Sierra Leone has come a long way as a nation and the narration of its history will never be complete without reference to the contributions of its youthful population. Whether in a bad or good way, young people have played and continue to play significant role in shaping the destiny of our nation. From the Green Book Revolution at Fourah Bay College in the 1970s to the Freedom Match of 8th May 2000 against Foday Sankoh of the Revolutionary United Front, young people have always demonstrated their readiness to contribute to the political and social emancipation of our nation. Yet, it was also young Sierra Leoneans who were misguided to demand freedom and justice through the barrel of the gun that led to more than a decade of devastating armed conflict. Today a handful of brilliant and hardworking Sierra Leoneans have struggled to climb the national lather and now occupy positions that give them the rare opportunity to make and influence decisions, and I congratulate them. However, the majority young Sierra Leoneans continue to struggle for some of the basic things of life. The reality is that the problems facing young people in Sierra Leone today are as many and fierce as angry bees in a honeycomb. Some of these problems include illiteracy and lack of education, lack of skills and vocational training that will enable them to enter the job market, massive youth unemployment, drug abuse, and the culture of violence and crime as a method of survival. It is imperative that we change this ugly narrative.

In a very short time the Government of His Excellency President Julius Maada Bio has been able to take certain steps that have placed Sierra Leone on the trajectory of recovery and development. However, more can be done especially for young people. I applaud His Excellency President Julius Maada Bio for appointing competent Minister of Youth Affairs and Youth Commissioner who have the experience and capacity to drive positive change in youth affairs. The reality however is that Sierra Leone still lacks a proper national youth policy and legal framework that will clearly inform and direct the affairs of young people. The current operational national youth policy in Sierra Leone came into being fourteen years ago and it was only in 2012 that another youth policy was drafted which has since remained only a draft. The 2003 National Youth Policy is not only grossly inadequate, but it is also outdated and deficient in innovation. Meanwhile Sierra Leone had signed the African Youth Charter since the 17th June 2008 and up till now we have not ratified it as a nation. The Charter is a regional human rights instrument that seeks to address the problems of
young people in Africa and it is a comprehensive document that can sufficiently inform and direct the development of young people in Sierra Leone if it is ratified.

The African Union consists of 55 member states; 36 member states have ratified the Charter and are presently making efforts towards its domestication and implementation. This means that the majority of African countries, including South Africa, Zimbabwe, Cameroon, Angola, Nigeria, Ghana and others, have realised that the African Youth Charter is indeed an indispensable blueprint for addressing their youth problem. It is really unfortunate that Sierra Leone is not among this category of African countries that have ratified this Charter and presently making progress in its implementation. It is unfortunate because Sierra Leone, like a number of other African countries today, is known to the rest of the world as an underdeveloped third world society that is affected by poverty, the scourge of HIV/AIDS, natural disasters, corruption and bad governance, and above all, a society that is struggling with its teeming young population. According to the 2015 Census eight out of every ten persons in Sierra Leone are aged 35 years and below, while those aged 24 years and below make up 62.3 per cent of the population. This young population reflects high fertility which also makes room for further population increase in the coming years. Presently more than one-third of the country’s population are in the youth category of 15-35 years. But the social and economic problems associated with this youth bulge are not peculiar to Sierra Leone, nor are they peculiar to Africa. A knowledge of world history will reveal that even America and the countries of Europe experienced similar social and economic problems in the 16th to 18th centuries which led Karl Max into radicalism and ended up advocating the idea of revolution. However, mine is not a call to revolution but a call to peaceful and evolutionary approach towards accomplishing the objective of empowering and developing young people in Sierra Leone, which is what the Charter seeks to achieve.

Ratification of the African Youth Charter is highly significant to not just the success of President Julius Maada Bio’s New Direction but also to a secured future for young people in Sierra Leone. The first eight articles deals with provisions relating to the human rights of young people. In articles 10 (development) and 11 (youth participation) the Charter recognizes the contribution of young people to development, and admonishes national governments to create safe spaces for economic, political, social and cultural development
and benefits of the young people. This can be realised in two ways; first, it allows for individual youth development with the aid and encouragement of the government; and second, it gives youths the privilege of being partners in the development of their respective countries and, by extension, their sub-regions. This will further be materialised through participation of the youth in parliament and other decision making bodies, creating platforms for equal access to decision making and information, as well as giving priorities to policies and programmes of youths to enable interaction with marginalized youth, out of school and out of work youth. Of great importance are articles 13, 14, 15, and 16 which deal with the issues of education, skills development, poverty eradication, socio-economic integration of young people, sustainable livelihoods, employment and health. These are all major issues of concern to Sierra Leone.

I absolutely commend the free education programme of the His Excellency President Julius Maada Bio. However, there is no gainsay in the fact that education without employment opportunities creates little or no impact on the socio-economic lives of young people. Over the years there have been instances of educated young Sierra Leoneans who risked their lives on the perilous journey of ‘temple run’ in search of opportunities in Europe and America simply because of the lack of employment opportunities in our home country. Therefore, if the free education programme is to succeed in making meaningful impact then there is need for the government to institute vocational and specialized skills training for young people, create jobs and employment opportunities and also ratify and domesticate the African Youth Charter with a view to create the conducive policy and legal environment.

The African Youth Charter is a comprehensive document that addresses several issues affecting the lives of young people. It underscores gender issues in article 23, especially the subjugation, discrimination and marginalization of girls and women; mentally and physically challenged youth and the elimination of harmful social and cultural practices in article 24 and 25. Furthermore, articles 26, 27, and 28 are provisions relating to the way forward for the appropriate implementation of the Charter, which involves the responsibilities of the youths with respect to their own development, as well as the responsibilities of State Parties and also regional and continental organizations such as the ECOWAS and AU. A proper framework in the form of a national youth policy and law is critical to the development of young people and this present Government, with all its good intent and ambition, will remiss in its duty to young Sierra Leoneans if it fails to ratify this Charter. YEAN-SL therefore calls on the government of His Excellency President Julius Maada Bio to demonstrate commitment to the young people of our nation by ratifying the African Youth Charter. Our greatest resource is our young population, let us invest in the future of our nation by investing in them.