DIASPORA WEEK
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A Joint Jollof Venture: West Africa Sets Its Sights on Integration

At the opening of the West Africa Integration & Investment Summit in Freetown, leaders called for deals, not declarations. The region's most integrated people weren't on stage: its diaspora.

SLDIC News Bulletin · The opening leaders' session, 17 November · Julius Maada Bio International Conference Centre, Freetown



President Julius Maada Bio addresses the WAIIS 2026 opening session in Freetown. Photo: SLDIC.

400m+	12–15%	$180bn+	170+
people in the ECOWAS market, per President Bio	**intra-trade** of West Africa's trade is with itself, per President Mahama	**pipeline** published value of the WAIIS investment pipeline	**projects** on the table for review and deals

The jollof joint venture

Midway through his keynote, President Julius Maada Bio reopened West Africa's oldest rivalry. He had once conceded the jollof title to Ghana, he told the hall; today he would not be so diplomatic. The best jollof, he declared, comes from Freetown. Then he offered a truce: **a West African joint venture**, with rice from Sierra Leone, meat from Senegal, tomato paste from Ghana and vegetables from The Gambia. "The competition is over."

The room laughed, but the joke carried the summit's whole argument. **No single country makes the dish alone.** Each brings what it does best, and the value is in the combination. That is regional integration on a plate. The joke landed because **the jollof wars were born in the diaspora**: West Africans abroad argued over whose pot was best at parties, weddings and on social media long before presidents joined in. Integration on a plate is the idea that ran through the opening session of the West Africa Integration & Investment Summit

(WAIIS 2026), which formally opened on 17 November at the Julius Maada Bio International Conference Centre.

The Bio Jollof Joint Venture

"The competition is over." — President Julius Maada Bio

Sierra Leone	Senegal	Ghana	The Gambia
supplies the rice	supplies the meat	supplies the tomato paste	supplies the vegetables

Integration on a plate: each country brings what it does best, and the value is in the combination.

The opportunity, and the gap

West Africa's case for integration is easy to make and hard to deliver. The Economic Community of West African States was founded in 1975; after Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger left in 2025, it has **12 member states**. President Bio described a regional market of **more than 400 million people**, with access to **roughly 1.4 billion** through the African Continental Free Trade Area. The summit arrived with **more than 170 projects** and a published investment pipeline of **over US$180 billion** across energy, minerals, agribusiness and digital.

Yet West Africa still trades remarkably little with itself. President John Dramani Mahama put intra-regional trade at **just 12–15%**, a figure that has barely moved for years. By another measure, trade within ECOWAS accounts for **about 11.5%** of the bloc's exports, against **62.6% within the European Union**. The region's own trade liberalisation scheme predates the continental free trade area, but checkpoints, extra certificates and poor roads still make moving goods from Freetown to Accra, or Accra to Lagos, an exercise in frustration.

> ***"Try moving goods from Freetown to Accra, and you will regret it and never try again."***
>
> **— President John Dramani Mahama, on non-tariff barriers**

Bio's vision is to close that gap. Fifty years after the founding leaders built a community of states, he said, this generation's responsibility is to build a **community of markets**, united by production, trade and investment.

> ***"West Africa does not lack wealth. What we have lacked, for too long, is the ability to turn our productive wealth into shared prosperity."***
>
> **— President Julius Maada Bio**





Delegates in the main hall for the opening session. Photos: SLDIC.

The integration that already exists

Leaders spent the afternoon describing an integrated West Africa as a goal. In London, Washington, Toronto and Paris, **it is already daily life**. West Africans abroad host festivals together, pack the same Afrobeats concerts, wear the same fashion, watch the same films, and fly home for the same Detty December. A Ghanaian, a Nigerian, a Senegalese and a Sierra Leonean in the diaspora rarely think about the border between them. The jollof wars started here for a reason: it is a rivalry that only makes sense among neighbours who eat at each other's tables.

No one understands the practical benefits of pan-Africanism and integration better than the West African diaspora. It already moves money, ideas, talent and taste across the region's borders. Yet in a session about integration, the diaspora was barely mentioned as one of its instruments. It remains the region's **most overlooked tool for integration**.

The one voice on stage to name it was Sir Idris Elba. In his "In Conversation" session, Elba gave the summit a new word: alongside the public and private sectors, he said, there is the **"divate" sector**: the private sector and the diaspora combined. "Divate money is important," he said. "I come from the diaspora." Elba said the answer to building investable projects was innovation: "Africans are innovative. When you don't have, you make what you can."



Sir Idris Elba (centre) during the "In Conversation" session on the WAIIS 2026 main stage. Photo: SLDIC.



Sir Idris Elba in the audience during the opening session. Photo: SLDIC.

> ***"The divate sector is a combination of private sector and the diaspora. The diaspora is very powerful. It may not be corporation money, or financing, but it is passion, legacy, and history."***
>
> **— Sir Idris Elba**

SLDIC's view: we are more than passion. Here we push back. Passion, legacy and history are why the diaspora invests, but the capital is real. Sierra Leoneans abroad send home about **US$500 million** a year, the Governor of the Bank of Sierra Leone told SLDIC London. That is not passion; it is finance. Across the region, Africans abroad sent an estimated **US$56 billion** to sub-Saharan Africa in 2024, a record, according to the World Bank. Nigeria's first diaspora bond raised **US$300 million** in 2017 and was 130% subscribed. This year, Burkina Faso's diaspora bond raised **151.5 billion CFA francs** in a month, beating its 125 billion target. The divate sector is not only goodwill. It is a source of finance that governments are already tapping.





Delegates at the WAIIS 2026 opening session. Photos: SLDIC.

Sierra Leone as the gateway

For the Sierra Leonean diaspora in particular, the summit pointed to a practical path. Sierra Leone hosted the region's leaders and set the agenda. What it still needs is a **deliberate push to bring diaspora capital home**, with clear incentives, protections and a front door for investors abroad. A Sierra Leonean abroad can treat the country as an entry point to the whole regional market: **start here, build here, then scale across West Africa**.

START HERE	BUILD	SCALE
Sierra Leone: home networks and a seat at regional summits. Still needed: a deliberate push for diaspora capital	Register, partner and produce locally, in the sectors WAIIS prioritised: food, power, minerals and digital	Use ECOWAS integration, and Bio's proposed single-window registration, to sell across West Africa

If ECOWAS adopts Bio's proposed **single-window business registration**, a business registered in Freetown could operate across the community. That would turn Sierra Leone from a single national market into a **gateway to the region**.

> ***"Investors come to West Africa not simply to extract value, but to create value here. Build with us. Produce here."***
>
> **— President Julius Maada Bio**

What the leaders said



Delegates in the main hall at the Julius Maada Bio International Conference Centre for the WAIIS 2026 opening session. Photo: SLDIC.

Speakers, in order of appearance.

1	**Hon. Dr Kandeh Yumkella**	Chairman of WAIIS; Chairman, Presidential Initiative on Climate Change, Renewable Energy and Food Security, Sierra Leone
2	**Tony Elumelu**	Chairman, Heirs Holdings; WAIIS co-chair
3	**H.E. Dr Thani Al Zeyoudi**	Minister of Foreign Trade, United Arab Emirates
4	**H.E. Rtd. General Birame Diop**	President, ECOWAS Commission
5	**Allé Nar Diop**	Minister of Economy, Planning and Cooperation, Senegal, for President Bassirou Diomaye Faye
6	**H.E. Dr Julius Maada Bio**	President of the Republic of Sierra Leone
7	**H.E. Dr John Dramani Mahama**	President of the Republic of Ghana
8	**Sir Idris Elba**	"In Conversation" session

President Julius Maada Bio: "Tomorrow is deal day." "This summit must produce more than declarations," Bio said. His instruction was blunt: **if you have money, come tomorrow**; if you have projects, the summit will help get them to bankability. He set out **four regional priorities**, asked his fellow leaders to adopt the single-window registration, and tied investment to migration, describing young West Africans who "risk it all" to cross the ocean because the jobs are elsewhere. He invited young people from across the region to witness the commitments made, and proposed that the summit become a **standing platform** where leaders return to report what has been delivered.

Bio's four regional priorities

1 — Feed ourselves
Irrigation, storage, processing and markets

2 — Power to grow
Regional energy partnerships for reliable electricity

3 — Minerals to industry
Process resources at home; skilled jobs, local supply chains

4 — Connect to compete
Roads, digital infrastructure and payment systems



> ***"Government is the enabler. Government cannot be the operator."***
>
> — President John Dramani Mahama

President John Dramani Mahama of Ghana at the WAIIS 2026 opening session. Photo: SLDIC.

President John Dramani Mahama: trade, value and sovereignty. Ghana's president blamed **non-tariff barriers** for the region's weak trade and set out a division of labour: governments provide stability, the rule of law and infrastructure; development finance institutions provide patient capital; the private sector builds.

Every time West Africans eat imported rice or chicken, he said, "we export value and bring poverty back home." He told his host that Sierra Leone's minerals should serve Sierra Leoneans, and cited Ghana's Gold Board: small-scale gold output rose from **64 tonnes worth US$4.6 billion** in 2024 to **104 tonnes worth US$10.8 billion** after the reform, while royalties moved from a fixed 3% to a **5–12% sliding scale**. He also called for more cross-border power trade, now about 7%, and proposed launching the **ECO currency** with the countries that are ready.

> ***"African minerals must be a source of wealth and prosperity for African people."***
>
> **— President John Dramani Mahama**

Tony Elumelu: integration through investment. The Chairman of Heirs Holdings and WAIIS co-chair argued that **integration will be delivered by investment, not proclamation**, and that the region must move beyond exporting raw materials and fragmented national economies. He pointed to the Tony Elumelu Foundation's support for more than **24,000 young entrepreneurs** across all 54 African countries, and warned that the region cannot keep exporting its young people instead of creating opportunities for them.

> ***"The world is changing rapidly, and West Africa cannot afford to remain a spectator."***
>
> **— Tony Elumelu**

H.E. Rtd. General Birame Diop: from potential to productivity. The President of the ECOWAS Commission listed the region's assets, from its population and farmland to its energy and digital potential, and called for a decisive shift from potential to productivity: **bankable projects, credible financing and partnerships that deliver**.



> ***"Success must ultimately be measured not by the number of declarations, but by the investments mobilised."***
>
> **— H.E. Rtd. General Birame Diop, President, ECOWAS Commission**

The ECOWAS Commission President at the WAIIS 2026 opening session. Photo: SLDIC.

Allé Nar Diop, Senegal's Minister of Economy, Planning and Cooperation, spoke in French on behalf of President Bassirou Diomaye Faye; **H.E. Dr Thani Al Zeyoudi**, the UAE's Minister of Foreign Trade, and **Hon. Dr Kandeh Yumkella**, Chairman of WAIIS, also addressed the session.

> ***"The time for Africa's potential to become Africa's prosperity is now."***
>
> **— President Julius Maada Bio, closing his keynote**





Delegates and officials in the main hall. Photos: SLDIC.

What to watch

- **Deal day.** Which of the 170+ projects reach signed commitments, and in which sectors.
- **The single window.** Whether ECOWAS takes up Bio's call for one business registration across the community.
- **A seat for the diaspora.** Whether the "divate" sector gets a formal place in the region's integration agenda.

SLDIC Freetown 2026 · 28–29 December

We will carry these questions into the conference, run in partnership with the Office of the Vice President and the National Investment Board: how the diaspora can start in Sierra Leone, build here and scale across West Africa.

Editor's note and sources

This bulletin covers the opening leaders' session only and is based on SLDIC's own audio recordings and photographs. Quotations are drawn from audience recordings, and President Mahama's figures were checked against 3News' report of his speech; speaker names and titles are as displayed on the summit's stage screens. Remarks by Allé Nar Diop (delivered in French), Dr Thani Al Zeyoudi and Dr Kandeh Yumkella were not recorded in full and are not quoted.

— Arise News: Sierra Leone president, Sanwo-Olu, Elumelu target $180bn investment pipeline
— 3News: WAIIS must be the key to unlock real West African integration — Mahama
— D+C Development and Cooperation: ECOWAS in crisis — it should aim to foster economic integration
— Africanews: What's next for ECOWAS after three members leave
— Primature du Sénégal: Allé Nar Diop
— TechInAfrica: remittances to sub-Saharan Africa hit record US$56bn in 2024 (World Bank)
— ThisDay: Nigeria's US$300m diaspora bond, 130% subscribed
— Financial Afrik: Burkina Faso diaspora bond raises 151.5bn CFA francs
— Burkina24: Burkina Faso launches diaspora bonds to raise 125bn CFA francs