Partnership between Ministry of Environment & NDU and Environmental NGOs

Meeting of Honourable Anil Kumar Bachoo, Minister of Environment & National Development Unit, with Environmental NGOs, Monday 13th February 2006

A. Welcome Address

• It is my pleasure, as Minister of Environment & NDU, to welcome all Environmental NGOs to this meeting. You are one important stakeholder in environmental protection activities. Last month, I presented to the press and to the country my vision and the environmental philosophy that will guide the activities of my Ministry. I understand that a copy of my speech has already been circulated to you. The objective of today’s meeting is basically to discuss the scope of collaboration and partnership that is possible between my Ministry and you.

• Before presenting briefly my vision and environmental philosophy and then discuss with you on potential partnerships, I would like to stress on a few important issues:

• First of all, I will remind you that the ultimate goal of environmental protection is to achieve the concept of Sustainable Development. Economic development, social justice and environmental protection reinforces one another and must go hand in hand. Involving the public is vital in the process, which in line with the government declared policy of “Putting People First”.

• It is increasingly being realized that there is a clear connection between environmental considerations and economic competitiveness. Countries that reconcile their environment and their economy will enjoy a definite economic advantage. This is one simple message I am sending to all Mauritians. To achieve this, we need to be more creative and innovative in our actions.

• The architecture of our economy is changing as we develop new engines of economic growth. We are relying more and more on the tourism sector—which will put increasing pressure on our coastal zones. We are moving from highly visible industrial companies towards the more hidden Services sector and SMEs. We want to attract foreigners to settle on the island through the IRS scheme where environmental quality will be one of the criteria they will choose before moving here. Consumerism is on the rise, bringing with it higher resources consumption and waste generation. It is now the right time to have a new environmental policy to ensure that Mauritius stays on the path of sustainable development and that environmental protection enhances our competitiveness. We will publish a White paper next month which is intended to stimulate discussion that will assist government in arriving at this new national environmental policy. I look forward to Environmental NGOs providing their comments and input into this national document.

• Section 10 of the EPA Act of 2002 makes provision for the establishment of a National Network for Sustainable Development. The objectives of this Network is to act as a forum of discussion and consultation on environmental issues. I note with concern that, since 2002 when the EPA act was
proclaimed, this network has never been established. We have already taken steps to establish this National Network for Sustainable Development by next month. This will be a major tool that my ministry will use for consultation and advice from all stakeholders, including NGOs.

- Government will continue to take the lead in encouraging environmental awareness. We will make Mauritians conscious of the need to change bad habits and drive the message that the environment is every citizen’s responsibility. But the scene will need to evolve. However, with time NGOs, Media, Private Sector; Local Governments etc, must also take the lead. The emphasis is to urge individuals to take responsibility for the environment and encourage everybody to drive activities. After meeting the press, Local Authorities and today Environmental NGOs, I plan next to meet another important stakeholder – our private sector-early next month.

**B. Vision and Mission**

I would like now to share with you my vision and environmental philosophy

- **My Vision** is that Mauritius reaches environmental sustainability and we have a clean and healthy environment that Mauritians are proud of.

- **OUR MISSION** is to enable our Republic to attain the highest level of environmental quality as a means to enhance the quality of life of Mauritians, preserve our natural environment and advance our competitiveness. This will be achieved through continued innovation and vibrant partnerships and collaboration with all stakeholders.

During this mission, we will adopt the following environmental philosophy:

1. **We will focus on visible results**-making our air, freshwater and lagoon waters, and land of better quality and making Mauritius greener.

2. **Our policies will encourage sustainable consumption and production** as well as the development of an environment industry

3. **We will use the best science and data to inform our decision making**

4. **We will continue to increase environmental awareness** and build a Mauritian ethics of personal responsibility through education and voluntary initiatives.

5. **Environmental protection efforts will not be the sole responsibility** of the Ministry of Environment: all Stakeholders will be involved.

6. **Mauritius will continue to adhere to the international code of conduct** through relevant conventions and protocols.
C. Role of Environmental NGOs

• One of the main principle of the environmental philosophy is that Environmental protection efforts will not be the sole responsibility of the Ministry of Environment. The emphasis is to encourage everybody, including NGOs, to drive activities.

• This Government does recognize that increasingly civil society will demand a greater voice and a greater role in decision making. Environmental NGOs are representatives of specific segments of civil society. I have noted that there has been no systematic consultation with Environmental NGOs in the past. I want now to build a new partnership with you through a more systematic consultation process.

• I consider that you can play a vital role in the local community in helping to implement participatory democracy. You bridge the gap between government and the citizen while we implement our policies and projects. You have a comprehensive understanding of problems faced by local communities because of your direct contact with the people.

• I, as Minister of Environment, consider you as a partner whenever I will be promoting sustainable production and consumption policies. And although you can act as watchdogs, influence us and sometimes even work with us, we respect your independence and your opinions.

D. Potential Activities by Environmental NGOs

I would like now to discuss specifically the potential partnership between you and my Ministry. Personally, I would like to see the following kinds of activities from Environmental NGOs:

• You have an important role in organizing systematic environmental awareness campaigns. You can help us in organizing campaigns on, for example: Anti-Littering; Keeping our Beaches and Rivers clean.

• There is still much we need to do to make recycling our way of life. We need to move away from a “Use and Throw” society to a “3R” society- Reduce, Reuse and Recycle. To achieve this, we will have to change consumer’s behaviour and your support is important. I consider the present Plastic Carrier Bag Regulations to be ineffective. We are not addressing the root cause of the problem which is unsustainable consumption. People tend to believe that plastic bags have no costs and use a lot of them whereas the true costs of bags is included in the price of items without knowledge to the customer. The use of degradable plastics also make people tend to believe that discarded plastics will disappear – this actually lead to an increase in plastic waste. I have set up a Technical Committee to formulate a new Plastic Bag regulation after agreement between all parties concerned. But, you NGOs, can play a major role in educating and sensitizing the consumer about the importance of reducing the use of these bags and promoting alternatives such as “tente vacoas” and cloth bags.

• We aim for an environmental consciousness that will mature into personal responsibility for environmental protection. And what better way it is than to start with the young, who will inherit the
future of this country. If we can foster a sustained interest in environmental protection in our young people, we would have laid a good foundation for a generation of Mauritians who are more conscious and engaged towards our environment. Try to initiate activities so as to engage young people of all ages on issues pertaining to the environment and try to organize activities in all educational institutions in Mauritius.

- We must also recognize role models in our society. You can, as a network, launch an Award scheme to recognize outstanding individuals, organizations and companies that are role models of environmental protection.

- NGOs should upgrade their ability to formulate and propose policies in the future. In order to do so, NGOs themselves must have specialized knowledge and ability as well as a thorough grasp of the problem at hand. You need to form a network among yourselves and probably with Universities and research organizations. Capacity building of NGOs is a must and my Ministry can help you in that respect. Please do make the most of the internet tool. Besides helping networking, it will also help in capacity building.

- Besides focusing on Government, you should also look at the environmental performance of the private sector. This will be in their own self interest as it will improve their efficiency. You can either act as a watchdog, or ask for greater transparency and accountability through environmental reporting, or you can try to work alongside businesses, in order to address corporate social responsibility.

- One of the objectives of the National Environment Fund is to support NGOs engaged in environmental protection. I would like you to share with us the activities you plan for this year. Please do fill and return the form that has been distributed to you. Indicate the projects you are currently working on or that you plan to initiate in the coming months. An NGO desk is available at the Ministry to help you, if necessary, to fill the form. Should the projects be well prepared and focused on visible and sustainable results, we will consider assisting you financially through the National Environment Fund, but this should not be considered as acquired beforehand. Let me also point out that there are other funding opportunities through other national and international organisations or through the private sector. You have to be innovative both in the type of projects you want to do and also in identifying funding opportunities.

**E. Activities for World Environment Day, 5th June 2006**

There is a latent expectation from the population to be more involved in environmental protection efforts. For the World Environment Day, within the general theme of Combating Desertification, I am launching a Tree Planting campaign - *Plant a Million Tree*. My vision is that in the long term, through such tree planting campaigns, Mauritius be known as the “Garden Island”. I want the involvement of all stakeholders in this campaign and I hope to see all of the Environmental NGOs participating in this event. Let us know the type of activities that you plan for World Environment Day.
F. Conclusion

In conclusion, close partnership with civil society through Environmental NGOs is crucial for my Ministry to fulfill its mission. The MOE will continue to act as a network facilitator, fostering closer relationships with all stakeholders to strengthen and deepen the message of environmental sustainability.

Let us develop an effective partnership that will result in environmental stewardship for the overall improvement of environmental conditions and quality of life of our people in the country.