

**Speech of Hon (Mrs) L.D.Dookun- Luchoomun
Minister of Education & Human Resources,
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Forum organized by the Council of Religions

(Wednesday March 02, 2016)

I am deeply pleased to be with you today on the occasion of this Forum organized by the Council of Religions of Mauritius. I believe it is always a positive sign to see endeavors and initiatives on the part of different bodies and organizations that aim at sustaining peace and harmony in Mauritius.

I say 'sustaining' purposely.

Thankfully, our country has not gone through and, hopefully, will never go through the ghastly occurrences that are afflicting so many other countries.

In fact, there is nothing more horrendous than to hear and read, on an almost daily basis, about countries that are being battered by internal conflicts and other forms of unrest. We know how such events can engender and lead to horrors like the displacement of populations, the violation of human rights and sexual and gender-based violence, among others. These conflicts thus have a shattering effect upon their populations, creating a 'generation of hate' and long-lasting animosity, especially among the children and the youth.

Certainly, ladies and gentlemen, education has a lead role to play here. In fact, there can be no platform more significant than

education in the process of peace-building, of building a *culture* of peace that permeates across the entire social fabric of a nation.

It is certainly this realization that led the global community to make the promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence and the appreciation of cultural diversity part of the 7th target of the Global Goal on Education, Goal 4, of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a reassuring sign that a country like Mauritius has, over the years, learnt how to foster multi-racial and multi-religious co-habitation. In general, our people have imbibed the virtues of such co-existence. True, there had been, in the past, some isolated threats to social peace and harmony. We were fortunate in that we had been successful in stemming the tide timeously—but that does not make us immune to a possible threat of recurrence.

That is why nurturing understanding and peace among the people is an on-going process. We cannot rest on our laurels. Our different NGOs active in the field have a role to play and most of them are doing that to the hilt.

I am pleased to convey my warm appreciation to the Council of Religions for the laudable work they have been carrying out to promote interfaith understanding and dialogue. In fact, right from its inception, the Council has been living up to its mandate of not merely de-escalating inter-faith conflicts but, as far as possible, pre-empt them.

Do keep up the good work—I can only have words of encouragement for the President and his Team at the Council.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me at this juncture to tell you a story. It is certainly one that some of you already know. I will nonetheless crave your indulgence and ask you to bear with me.

The story goes thus.

There were once two tribes in the Andes that were at war with each other, one living in the lowlands and the other, the Highlanders, higher up in the mountains.

One day, the mountain people invaded the Lowlanders and, among the loot and plunder, they kidnapped a baby and took it with them back up into the mountains.

The lowlanders didn't know how to climb the mountain nor did they know the trails leading to the summit. Still, they sent a posse of their best fighters to climb the mountain and bring the baby home.

After several days of effort, however, they decided that the cause was lost and, helpless and hopeless, they got ready to make their way back.

Suddenly, they saw the baby's mother walking toward them. And they realized that she was coming down the mountain!

And then they saw that she had the baby strapped to her back. How was that possible?

One man stopped her and said, "We couldn't climb this mountain. How did you do this when we, the strongest and most able men in the village, couldn't do it?"

She shrugged her shoulders and said, "It wasn't your baby."

Ladies and gentlemen,

I love that story – and not simply because it talks of maternal determination and willpower. There are so many lessons to draw from it. Above all, it tells us that the human spirit, when fueled by genuine resolve, can make a mockery of the artificial barriers separating man from his fellow beings.

I think this is the message that our schools should be able to convey and instill in our learners. Our own Lowlanders and Highlanders can share a common ground of understanding and tolerance if they genuinely want it.

It is innately natural for human beings to be good and tolerant at heart--- and this is more so for children.

Our children carry no baggage of intolerance and non-accommodation at their young age. Our children are blessed with the faculty of bringing no backpack of prejudices when they come to school

Rather, at that age, they are curious, yes, but also accept and enjoy the differences.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This is why I am strongly convinced that there is virtue in the promotion of Inter-culturalism, of Intercultural Education in our schools.

In fact, the policy I have put in place is to ensure that the spirit of inter-culturalism takes root inside the classroom from an early age.

The work has already started and MIE has been requested to work towards ensuring this becomes a reality in schools. We want our children to assimilate a values-based education, an education that

encourages dialogue and understanding about values that are universal to all cultures and faiths.

And this inter-cultural dimension is to be reflected in the curricula at different levels.

Ladies and gentlemen

In a broad manner of speaking, it is universally agreed that the dimension of religious understanding is already captured in Interculturalism. Indeed, values that characterize religious convictions are also included in intercultural education.

We are all familiar with some of those values:

- the rejection of stereotyping, of racism;
- the emphasis upon empathy;
- the respect for multi- religious practices and tolerance and accommodation.

This last, as we all know, is based on the element of reciprocity, of not doing unto others what we wouldn't want others to do unto us.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Schools are places where different learners from diverse backgrounds have to cohabit – and that means securing for them an environment that is democratic, an environment that is accordingly highly respectful of both religious and non-religious convictions.

This is not the case for Mauritian schools alone. Many countries have today to contend with a reality where the classrooms are not only multicultural, but also multi-faith. The classrooms may as well have atheists and agnostics.

It becomes perfectly understandable that these countries insist that their schools, as the document 'UNESCO Guidelines on Intercultural Education' puts it, "be preserved as a space free from religious symbolism and dogma."

But don't get me wrong.

I am all for the promotion of peaceful behaviour in school environments, the promotion of knowledge and attitudes that forestall the occurrence of conflicts based on misunderstanding and intolerance.

I am – and I say this with sincere conviction—I am all for the fostering of dialogue that leads to a better comprehension of "*The Other*".

However, as you deliberate the issue of Interreligious Education (IRE) during this Forum, please keep in view that Mauritius is a secular state and our schools are by definition secular institutions although we are all aware that it is necessary for our children to learn and respect each other.

And that there is a lot of sensitivity about the issue. As I said earlier the MIE, is currently engaged in elaborating the intercultural education curriculum. I will request the Council to submit all recommendations emanating from this forum to the MIE for possible inclusion in the curriculum being prepared.

I thank you all for your kind attention.