

A moment with the President

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**Marceline Evenor:** Ladies and Gentlemen, good evening and welcome to our programme, A moment with the President. Last week Heads of States were at the United Nations in New York, to evaluate the progress different countries have made towards attaining the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The Millennium Development Goals are related to human development, to provide governments with the means to measure the progress their countries have made in the 25-year period that is from 1990 to 2015. The issues in the Millennium Development Goals are:

- Eliminate extreme poverty and hunger.
- Promote equality between men and women as well as the empowerment of women.
- Fight against HIV Aids, Malaria and other diseases.
- Develop a worldwide partnership for development.

It was Vice President Danny Faure who represented Seychelles in this summit in New York. Vice President Faure spoke on the progress which Seychelles is achieving to attain those targets and also on the challenges the country is facing to ensure the next phase of its development. In this A moment with the President we will see how Seychelles is managing its undertakings to attain those targets, to ensure their sustainability and accomplish even more. Mr. President, to begin with, can you tell us how you rate the position of Seychelles vis-a-vis those targets?

**Mr. President:** First of all I would like to point out the importance of this summit. The United Nations found it necessary, after the financial crisis which hit the world two or three years ago as well as other crises such as the oil and food crises, that this summit examined the progress made. In relation to the time frame given, that is until 2015, it was important to see the effects of the financial crisis and also new financial plans which the world had for those countries to attain the targets set. I asked the Vice-President to represent me over there and explain the position of

Seychelles. It is with pride that we told the U.N that the Seychelles had met nearly all the targets set for this period. Of course, the financial crisis has had a negative impact but at the same time the challenges which it represented have given us the opportunities to move faster, with more determination to meet those targets and even do more.

In education and health, for example, we have already achieved the targets set; even before U.N had set them. For a long time, even during SPUP era of 1964, under the leadership of President René, we had the vision to give each Seychellois child equal opportunities to get a good education and we implemented this after 1977. As for health, we are one of the few countries in Africa and some other continents to give our people access to free health and medical care. On top of all this, today Seychelles is a leader in the preservation of the environment. Seychelles is the most advanced country in the world for the protection of the environment after it declared 47% of its territory as conservation areas. New Zealand is second with 30%. Seychelles will not stop there; we shall continue to spearhead this and soon we shall be in a position to attain 50%.

As for equality between men and women, again Seychelles is a world example where women have the same opportunities than men, not only in education but also in employment. We have empowered all sectors of our population to drive this development. In other domains such as infant mortality and mortality of women during childbirth, both of which are targets set by the U.N, we have the lowest rates compared to countries in Africa and other continents.

I believe that, not only have we attained those targets but we are ahead of the established ones. We have therefore informed the U.N that with the help of UNDP we are working on new targets which we call MDG Plus. These are,

- Ensure a high standard of education.
- Have more women in key positions in the country
- Ensure a healthy environment.

We have already attained the millennium targets and now we are setting new targets and with the assistance of UNDP we will be able to attain those targets. All this will guarantee a better life for our Seychellois people. As for the economic reform which we had to undertake to face the challenges which the world financial

crisis is causing, we are looking into the possibility of undertaking other reforms to meet some economic targets. Today Seychelles has introduced a new mechanism, a new structure, a new economic and financial environment which can improve its development and thus help towards achieving the MDG Plus.

**Marceline Evenor:** The Vice-President pointed out to the U.N that Seychelles is facing the challenge of how to finance the next phase of its development, now that we have been classed as a middle income country. Does this mean that Seychelles, in a certain way, has become a victim of its own development?

**President Michel:** In fact this is what we call “middle income trap”. This means that usually countries are assisted with concessionary loans. International organizations finance development projects so that countries can reach the level of development which Seychelles has already attained, a middle income country. When you reach this stage, they tell you that you no longer qualify to receive concessionary assistance in financial terms. So the small island states who have done well have to go to commercial institutions to finance its further development. This is so difficult and so expensive and those small countries face difficulties to finance their development and ensure that they are able to continue to meet those targets set, and go further. It is for this reason that Seychelles has been a leader in sensitizing international organizations to the fact that when you help a country, especially small island states to reach a certain development level, you have to continue to give it the possibility to finance its development, for it to progress. If not, the country will regress and when there is a regression it means that the country will plunge back into poverty. That is why, I believe, it is necessary that the international financial communities and the United Nations are aware that we have to introduce new criteria to be able to help those small countries, especially small island states, to have the necessary concessionary finance to continue their development. I think that more and more, with more persuasion from us, the international institutions are listening. I think that we shall find a way to continue this dialogue for our case to be considered.

But at the same time, the fact that we have reached a level considered as a middle income country and we have been able to ensure a sustainable development, we also have to develop new opportunities to face new challenges. That is why Seychelles, during the past five years, has pressed for the development of a

partnership with new countries which are ready to help us; ready to bring investments here. This has also come about through our active, economic and diplomatic policy. Our traditional partner who was Europe cannot do much because of the recent financial and economic environment. We have to look for new partners such as countries in the Gulf where there is money to invest. China is becoming an economic powerhouse and is also investing a lot in Africa. India, too, is becoming an important powerhouse. We also have South Africa. We also form part of SADC, an organization south of the continent of Africa where South Africa plays a leading role and it too is a powerhouse in Africa.

It is especially important that we develop commercial relations and investment partnerships with the countries already mentioned, to get the financial support for our development projects, and so continue to go beyond what we have already achieved.

**Marceline Evenor:** Mr. President, with our present situation, as a Middle Income Country, we are in a programme of reform with the help of IMF. You have mentioned that Seychelles is getting ready to undertake another commitment with the United Nations for MDG Plus. Are we in a position to do such a thing?

**Mr. President:** I think that we are in a favourable position because in the first place we have finished meeting the millennium targets. Now we cannot stagnate, we have to go forward and those targets which we have agreed upon with the United Nations will give us the means and also help us to face new challenges so that we will be able to give a better life to our Seychellois people; to bring more development in Seychelles; for us to empower the Seychellois to take their responsibilities and claim ownership of this new economic environment.

I think that the reform we have undertaken has given us the means, the opportunities with the new environment; the new economic architecture which exist in Seychelles. We will be able to work together towards those objectives. I believe that the strong partnerships which we are building with friendly countries will help us obtain the necessary financing to bring about those developments and at the same time create opportunities for Seychellois to get access to the necessary funds for them to also participate in further development.

**Marceline Evenor:** A few years ago you launched the “Strategy 2017 with the aim of doubling the wealth of the country by 2015, two years after the millennium targets are to be confirmed attained. Is the strategy 2017 still valid today now that we have undertaken the financial reform programme?

**Mr. President:** The 2017 strategy is, on the whole, still relevant. Of course, with the changes in the global economic environment certain things have been surpassed. Certain targets which had been set for 2017 will have to be revisited but the strategy 2017 on the whole is still valid. The reforms which have been undertaken have helped to take us beyond the strategy 2017.

There are certain things which were not in 2017 but which had to be introduced and this is good because it forms part of this new beginning. It forms part of the targets which we are trying to achieve. We have introduced a social welfare system which was not in strategy 2017 but at the same time it has become a safety net which is important for any developing economy. It also encourages people to work but at the same time it assists those in need. This I believe it is important and we have to improve and streamline it in future.

We have also introduced the programme ‘From welfare to work’, your own small business. This was not in 2017 but it is very positive. It is now the responsibility of people to cater for their livelihood and create more wealth for their country.

In fact strategy 2017 will remain the foundation on which, together with UNDP, we will work on those targets and thus attain the MDG Plus targets.

**Marceline Evenor:** In this process of creating more wealth for our country, Mr. President you are asking people to pick themselves up and work. Now that government has put, at the disposal of the Seychellois entrepreneurs, Ile Aurore and also the waterfront for their businesses, how do you envisage this development?

**Mr. President:** Perhaps it would be good that I explain the concept behind this but at the same time I need to go back a bit because as you know Ile Aurore had been earmarked for a tourism project. Steps had been taken with an international company based in South Africa who was to lease the island and undertake a big tourism project there. With the world financial crisis, that company has not been

able to honour its commitments which would have enabled it to begin its project. It was in this context, after the reform that I decided to revisit the various strategies. Sometimes you hear one or two people, perhaps maliciously, criticize government's decision to invite important partners to come and undertake tourism development here. They criticize the fact that government allows big companies such as Hilton Hotel, Banyan Tree and other big hotels to come here to invest in the tourism sector, and with certain concessions which we have given them which others did not have. I think that we should look at this issue more objectively.

During the 90s when countries all over the world, especially developing countries were expediting their development, there was a lot of competition for investments in the tourist industry whereby many countries were offering free land to investors who wanted to come. It is for this reason that we decided, that it was timely for us to give some concessions to investors for them to build big establishments and so help to create a new tourism image for our country. I believe that it is those big hotels which we have allowed to come here with certain concessions which have helped to upgrade our image. They had the means to market Seychelles and they have done so. Seychelles is one of the most attractive and sought tourist destinations in the world.

Also, when I decided to bring other airlines to Seychelles, there were many criticisms. But the airlines came and they marketed Seychelles. Now there are more tourists who come to occupy the big hotels. At the same time Seychelles is being promoted in other countries to make it known to the world. If those big hotels were not there, where would all the Seychellois workers get work? They have created jobs; they have created downstream possibilities for other Seychellois to have their small businesses. I think that this, together with other tourists who come here, will bring more revenue which in turn will help our country to develop at that level. It is for this reason that the reform we have undertaken with success, in tourism, has not had too much adverse effect and we have been able to maintain our pace of development and register success in a shorter time than the world expected. At that time we were looking for foreign companies to invest in the tourism sector here. With the recent economic and financial reforms more possibilities exist now whereby Seychellois have more means to do businesses. The time has now come for us to say ok, the big hotels that we have today and those which have already been granted approval such as Cap Ternay – Emirates,

Grande Police, the one at Beau Vallon and other such projects, are enough. Those hotels have their market and this is adequate for Seychelles.

The type of tourists with this type of spending capacities will go to such hotels. But at the same time, now that the economic environment is favourable, we can empower more Seychellois to take part in those projects. My decision to offer Ile Aurore and Victoria waterfront in this new project of development is precisely to give the possibilities to Seychellois to invest not only in the tourism sector but in other projects which will be complementary to this development.

On the east side of Ile Aurore there is potential for several guest houses to be built; small hotels belonging to Seychellois who don't have large capitals. Let us not deceive ourselves to believe that the Seychellois have all the finance necessary to invest in various projects. They would need a foreign partner. At least there shall be a Seychellois ownership. With the small hotels there could also be the possibilities of several villas. What we want to do is to have an integrated development where there would be small hotels, villas, guest houses, condominiums, together with light industries which would support the economic activities over there. There would be commercial sites which would be earmarked. Afterwards those would be tendered out so the Seychellois would be able to bid and then get the finance for development. We are in the process of working on this project. Next year plans will be completed. After consultations which would start soon we would be in a position to announce the tender and the Seychellois would be able to bid and participate in this proposed development.

Again not only will we give the Seychellois the possibilities to participate in this development, to plan their budget but government must also continue to work with the banks for them to become more proactive in lending people money with a reasonable interest for them to undertake those development projects. The Development Bank of Seychelles would have to revisit its structure to ensure that this is facilitated. The same procedure would apply for the waterfront. In this way we would allow the Seychellois to take more ownership, of not only the future of the tourism industry but also other types of businesses such as entertainment, and other economic activities which would help them to participate in the creation of more wealth for themselves and for their country.

**Marceline Evenor:** Mr. President we talked about the Millennium Development Goals and we said that Seychelles has achieved them. On the surface we see that all our children go to school, people have access to a free health service, there is equality between men and women and the latter is empowered. But perhaps some people would argue that when you probe deeper the picture is not so rosy. Let us consider the Ministry of Health which seems to have many problems; for example HIV/ AIDS is increasing and we are not reversing its trend. We say that there is no poverty in Seychelles, yet there are 2000 and more people who are on the welfare system and this is linked to unemployment.

Between now and 2015, what strategy does government have to create jobs to remove people from welfare, give them work and tackle all the challenges we have especially in regards to the Ministry of Health.

**Mr. President:** I believe we have to look at the details of those issues. You have mentioned HIV/ AIDS. This is a problem. It is a challenge not only for Seychelles but also for the whole world. The whole world, any other country, has not been able to reverse this trend completely. It is more complicated than just giving health care to people. It is an education that we have to give; a change of attitude, especially among the vulnerable sections of our population such as children, and young people. You have to educate them regarding their attitude and their behaviour. As you can see this is not a matter for the health system alone. It involves education too. We will have to sensitize our population for people to understand that we have to change our behaviour if we want to eliminate this problem. This is a big challenge which we have to strive to eradicate. Government as well as the whole society have to assume their responsibility to sensitize the population not to behave in such a way and continue to spread this disease.

You have asked about welfare. There again we have to consider the details. There are people who don't work and who are receiving help but at the same time we know that there are many jobs in Seychelles. There are also certain people in our society who will always need welfare assistance; the invalids for example. I believe that it is the duty of the state to assist those who are ill, who cannot work, and whose family does not have the means to help them maintain a decent life. Sometimes people are working and are suddenly incapacitated through an accident or illness; the person has to be on welfare until he/ she is well or the family can



help. There will always be welfare. There cannot be a target to eliminate social welfare completely but we should always encourage people who can work to try and work, encourage them to change their attitude and take responsibility to earn their living instead of depending on welfare. This is an ongoing process and we have to work on it to have a population which can take its responsibilities.

This is how it should be.