ACF Alliance of Champions for Food Systems Transformation

VOICES OF PROGRESS

SIERRA LEONE



IN CONVERSATION WITH

KIPTIEU F. DEBS

Owner of Sanctuary Farms, Sierra Leone

Please could you tell us a bit about yourself and your farm?

My name is Kippy, and I'm turning 50 this year. I'm the owner of Sanctuary Farms, located in the Western Area Rural District just outside of Freetown, Sierra Leone. We grow a variety of fruits and vegetables—naturally and without the use of pesticides. Our main crops include habanero pepper, sweet peppers and cabbage, and during peak season we produce salad greens, cucumbers and carrots. We work with sandy loam soil (pH 5.5), and I've made it a point to learn everything I can about our soil and its natural needs since we started farming four years ago.

Our 10 local staff farm organically, using only natural fertilisers and compost, including from our small goat herd. Our operations run on solar-powered irrigation and we cultivate mostly in 10 greenhouses (each 300 square meters), using just 10% of our 57-acre land for now. Our goal is to evolve into a training hub, where schools can bring students for practical learning and farmers from across the region can learn sustainable techniques.

We're gradually preparing to expand into open-field cultivation. It's important to us to keep that connection with the local way of farming, using familiar methods while testing how sustainable techniques perform outside of the controlled environment of a greenhouse. This will allow us to inform both investors and government stakeholders about the real results and scalability of organic production.

Can you describe a typical day during your busiest season?

Our days start at 6:30am with a quick inspection of the plants and the soil, monitoring plant health and checking the greenhouses and surroundings for pests. We irrigate based on a rotating plan set the day before and we are always looking two days ahead.

At around 11am we break for a rest, then return to the field until about 4pm. Harvests take place twice a week. I always say, "plants are like women—you need to love them, care for them, talk to them, and they'll give back". Sometimes, we even dance around the greenhouses to keep the energy positive!



What trade-offs do you currently face in producing healthy food in a way that is sustainable?

The biggest decision I've made is sticking with organic farming. That commitment affects every part of how we work—from land preparation to seed selection, pest control, water and energy use. Organic farming in Sierra Leone comes with many resource limitations, especially when it comes to pest and disease control. For example, fighting spider mites in greenhouses without chemicals can reduce yields. I've used lemongrass sprays as a natural deterrent, but it's slower, less effective and impacts productivity.

We do everything manually, including composting and preparing the soil—no slash-and-burn, which destroys the biodiversity and organic matter we rely on. The trade-off is clear: chemical farming gives faster results, but we are investing in long-term soil health, food quality and environmental integrity.

How could government policy help you manage these trade-offs in a way that leads to better outcomes for you, your community and the environment?

The government could help most by investing in agricultural knowledge and structured training, especially vocational programs. Right now, most training is piecemeal. We need systematic, accredited programmes that equip young people and practicing farmers with up-to-date skills—especially in organic methods.

Government support must also include making organic inputs more accessible. Most people use what's cheap or free. If the government only distributes chemical fertilisers, that's what people will use. Agrodealers won't stock organic products if there's no demand or subsidy, especially since they're more expensive and slower to sell. We also need the government to support the development of packaging alternatives (we currently rely on plastic) and make the import process for seeds and equipment smoother and faster.

How do you feel about your future as a farmer?

When I think about the future, I'm hopeful – but I'm also realistic. We've grown from 3 greenhouses to 10, thanks to support from a grant. We've built a cold storage facility that now serves other farmers. But to grow further, I need confidence that this momentum will continue.

What worries me is what happens after Feed Salone. Will it endure beyond this political term? Will the Ministry still be responsive? I want to see Feed Salone become a long-term national agenda. Farmers need to feel there is a visible, reliable system of support—things like insurance, investment incentives for hiring and training, and a transparent, accessible farmer registry. That kind of system builds trust and lets us plan for the future.

Everyone has a stake in this. Agriculture is more than growing food. Agriculture grows people, communities, and possibilities. I'm ready to keep going—and I hope the whole country will come with me.



> **"Agriculture is more than growing food. Agriculture grows people, communities, and possibilities."**

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IN CONVERSATION WITH

MINISTER KPAKA

Minister of Agriculture and Food Security, Sierra Leone

Please could you tell us a bit about yourself and describe your journey into food systems?

As Minister of Agriculture and Food Security, I entered government with a background in political economy and international development, working with government and global institutions such as the World Bank and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

"My journey into food systems was shaped by the belief that transforming agriculture is not only key to ending hunger – but also to lifting rural populations out of poverty and driving inclusive economic growth for future generations of Sierra Leonians."

What areas of policy do you oversee?

As well as formulating national agricultural policy, which spans crop production, livestock development and value chain transformation, my role is also about ensuring its effective implementation — driving productivity, resilience and food security across the country.

Under Feed Salone, the President's flagship programme to transform Sierra Leone's food system, my mandate has expanded to include interministerial coordination and strategic investment mobilisation. I also provide leadership on cross-cutting national priorities such as rural infrastructure, digital innovation in agriculture and climate-smart farming practices.

How do these interact with different parts of government?

Agriculture is deeply interlinked with other sectors, including health (nutrition and school feeding), environment (climate resilience and reforestation), finance (subsidies, credit, budget allocations), and trade (export promotion and import substitution). Through the Presidential Council on Feed Salone chaired by H.E. the President that I coordinate, we now have structured mechanisms to ensure coordination across key ministries and agencies, supported by a dedicated secretariat and technical working groups.

How are competing agendas considered alongside each other? What are the challenges in doing this?

Balancing priorities such as sustainability vs. productivity, or short-term food access vs. long-term transformation, is a daily challenge. For example, promoting local rice requires import controls and hard negotiations with the rice importers while ensuring continued availability and affordability for consumers. We also face trade-offs between agricultural expansion and environmental protection. As we scale production, we are taking steps to prevent deforestation, limit slash-and-burn practices and protect our valuable forest ecosystems.

What structures, institutions or processes has the government put in place to consider these in the round?

Food systems transformation is a national priority backed by the President. By institutionalizing coordination through the Presidential Council, alongside technical coordination platforms that bring in the private sector with development partners, we have created structures through which we can navigate complexity, monitor progress and align the government's policy interventions.

What, from the national perspective, is the prize of getting the transition right? And what are the costs of getting it wrong?

The prize of getting this transition right is nothing short of transformational. It means universal access to affordable, nutritious food, better education outcomes through improved school feeding, and expanded economic opportunities for youth and women. It unlocks the potential to turn agriculture into a profitable, investable sector, while enhancing environmental sustainability and resilience to climate change. Ultimately, it offers inclusive, broad-based growth that lifts millions out of poverty and builds a more stable, self-reliant nation.

But the costs of getting it wrong are just as high. They include increased dependence on food imports, persistent rural poverty, underemployment of youth and growing vulnerability to climate and market shocks.

The transition demands significant investment, complex cross-sector coordination, and crucially, the political will to manage trade-offs and align diverse interests. It is a difficult path—but the return on getting it right is generational. That is the path Sierra Leone has taken.





What are the government's aspirations for your country's food system in 2030? 2050?

By 2050, Sierra Leone envisions becoming a net exporter of strategic agricultural products, driven by climate-smart practices, modern agro-industrial growth and a digitally connected rural economy. Our long-term vision prioritizes inclusive and sustainable development, where women and youth have equitable access to land, finance, technology and markets. Sierra Leone is determined to spearhead a Pan-African movement towards continental food sovereignty, demonstrating resilient leadership in transforming into a regional food basket.