

**Speech of Hon. Deepak Balgobin
Minister of Information
Technology, Communication and
Innovation**

**Mauritius Digital Promotion
Agency Bill
(Second Reading)**

**National Assembly
Tuesday, 18th April 2023**

Mr Speaker, Sir,

I beg to move that the Mauritius Digital Promotion Agency Bill (No. 3 of 2023) be read a second time.

Monsieur le Président,

Face aux enjeux de la mondialisation, aucun pays ne peut rester en marge des innovations technologiques.

La digitalisation des services publics est aujourd'hui plus qu'une nécessité ; c'est une préoccupation majeure pour le Gouvernement face aux attentes de nos citoyens.

Et l'importance capitale pour réussir ce processus de développement s'associe à la préparation de cette nouvelle ère numérique dans laquelle s'est engagée notre pays depuis ces dernières années, grâce à la vision du Premier ministre de créer une Île Maurice intelligente et connectée.

Monsieur le Président,

Dans cette course vers le futur, nous présentons aujourd'hui, devant cette auguste Assemblée, un projet de loi qui vient combler les lacunes existantes au National Computer Board Act qui date de 1988.

Aujourd'hui, après plus de 35 ans d'existence, il est impératif de renouveler la réflexion autour des objectifs du NCB et d'instituer des nouvelles fonctions au NCB afin de mener cette institution à atteindre de nouveaux horizons.

Ainsi, la restructuration du NCB en tant que Mauritius Digital Promotion Agency est en ligne avec la stratégie du Gouvernement et de notre programme Gouvernemental.

Nous ne sommes point des techno-prophètes Monsieur le Président, en revanche notre but est non seulement d'anticiper les besoins digitaux de nos citoyens, en améliorant la manière dont le Gouvernement offre ses services en utilisant les outils numériques, mais aussi de nous assurer que nos citoyens soient dotés d'aptitudes qui les permettent d'adopter ces services.

Comme l'a dit l'inventeur américain Charles Kettering, je cite : *«Je m'intéresse à l'avenir, parce que c'est là que je vais passer le reste de ma vie.» (Fin de citation)*

Mr Speaker, Sir,

The bill which is before the House today represents a crucial step in Government's collective efforts to promote and boost digitalisation in

Mauritius, and to ensure that our country remains competitive in the global digital landscape.

I stand before you today as the Minister of Information Technology, Communication and Innovation, under the leadership of the Honourable Prime minister, with a message that holds a vision which will empower generations to come.

We are in the middle of a technological revolution that is transforming every aspect of our lives at an unimaginable pace. Today, over 4 billion people across the globe are online and the digital economy is no longer a luxury or an option. It is a fundamental requirement for any country that seeks to remain competitive and prosper in the global economy.

The digital age has already transformed the way we live, work, and interact with one another. It has the potential to reduce poverty, improve our education system and healthcare capabilities, and promote gender equality, amongst others.

Mr Speaker, Sir,

In Mauritius, the ICT sector has contributed significantly to the country's GDP and according to the Economic Development Board, it has

accounted for approximately 6.9% of Mauritius' GDP in 2021. This demonstrates the enormous potential of the ICT sector to drive economic growth and job creation in the country.

The sector employs over 32,000 persons and this number is expected to grow in the coming years as this Government continues to actively promote digitalisation and innovation.

This Government is in fact leveraging the power of IT in new and innovative ways. We have implemented digital platforms to improve services and the lives of the citizens thereby allowing them to access Government services from the comfort of their homes.

We have accelerated the shift towards the digitalisation and no less than 140 public services are online.

Citizens are encouraged to make use of these services through the different marketing campaigns launched by my Ministry on different media and social platforms. Many of you have probably come across our printed and digital campaigns on MauPass, MoRendezVous or Mokloud.

Mr Speaker, Sir,

The path to success is not only to provide access through proper ICT infrastructure and ensure implementation of technology but also, a digitally agile culture must be nurtured to deliver the innovation we want to see.

Our society is undergoing numerous technological changes and in this digital era, with Innovation, the rapid expansion of the Artificial Intelligence, Robotics industry and the advent of Metaverse, we cannot rest on our laurels.

It is against this backdrop that we are proposing, today, the revamping of the National Computer Board into the Mauritius Digital Promotion Agency.

This Agency will be called upon to play an important role in:

promoting digital literacy among our citizens,
driving the adoption of digital technologies among businesses, and
fostering innovation in the tech sector.

The ultimate objective is to build a world-class digital economy in Mauritius that benefits all our citizens, as neither do we want to, nor can we afford to lag behind in this race!

Mr Speaker, Sir,

At the time NCB was set up and its Act voted,

IT was in its infancy,

Internet was not even known to people,

Mobile phones did not even exist in the country,

and today

Our ICT sector is set to become one of the main pillars of our economy,

The country is fully connected and fibered,

We have launched 5G connectivity for mobile phones,

We have a mobile penetration of 157%,

We have 1.9 million mobile phones.

The statistics speak for themselves Mr Speaker, Sir.

The NCB has also played a fundamental role in promoting and developing the ICT sector by e-Powering the public and private sectors.

The objectives set under the NCB have ensured that the nation is properly equipped with the necessary ICT infrastructure, strategies and policies, and a growing pool of ICT literate citizens.

Important projects and responsibilities were entrusted to the organization, the focus of which was to e-Power the citizens, the businesses and the public sector.

With the influx of projects, Professionals in IT have been recruited to support the smooth running of the organisation.

The number of employees as at January 2023 stood at 86 compared to 55 employees in January 2010.

It is without a doubt, Mr, Speaker Sir, that due to the various initiatives undertaken by the NCB over the years, digital literacy has increased from 51.3% in 2010 to around 60% in 2021 according to Statistics Mauritius and this percentage will continue to grow.

But is it enough?

The NCB Act did not, however, make all provisions for the exponential growth of the ICT sector worldwide as compared to incremental growth for other sectors.

In fact, although digital transformation has made inroads faster, the functions attributed to the NCB have remained unchanged over three decades, thus the need to review its role and responsibilities.

Mr Speaker Sir,

The House would recall that in the Budget Speech 2020/2021, it was announced that with a view to accelerating digital transformation, the NCB, amongst other organisations falling within the purview of my Ministry, would be restructured.

The objective would be to strengthen and empower the institution, to re-orient its services and expertise towards building innovative capabilities.

It is in this context that in July 2021, a consultant was appointed to advise on the restructuring of the organisation by proposing the future direction of the NCB with a revised mandate, as well as new vision, mission and strategic objectives aligned with Government's medium and long-term plan for the country's economic development.

The consultant, after a thorough analysis of the current state of the organization and, based on a comparative exercise of ICT sectors in countries such as Singapore, Estonia, India and Rwanda, came up with a

series of recommendations for a new organisational structure with revised strategic goals and objectives.

The consultant also took into consideration the fact that the NCB has a wide experience and expertise in delivering and managing ICT training and awareness projects, outreach and cooperation across institutions, including citizens and businesses.

The recommendations included the need to repeal the National Computer Board Act of 1988 and to come up with a new bill to provide for a revamped organization, subsequently named the Mauritius Digital Promotion Agency, which would take over the functions of the NCB with a new vision as follows: “to create a di-gi-tally inclusive knowledge-based society through next generation technology” and a new mission statement: “to lead Mauritius towards a world class digital economy by fostering the required skills and making technology widely accessible to all”.

Mr Speaker, Sir,

Allow me to go through the salient clauses in the Bill.

Objects: Clause 4

In view of the evolving needs and fast-moving pace of the ICT/BPO Sector, the Mauritius Digital Promotion Agency is expected to respond effectively to new national aspirations to cater for the multi-faceted challenges emerging in the wake of globalization threatening the very resilience of the country's economy.

The organization will hence be called upon to spearhead the development of the ICT Industry of Mauritius through Innovation, to increase its global competitiveness.

It will also play a prominent role in the development of the ICT industry by advising Government of Mauritius on policies to harness emerging technologies, implementing innovative projects related to boosting ICT exports, technopreneurship, democratising access to ICTs, and promoting Digital Culture and Citizens Empowerment.

Clause 4 of the Bill thus provides for the Agency to have, as main objects to: -

boost growth of the ICT sector through skills development and innovation;

achieve basic ICT proficiency among all population groups; and

advise the Minister on the formulation of national policies in respect of the promotion, development of ICT and its application.

Functions: Clause 5

Mr Speaker, Sir,

To enable the MDPA to achieve its objectives, provision is made under clause 5 of the Bill for the Agency to perform its functions.

The Agency will be the body responsible for the promotion of digital literacy amongst the population at large, so as to inculcate the notion of digital citizenship nationwide, which relates to the ability to navigate into digital environments in a safe and secure manner.

It will also be responsible for the national upskilling programme in ICT and to conduct awareness campaigns so as to attract talent into the sector.

The institution will act as facilitator for setting up of ICT start-ups and developing programmes for ICT Skills development and promoting digital entrepreneurship for the SMEs business community.

For producing smarter outputs and results, and to avoid duplications in institutional functions, the MDPA will work together with other organisations of my Ministry namely the Mauritius Emerging Technologies Council and the Mauritius Research and Innovation Council and also with other Government Departments and the Private sector and NGOs.

I must also highlight that since August 2021, Mauritius has entered the league of the few countries where the Government has its own Certificate Authority (CA).

The CA has the responsibility of issuing of digital certificates to facilitate the verification of identities between users in an electronic transaction, including the use of electronic signatures for individual and businesses.

This service, known as MauSign, is currently being managed by the NCB which has been licenced under the Information and Communication Technologies Act to operate as a Certificate Authority.

This important function will be taken over by the MDPA.

Another important function of the MDPA would be the promotion of the use of Open Data at national level. Open data, as defined in the Bill, refers to data held by Government and/or the private sector, which is not confidential and can be freely used or distributed.

The NCB, since, April 2018, has been hosting the Open Data Mauritius Portal which currently provides for some 430 datasets related to various topics or sectors of our economy.

In today's world, Data is the new oil!

These datasets have the potential of unleashing new business opportunities by powering innovation in all sectors of the economy with the creation of new products and services. This function will also be taken over by the MDPA.

(iii) The Board -Clause 7

Mr Speaker, Sir,

In order for the Agency to attain its objectives, it is imperative that people who are responsible for its management have extensive knowledge and experience in the field of ICT and digital literacy among others.

Provision is, therefore, made at Clause 7 of the Bill for the membership of the Board of the Agency to comprise representatives of relevant sectors, including the private sector, having knowledge and experience in the fields of ICT, Emerging Technologies and education.

This will ensure that there are continued linkages between the organization and the ICT industry.

Staff of Agency – Clause 11

Clause 11, Mr Speaker Sir, refers to the appointment of staff of the Agency by the Board on terms and conditions as may be approved by the Minister.

With regards to recent press articles published concerning this restructuring, which, I believe, are of bad faith and which have attempted to distort public opinion on my Ministry's agenda, I wish to inform the House that I have personally met the NCB Employees Union to dissipate any confusion in the minds of the existing employees.

I have given the assurance to the Union that none of the staff members will be less favourable or penalized in the transition from the NCB to the Mauritius Digital Promotion Agency.

I am glad to share that the NCB Employees Union has expressed its satisfaction and extended its full support to the Management and the Ministry in this transition.

Allow me, Speaker Sir, to table a letter dated 12 April 2023 addressed to me by the NCB Employees Union.

Mr Speaker, Sir,

I wish to reiterate that the transition from the NCB to Mauritius Digital Promotion Agency is being carefully planned. My Ministry will be taking all necessary steps cautiously to ensure that everyone is included and no prejudice is caused to any of the existing employees.

Monsieur Le Président,

L'Honorable Premier ministre a pour vision de bâtir une nation intelligente.

Et les premières pierres sont déjà posées.

C'est sur cette fondation solide que nous construisons désormais l'avenir pour les générations à venir.

La refonte et la restructuration de nos organisations changeront la donne sur la façon dont nous voulons opérer dans cette quête, c'est-à-dire :

créer une île Maurice plus intelligente pour nos citoyens, et

renforcer notre économie.

Mr Speaker, Sir,

We may have innovative digital solutions in place, but they are useless without broad take up by all segment of the population.

At a higher level, the Mauritius Digital Promotion Agency will give a boost to the development and application of ICT in the evolving technology world to deliver better citizen experience.

Mr Speaker, Sir,

We practice what we preach.

And this Government is moving forward and fast in this new digital era.

With these words, Mr Speaker, Sir, I commend the Bill to the House.

Thank you.