

**High-Level Symposium on Sustainable Cities and  
Sustainable Urbanisation, Yangzhou, China,**

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**Keynote Statement by**

**Dr. The Honourable Abu Twalib Kasenally, GOSK, FRCS Ed.  
Minister of Housing and Lands, Mauritius**

It gives me great pleasure to be amongst you today in Yangzhou, to present this keynote statement on *Sustainable Cities and Sustainable Urbanisation*.

The venue itself is highly symbolical as Yangzhou is famous for its historical building features, its livable neighbourhoods and beautiful waterways. In order to retain these traditional characteristics, the City has put into place an urban conservation strategy which was internationally recognized and for which it has won a United Nations Habitat Scroll of Honour Award in 2006. I am also really impressed by the success of the City of Yangzhou in the field of sustainable development. Let me on the outset, congratulate the Mayor of the City of Yangzhou and his team for their outstanding performance in the field of urban planning.

At present, the City of Yangzhou in partnership with the Institute for Sustainable Communities, is effectively implementing a low carbon demonstration project aimed at improving the residents' quality of life while keeping carbon emissions low. Measures include better resilience to climate change, permeable pavements and storm water harvesting. Please, do keep on the good work!

I hope most of us present today will be inspired by the achievements of the City of Yangzhou and its urban planning process. As we all know, land use planning is fundamental in the way our towns will eventually be transformed. Urban planning combines land use, transportation facilities, water and other infrastructure, amenities and commercial activities to make cities and towns great places to live in.

It must be acknowledged that settlements outlive any single generation and hence, the planning decisions taken today will profoundly affect the lives of future generations of town dwellers. We should therefore be very careful on how we control and manage urban growth to best meet the needs of our inhabitants.

The organization of this two day symposium on “*sustainable cities and sustainable urbanization*” will enable us to reflect on the state of our towns and cities and the basic right to adequate shelter and on progress achieved so far in sustainable development. It will also give us the opportunity to learn from our foreign counterparts on their experiences in building sustainable cities.

The world is urbanising at an unprecedented pace and already more than half of the global population lives in towns and cities. During the next fifty years two-thirds of the world’s population will be living in towns and cities.

Although there are many benefits to be derived by living in urban areas, rapid urbanization can lead to many problems such as traffic congestion, crime, poverty, high land costs, environmental degradation and flash floods. Therefore, it is imperative that we plan upfront and discuss appropriate actions that will need to be implemented for the future of our cities, towns and villages.

Let me just give you a few facts and figures about Mauritius. Mauritius is a small island in the Indian Ocean and it has an area of approximately 2000 sq km and a population of 1.3

million. In view of the smallness of the island, and the concentration of people and activities, the issues of urban planning and sustainable development remain very high on the Government agenda.

For a country like Mauritius with limited land and natural resources, promoting an efficient land use planning in an environmental-friendly manner is of paramount importance, as pressures on land resources keep on increasing due to the competing demands of various economic uses and a growing population.

This year, it is most appropriate that the United Nations has decided that urban practitioners will debate on the theme of **Urban Mobility** because mobility and access to goods and services is essential to the efficient functioning of our cities and towns as they expand. The relevant theme has reminded us how crucial it is to have our land use policies integrated with our transportation strategy to provide for sustainable communities.

Accessible cities encourage a change towards more sustainable means of transportation and aim at having more travellers out of cars and onto buses, light railway transit,

bikes and pedestrian walkways. This is what as a responsible Government we intend to do in Mauritius. The introduction soon of the mass rapid transit system in Mauritius will encourage people to use more public transport rather than their cars. This change in behavior, we believe, will contribute to smarter and greener neighbourhoods.

Growth of cities is a cause for concern due to their physical expansion which keeps extending beyond the existing towns and villages. In Mauritius the development of settlements has traditionally been carried out at relatively low densities encroaching onto agricultural lands and environmentally sensitive areas. We are aware that we need to rethink our land use planning process if we want to achieve a sustainable type of urban development. The buildings of tomorrow, as well as their layout will need to be eco-friendly and clustered at major transportation nodes to achieve sustainable urban mobility.

But urban mobility is not only about transportation, it equally involves urban planning. Urban planners and urban designers must come forward with ideas on how to bring people and places together, by creating cities that focus on accessibility and optimal urban densities rather than making proposals for additional roads.

I am pleased to inform you that Mauritius has innovated in the field of land use planning by laying emphasis on urban mobility. The Urban Outline Schemes which will soon become operational have promoted higher densities in the city and town centres, redevelopment of derelict areas, a public transport strategy and recommended mixed use activities which will favour a dynamic and vibrant urban life. The longer term aim of these objectives will be to reduce dependency on the private cars especially for journeys to work and to promote sustainable cities and towns.

In addition to traditional urbanisation concerns, we will need to assess the impact of climate change on our settlements. The small size and the geographical isolation of Mauritius make it extremely vulnerable to natural disasters, food security and rising fossil fuel costs. As natural disasters often result from expanding settlements in areas of risk around existing urbanised areas, an alternative option is a higher density sustainable urbanism supported by urban mobility.

We experienced flash floods and the consequences of climate change this year in March. Torrential rains of an intensity never witnessed before, unfortunately claimed 11 lives. The flash floods have made us conscious that we need to be

extremely cautious prior to releasing lands for development, adjoining sensitive areas and hill slopes. It is clear that in our land use planning policies we will need to address the resilient design challenges and opportunities that towns and villages like ours may face from natural disasters such as flooding and landslides. Our communities will have to adapt, build resilience and increase their capacity for learning from past disasters for better future protection. We learnt a lot from the flooding we experienced in March 2013 and we are taking major remedial action such as drain construction and new regulations for basements to make sure that such disasters should not strike again.

The Government of Mauritius has recently introduced new legislations on building control and energy efficiency to encourage a new approach to green building design and construction.

Some concrete efforts have already been made to mitigate Green House Gas by integrating climate change issues into new land use development strategies.

There is, in addition, a strong political will to further enhance the existing policies so as to develop resilience to the adverse

impact of climate change and to ensure achievement of sustainable development goals. It is a fact that good urban design and eco-friendly city planning do not require major investments. Eco friendly guidelines such as rain harvesting techniques and solar panels can be easily retrofitted in existing buildings.

A new technique that can be developed, I understand, is in the form of eco-towns. As Ebenezer Howard, eminent British town planner and Nobel prize winner rightly said Town and Country “must be married and out of this union will spring a new hope, a new life and a new civilisation.”

Eco-towns will be the new sustainable towns of tomorrow, developed on a human scale. Eco-towns should be well designed in line with eco-friendly guidelines, accommodate higher densities, provide employment, be attractive places to live, with good services and facilities, and should connect well with the larger towns or cities close by. The Mauritian Government will be looking into the possibility of introducing such eco-towns in the near future.

We believe that all citizens should be educated and sensitized on the importance of tree planting. Trees are important

features in the ecosystem and should not be felled. They beautify our environment, protect our soils, minimize the impact of climate change and provide shade. We should request all our citizens to plant each a tree to provide for greener environments.

Over the past few years, my Government has been making determined and sustained efforts to extend house ownership to the maximum of households in Mauritius, so much so that there is nowadays an impressive set of policy instruments, acting both on the demand side and on the supply side, favouring the provision of housing.

89% of all households own their houses. Basic household facilities such as electricity, piped water supply inside the house, flush toilet, and regular refuse collection are available to more than 95% of households. In addition over 92% of all houses are built in durable materials in concrete.

The Government of Mauritius has contributed in the provision of housing to nearly one-third of the housing stock. Houses are given to needy people, through the setting up of an empowerment fund and corporate social responsibility funds.

However, in spite of all the efforts being taken to provide durable housing to all Mauritians, there are still a few pockets of poverty where the living conditions of the urban poor need to be improved in a holistic way.

As a result of which we have developed a bottom up approach in our planning system to meet target 7D of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), on the reduction of the proportion of the urban population living in slums. At the very moment that I am talking to you, the Millennium Development Goals report for Mauritius is being launched, whereby it will be stated that Mauritius is well on target to achieve most of the Millennium Development Goals if the present economic growth is sustained.

You will recall that at the World Urban Forum in Nanjing in 2008 commitment was taken to introduce The Participatory Slum Upgrading Programme (PSUP) to improve the living conditions of people living in slums. I am pleased to inform you that my Ministry has coordinated the Urban Sector Profiling Study and PSUP, being undertaken under the aegis of UN-Habitat.

The Urban Sector profiling is an initiative of UN-Habitat to adopt a different approach towards poverty issues and ultimately towards the drafting of an innovative housing policy for Mauritius. PSUP will recommend strong measures to eliminate slums by upgrading existing outdated and unsafe housing.

The key word in the formulation of the PSUP and the Urban sector profiling was the participatory approach in order to have an insight on all the issues pertaining to poverty. The need to understand how those vulnerable groups who are not able to have access to basic amenities and a decent house are excluded from the system is critical.

Mauritius has already embarked on the implementation of Phase II of the PSUP which is Action Planning and Program Document Formulation. The overall aim of Phase II is to select a list of “slums” across 3 selected regions wherein pilot projects can be developed and implemented, using the full multi-stakeholder participatory approach.

Phase II will conclude with the submission to the European Union for funding in collaboration with the Mauritian Government of a series of project documents for the

upgrading of the slums selected. Those project proposals which will be successful will constitute the third phase of PSUP. It is hoped that these projects can be replicated in other pockets of deprived areas in Mauritius.

I am also taking the opportunity to inform you that the Senior Chief Executive of my Ministry, Mr. Oozeer will deliver a comprehensive presentation on the preparation and implementation of the PSUP in Mauritius, this afternoon.

Just like the city of Yangzhou, we have accomplished a lot in the urban heritage and conservation fields. I understand that a special plan was prepared for the Conservation of the Historical and Cultural areas and for improving the residential environment of the older parts of the city of Yangzhou.

Similarly, in Mauritius, land use guidelines have been prepared to provide a suitable setting and a high level of authenticity and integrity in terms of the historic landscape for le Morne area, the refuge of runaway slaves; and the historic urban form and architecture for the buffer zone of the heritage site of Aapravasi Ghat, the landing place for the arrival of indentured labourers in Mauritius. The two sites are preserved

to commemorate the contribution of slavery and indentured labour in the making of modern Mauritius. You will surely agree with me that a country cannot prosper if it does not protect and preserve its cultural landscape and its urban heritage.

To conclude, I am convinced that all the fruitful discussions which will come out at this two day symposium will enable us to tackle the challenges of urbanisation that loom ahead. It will allow us to make tangible proposals towards the creation of harmonious cities, which will offer a variety of choices in terms of employment, livability, leisure, green space, opportunities within a safe and secure physical environment. It will also remind the world and all of you present today that we all have a responsibility in the urban legacy that we will bestow upon our children.

As Vincent Van Gogh has rightly said:

***“Great things are not done by impulse but by a series of small things brought together.”***

I am convinced that by putting all our efforts (whether big or small) together and creating awareness we will come forward

with solutions in land use planning and urban design to create sustainable cities of tomorrow.