dollars, and will soon be inaugurated.

As a major contributor to national development, Orange Sierra Leone represents approximately 4% to the country revenue mobilization, making it a key player in the economic landscape of Sierra Leone.

Orange SL is also investing in digital, financial and social inclusion and skill development especially for the youth and women to ensure no one is left behind in the digital transformation in Sierra Leone. Presently, there are 3 state-of-the-art Orange Digital Centers across the country in Freetown, Bo and Makeni. These centers provide free training for entrepreneurship and digital programs. The company also has 3 dedicated Women Digital Centers across the country with the aim of empowering women and young girls for career advancement. In the last 3 years, 5000+ youth (50% women) have been trained, with 760 now inserted into the workforce.

An entrepreneurial competition is organized every year - the Orange Social Venture Prize (OSVP). This competition creates a platform for young innovators and entrepreneurs to obtain exposure, mentorship and capital. There are many success stories from this competition who have become leading entrepreneurs in Sierra Leone — the OSVP competition was a catalyst and propeller for their businesses. Orange SL is especially proud that a young Sierra Leonean entrepreneur, Joseph Koroma of LifeBlood, was crowned the winner of the 2022 OSVP International Grand Prize (among 17 countries and 1,700 projects), a remarkable achievement that highlights the incredible talent and potential within our local ecosystem.

As the leader in the mobile financial services, immense contribution has been made towards the development of financial inclusion, through innovative products and services. Several micro loan programs including the recent Kwik Money loan service through Orange Mobile Finance Sierra Leone (OMFSL) has been rolled out, as we address the needs of the unbanked population. In 2024, OMFSL disbursed up to \$6M to 45,000 customers through the micro loan services.

Orange is here, to connect people, empower lives, and drive transformation — boldly, responsibly, and with care.

LinkedIn: Orange SL

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**Orange
Sierra Leone**

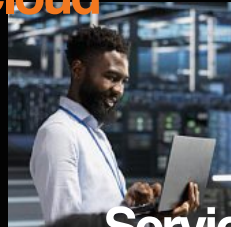


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OPINION

SAHEL TENSION FESTERS SINCE ECOWAS EXIT



LANSANA GBERIE

Sierra Leone's ambassador to Switzerland and permanent representative to the United Nations in Geneva

In his inaugural statement as chairman of the Authority of ECOWAS' Heads of State and Government on 22 June, President Julius Maada Bio said he will prioritise "restoring constitutional order and deepening democracy" and "revitalising regional security cooperation", among others, during his one-year mandate. The two aspirations are intimately linked; and ECOWAS sees their negation as an existential threat. Recently derided by some as *passé*, ECOWAS, as UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said in a report published in December 2024, "has historically been a positive example of regional integration". Not anymore, he lamented. It is "crucial for regional leaders to renew efforts to overcome differences and promote cooperation ... for the development of an effective regional security mechanism to combat the persistent threats of insecurity, violent extremism and transnational organised crime that endanger the lives and livelihoods of people across the region."

Its robust intervention in the 1990s helped, in no small measure, to save countries like Liberia, Guinea Bissau and Sierra Leone from collapse. Now, its leaders are struggling to keep ECOWAS together, after some of its most vulnerable members – Sahelian countries Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger – dramatically defected from the bloc.

Nearly a year before his election as ECOWAS' chair, President Bio made a tentative effort to "overcome differences and promote regional cooperation". On 7 August he visited Burkina Faso on the invitation of Captain Ibrahim Traoré. Bio, a former military leader, led a peaceful transition to civil rule, returning later to become president after winning elections. His early career background no doubt appealed to Traoré, though it is unclear whether he is ready to trade his glorified image as a dashing military leader for drab civvies, as Bio did.

Sierra Leone led the UN Security Council that month, and though Traoré

masked the invitation as a step towards enhancing "fraternal relations", it was understood that the wider implications of the spreading insecurity in the Sahel would be discussed.

Bio's statement after the meeting suggested that it was cordial but liminal: "With mutual trust and respect, we will continue these engagements with open minds to achieve our shared objective of resolving conflicts and disagreements in our sub-region." In September, Traoré and the military leaders of Mali and Niger announced the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AoSS) and in January formalised their withdrawal from ECOWAS.

Contact between the three Sahelian states and ECOWAS members seemed abridged: Traoré has not been invited for a reciprocal visit to Freetown; and an invitation by Ghana's President John Mahama to attend ECOWAS' 50th anniversary celebration in Accra after a 'good neighbourliness' visit to Ouagadougou was not honoured.





The situation is steeped in pathos. Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger quit ECOWAS after the bloc imposed sanctions over their military coups. Yet seven of ECOWAS's 15 founding members were themselves military regimes. Nigeria's General Yakubu Gowon – the bloc's main driving force – was overthrown just two months after its launch, while attending an OAU summit hosted by Uganda's General Idi Amin. His successor, General Murtala Muhammed, swiftly took up the ECOWAS mantle.

ECOWAS began to take shape as a governance and security instrument with the 2001 Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance. The shift was driven in part by the bloc's response to crises in Liberia, Guinea-Bissau and Sierra Leone – countries mired in coups, misrule and prolonged instability. The bloc came to see democratic governance as essential to both security and economic integration, after the high cost of military interventions. The protocol set out clear measures

ECOWAS: Democratic governance is essential for security, economic integration

in response to coups – including sanctions, suspension of membership and diplomatic pressure.

At the time, the bloc's most influential leader, Olusegun Obasanjo, was a chastened former general who had transformed himself into a civilian statesman. Other members included leaders with impeccably democratic credentials, like John Kufuor of Ghana, Alpha Oumar Konaré of Mali, Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal, Mathieu Kérékou of Benin, Ahmad Tejan Kabbah of Sierra Leone and José Maria Pereira Neves of Cabo

Verde. There were military and former military officers among the group of signatories, but they all agreed in principle to democratic transitions.

Particularly for smaller countries like Sierra Leone, ECOWAS remains a key guarantor of security and stability. Its weakening or diminution is not just regrettable, it could be destabilising.

One example is the long-running border dispute between Sierra Leone and Guinea. In 2000 and 2001, Guinean troops entered Sierra Leone's Kailahun district after pushing back anti-government rebels who had launched deadly attacks from there. The incursions caused widespread destruction, displacing Guineans and forcing around 75,000 Sierra Leonean refugees to flee. Guinean forces then occupied a strip of land at Yenga. Sierra Leone's Kabbah secured an agreement with Guinea's Lansana Conté in 2002 for a withdrawal once stability was restored.

After Conté's death and the rise of a military regime, tensions resurfaced. In 2009, Guinea reinforced its presence in Yenga. The dispute calmed somewhat under President Alpha Condé, following ECOWAS mediation. But those talks were interrupted when Condé was overthrown by Colonel Mamady Doumbouya – an event that triggered ECOWAS sanctions, now lifted. In recent months, Doumbouya has escalated matters again, building a military camp in the Yenga area, despite making no formal territorial claims. Last month, amid growing frustration over Guinea's lack of cooperation, ECOWAS advised Sierra Leone to seek arbitration at the International Court of Justice.

The link between military rule and rising instability is clear – in both this context and the more volatile Sahel. As global attention shifts elsewhere, the problem risks deepening. In his new role, President Bio could raise its profile. Soon after his election, ECOWAS tasked its commission with assessing the Guinea-Sierra Leone dispute and proposing a peaceful way forward. ●



REPUBLIC OF SIERRA LEONE



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CONVERSATION WITH

Haja Salimatu Bah
MINISTER OF COMMUNICATIONS,
TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION,
SIERRA LEONE

**“WE DON’T WANT
TO JUST CONSUME
TECHNOLOGY –
WE SHOULD BE
CREATING IT”**

From streamlining public services to launching West Africa’s first open 5G network, Haja Salimatu Bah outlines how Sierra Leone is using technology to drive transparency, financial inclusion and youth-led innovation

Introducing new technology can often lead to job losses. Is that something you’ve had to grapple with?

Yes, it’s a challenge – but not one unique to Africa. The bigger issue is how governments respond. We need to balance the benefits of automation with the realities of people losing roles that technology renders obsolete. Ideally, we’d reskill those affected so they can contribute in new ways, but not everyone is willing or able to make that transition. And of course, not everyone welcomes the transparency and accountability that digital tools bring. That’s where political leadership matters.

And you’ve had strong support from the top?

Absolutely. Before President Bio took office, Sierra Leone had no real digital infrastructure. In six years, we’ve made significant progress – and without his leadership, I couldn’t do my job effectively.

Can you give us some concrete examples of what’s been achieved?

One of the most important steps has been

laying the groundwork. In 2019, we created the Directorate of Science and Innovation, appointed a Chief Innovation Officer, and launched the National Innovation and Digital Strategy. That strategy focuses on three core areas: digital identity, digital government, and the digital economy.

What's been achieved in terms of digital identity?

We've registered around 90% of Sierra Leoneans with digital IDs. That's a huge milestone, especially when you consider how this links to broader goals like streamlining public services and improving access to finance.

Does it also impact elections?

Yes, voting is one of the key applications. But it's also being used in banking. The Bank of Sierra Leone launched a fintech sandbox – a kind of live-testing environment for new financial products. Several fintechs have emerged from it and are doing great work bridging the gap between formal banking and everyday citizens.

What other digital economy tools are you introducing?

We've just launched a payments switch that allows better integration between banks. On the digital government front, agencies are gradually digitising their operations. For example, our new HR Hub allows us to manage public workforce records and tackle long-standing problems like ghost workers. We're also introducing geo-tagging to monitor civil servant attendance.

Are you developing a central government portal?

Yes, we're working on a single-window citizen portal. It will serve as a digital clearing house, allowing people to apply for government services in one place – everything from licences to birth certificates.

Of all these initiatives, which are you proudest of?

That's tough – I've only been in this role for two years, so most projects are still in progress. But I'm most proud of the way we've made technology a foundational pillar for



**SOLAR-POWERED
5G LAUNCH: IN JUNE
2025, FREETOWN
LAUNCHED ITS FIRST
OPEN-ACCESS 5G
NETWORK, NOTABLY
POWERED BY SOLAR
ENERGY IN A PUBLIC-
PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP
WITH ZOODLABS AND
CROSSBOUNDARY
ENERGY.**

every sector. We've also made great strides in telecommunications. Fibre-optic backbone now reaches 14 out of 16 districts. And we have three mobile operators competing to provide better services. That's a strong showing for a country of eight million.

You mentioned local solutions earlier. Can you elaborate?

Yes, that's another area I'm passionate about. Sierra Leoneans are developing in-house tech for local needs. One initiative I'm excited about is Felei Tech City, a planned innovation zone that will provide infrastructure and support for entrepreneurs and startups.

Have you encountered resistance to digitisation – from citizens or within the public sector?

Yes. Some people are uncomfortable with automation and transparency. That's why civic education is vital. Changing the habits of workers used to paper-based processes takes time. We're also asking citizens to stop relying on personal connections to get things done and instead trust the system – to go online, fill out a form, and receive a fair response. It's a cultural shift, and it won't happen overnight.

Are there any particularly exciting innovations emerging from young Sierra Leoneans?

There are plenty. One young person is developing a smart irrigation system. Another has built an app to match blood donors with hospitals. These solutions are emerging across sectors, and it's genuinely inspiring.

What role is the education sector playing in this transformation?

A major one. We've partnered with universities to create an education data hub that overlays infrastructure needs with resource allocation. One success story is our results-checker app, which has saved families over \$2 million in exam result fees. We're also targeting gender disparity with STEM scholarships for girls – from primary school all the way to university.

Is digital skills training a priority?

Very much so. Africa is expected to create 230 million jobs in the digital sector by 2030. We don't want to be passive consumers of technology – we want to be inventors and exporters too. That means focusing on practical skills: coding, web and graphic design, digital arts, and AI.

Let's return to telecoms. What's happening there?

Telecoms are the backbone of everything we do. Without mobile and internet access, digital government and economy efforts fall flat. That's why we're about to launch West Africa's first open 5G network – a huge milestone for us.

What about connectivity in rural areas?

We've made rural inclusion a top priority. That's why we introduced Starlink, despite some scepticism. Traditional infrastructure – like fibre or towers – is expensive and slow to deploy. With Starlink, you can set up internet in a remote village almost instantly. The president was clear: access should be universal. He's even said that mobile and internet services should be treated as a basic human right.