

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

Opening Ceremony - 'Driving Innovation through COVID-19' - MRIC

Trianon Convention Centre, Thursday, 6th August 2020 - 11h00

==

**Dr Kaviraj Sukon, Chairperson, Mauritius Research and Innovation
Council**

**Professor Theeshan Bahorun, Executive Director, Mauritius Research
and Innovation Council**

Ms Sandrine Valère, Permanent Secretary of my Ministry

MRIC Council Members

Representatives of Ministries, Institutions and other organisations

Project Leaders and their team members

Members of the Press

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to be with you today for this event following our '**Driving
Innovation through COVID-19**' call for proposals, which, as a matter of fact,
marks the first key activity of the MRIC following the lockdown period.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As you are aware, the endeavour of the MRIC, which falls under the aegis of my Ministry, is to address a growing need for stronger coordination, better inclusiveness and more effective and responsive research and innovation policy governance.

Allow me at this point to congratulate Dr Sukon, the newly appointed chairman of the MRIC as well as Professor Bahorun, the new Executive Director. Under their guidance and leadership, I expect the MRIC to attain a new dimension in its mandate towards furthering the Research and Innovation agenda of the Government. I also expect MRIC to strengthen its relationship with educational institutions and the private sector.

Here, we should not forget what is happening in the world. Up to now 18 million people have been infected by the coronavirus and with confirmed number of 700,000 deaths due to COVID-19. The way Mauritius has dealt with this pandemic is praiseworthy and we should be thankful for the leadership of the Honourable Prime Minister, Pravind Jugnauth and his Government and also all the front-liners, due to their dedication Mauritius is today Covid-free. This has allowed our citizens to start working and contributing to the country again and this is what we call the new normal.

In this novel Coronavirus context, Mauritius need to come up with innovative and sustainable solutions to address major new challenges. The aim is to increase the quality of life for everyone while making Mauritius still more attractive to foreign investors.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As you would concur with me, all countries affected by COVID-19, have had to put in place a series of measures to combat the virus and its potential impact on society and businesses.

In this regard, and in light of the situation in Mauritius in February and March 2020, the MRIC launched a Special Call for Proposals on 4th April 2020.

The idea was to identify people who could quickly help in developing, adapting or expedite production of innovative products and services to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 on our citizens and the society as a whole.

The aim of the MRIC is thus to provide dedicated and targeted funding for research and innovation-based actions to combat COVID-19.

MRIC also wanted to provide a boost to enterprises, businesses and research institutions, as part of a coherent and integrated national effort.

The establishment of these priorities led the MRIC to call for proposals for projects which address

- (i) technology-based products and services and
- (ii) social and policy measures.

We have all witnessed, during confinement, how important technology has become. In the coming years, we can anticipate that technology will play an increasing role in the workplace and at home and, as such, it was important for some of the projects to be technology-driven.

Now, technology cannot exist in isolation.

This is why we also invited people innovating in the social area to submit their proposals so that no one is left on the side lines of development.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Prospective applicants were encouraged to develop projects that could leverage on existing infrastructure, capabilities and networks, ideally, with local partners. We did not expect people to develop solutions from scratch.

Projects were required to be innovative though.

“Innovation is any change, either big or small, that makes a difference.”
(Thomas Smith)

Beyond considerations for technical and non-technical innovation, the intent of the MRIC underlying this Special Call, was also to map out a pathway that would enable enterprises, especially those most badly hit by the pandemic, to transition smoothly towards a remodelled socio-economic environment emerging from the lockdown.

At the close of this Special Call on the 17th April 2020, right in the middle of the lockdown, the MRIC received a total of 252 applications, which gives a clear indication of the willingness of these entrepreneurs, organisations, universities, research institutions, amongst others, to fight against COVID-19.

While a majority of the proposals received involved the development and application of technology-based products and services, 40 % also addressed social and policy measures.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

During the confinement, a panel of independent experts was set up to select the best proposals which fully abided to the terms of the call.

At this point, allow me to sincerely thank all the experts in this special panel for their dedication and sense of patriotism.

Following a stringent evaluation of the proposals, the MRIC has shortlisted and approved the funding of 26 projects.

The approved projects cover a broad range of areas such as:

- food security,
- e-learning,
- protective equipment,
- medical services,
- targeted support to vulnerable groups,
- and the reduction of the effects of the COVID-19 virus.

Importantly, these projects will be co-financed by:

- the MRIC for a total amount of Rs 18 Million
- and by the entrepreneurs or private companies themselves for a total amount of Rs 10.6 Million

This reflects the engagement of the private sector to contribute towards the creation of a better Mauritius through innovative ideas and products or services.

I am also informed that some of them have already received their funding.

Furthermore, following the budget speech 2020-2021, Government has announced the implementation of the **Technology Innovation Fund** for investment up to Rs 2 million as equity in projects recommended by the Mauritius Research and Innovation Council.

In this connection, the MRIC is working with the SME Equity fund to explore possibility of the equity funding for projects in the incubation and acceleration phases of the National SME Incubator Scheme (NSIS).

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We will soon have the opportunity to listen to short presentations by the team leaders of some of the approved projects. I understand that the presentations will cover a large palette of solutions.

Furthermore, at the end of the event, you will all have the possibility to interact with project team members.

Dear friends,

This event underlies a new philosophy and a new strategic approach for MRIC.

Henceforth, reaching out and interacting with the widest range of stakeholders is of paramount importance. MRIC will aim to bridge the existing gaps and create a seamless environment between applied research, development and innovation at a national level – an approach which is in complete resonance with my vision.

To end, I wish to congratulate the 26 teams which will officially receiving their certificate today.

A big thank you also to all those 252 teams which participated in this call for proposals as well as the panel of experts. We acknowledge and recognise their efforts in making a better Mauritius.

I thank you for your kind attention.