

Interview: H.E. Ameenah Gurib Fakim, President of the Republic of Mauritius



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The new government of Mauritius has chosen pharmaceuticals, healthcare and life sciences as priorities for the country's innovation economy. Pharmaboardroom spoke with Ameenah Gurib Fakim, president of the Republic of Mauritius, who outlined her country's strengths, and the challenge of replacing the country's conventional 'sun and sand' image with life sciences.

Mauritius's successful growth strategy over the last decades has been one of diversification, and working towards creating an innovation driven economy. Today, what role is the healthcare and life sciences sector expected to play within this framework?

Provision of healthcare that is free at the point of delivery to all citizens has always been a fundamental tenet of our economic and political identity. In contrast to the rest of Africa, ensuring accessibility of care to our people is always a priority. We have also witnessed the emergence of a private healthcare sector catering to those wishing to be treated outside the public system. Additionally, there is a market for allopathic medicine, which provide therapies to a significant number of Mauritians and is available both in the public and private sector. Traditional medicine as practiced in India, China and Africa is also present on the island, no doubt fuelled by the reality that we are a multi-ethnic nation composed from numerous waves of immigration.

Whilst we have been able to meet the MDG target touching on health issues, on the life sciences side, we find ourselves grappling with specific challenges. It is a fact that research and education represent the core drivers of a high quality life sciences sector. On a global scale, the world is witnessing a depletion of talent in the life sciences sphere as fewer students opt to do sciences and thus to find a critical mass to specialise in that particular field is an issue to reckon with. This trend is accentuated in the case of a country like Mauritius that historically hasn't enjoyed as much exposure to such learning and expertise. Our immediate solution to countering this tendency is to impose high quality teaching across the Mauritian education landscape. Emblematic of this has been the new government's drive to open up the economy and foster the emergence of tech industries such as biotechnology or information and communication technology (ICT).

Since the Mauritian population remains comparatively small, we will also need to attract an international workforce. Historically, the primary incentives for enticing this talent were essentially tax breaks and high salaries. Today, however, a competitive salary on its own will not be enough to draw in the high calibre people we need to come to Mauritius. It is important that we complement those original pull factors with the sorts of state-of-the-art research laboratories that specialists want to work in and a high-quality supporting infrastructure amenable to people's lifestyle preferences.

A high quality infrastructure and skilled labour force are pillars of any innovation economy. A third pillar is, perhaps, the smart alignment of policy-making and market forces. How would you assess the current situation in Mauritius in this regard?

Continuing on from last year, we are striving to promote real dialogue between public and private actors because we believe that collaboration of both sectors is absolutely fundamental to the eventual realisation of our innovation economy. The difference between now and a year ago is that this public-private sector dialogue is proceeding at a much faster pace which is reflective of the dedication with which Prime Minister Anerood Jugnauth has been pursuing the matter. Discussions are also ongoing as to how to implement an appropriate legal and regulatory framework that will appeal to the international investor community and promote FDI.

I know, first-hand, from my weekly meetings with the prime minister how much the new government is prioritising the life sciences sector and other technology savvy industries as catalysts to national economic development and prosperity. Already the new administration has been forging ahead with investment in the bandwidth of our nation's information and communications technology. Real change is afoot and I am highly confident that within the next couple of years our national economy will be standing on even more pillars than it does right now.

Mauritius is best known as a tourist attraction, so positioning the country as a heavyweight in life sciences may well be challenging. How do you go about convincing your counterparts and the international investor community of the credibility, viability and sustainability of developing a competitive life sciences industry in Mauritius?

Don't forget we've achieved some pretty decent success stories in the past and proved adept at adapting to the times. Sugar was actually our original success story. We were initially heavily dependent on an industry with a very low skilled workforce, but nevertheless were able to successfully scale the value chain and transition over to fabric manufacturing and eventually the service economy with the growth of a highly performing tourism industry. As the economy matured, our state institutions developed too, along with the capabilities of our people. Nowadays we enjoy a literacy rate of above 90 percent, renowned research institutions and clear separation of legislative, judicial and executive powers. On all counts we can identify a noticeable advancement. Our highly acclaimed research centres are a case in point and can serve as a flagship example. This is a lesson which demonstrates that when our people put their minds to it they can indeed be successful. These are the sorts of stories that we would do well to replicate.

On an institutional level, I am resolute in demanding that we need more governance, but less government. It's vitally important that we empower our institutions and rework the regulatory framework to make them better fit for purpose. The vision is to create an agile, streamlined and effective state apparatus that is responsive and purposeful in its actions. Right now, our Board of Investments is reviewing the permit process so that the state can deliver a speedy and efficient service whereby applications are awarded or rejected within a single week. The key to bringing this about, of course, is ensuring that state institutions are staffed with capable personnel and appropriate talent.

Life sciences tend to be a business driven by high risk and long-term returns. In an era where R&D productivity is declining, how can you be so sure this particular sector will be a success story in Mauritius?

In Mauritius we possess many strong points and one of those strengths is our people. Mauritians come from all over the world, creating a wide genetic diversity. Our multiracial society can actually be a competitive advantage. If you look at the enterprise I helped establish, we capitalized on these advantages to conduct clinical trials. Just look at our indicators for ease of “doing business”: we are developing zero tolerance towards bribery and are improving our score on governance. We represent a bridge from east to west throughout Africa and with Africa. Our fiscal terms are also highly encouraging for incoming business. Although our island may be comparatively small, we have the vast Indian Ocean of some 2.2 million square kilometres on our doorstep. This incredible expanse of sea, which remains largely unexplored offers huge potential for the life sciences industry. These are all strengths that can differentiate us from other countries and what we need to do is to believe in them and capitalize on them.

The time has come to reach beyond the stereotypical image of “sun and sea” and rebrand Mauritius in accordance with our strengths as “the intelligent island.” If you analyse the global scope of industries like biotech and ICT you will find we have ample room for manoeuvre. A challenge in years gone by was bio piracy, but nowadays we have the Internet as an ally. Moreover this isn’t about sweeping away our highly renowned tourism industry, but about adding to it and extending it further. If you look at the potential for medical tourism, wellness industries, then there’s trillions of dollars to be made. Combining tourism with medicals can really offer a winning formula.

In a lot of interviews you often speak about the uncapped potential of herbal medicine and taking advantage of Mauritius biodiversity. As a scientist and now President, what do you want Mauritius’s contribution to the future of medicine to be?

If one were to look at the world narrative of medicine, the fear of antimicrobial resistance should come up. My dream would be for a molecule derived from our biodiversity to ultimately be capable of addressing that problem. It doesn’t have to be a molecule per se – it could equally well be a remedy derived from our unique and extensive flora and fauna.

Just looking at the way the market is shaping up, you’ll discover that 25% of all medicines come from medical plants. The opportunities are clearly out there, but the question is how can we go about exploring our natural biodiversity sustainably? What do we factor into our calculations? I have always maintained that our biodiversity has to work for us. The bottom line is, in terms of biodiversity, we possess very valuable natural endowments – whether soil, bacteria or fungi, you name it, we have it. That’s not to mention the vast untapped potential derived from probing into the marine environment. There’s clearly scope for broadening our horizons.

Finally, as one of the few female Heads of State, do you see yourself as a role model for women around the world?

The gender issue is something particularly dear to me. This is an area where we lose a lot of capacity, especially across Africa. The poor state of female education is producing massive damage to economies and societies across the continent. A state cannot produce a vibrant and successful economy if you ignore a full 52 percent of your population and yet sadly that is very much the tendency. My message to youth is to take risks. We have to encourage young people to learn to take risks again and to indulge in the entrepreneurial spirit. Bankruptcy is not the end of the world, but a learning curve to take lessons from. The important thing is to learn from your mistakes so as to

ensure you fly higher afterwards.

There are only 17 other female head of states, so yes I do believe that I am a role model, especially for young women. I hope I can inspire them to believe in themselves and say “yes I can”.

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