

Address of Hon L.D. Dookun-Luchoomun
Vice Prime Minister,
Minister of Education, Tertiary Education, Science and Technology

Half-Day Workshop Leading to a Science –to - Policy Platform
Tuesday Sept 8, 2020

Protocol

It gives me great pleasure to be here today for this half-day workshop that will ultimately be prefatory to the setting up of ‘L’observatoire de l’environnement’.

As we know, Observatories the world over, no matter whether they happen to be geared towards terrestrial or celestial events, serve, among other things, to collect data, scientifically-proven data, that help define and inform policies. This partnership between the Ministry of Environment, Solid Waste Management and Climate Change and the University is to come up with an observatory to determine the link between environmental quality issues in our island in order to better understand how these affect the health, well-being and economical impact.

Of course, there are modalities involved, modalities that have to be worked out and defined for the setting up of such a science-to-policy platform. Today, I am certain that this threshold will be resolutely crossed.

Indeed, we all expect today’s workshop to clear the air and indicate the way forward.

Allow me at this juncture to congratulate my Colleague, the Minister of Environment, Solid Waste Management and Climate Change, for having taken the initiative quite a while ago, in December last, to hold “Les Assises de L’environnement”.

Such ‘Assises’, as we know, are always instrumental in defining the orientations that policies should take, in this case, policies on the environment.

Now, we do know that there are a number of organizations, NGOs, private individuals and others who , in their own individual ways, are contributing to raising concerns about the environment and also adopting a hands-on approach to these. The ‘Assises’ were certainly instrumental in bringing all of these persons and groups together so that all parties could look in the same direction.

However, it doesn’t suffice to read from the same script. It is also vital to ascertain that recommendations made get to be implemented, wherever feasible.

Hence, I am glad that matters have been brought to a head today. Not only has work started on the setting up of the Observatory, but today’s meeting fulfils one the objectives of the Observatory which is to develop its research and development component.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Matters related to the environment are highly significant for a country like Mauritius, a Small Island Developing State. We know the extent to which we are highly vulnerable to climate change: we are currently situated in the 13th position in the measure of such vulnerability. We are also the 7th most exposed country to natural cataclysms like cyclonic conditions and risks pertaining to heavy rainfall.

Events that have been happening for some time now—flash floods, the recent oil spill, the loss of beach land through erosion, the global rise of sea level to the tune of 3,2 mm per year, the threat to our bio-diversity—all these serve as a wakeup call, indicating the need for us to be vigilant.

Obviously, the impact is both social and economic. We should realize that floods alone, for instance, come with a price estimated at USD 27,2 M . In addition, the impact on the fishing industry and, even more, on the Tourism industry, among others, is quite telling.

We have to face it: an increasing trend in investment today focuses on eco-tourism. Agreed, Covid 19 has led to the temporary closure of our frontiers—but one day or the other, these will have to be opened.

The question we will have to respond to is this: will we be in a condition to draw environmentally-minded tourists to Mauritius if our natural conservation is not vitally sustained?

But the proof of the pudding, as we say, lies in the eating. The vulnerability or otherwise of our environment has to be substantiated by evidence.

As an African proverb has it,

“When the shadow of a tree is bent, straighten the tree, not the shadow.”

The soon-to-be-set-up Observatory will help straighten the tree by relying enormously on research-based data and evidence.

And this is where the linkage between the Ministry of Environment and the UoM becomes timely and *‘fort a propos’*

I must say that collaborative research is something that my Ministry particularly encourages. This is all the more true for our public HEIs.

In fact, can a University prove its mettle by solely relying on its teaching component without due regard to a strong dosage of research?

I personally believe that one of the contributory factors to Mauritius achieving international recognition for its higher education sector is the latter's capacity to generate new knowledge through research, to transmit it effectively and ultimately, ensure its applicability.

This is why my Ministry had set up a Research Fund under the Higher Education Commission in 2017 to foster the culture of research among academics in Public HEIs. A number of Research Schemes have thus been elaborated and partnerships and collaborative ventures are encouraged not only with local but also with international partners. The linkage of the UoM to *Le Partenariat Hubert Curien, Le Réduit* for instance, is one such case where networks and bilateral exchanges become possible among University staff.

I am therefore quite pleased that the UoM should be working collaboratively with the Ministry of Environment, Solid Waste Management and Climate Change in this present context.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Issues pertaining to the environment are a matter of concern for all of us.

And , most countries in the world now make it a point to inculcate the sound principles related to the environment right from an early age.

Our own policy about the environment in education is already clearly established. Thus, environment issues are addressed in our school curriculum. We also ensure that students are made aware of *solid waste management problems, the need for conservation of our biodiversity, climate hazards, coastal erosion, soil degradation and backfilling of wetlands.*

Need I therefore add that all data and evidence that will arise from the observatory will in fact be instrumental in *redefining* our programmes of study?

In conclusion, ladies and gentlemen, we should not forget, that very often the vulnerability of our environment, is primarily due to our own actions, the actions of human beings. We are often responsible for environmental degradation.

Hence, the very fact of having an observatory that collects, manages and sifts through all the data coming from different sources already sends a positive signal. This becomes the first concrete response to the environmental crisis: such data will help sensitize and empower both seasoned and active “warriors” for the environment as well as the average citizen. By making more informed choices, we are very likely, through combined efforts, to improve the ‘State of Health ‘ of our environment or, at the very least, help towards the mitigation of its degradation.

Let me therefore wish all of you positive deliberations so that the modalities of a sound science-to-policy platform can be enunciated.

Bon courage and God’s speed to all of you.

Thank you for your attention.