

## **A Moment with the President 29th August 2010**

Marceline Evenor **(ME)**:

Good evening and welcome to our 'Dialogue with the President' programme. Today's topic is Tourism.

On Thursday, President Michel along with the Minister for Tourism launched a new vision for the promotion of Seychelles, one that will show-case a lot more than just the sun, the sea and the beaches: A vision under the name of 'The Seychelles Brand'

Mr. President, 'The Seychelles Brand' is the label under which our tourism industry will be known. How will we achieve this Seychelles Brand?

**President Michel** : Good evening Marceline. Well the Seychelles Brand is simply a new approach in a new era. Seychelles along with the rest of the world is going through an unforeseen transformation which requires us to be dynamic and up to date with new developments. We are living in a globalised world where there is a lot of competition and in our case; this mainly concerns our tourism industry. Many countries around the world are trying to increase their percentage of tourism activity and Seychelles is no exception; we need to remain dynamic and pro-active and brand ourselves in such a way that will attract the most tourists, hence the need to go beyond our existing promotional approach; the natural beauty of our islands, our beaches, our sea and sun have always been our promotional anchors on the tourism market, but today's ever growing competition requires that we broaden our perspectives and expand our services so that we are able to offer what we already have along with something better, something more that visitors would like to experience and that they cannot find anywhere else.

That would be what I call 'The Seychelles Brand'. It would be everything that Seychelles is and that Seychelles has to offer. It would be much more than our natural beauty, more than our sun and our beautiful beaches; it would encompass our way of life, the harmony of our nation, our social cohesion. We have always been known for our hospitality and our welcoming nature and it is values such as this that we should seek to portray, in order to encourage visitors to visit our shores.

Furthermore, we have other riches, other attractions that characterize our islands; there's our mountains whereby trails could be created so that visitors can better appreciate and interact with nature, there's also our culture, the arts, our music, our traditional dance, all of which needs to be developed and packaged in such a way that visitors can most discover and appreciate.

**ME**: Mr. President, you placed a lot of emphasis on our social cohesion; how do you think this will contribute towards this new approach, this new vision for our tourism industry?

**President Michel**: We often have the tendency to measure our wealth by the amount of money we have or the things we own; I believe that a country is rich when its people exist in harmony and social cohesion, as is the case for Seychelles. We are rich in our way of life, in our interactions and our mentality and all this needs to be showcased in our 'Seychelles brand' whereby Seychelles can be

viewed for its true uniqueness as another world which tourists from all over the world will come to experience.

Today I believe that we have leading roles in many things which we have done within our country. Today, Seychelles is not only respected but admired for our many successes, which we need to make the most of whilst continuing to nurture our good values, such as our morality and the way in which we treat people. We should learn to appreciate those who contribute towards our wellbeing. Unfortunately, sometimes there are some of us who have a tendency to behave otherwise. We need to develop a positive attitude towards the way in which we treat our visitors; we should not attack them or steal from them because we will be the ones who lose out when they chose not to come back.

After all, the peace and tranquility is what the visitors love about the Seychelles. We need to work towards finding solutions to our problems as a civilized nation. Our solutions should come through discussions and negotiations instead of riots and public discord which discourages visitors. As long as I'm President, I will continue to advocate for this social and racial cohesion that we have, whereby we who are descendants of different races exist in harmony as one nation. We need to treasure this; it should be nurtured so that we remain an example for the world as this is where our wealth lies and this is what makes us an admiration for the whole world.

**ME:** But why is it that until now we have not been making use of all those assets? Our social cohesion, our way of life, our mountains and our trails. Why are we not making use of all those? What is it that's keeping us from exploiting them a bit more?

**President Michel:** I don't think that anything has stopped us; it's more something that is fast becoming a necessity for us to develop for the future. In the past, our sun and our sea was enough as a promotional tools, as it was what tourists wanted then. Today however, tourists want much more; they want bigger and more value, better and more varied human connections. That is why I think we need to be evolving and adapting with the world so that we can incorporate these values in our brand because, after all it is what brings the tourists to us and they in turn bring us more wealth. It is such wealth that helps our country to develop which makes it all the more important that we continue to generate it by ensuring that we continue to attract and cater for tourists.

**ME:** Mr. President, during your speech on Thursday, you launched this approach that we are talking about today. You also said that there was a need for all Seychellois to take ownership and become patrons of our tourism industry. Could you explain to us what you mean by that and do you think that by doing this, we will be able to make more progress.

**President Michel:** I think we need to consider the development of the tourism industry in its existing context alongside the development that has taken place in the world. It is therefore important for us to realize that branding is a necessary tool especially for countries like Seychelles. For example, today we have big hotels such as Four Seasons, The Hilton, Banyan tree and Lemuria of the Constance hotel group, which have established partnership with Seychelles. Such Five star tourism establishments were necessary for us to be able to better market Seychelles because it is they who have the repute, the resources, the finances and the knowhow to conduct promotion on a worldwide scale.

Furthermore, just as Air Seychelles was our only airline, she was considered the lifeline for our tourism industry, but by allowing other airlines such as Qatar and Emirates to operate here, we have allowed our Tourism Industry to take on a new perspective, because the resource capacity that these airlines possess, enables them to further promote Seychelles in countries and cities which are out of our reach, and all the while, filling their seats and generating new clientele. I believe that these companies are also key assets that will help increase our international visibility. They also help create more economic activities for the local Seychellois who are willing to be active and hardworking in the attainment of their goals their professional responsibilities.

Today we have many Seychellois who have made a name for themselves in the tourism industry; they are those who invested in the hotel business, notably large ones but mainly small guest houses and self catering establishments which are doing very well. My vision is to see more Seychellois invest in the tourism industry and make the most of the wide range opportunities and possibilities that it offers. With this in mind, next year I will unveil concrete plans that have already been worked upon, to see how the Seychellois themselves can have access to structures that will provide them with opportunities to better participate in the tourism industry.

**ME:** Mr. President; you just spoke of small hotels and how people need to be more pro-active. There are a few people who run small establishments either within or in the vicinity of their homes. They accommodate visitors and they probably do not feel that they need a license to do so. They are actually doing very well, their promotion is done by word of mouth and they have many repeated clients. Don't you think that now that you're encouraging them to obtain a license, they would be reluctant as this would eventually oblige them to pay taxes and other dues?

**President Michel:** I think that, we should be fair in the way we do things. Do you think it's fair for someone who follows the set procedure and obtains a license and pays taxes in order to earn a living by operating a small guest-house while someone else on the other hand who does not have a license or pay taxes benefits of the same income as him or her?

That is why we are not seeking to punish people; quite the contrary; we wish to identify those people who are running their small guest houses without a license, to explain things to them and encourage them to purchase a license so that they can operate their businesses legally. Consequently they will obtain the support of the Seychelles Tourism Board (STB) whereby they will feature in the Board's online directory for small tourism establishments and be promoted in the Board's many campaigns. For just as there are clients who prefer large five star hotels, there are others who prefer more affordable, down to earth establishments. This means that the market for such establishments definitely exists and could be a means of income for many Seychellois. Nonetheless, this needs to be in an orderly manner; people need to acquire a license whereby they can operate in a fair business environment and at same time benefit from the tourism structures in place.

**ME:** You also spoke of the need for farmers to supply their products to hotels and for hotels to make use of local products, especially in their kitchens. The farmer's association has also announced that it has taken the first step in establishing partnership with the hotels. Why do you think that the hotels

prefer to use imported goods? And how would you explain the fact that farmers are still not able to cater to the hotels' supply requirements?

**President Michel:** I believe that there are many issues which lead to this problem. I think we should start by maximizing the use of local products that's used in the hotels and the Tourism industry. I think this will help our local farmers to earn more; they will produce more and sell more to the hotels and I think it is important that the large hotels that are in business here make use of the local products produced by our local farmers.

However, there are certain instances whereby some hotels complain about the unreliability of local supplies as well as their cost. There is also the fact that some of the products used by the hotels are not produced locally, so they have no choice but to import them.

All these are points for concern which I have asked the Human Resources Minister to take up along with the STB, the Hotel Association, the Farmers' Association and other relevant bodies in order to come with a working understanding or strategy whereby hotels will be able to negotiate contracts with farmers in order for them to purchase the farmers' products at a price that will benefit both parties. There is surely a way to achieve this, and the Agriculture Ministry will have to be at the head of this process, to ensure that our local farmers continue to thrive from our tourism development.

**ME:** What do you think we should do to encourage local tourism? Why is it that most Seychellois find it too expensive and prefer to make an overseas trip to Mauritius, for example, instead of one of our own islands?

**President Michel:** I believe that local tourism does exist to a certain extent. There are many Seychellois who go for weekends on Praslin or La-digue. I even know some who vacation in the Hotel on Desroches; even though it's a bit expensive there are some people who can afford it. I think the main problem is not the accommodation but the access to our outer islands. The IDC run guest houses are mostly affordable to Seychellois, but it is the transportation cost that is high. This is an area where the different agencies concerned could consider more innovative means that will encourage more local tourism.

This kind of tourism, however, should not be limited to guest houses and island hopping, but should include the possibility for our people to experience and enjoy the variety of services available to tourists. For example, there are places like Domaine de Val de Prés and Anse-Royale beach which are now under the responsibility of the STB and which provide visitors with the opportunity to experience the Seychellois culture through its community, its cuisine and the many other cultural manifestations which will be held in such places. I would like for places like Val de Prés to become a cultural window not only for tourists but for Seychellois as well. During their free time, the people should be able to re-discover and re-kindle the bond that they have with their local culture, including the arts, the dances, the cuisine and much more; all of which will form part of the 'Seychelles Brand'.

The Beach Park at Anse-Royale could host beach and water sport activities whereby tourists and locals alike could participate and continue to contribute respectively towards the country's economic growth. This also will be part and parcel of the Seychelles brand; it will ensure that the brand is not only

established, but is lived and maintained. A brand needs to be lived and practiced, and in the case of Seychelles, we need to showcase our values. The values that make us Seychellois, that make us proud to be who we are and that makes tourists appreciate us more.

**ME:** We know that after your speech on Thursday, there was a lot of consultation whereby all relevant partners and stakeholders met to discuss this new approach. How much longer do you think it will take before we begin to notice this transformation in our Tourism industry?

**President Michel:** Things are moving really fast. Just yesterday the discussions have started and we have requested the input of all stakeholders in the Tourism industry. We want all of them to have an input which will be considered by a committee set up by the Government. This will form part of an action plan for the tourism industry which will guide us for the next ten years and which will form part of our 'National Development Plan'. Furthermore, and most importantly; we now have a dynamic partnership between the Government and the private sector. The Government acts as a facilitator; to provide orientation and direction, but the private sector should remain the driving force behind the Tourism industry; it is they who are at the forefront, they are the ones who run the industry, and we need to continue to work together and build on the existing synergy, which will enable us to develop our brand in a much more dynamic way so that we can be guaranteed results in the very near future. And starting next year I will introduce some measures; some projects that will enable our local entrepreneurs as well as regular people who would like to become entrepreneurs to participate more actively and generate more income in our Tourism industry.

**ME:** Mr. President, now we will move on to a question from the general public. People are saying that you travel a lot and that during your interviews you always speak of donations that we have received from friend countries. However, some people are complaining, saying that they don't see where these donations go as they don't really see or feel their effects.

**President Michel:** I am glad that you asked me this question. I actually met someone who asked me this same question; the other day while I was on a visit on Praslin; a lady said to me: 'Mr. President we see you coming and going a lot from different countries and obtaining a lot of good things for us, but don't you think it would be nice if we could all get a little of those things?' I smiled at her and said: 'Madam, everything that I bring goes to every Seychellois, including you; I don't keep anything for myself.

I think that such perceptions are generated by some malicious smear campaigns which suggest that I use the donations that we get for my own personal gain. I would like to assure the Seychellois people that, though it is true that I travel a lot, I do it for the good of the country, I work for Seychelles and its people, and I believe that our country's image is at such a level that it is admired by many other countries and the partnerships that I have been able to secure with those and many other countries will help us to continue to grow.

If today our economic reforms have been a success, it is thanks to those partnerships that I have developed those grants which we have received and the projects that have been initiated. Through all the trips and the exchanges that I have made, our reforms have succeeded at a rate which is faster than what the world expected.

If I could state a few examples: through my visit to China, we have seen the construction of the Au-cap and Baie-Lazare schools, and soon we will see the construction of another primary school. We also have the new hospital at Anse-Royale as well as new buses and new houses, all of which have either been donated to or constructed for us by the Chinese Government. None of these are my personal assets; they belong to the Seychellois people.

I have also made several visits to Abu-Dhabi, through which, we have obtained buses, generators, and eventually a wind farm which will generate electricity. We have received new planes, a diagnostic centre and 15million dollars for the implementation of our economic reforms. All of these have been donated to the Seychelles and the Seychellois people; it is the Seychellois children that go to these schools, just as it is the Seychellois people who use the hospitals. Therefore, indirectly it is every Seychellois who benefit from all that I receive on my overseas visits.

These are some concrete examples of how the things that I have received as gifts or donations from my overseas visits have been used for the benefit of the Seychellois people; if we get buses, it is so that all Seychellois can ride them. We all benefit, even if not directly; it is not a question of giving each and everyone a certain amount of money, but rather of obtaining things that will be of use to us in our daily lives.