

Speech Hon VPM
United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) Regional
Workshop
Monday 07 August 2023

Ms. Shamika Sirimanne, Director of UNCTAD's Division on Technology and Logistics.

The representative of the Aerospace Information Research Institute of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (AIRCAS)

The representative of the Alliance of International Science Organisations (ANSO)

The representative of the National Remote Sensing Center of China

The representative of the United Nation Development Programme

The representative of the FAREI

Esteemed delegates

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me immense pleasure to address you today for this opening ceremony of the Regional Workshop of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). The theme to be deliberated upon is in itself highly topical and vital: 'Advancing Satellite-based Crop Monitoring to Increase Resilience in the Face of Global Food Insecurity.'

Allow me first to extend a warm welcome to all the delegates who have travelled to Mauritius for this significant event. I sincerely hope that your stay on our beautiful island will be both professionally productive and socially enjoyable.

Today's theme is particularly relevant as the world continues to confront the impacts of global climate change and the challenges this situation poses to food security. We are indeed living in an era where Winston Churchill once said, *procrastination and half-measures, are no longer acceptable, the consequences are too harsh.*

I wish to express my heartfelt gratitude to the organizers of this crucial regional workshop, for convening this gathering. Your efforts are commendable and I am also thankful for the invitation extended to me to share my ministry's vision

regarding the vital role of Science and Technology in realising Mauritius' sustainable development goals.

Mauritius, as a small island nation encompassing a mere 2040 km² of land, faces formidable challenges concerning food security, exacerbated by our vulnerability to the effects of climate change. Given these realities, it is imperative for us to bolster the resilience of our agricultural sector, given that Mauritius currently imports 77% of its food requirements, thereby underscoring its vulnerability, like many other Small Islands Developing States (SIDS), to external shocks. The current Ukraine conflict has further exacerbated the food crisis in different parts of the world by disrupting the supply of essential food items and driving up food prices at an alarming rate. This crisis serves as a poignant reminder of the impact of globalisation and how conflicts in faraway lands can still deprive our people of sufficient quantities of affordable and nutritious sustenance.

In the face of these challenges, Mauritius has remained at the forefront, pioneering solutions to promote agricultural development. In Mauritius we established a School of Agriculture as far back as 1914. The vision then was that of preparing skilled human resources. In Mauritius and for the wider region.

Over the years, this School has played a pivotal role in advancing our agricultural sector and is a testament to how science can profoundly influence a nation's developmental trajectory. Today, the School of Agriculture has evolved and continues to drive progress in agriculture by producing competent graduates and fostering capacity building.

Further strategic investments in research and development have borne fruit, through the establishment of the Mauritius Sugar Industry Research Institution, now known as the Mauritius Cane Industry Authority. This institution has not only developed new varieties of sugar cane that are more resistant and adaptable to our local climate but has also bolstered Mauritius' reputation in the global sugar sector. The wealth of scientific knowledge generated by this institution has obtained international recognition and acclaim, further enhancing our standing in this crucial industry.

Going forward, **Ladies and gentlemen**, the path to a more secure and sustainable future lies in prioritising research, innovation, and capacity building in our agricultural sector.

By leveraging the power of science and technology, we can navigate these challenging times and fortify our nation against the uncertainties of a rapidly changing world.

If we aspire to witness the tangible impact of science and technology on our society and, in particular, on our agricultural sector there arises a crucial need to establish a seamless linkage between academia, represented by researchers, and our dedicated farmers, toiling diligently in the fields.

In this pursuit of fostering multi-stakeholder collaborations involving local, regional, and international organisations, we have successfully transformed the Belle Mare Village, located in the east of Mauritius, into a beacon of Climate-Smart Agriculture. This village stands as a testament to our commitment to climate resilience, food security as well as poverty alleviation.

Ladies and Gentlemen, This Climate Smart Agriculture project aims at building the capacity of farmers in the village to adopt innovative approaches to sustainable agriculture and enhancing food security for Mauritius.

The Government of Mauritius has made significant investments in research and development through the establishment of a dedicated Research Fund. Although we acknowledge that we are still striving to achieve the African Union's recommended 2% of GDP dedicated to R&D, we are proud to report increased investment in research and development over the past five years.

Moving forward, in the realm of agricultural research, our focus is on developing new technologies to elevate crop yields, combat pests and diseases, and adapt to the challenging effects of climate change. Among these technologies, satellite crop monitoring holds a promising potential for identifying areas at risk of drought or flooding and implementing necessary mitigation measures.

However, we recognise that access to such cutting-edge technologies remains a considerable challenge for many of the small island developing states, underscoring the urgency of pooling our resources through robust regional and international collaborations.

When diverse organisations work together they unlock the potential of pooling resources and expertise to develop more effective solution.

In the past, my Ministry hosted other international conferences on critical thematic areas, including Smart Agriculture for Developing Nations in collaboration with the NAM S&T Centre, and Climate Smart Agriculture in partnership with the European Union and the Australian Government. These platforms serve to bolster the capacity of our local farmers and academics while also facilitating networking and partnerships with countries grappling with similar challenges.

As we forge ahead, let us uphold the belief that through unwavering dedication to science, technology, and international collaboration, we can drive positive change, ensure sustainable agricultural practices, and cultivate prosperity for all.

Ladies and Gentlemen

As you are no doubt aware, the Food and Agricultural Sector is likely to fact that economic challenges in feeding the 9.6 billion of prospective inhabitants of the planet by 2050. This implies that food production must increase by 70% by 2050, and this despite limited available land, coupled with decreasing availability of fresh water. This situation can be potentially more drastic for SIDS whose vulnerability to prolonged periods of droughts and floods caused by climate change increase by the day.

As a small island developing state, Mauritius faces several challenges in ensuring access to nutritious food at affordable costs to its population, while eliminating food wastage and minimising post-harvest losses.

It is thus imperative for SIDS to upgrade their traditional farming practices. There is absolutely no doubt that climate smart data driven and data enabled agriculture is the way to go. We must have recourse to a tech-revolution to develop and adopt eco-friendly systems and climate smart techniques for enhancing crop productivity.

While simultaneously encouraging the emergence of young and dynamic agricultural entrepreneurs.

Ladies and Gentlemen

It is my firm conviction that extensive research will revolutionise the agro industry and lead to the adoption of innovative techniques in crop production.

We have already witnessed the benefits of precision agriculture in minimising use of water, pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers.

Similarly smart agriculture allows the crops to be monitored constantly and helps detect further helps in sharing information crucial for farmers and enhances access to technical details.

Use of drones, sensors helps in monitoring crops as well as soil content.

Farmers can have a bird's eye view of their fields, monitor growth stages and get accurate information about their crops' health.

But, again for all this to be possible there should be an effective transfer of knowledge from the labs to the farmers.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As I conclude this address, I want to underscore the significance of this workshop as an exceptional platform for learning from the experiences of other nations.

I encourage all participants to draw parallels with the challenges your countries have faced or are facing and seize this opportunity to develop SIDS specific policy

recommendations that will enable us to harness the transformative potential of technologies in achieving sustainable development goals. Together, through international collaboration and knowledge-sharing, we can chart a course towards a prosperous and sustainable future for all.

With these words, I will like to wish your fruitful deliberations and discussions and I have the pleasure to declare the workshop open.