



Speech by Her Excellency

Mrs Ameenah Gurib-Fakim, GCSK., CSK., PhD., DSc

President of the Republic

on the Occasion of the

Third Edition of the UNESCO-MERCK

Africa Research Summit

on Tuesday 27 November 2017

at 08 30 hrs

Hennessy Park Hotel, Ebene

Dr. The Hon. Mohammad Anwar Husnoo, Minister of Health and Quality of Life,

Hon. Ministers,

Hon. Parliamentary Private Secretaries

Hon. African Ministers of Health and Education,

Mr Engida Getachaw, Deputy Director-General of UNESCO,

Members of the Diplomatic corps,

Distinguished scientists, guests,

Dr. Yusuf Hamied of CIPLA,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Good morning!

I am really pleased to welcome you all to Mauritius and to this third edition of the UNESCO-MERCK Africa Research Summit.

I thank the organisers for this valuable partnership with the Government of Mauritius to contribute to building research capacity in Africa.

We are also pleased to have with us Prof. Frank Stangenberg-Haverkamp, Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Merck Foundation and Dr. Rasha Kelej, CEO of the Merck Foundation.

I'd like to extend a welcome to the senior officials of international NGOs, the international and African researchers and of course our young students especially these talented young women and men who will help us build on our achievements, learn from our mistakes, while practicing the highest standards of scientific excellence needed to accelerate sustainable development on the African continent.

Ladies and gentlemen,

UNESCO-Merck Africa Research Summit – MARS is a valuable opportunity for all those engaged and interested in health research in Africa to learn about the full spectrum of ground-breaking scientific research currently underway, and prepare for the road ahead in Africa's development as an international hub for research excellence and scientific innovation.

Conducting the 3rd edition of UNESCO MARS in Mauritius is valuable for us as it complements our national strategy to promote scientific research, empowering women and youth in STEM and our Ministry of Health focused strategy on improving cancer research and access to Cancer care.

It is because the future of innovation in science and technology is in the hands of our youth that I wish to dedicate this third edition of the UNESCO-MERCK Africa Research Summit to the young students who have joined us today. Let us give them a round of applause...

I would like to take this opportunity, *Ladies and gentlemen*, to say a few words about Mauritius and the importance we attach to science, technology, and innovation for our and Africa's current and future prosperity.

Mauritius, as you know, is a small island developing state and we have a history of colonialism that ranged from brief visits, hundreds of years ago by people of what we now call the Middle East, followed by former colonial powers like Portugal, and in more recent centuries by the Dutch, the French and finally the British.

Since gaining its independence in 1968, Mauritius has shown exceptional progress, on multiple fronts.

Although we are a comparatively small country, we are leading in terms of many economic, social, and environmental indicators.

We were for long highly dependent on sugar cane cultivation, with its dominance of low-wage, low-skilled, back-breaking jobs. Mauritius has become across the years a developmental state with a well-educated and diverse society, with a robust and knowledge-intensive economy.

Through a focus on sound, people-centered policies we are now often taken as example not just for Africa, but for the world, in terms of good governance as well as for a productive financial sector, high-end tourism, and gender equality to name just a few.

We also have a proud history of and we remain abundantly multi-cultural, a living laboratory for societal benefits that accrue from true inclusion.

Still, we in Africa face considerable challenges to the health and wellbeing of our people. Our continent is home to 15% of global population, but produces only 3% of global GDP, while carrying 25% of the disease burden.

Africa accounts for just 2% of world research output, 1.3% of research spending and 0.1 percent of patents.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals present an optimistic picture of what the world can look like in 2030. But Africa has far to go to reach these goals, most particularly those relating to poverty and disease. Our future will depend on our ability to prioritize investments in R&D to solve some of the toughest health and development challenges the world has ever faced.

In addition to the human development imperative, our investments in science and technology will also be pivotal to our economic health. When it comes to market competition, we must also reckon with the fact that Africa must catch up with other rapidly-growing economies of Asia, Latin America and the Middle East.

I am confident that a greater, frontal push in science, technology and innovation will be key to sustaining the “Africa Rising” narrative, both now and in the future.

Ladies and Gentlemen, **It is particularly timely that we are meeting today to discuss the latest advances in Cancer Research and Vaccine Development. Our deliberations are important because as the middle class rises in Africa, so are the *afflictions* of abundance.**

Death due to non-communicable diseases threatens to overtake death due to communicable diseases in Sub-Saharan Africa in the decades to come.

In this region of the world, NCDs accounted for just 28% of mortality as recently as ten years ago. Yet the U.S. Agency for Healthcare Research & Quality estimates that by 2030, NCDs, prominently cancers, heart disease and Type 2 diabetes, will account for 46% of mortality in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The comparable change in incidence of NCD mortality in the wealthiest regions in the world are just a minor increase of 2% from 87% of mortality in 2008 to 89% projected in 2030.

Of course, there is good news in these figures: the incidence of communicable disease in Sub-Saharan Africa is decreasing, both in the absolute and proportionally.

In fact, life expectancy at birth increased in Sub-Saharan Africa an astounding 50%, from 40 years to 60 years, between 1960 and 2015 – despite the thankfully momentary decline in life expectancy suffered in the 1990s as a result of the AIDS epidemic.

This success story, *Ladies and Gentlemen*, has been in great part due to the focus and dedication of governments, scientists and public health officials worldwide who brought their resources to contain the spread of AIDS with all its accompanying negative impacts on economic and social well-being.

But the growing incidence of non-communicable disease in Africa is also a cause for concern. As Africa becomes more industrialized and people live longer, they suffer from those diseases and conditions already experienced in overwhelming numbers in the industrialized world.

So what can we learn from the lessons of experience from industrialized countries as they've been confronted for decades of increased Type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, stroke, certain cancers, infertility and complications in pregnancy? There are several important messages that can be gleaned from these converging events.

First, we can and must take advantage of the accumulated experiences in these critical areas. Over two generations, disease that is in great part a result of poor nutrition and unhealthy living has overtaken people in the U.S. to the point that, as of 2014, more than 38% of individuals over age 20 are obese, and an astounding 70% were at least “overweight.”

Those numbers are just now starting to decrease due to concerted public health and education measures as well as important advances in pharmaceutical and non-pharmaceutical treatments. We must therefore seize upon the opportunity and build our capacity to deal with these threats through the power of partnerships.

Second, we can also extrapolate from African success stories in the technology sector where entrepreneurs have been able to take advantage of the relative lack of infrastructure to leap-frog directly to better, market-based solutions.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

A few years ago, we all witnessed the challenges posed by Ebola, which threatened to become a disastrous global pandemic.

To fight Ebola, governments, international health agencies and private foundations stepped up their efforts, provided major resources and improved coordination to combat the deadly disease and contain its spread.

However, because non-communicable disease plays out more slowly, and are not transmitted from person-to-person, they tend to invoke less urgency and evoke fewer glaring headlines.

It is our obligation to see the threats posed by non-communicable diseases for what they are, and to mobilize our resources to address it in a manner that is proportional to the severity of the challenge. This is the premise of a new alliance known as “CARI”: The Coalition for African Research and Innovation.

CARI is a coalition of governments, universities, foundations, NGOs and pharmaceutical firms, including Merck, who have come together to build world-class Research & Development infrastructure in Africa. It exists to accelerate scientific breakthroughs in Africa to help more Africans lead better lives.

CARI's approach is two-pronged: first, to increase investment in R&D on the Continent, and second, to decrease the fragmentation of existing research, by linking people to one another, to ideas, and to resources, including funding together with all the other resources that make up a robust science and technology ecosystem, from mentorship to policy advice.

CARI's goal is to catalyse a highly coordinated, well-funded, innovative African R&D community. It will convene stakeholders to work toward commitments to work together in new ways to meet short-term health and development objectives while building long-term capacity in various fields of science.

This collaboration will be driven by African priorities, and it will include African governments, African development organizations, the African private sector, African and global philanthropists, and African and global industry.

The ultimate vision of CARI is to create a movement that makes science and innovation a central part of public discourse in Africa. One of the tools that CARI will employ to raise the level of political and public engagement and commitment is rigorous documentation of the long-term benefits of investment to the economies of African nations.

This will be critical to enlist governments and others to regard R&D not as an “expense”, but rather as an “investment” in economic development and well-being.

Thus, CARI is gathering public and private investment, focusing initially on clinical and translational research, to build a dramatically scaled-up infrastructure for science on our continent. It will also ensure the right governance conditions to enable and attract public and private investment in R&D in Africa, an essential element to the maintenance of a sustainable initiative.

With seed funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Wellcome Trust and the U.S. National Institutes of Health, its long-term ambitions are to reinforce every step of the research ladder, so that opportunities for world-class training and satisfying jobs in research and manufacturing of pharmaceuticals are as attractive in Africa as they are anywhere else in the world.

CARI also intends to exploit an opening to reverse the African brain drain. It will work to create a brain *gain*, or what I like to call an increase in brain *circulation*. Why shouldn't Africa attract promising students and post-docs for their education and training in the way that North America and Europe has since the 20th Century?

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Our Summit today is an essential building block as we seek to build a sustainable infrastructure to boost world-class training and scientific productivity here in Africa. I am confident that through a commitment to scientific excellence, increased investments in R&D and the power of partnership, we can improve the everyday lives of African citizens. We can and must rise to the multifaceted challenges.

Our ability to create a sustainable future for ourselves is not optional. It is existential. There's an African proverb that says, "The best time to plant a tree was twenty years ago. The second-best time is now."

I urge all of you, and especially the students to whom this Summit is dedicated, to bring your seedlings and your shovels.

Let us plant that tree together for a better tomorrow.

Thank you.