



PRESIDENTIAL LECTURE ADDRESS

BY

**HIS EXCELLENCY DR JULIUS MAADA BIO
PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF SIERRA LEONE
CHAIRMAN, ECOWAS AUTHORITY OF HEADS OF
STATE AND GOVERNMENT**

ON THE THEME:

**“AFRICA IN AN AGE OF DISRUPTION: POWER,
AGENCY AND STRATEGIC CHOICE”**

AT THE AFRICA TOGETHER CONFERENCE 2026

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

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I. SALUTATIONS

- **MS MICHELLE HADEBE, CHAIR OF THE AFRICA TOGETHER CONFERENCE,**
- **DISTINGUISHED REPRESENTATIVES OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE,**
- **FACULTY MEMBERS AND STUDENTS,**
- **MEMBERS OF THE AFRICAN DIASPORA,**
- **DISTINGUISHED GUESTS,**
- **LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,**
- **GOOD EVENING.**

II. OPENING REFLECTIONS

MADAM CHAIR, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

1. Before I speak as a President, allow me first to speak as a man shaped by Africa.

2. I grew up in Sierra Leone at a time when the promises of independence still felt young, and the fragility beneath them was not yet fully visible.
3. I was a young soldier when civil war tore my country apart.
4. I watched institutions collapse. I watched neighbours become enemies. I watched a nation with every reason to survive nearly cease to exist.
5. But I also witnessed something extraordinary.
6. **I saw ordinary Sierra Leoneans** — market women, teachers, farmers, young men and women with little except dignity and resilience — **refuse to surrender the idea of their country.**

7. They held onto it when institutions failed. They rebuilt it when leadership had failed them.
8. That experience did not make me cynical about Africa.
9. It convinced me that the difference between nations consumed by crisis and nations that survive it is not simply resources or geography.
10. **It is the quality of institutions. The resilience of citizens. And the clarity of leadership.**
11. Everything I will say this evening flows from that conviction.
12. Because the defining question before Africa today is not whether disruption exists.

13. It is whether Africa will respond to disruption with dependence or with agency; with reaction or with strategic choice.

14. And there are few places more important to that conversation than universities, where the future is debated before it arrives.

III. CAMBRIDGE, AFRICA, AND THE RESPONSIBILITY OF IDEAS

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

15. I am deeply conscious of where I stand tonight.

16. The **University of Cambridge** is one of the world's great intellectual institutions.

17. It has shaped science, politics, economics, philosophy, and global thought for centuries.

18. It has also shaped Africa's story.
19. Many African leaders and thinkers who fought for independence passed through institutions like this one.
20. Yet institutions connected to the empire were also part of structures that disrupted African governance, extracted African wealth, and shaped political realities whose consequences remain with us today.
21. I raise this not to assign blame, but because serious partnerships require historical honesty.
22. The relationship between Africa and institutions like Cambridge must now evolve beyond old assumptions — **not as patron and subject, but as**

genuine intellectual partners with a shared stake in humanity's future.

- 23. Antonio Gramsci** once observed: ***“The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born.”***
- 24.** Much of what we now call disruption is humanity living inside that transition.
- 25.** And universities such as Cambridge carry a profound responsibility during moments like these.
- 26.** Ideas developed in places like this have shaped nations, transformed economies, and altered the direction of civilisation itself.

27. That is why this conversation matters, because **Africa's choices in this century will shape far more than Africa alone.**

IV. THE AGE OF DISRUPTION

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

28. We are living through an era in which disruption has become the defining condition of global affairs.

29. **Technology** is advancing faster than governance systems can adapt.

30. **Artificial Intelligence** is reshaping economies, labour markets, warfare, and even the nature of truth itself.

- 31. Climate Change** is redefining food security, migration, and human survival.
- 32. Geopolitical tensions** are fragmenting the international order.
- 33.** The old assumptions of stability no longer hold. The world is being reordered in real time.
- 34. For Africa, the defining question is no longer whether disruption will affect us. It already has.**
- 35. The real question is whether Africa will simply experience disruption or strategically shape the age emerging from it.**
- 36.** Will Africa remain an arena where global powers compete for influence?

- 37.** Or will Africa become an actor with the confidence and strategic clarity to shape outcomes itself?
- 38.** That is the deeper meaning of this conference theme: “**Africa in an Age of Disruption: Power, Agency and Strategic Choice.**”
- 39.** Because in this Century:
- **POWER** increasingly belongs to societies that can adapt quickly, innovate intelligently, and act strategically;
 - **AGENCY** is the capacity to define priorities independently and protect national interests with clarity; and
 - **STRATEGIC CHOICE** is what transforms potential into influence.

- 40.** Africa's greatest risk is not disruption itself. It is **entering an age of disruption without strategic agency.**
- 41.** Yet disruption does not automatically produce decline.
- 42.** **For societies with vision, disruption can become an opening for strategic emergence.**

V. THE VIEW FROM WEST AFRICA AND ECOWAS

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

- 43.** As President of Sierra Leone and Chairman of the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government, **I can say with certainty that disruption is no longer theoretical for Africa.**

- 44.** In West Africa today, we are confronting democratic fragility, unconstitutional changes of government, violent extremism, disinformation, economic shocks, and climate insecurity.
- 45.** The struggle for constitutional order in West Africa is not separate from the age of disruption. **It is one of its clearest manifestations.**
- 46.** When democratic legitimacy weakens, instability expands.
- 47.** When institutions lose public trust, extremism fills the vacuum.
- 48.** These challenges cannot be addressed through reaction alone.

49. They require strategic leadership, institutional resilience, and regional cooperation grounded in legitimacy and public trust.
50. Because **legitimacy is now one of the most important forms of strategic power.**
51. And if I may speak personally for a moment, I learned something very early in public life: **Power is easiest to seize when institutions are weak.**
52. But **history teaches us that the true test of leadership is not the ability to take power.**
53. **It is the discipline to submit power to constitutional order.**

- 54.** In 1996, during one of the darkest periods in Sierra Leone's history, **I spearheaded the transition from military rule back to democratic governance after nearly three decades of autocratic rule.**
- 55.** That experience shaped my understanding of leadership permanently.
- 56.** I learned that coups may simplify power temporarily, but they destroy legitimacy.
- 57.** I learned that military command cannot substitute for democratic consent.
- 58.** And I learned that **the hardest act of leadership is not taking power — it is limiting it.**

VI. GOVERNING IN REAL CONDITIONS

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

- 59.** When my Government came to office in 2018, Sierra Leone was emerging from years of crisis, institutional fragility, and underinvestment.
- 60.** We faced a fundamental choice: **Do we wait for ideal conditions before investing in our people?**
- 61.** Or do we invest in our people to transform those conditions? **We chose the latter.**
- 62.** We abolished school fees and launched the **Free Quality Education Programme** because we understood that no nation can rise sustainably while millions of its children remain excluded from opportunity.

- 63.** Today, **more than one million additional children are in school.**
- 64.** We **expanded healthcare services,** strengthened maternal and child health systems, and invested in a more resilient public health sector.
- 65.** We **prioritised women's empowerment** through progressive reforms and expanded opportunities for girls and women — because no society can fully develop while half of its population is left behind.
- 66.** We **launched the Feed Salone Programme** to strengthen food security and agricultural productivity.

- 67. We invested in technology, infrastructure, youth employment, and public service reform — recognising that sustainable transformation requires both human capability and institutional strength.**
- 68. None of this work is complete. But the direction is clear.**
- 69. In an age of disruption, human capital must become Africa's primary engine of resilience and competitiveness.**
- 70. Human Capital Development is not a social expenditure. It is Africa's most strategic long-term investment.**
- 71. But honesty also demands accountability.**

- 72.** African leaders cannot speak only about external injustice while ignoring internal responsibility.
- 73.** Corruption remains a serious challenge across parts of our continent.
- 74.** Democratic backsliding is real.
- 75.** And institutions weakened for political convenience ultimately weaken nations themselves.
- 76.** If Africa is to demand fairness and respect globally, then African leaders must also remain accountable to African citizens.

77. Because a Continent that seeks global respect must also uphold integrity, transparency, and constitutional responsibility at home.

VII. AFRICA'S STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITY

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

78. Africa possesses extraordinary strategic assets.

79. We are home to the **world's youngest population.**

80. We hold **critical minerals** essential to the global energy transition.

81. We possess **vast agricultural potential, entrepreneurial energy, cultural influence, and immense human capital.**

82. But history teaches us that potential alone does not produce power.
83. Resources without strategy often enrich others more than ourselves.
84. The challenge before Africa is therefore not whether we matter. **We already do.**
85. **The challenge is whether we can convert relevance into leverage.**
86. Whether we can **transform assets into strategic influence.**
87. And whether **we can act collectively enough to shape outcomes rather than merely absorb them.**

88. Every **disruption creates pressure.** But it also **creates strategic choices.**

89. And history remembers the societies that choose wisely.

VIII. THE INTERGENERATIONAL QUESTION

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

90. Africa possesses another strategic resource that is often overlooked.

91. The wisdom of those who carried this Continent through independence, conflict, recovery, and transformation.

92. And the energy of a younger generation determined to build something better.

- 93.** Wisdom without energy stagnates. Energy without wisdom can destroy.
- 94.** But wisdom and energy working together — that is how civilisations advance.
- 95.** Our elders must not only be honoured. They must be consulted.
- 96.** Our youth must not only be celebrated. They must be empowered.
- 97.** Because continuity of vision across generations is itself a form of strategic power.
- 98.** And many of the future leaders of Africa — and many of the future leaders shaping Africa from outside the Continent — are sitting in rooms like this one tonight.

99. The question before your generation is not whether the world is changing.

100. It is whether **you will have the courage to shape that change intentionally.**

IX. THE THREE STRATEGIC ARENAS

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

101. Allow me to briefly identify **three strategic arenas that will shape Africa's future.**

102. FIRST: Technology and Digital Sovereignty.

103. Power today increasingly resides in code, data, platforms, and Artificial Intelligence.

- 104.** AI may become one of the most consequential forces shaping this century.
- 105.** It is redefining power, labour, governance, and even the nature of truth itself.
- 106.** Africa, therefore, faces a profound strategic choice: **Will we participate in the AI revolution primarily as consumers of technologies designed elsewhere?**
- 107.** **Or will we help shape the systems and standards that define the future global order?**
- 108.** If Africa remains only a consumer of Artificial Intelligence, we risk reproducing digitally the same extractive relationships that characterised earlier economic eras.

109. AI is also reshaping the information environment upon which democracy itself depends.

110. Disinformation, synthetic media, and algorithmic manipulation now possess the capacity to undermine public trust and weaken democratic institutions.

111. Yet I remain optimistic.

112. Across this Continent, young Africans are already innovating in fintech, digital health, agriculture, education technology, and artificial intelligence itself.

113. Africa's challenge is not talent. **It is scale, investment, and strategic coordination.**

114. We must invest in digital literacy, research institutions, ethical governance, and innovation ecosystems that position Africans not only as users of technology, but as creators and owners.

115. Because societies absent from the writing of technological rules eventually find themselves governed by rules written by others.

116. Africa must not only adapt to the future of Artificial Intelligence.

117. Africa must help shape it.

118. SECOND: Economic Transformation

119. Africa cannot industrialise its future using extractive models inherited from the past.

- 120.** We cannot continue exporting raw materials and importing finished products.
- 121. Value addition** must replace raw extraction.
- 122. Regional integration** must become a practical economic architecture, not merely a political aspiration.
- 123. The African Continental Free Trade Area presents enormous possibilities.**
- 124.** But possibility alone is insufficient without implementation and political will.

125. THIRD: Climate Change and Resilience.

126. Africa contributes the least to global emissions, yet suffers disproportionately from climate shocks.

127. That is a moral injustice. But strategic leadership transforms vulnerability into leverage.

128. Africa possesses renewable energy potential, critical minerals, and agricultural resources that will shape the future global economy.

129. We must therefore help shape the global climate agenda, not simply appeal to it.

130. Because disruption punishes delay.

131. And in strategic affairs, indecision is itself a decision.

X. WOMEN AND YOUTH EMPOWERMENT

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

- 132.** No conversation about Africa's future **can ignore the question of women's leadership and participation.**
- 133.** Africa cannot claim strategic capacity while **marginalising half of its population from governance, the economy, and decision-making institutions.**
- 134.** **That is a moral and strategic issue.**
- 135.** The women of Africa are not waiting to be empowered. **They are already powerful.**
- 136.** **What they require is the removal of structural barriers that prevent their full participation.**

137. And the same is true for Africa's youth.

138. No Continent can speak credibly about agency while excluding its young people from shaping the future they will inherit.

XI. THE RESPONSIBILITY OF SCHOLARSHIP AND THE DIASPORA

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

139. Africa needs intellectual ecosystems capable of confronting complexity without surrendering to cynicism.

140. We need **leaders who understand that knowledge itself is strategic power.**

- 141.** And this places a particular responsibility on the African diaspora — **especially scholars, innovators, researchers, and professionals shaped by institutions such as Cambridge.**
- 142.** You are not outside Africa's future. **You are part of its strategic capacity.**
- 143.** Your responsibility is not simply to interpret Africa to the world. **It is to help connect global knowledge to African transformation.**
- 144.** Africa does not ask Cambridge for charity of thought. **Africa asks for seriousness of engagement.**
- 145.** Africa should not only be studied by the world.
- 146.** Africa must increasingly become a source of ideas that help shape the world itself.

- 147.** Before I conclude, **allow me to leave this room with three requests.**
- 148. TO THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE:** deepen partnerships with African universities not as benefactors, but **as co-creators of knowledge.**
- 149. Support research shaped by African priorities and African realities.**
- 150. TO THE AFRICAN DIASPORA:** your skills, your networks, your capital, and your credibility are among Africa's most underutilised strategic assets.
- 151. Help build bridges that carry knowledge, investment, mentorship, and opportunity back to the Continent.**

- 152. AND TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY:** Africa does not need more declarations without implementation.
- 153. Africa needs debt restructuring that is real. Climate financing that is delivered.**
- 154. Trade arrangements that reward value addition rather than raw extraction.**
- 155. And a genuine seat at the tables where the rules of the global economy are written.**
- 156.** These are not requests made from weakness. **They are demands made from clarity.**
- 157.** Because Africa is no longer asking simply to be included in the future. **Africa is preparing to help shape it.**

XII. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

MADAM CHAIR, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

158. Let me conclude with this thought.

159. In many African traditions, communities gather around a fire.

160. The elders sit closest to the flame because they have tended it longest.

161. The young gather around the edges — learning, preparing, and eventually inheriting responsibility for carrying the flame forward.

162. That fire is more than warmth. **It is continuity. It is memory. It is wisdom, identity, and shared purpose passed from one generation to the next.**

- 163.** In this century, disruption is not simply wind around the fire. **It is a force powerful enough to scatter the embers entirely.**
- 164.** And so, **in this age of disruption, the central question before Africa is ultimately a question of power, agency, and strategic choice.**
- 165.** **Do we possess the wisdom to tend the fire? The courage to carry it forward?**
- 166.** **And the foresight to pass it on brighter than we received it?**
- 167.** History is already moving.
- 168.** **The question is whether Africa will move as an Author or as an Observer.**

- 169.** Whether **we will merely inherit disruption or shape what comes after it.**
- 170.** Because the future will not belong only to the powerful.
- 171.** It will belong to those who can organise power intelligently, exercise agency confidently, and make strategic choices deliberately.
- 172.** And if Africa chooses wisely, **this age of disruption may yet become Africa's AGE OF STRATEGIC EMERGENCE.**
- 173.** Cambridge has long taught the world how to question.
- 174.** Perhaps this generation now has the opportunity to show the world that **Africa has also learned to choose, to act, and to build.**

175. Tend the fire. Carry it forward. And never let it go out.

176. Thank you for your attention.