



## **PRESIDENTIAL KEYNOTE ADDRESS**

**BY**

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**OXFORD AFRICA CONFERENCE 2026**

**UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD**

**THEME: "ANCHORING AFRICA: GROUNDED,  
GAME-CHANGING LEADERSHIP IN THE AGE OF  
DISRUPTION"**

**SUNDAY, MAY 17, 2026**

- **MS BERTHA TOBIAS, PRESIDENT OF THE  
OXFORD UNIVERSITY AFRICA SOCIETY,**
- **MEMBERS OF THE OXFORD AFRICA SOCIETY,**
- **MY FELLOW AFRICANS,**
- **DISTINGUISHED LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,**

**1.** I bring you warm greetings from the Republic of Sierra Leone — and from the twelve nations of ECOWAS, whose collective voice I am honoured to carry to this platform today.

**2.** Let me begin by thanking the **Oxford Africa Society** for inviting me back for a second consecutive year.

**3.** To be welcomed once is indeed an honour. To be invited again signals that this conversation is serious and we intend to keep it that way.

## **MADAM PRESIDENT,**

- 4.** Last year, standing on this same platform, I spoke about **African Agency**.
  
- 5.** I spoke about our duty, collectively and individually, to move away from being defined by external narratives, and towards becoming the primary authors of our own story.
  
- 6.** That argument remains valid and this year I want to press it further.
  
- 7.** Agency is necessary but it is not sufficient.

8. A people may recover their voice and still fail to secure their future.
9. A Continent may assert itself and still remain vulnerable if that assertion is not **anchored in institutions, legitimacy, resilience, and systems that can endure pressure.**
10. Last year, **we asked whether Africa could define itself?**
11. This year, we must ask something harder:  
**Can what we define endure?**

- 12. Can it survive shocks and disruption?**
  
- 13.** Can it survive political strain, demographic pressure, climate stress, and technological upheaval?
  
- 14.** Can it survive the fracturing of old alliances?
  
- 15.** That is the work of anchoring. **If agency is authorship, then anchoring is durability.**
  
- 16.** **If agency is to find voice, anchoring is what ensures that voice is not easily silenced.**

**MADAM PRESIDENT,**

**17.** I stand before you today wearing two mantles.

**18.** As **President of Sierra Leone**, I speak from the lived experience of a country that has been tested by war, epidemic, institutional fragility, economic strain and climate pressure — and **which continues, step by step, to reform and rebuild.**

- 19. As Chairman of the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government,** I speak from the vantage point of a region confronting some of the most complex political, security, and economic challenges we have seen in recent decades.
- 20.** From both positions, the conclusion is the same: **Africa's moment is not something we are waiting for. It is something we are already living.**
- 21.** The question is whether we are prepared to sustain and deepen it.

**22.** Sustaining it requires that we must first understand the nature of the forces working against it.

**MADAM PRESIDENT,**

**23.** The **age of disruption** is sometime described as though it were made up of separate crises.

**24.** But that is not how disruption is experienced on the ground.

**25.** Across our Continent, time and again, from the Sahel to the Horn, from the Great Lakes to the Mano River Basin, we have seen this clearly.

**26.** A drought does not stay a drought. It becomes a food crisis.

**27.** A food crisis becomes a revenue crisis. A revenue crisis becomes a security crisis.

**28.** What begins in a farmer's field ends up in the streets of a capital and spills over into a neighbouring country's border posts.

**29.** Africa's disruptions arrive together and if we analyse them separately, we will solve them poorly.

**30.** This is why **grounded, game-changing leadership** must begin by seeing disruption as a system of intersecting challenges and not as a sequence of isolated events.

**31.** And it is why no African state can secure itself in isolation.

**32.** In this age of disruption practical statecraft means treating constitutional order, economic resilience, security cooperation, climate adaptation, youth opportunity and technological agency as public goods.

**33.** These are the anchor that will hold us steady when disruption occurs.

**34. Africa will be anchored only if it does not compromise on the quality of its leadership.**

**35. I know this both as a regional proposition and as a national one.**

## **MADAM PRESIDENT,**

- 36.** Let me bring this closer to experience.
  
- 37.** Sierra Leone understands disruption, not from textbooks, but from lived reality.
  
- 38.** We have endured a conflict that tested the very fabric of our nation.
  
- 39.** We have faced epidemics that exposed the weaknesses in our systems, but also revealed the strength of our communities.

**40.** We have absorbed economic shocks that reminded us how vulnerable dependence can make us.

**41.** And today, we are dealing with climate pressures that affect farmers, fisherfolk, and communities across our country.

**42.** When I assumed office in 2018, Sierra Leone was still emerging from the Ebola crisis.

**43.** Our public finances were under strain. Confidence in institutions had to be rebuilt.

- 44.** Expectations were high, but the margin for error was small.
- 45.** It was not an easy position to inherit — compounded by COVID-19 less than two years into my first term.
- 46.** There have been setbacks, difficult decisions, and moments where progress felt slower than we would have wished.
- 47.** But what has mattered most is that we chose a **New Direction** and we remained consistent.

**48.** We made deliberate choices: **To prioritise people over patronage. To invest in systems rather than symbols.**

**49.** To pursue long-term transformation, even when short-term alternatives seemed more convenient.

**50.** Last year, I outlined **five key national priorities** — what we called our **Game Changer initiatives.**

**51.** Our **Free Quality Education programme** has expanded access to schooling for millions of children who would otherwise have been excluded, particularly girls.

**52.** Our agricultural reforms under **Feed Salone** are steadily strengthening domestic production and reducing reliance on imports.

**53.** These are not perfect outcomes. But they are meaningful ones.

**54.** They show that when policy is sustained and aligned with national priorities, progress becomes tangible.

**55.** And perhaps most importantly, they restore belief.

**56.** I have seen, in the eyes of young Sierra Leoneans, something that gives me confidence.

**57. I see the impatience for opportunity, not the fear of disruption.**

**58.** But Sierra Leone's story, with all of its difficulty and progress, is part of a larger regional story.

**59.** Across West Africa, we are seeing the pressures and the consequences of leadership decisions playing out in real time.

**60.** We must speak about this honestly.

**61. Coups and Unconstitutional Changes of Government** are not abstract developments.

**62. They are signals of systems under strain; of trust that has eroded; and of expectations that have not been met.**

**63.** ECOWAS has acted, as it must, to defend constitutional order. **That principle is non-negotiable.**

**64.** But we must also recognise that stability cannot be enforced indefinitely without legitimacy.

- 65.** Sanctions may create pressure in the short term but they cannot create trust or rebuild institutions.
- 66.** Diplomacy can open space, but it cannot substitute for governance that delivers.
- 67.** It is important for leaders to understand that democracy goes far beyond elections.
- 68.** To be meaningful, **democracy must work in substance.**

**69.** When citizens do not feel heard, when institutions fail to function, people begin to question the system itself.

**70.** Our responsibility is not only to defend democracy, but to make it mean something in the daily lives of our citizens.

**71.** That work cannot be outsourced or deferred.

**72.** Neither is it confined within a single border.

**MADAM PRESIDENT,**

**73.** We must also be honest about the regional and continent-wide consequences of political and economic instability.

**74.** Conflict does not stop at a customs post.

**75.** It moves through border communities, trade corridors, arms flows, extremist networks, displacement routes, and disrupted local economies.

- 76.** A stable country surrounded by instability cannot indefinitely remain untouched by what is happening around it.
- 77.** Regional leadership matters so acutely because if neighbouring states are weak, each state becomes more vulnerable.
- 78.** If neighbouring states are resilient, each state becomes more secure.

**79.** Many of our borders did not erase the older realities beneath them: communities linked by language, trade, marriage, culture, and shared history.

**80.** That is why regional cooperation is not an optional ideal but a survival strategy.

**81.** That shared reality extends, most visibly, to how people move, and why.

## **MADAM PRESIDENT,**

**82.** Too often, migration is discussed as though its primary meaning were movement toward Europe or North America. That is not the full picture.

**83. Much of Africa's displacement and migration burden is borne within Africa itself:** within states, across neighbouring borders, and inside regional systems already under strain.

**84.** We are managing the largest intra-continental displacement burden in the world, mostly alone, mostly without adequate acknowledgement, and mostly without commensurate resources.

**85.** That is the conversation we should be having.

**86.** The answer to displacement and economic migration cannot be insularity, collective blame, or the expulsion of vulnerable people.

**87.** Those responses may satisfy anger for a moment.

**88.** But they do not resolve conflict, create jobs, restore order or repair failures of governance.

**89.** They deepen fracture on a Continent whose security and prosperity are already shared.

**90.** African solutions must therefore be integrative before they are exclusionary.

**91.** Which brings me to the force that will define Africa's trajectory more than any other: **the sheer scale and energy of our youth.**

**MADAM PRESIDENT,**

**92.** We cannot speak about disruption without speaking about demography.

**93.** Africa is the world's youngest Continent. **By 2050 one in four people on earth will be African.**

- 94.** A Continent this young cannot be governed with old assumptions, slow institutions and economies that fail to create opportunity at scale.
- 95.** If politics does not adapt to demographic reality, frustration will outrun reform.
- 96.** If educational systems expand without labour markets widening, impatience will deepen.

**97.** And if democratic systems do not create meaningful pathways for participation, trust will continue to erode among those who are asked to wait the longest for dignity.

**98. Game-changing leadership** must be able to convert this reality into education, jobs, participation, mobility, and hope.

**MADAM PRESIDENT,**

**99.** This responsibility does not exist in isolation from the global environment.

**100.** The world is changing, and Africa must engage it with clarity.

**101.** We are entering a multipolar era, where influence is distributed, and alliances are fluid.

**102.** Africa is no longer peripheral to these dynamics. We are central to them.

**103.** And so, we must approach them with confidence.

**104.** African strategic autonomy is not about rejecting the world.

**105.** It is about engaging it on terms that reflect our interests.

**106.** It is about choosing partnerships that build our capacity, not diminish it.

**107.** That is self-respect and the same principle applies to knowledge.

**108.** Africa must contribute to shaping the frameworks through which the world is understood.

**109.** It applies just as urgently to technology.

**110. Artificial Intelligence (AI)** is already reshaping economies, governance, and society.

**111.** Africa cannot afford to be a passive consumer of these systems.

**112.** Right now, the training data underpinning most major AI systems contains almost no African languages at meaningful depth.

**113.** The legal and regulatory frameworks being drafted in Brussels and Washington will govern how AI operates on this continent.

**114.** We are not meaningfully present in those rooms.

**115.** If Africa arrives late to AI governance, others will write the terms on our behalf.

**116.** The issue for Africa is not whether to engage AI **but whether we will engage it as makers, rule-shapers, and co-authors.**

**117.** We need a pan-African AI governance framework — driven by the African Union, resourced by Member States, built in partnership with institutions like this one and equipped with teeth, timelines, and accountability.

**118.** This requires investment, collaboration, and confidence.

**119. To the scholars here:** The conversations that will define **AI governance** are happening now.

**120.** Africa must be present in those rooms. And if those spaces are not easily accessible, then create new ones.

**121.** And this same principle applies with equal force to climate change.

**MADAM PRESIDENT,**

**122.** Climate change remains one of the greatest injustices of our time.

**123.** Africa contributes the least to global emissions, yet bears a disproportionate burden of the consequences.

**124.** Our response must be both principled and practical.

**125.** We must continue to demand fairness in global climate finance.

**126.** But we must also continue to build resilience and adapt.

**127.** Because ultimately, **anchoring Africa means ensuring that our development is built on foundations we control.**

**128.** And we must be clear about who that future is for.

**129.** Africa cannot be anchored without its women. And it cannot rise without its young people. Their participation is not optional. It is essential.

**MADAM PRESIDENT,**

**130.** The leadership this moment requires is practical.

**131. Grounded leadership stabilises. Game-changing leadership transforms. Africa needs both.**

**132. So, what does anchoring Africa mean in practice?**

**133.** It means building states that citizens can trust.

**134.** It means making democracy deliver and defending constitutional order with the same energy we use to defend it in principle.

**135.** It means recognising that regional stability is a shared responsibility.

**136.** It means treating displacement, insecurity, climate change, demographic pressure and economic fragility as intersecting realities not isolated events.

**137.** It means rejecting isolationism and xenophobia as policy, nor merely as moral failures but as strategic ones.

**138.** It means a Continent that speaks with clarity, acts with consistency and understands that progress is not built in moments, but over time, and through decisions that accumulate into transformation,

**139.** That transformation involves people in rooms like this one.

**MADAM PRESIDENT,**

**140.** Let me end where I began, with the **Oxford African Society Members.**

**141.** **To the young Africans here** — build where you stand. But stay connected to where you come from.

**142.** **Let your education make you more useful to Africa, not less connected to it.**

**143.** The innovation Africa needs will not only come from Silicon Valley or Shenzhen.

**144.** It will come from people who understand the world's possibilities and the Continent's realities. **You are those people.**

**145. To the diaspora** — you are not observers of the African story. **You are characters in it.**

**146.** Bring your knowledge, your networks, and your commitment back into Africa.

**147.** That requires a conscious choice to remain connected.

**148.** Not to romanticise return, but to insist that your expertise stays in conversation with the Continent that produced you — whether you are physically present or building bridges from abroad.

**149.** The diaspora is not outside Africa's **story**. **The diaspora is one of Africa's most powerful assets, if it chooses to be.**

**150.** **To our partners** — engage with Africa in the spirit of partnership, not prescription.

**151. And to institutions such as the University of Oxford:** if you want to take Africa seriously, do not merely interpret the Continent.

**152.** Make room for Africans to shape the terms of interpretation itself.

**153.** Last year, I said: **Africa is watching. The world is listening. History is waiting.**

**154.** Today, I say: **History is not waiting. It is unfolding, right now, in our decisions, in our institutions and in what we choose to defend and change.**

**155. Africa can anchor its own story. We are already doing so.**

**156. What remains is leadership steady enough to hold the ground where stability is needed.**

**157. And bold enough to change it, where reform is overdue.**

**I THANK YOU.**