Ladies and gentlemen

I am really pleased to be amongst you for the opening ceremony of this international Workshop on ‘New Plant Breeding Methods for Sustainable Use of Genetic Resources and Security of food Production’.

I understand that this is an initiative of the University of Mauritius together with the University of Western Australian.

This workshop arrives at the right moment, when we in the government and also all Mauritians are reflecting on security of food production in the island.

For our foreign delegates and participants, you may not all be aware that we were visited by the cyclone Berguitta a fortnight ago.
This cyclone, although not as devastating in terms of winds and gusts, has brought a lot of rain and we are still facing the aftermath of this cyclone with torrential rains, thunders and lightning after the very humid conditions created; with rainfall in some locations amounting to more than 100 mm within 24 h.

More than 75% of our vegetable crops have been affected and in such a situation, when we are faced to import vegetables for the nation, we cannot remain unconcerned about food security and climate change.

Torrential rains are still on-going and the rainfall recorded for the month of January exceed 300% of the normal in many areas.

_Ladies and gentlemen_

Plant and animal breeding are a very old science and we cannot ignore the progress made through classical breeding to improve plant varieties and animal species.

However in recent years, our knowledge on plant and animal breeding and genetics has considerably further improved through advances in new technologies.

Only last year in December, my Ministry, in collaboration with other partners, organised a Workshop on the New breeding techniques related to CRISPR-Cas9 technology, also known as gene editing technique.

This technique is already being implemented in one of our research institute, the Mauritius sugarcane Industry Research Institute - MSIRI.
I am sure that this workshop, that I understand will touch on thematic areas such as new animal breeding methods, genomic selection, crop gene banks and genetic diversity and as well as adaptation to climate change amongst others, will be of great benefit to all of us.

*Ladies and gentlemen*

There can be no sustainable agricultural development in a country without innovation. Worldwide, governments are trying their best to sustain food security and economic development to meet challenges such as climate change.

The adoption of new technologies is a must and cannot be neglected.

Development of new improved animal and crop varieties based on new knowledge on crop and animal genetic diversity, utilization of gene banks and new DNA-based technologies should be enhanced so that we meet the new challenges including increased demand from consumers for better quality, safe and nutritious food.

*Ladies and gentlemen*

Over the years, the agricultural sector has played a pivotal and economic role and has served in the development of Mauritius.

Although the contribution of agriculture to our national economy has been declining steadily since the 1970’s from around 30% to only about 3.5% lately, largely as a result of a successful diversification of the economy, it still remains a very important part of our economy as 60% of our land is under cultivation.
It provides most of our vegetables, we produce sugarcane and our sugar is exported, nearly 15% of our electricity comes through the burning of bagasse which is a co-product of the sugarcane industry.

And also the agricultural sector provides direct employment to some 40,000 persons and not to forget that it helps to keep the country green and free from erosion.

With regard to our livestock sector, we are committed to boost this sector although we are conscious of the harsh competition from cheap imports, high cost of inputs and the increasing consumer concern over food safety and animal welfare.

Production levels for poultry, goat, mutton, pork and rabbit have been satisfactory, but more effort is needed to raise self-sufficiency for milk and beef.

Incentives are available to breeders and our researchers and support services are sensitising farmers on new technologies, and also on the potential to modernise this sector in the coming years.

We are tacking issues such as conservation of local genetic resources, enhancing use of genetically improved breeds to upgrade local breeds and also providing training to our researchers, technicians, and farmers.

My Ministry is endeavour to encourage agricultural, agro-processing, value addition, and agri-business development in order to reduce dependency on food imports as Mauritius is a net food importer, so as to contribute to the livelihoods of local farmers.
We are committed towards bringing new improved technologies to support growers, farmers to modernise our agriculture and overall to make the country progress towards a technology-driven economy.

I therefore support the initiative of the University of Mauritius for holding this important Workshop today.

**Ladies and Gentlemen**

Before I end and open this Workshop, I would like to thank the University of Mauritius and the University of Western Australia for this laudable initiative and also for all the sponsors that have contributed to make this event a reality.

This clearly shows that international collaboration is very important today at a time when we are all faced with similar challenges.

I am sure that both our foreign and local participants will benefit from the deliberations and that they would be able to formulate new ideas and projects in their individual country.

With these words, I declare the workshop open and I wish all participants a very fruitful deliberation over the next three days.

I also invite our foreign delegates to take some time to visit our island.

I thank you all for your attention.