

REPORT on FORUM/DEBATE organized by MAST



REPORT on the FORUM/DEBATE entitled **“THE CHALLENGE OF KEEPING MAURITIUS COVID-SAFE”**

Date held: Thursday 12th November 2020

Venue: BONAME HALL, MSIRI, Reduit, Mauritius.

Time: 13:30 to 15:30.

There were 4 speakers, followed by interventions from the floor and an open debate.

Speakers:

- **Dr DEORAJ CAUSSY**, Fellow of the Academy, Epidemiologist
- **Dr THANIKA JUWAHEER /Dr ROBIN NUNKOO**, University of Mauritius.
- **Mr KEVIN RAMKALOAN**, Director, Business Mauritius.

The debate was chaired by the President of the Academy, **Dr Michael Atchia**, with concluding remarks and vote of thanks by **Dr Yousuf Maudarbocus**, Past President MAST.

Tea and refreshments were served after the closure of proceedings.

*The Secretary of MAST, **Pr Y. Ramma** (y.ramma@mie.ac.mu) registered participants to the FORUM, numbering 101 persons, and which included

scientists, medical doctors and pharmacists, economists, educators, as well as representatives from the business and tourism sectors, from government, from IMF, from the Royal Society of Arts and Science, from aviation(See list in appendix). The press was well represented and the event covered, to different extents, by *Le Defi Quotidien* and *Le Mauricien* of 13.11.20 and by MBC.

Attached to the invitation was a summary of MAST first Policy brief on COVID 19, dated 20th August 2020, for reference.

This Forum was organized and held in the context of the project “*Dissemination of Policy Briefs on Covid-19 non-pharmaceutical interventions*” of the *International Science Council*, ISC and South Africa Academy of Science, ASSAf.)

Proceedings:

In the presence of all members of Council of MAST and a full hall of participants, the Chairman, Dr Atchia, opened the event at 13:30, with words of welcome and stressing the importance of today’s debate in the context of the COVID pandemic.

He presented a slide giving data on just 3 countries of the world to strengthen the need (the subject of today’s debate) to keep Mauritius COVID SAFE.

WINNING THE BATTLE: Mauritius Total Cases: 453, New/Day: 0

NEED FOR ACTION : South Africa Total Cases: 740,250, New/Day: 1,600

RED ALERT: USA Total Cases: 10,252,100, New/Day: 121,100

The speakers and the perspective the specific perspective from which they would address the audience were then introduced. The participants were asked to keep their questions and comment for after the speakers had made their brief presentations, all with the support of power point illustrations.

1. **Dr Caussy**, Epidemiologist addressed the situation of Mauritius as a COVID-19 safe state since April 2020, commenting in particular on the immediate

future regarding opening of our frontiers , as well as the situation regarding health care (specialists and equipment at our hospitals, quarantine centres in hotels, Government's Covid monitoring Committee etc) and the realistic hope for a vaccine. He covered the Health Sector Response (adopting a Health in All (HiAP) policy for management of COVID-19), formulating a fully fledged pandemic preparedness plan where the re-opening the border must be carefully planned, as well as adapting innovative digital technology for surveillance. He also addressed the need to creating and enhancing new partnerships: in order to achieve coordinated action to deal with the pandemic of COVID-19, Mauritius must develop and forge partnership at all levels, ranging from local, national, to international ones across relevant disciplines and sectors, as well as conduct research to generate evidence for action in Mauritius. And finally he addressed the question of the *social impacts* of the pandemic in Mauritius, how it could disproportionately affect the vulnerable population, including people living in poverty situations, older persons, persons with disabilities and the youth. For society, how to define and shape the next normal?

2. **Dr Juwaheer and Dr Nunkoo** specialists in marketing, tourism and hospitality addressed the economic situation of the country and its future if frontiers are re-opened or not in the near future. They asked three relevant questions: Opening our Borders, how safe and what's next? What is and likely to be the Economic Impact of Covid-19 in Mauritius and in Africa? If and when we reopen what best suited protocols shall we follow?

The protocols for reopening/ deconfinement in different comparable countries (Fiji, Taiwan, Maldives, Hong kong, Seychelles, Singapore and Reunion) were analysed and compared, in search of the best suitable solutions for the Mauritius situation. What other solutions? First is to promote domestic tourism; research has shown that in half of the economies in the region domestic tourists could replace a considerable portion of international visitors, if fully mobilized; second, in the recovery phase, countries can negotiate so-called *travel bubbles*, i.e. travel corridor with states which are neighbouring and in similar situation of control of the pandemic. The potential of travel bubbles was estimated and their feasibility assessed given the pandemic and pandemic preparedness of countries to be included in the plan.

3. **“Mr Ramkaloan, CEO of Business Mauritius**, the apex organization of the business community, addressed the public-private sector dialogue and industrial relations in this Covid era. He covered the employment situation, especially on the tourism and allied sectors as a result of COVID -19 and supported the need for new structures and protocols adjusted to the existing situation”.

To obtain data on the Impact of COVID 19 on the Mauritian Economy, a Business Survey to assess the impact of COVID-19 Outbreak in Mauritius (April-September 2020) was conducted by Business Mauritius, with UNDP and Statistics Mauritius. It covered Sales, Exports and expected 6-months outlook, Prices, Cancellation or postponement of orders, Demand and supply and expected 3-months outlook, Employment and Government financial support.

These key areas were identified namely: Strategies to boost exports, Resilience map of economic activities, Changing employment landscape, Business Continuity Planning, Adaptation and Innovation. Furthermore the UN World Tourism Organisation Outlook estimated these effects on tourism: 70% decrease in international inbound tourists (from Jan- Aug 2020), strong Impact on earnings and jobs, while Mauritius was classed in the Top 10 most vulnerable destinations. In Mauritius tourism accounts for 8.1% direct GDP contribution, with approximately 74,000 direct employments.

A number of scenarios for Reopening of our borders in 2021 were examined and discussed. And comparison made with other countries with different scenarios, some of which have failed badly.

Followed an exchange of views on the various aspects of keeping this country COVID SAFE, namely protocols utilized presently, quarantine measures, eventual vaccine and its availability, the several models of reopening frontiers and deconfinement, the participation of the various shareholders and interest, including the scientific community is arriving at the best strategy for economic recovery while keeping the country Covid safe. With 15 different questions/interventions from participants and brief responses from the speakers.

Concluding remarks: On behalf of MAST, Dr Yousuf Maudarbocus, Past President of the Academy, expressed his gratitude to the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) for its financial support in the organisation of this important event. He stressed the fact that the idea to organise such communication events on the pandemic in the SADC region was initiated by ASSAf with whom MAST has a Collaborative Agreement in the form of a Memorandum of Understanding since more than ten years. He went on to thank the four speakers for their excellent and relevant presentations, the audience for its active participation in the debate, the press for its role in the dissemination of pertinent information to the public and the Mauritius Sugar Industry Research Institute (MSIRI) for providing the venue and logistics.

Annex: Participants to the Forum/Debate numbered 99 and came from the private sector (business and industry), from organizations, including scientific bodies) such Mauritius Academy of Science and Technology itself, the Royal Society of Arts and Science, the MCIA and the MSIRI, the Ministry of Health, IMF, WHO (with apologies), Ministry of Agriculture, OUM and several other Universities, reporters from the press (L 'Express, Le Mauricien, MBCTV, local radios). *(Full list with contact details available)*

Michael Atchia, President MAST, 28 November 2020