Good morning!

I welcome you to the opening of this Consultative Workshop on Street Children. As announced a few months back, my Ministry intends to develop a Comprehensive Strategy on Street Children, which has drawn us all together here today…

The phenomenon of street children is a problem worldwide and Mauritius is no exception. The recent years have seen an increase in the dislocation of family cohesion and consequently a decline in parental presence within the lives of their children. In Mauritius too, there are children who live and grow up in a state of neglect and deprivation, often without protection, without education, affection, care
and guidance from the adult members of the families, vulnerable to all evils of society.

As Minister responsible for Child Development, my priority is to cater for the protection of children as there cannot be holistic development without a protected environment. This year, to commemorate the International Day of the African Child, on 16th June, we appealed for a national reflection. Are we doing enough for our children? POU NOU ZANFAN, ESKI NOU PE FER ASE? Not only my Ministry but also stakeholders, NGOs, religious organisations, families, parents… Children are the most vulnerable members of the population and deserve renewed efforts from all of us to protect them.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child engages with States Parties and other stakeholders to address the issue of children in street situation, highlighting the challenges that children in street situations face, the rights violations and the measures that need to be undertaken to
fully implement the provisions of the Convention on the rights of the Child to protect and promote the rights of children in street situations. All children, irrespective of their economic status, race, colour, sex, language, religion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or any other status have the same rights and are entitled to the same protection by the State. While the Convention makes no particular reference to children working and/or living on the street, all its provisions are applicable to them.

Having said this, if we take a look at the statistics of my Ministry, we unfortunately cannot find street children anywhere… This does not mean that my Ministry is not aware of their existence!!! Our national policies do not seem to capture the specificities of this category of children. True it is that the definition of “street children” in itself makes the issue even more complex, since the definition is country specific and evolves with time. However, I would wish to draw your attention to paragraph 50 of the Government Programme 2015-2019 providing
that “particular attention will be given to street children”. This explains our presence here today.

My Ministry has retained the Consultancy Services of the University of Mauritius for the Development of a Comprehensive Strategy on Street Children. The objectives will be to assess the nature and magnitude of the problem of street children in Mauritius, examine their situation and make recommendations in the form of an action plan.

I wish to seize the opportunity of this workshop to make a rallying call to NGOs, government and private sector to work together to address the issue of street children. A rights-based approach, based on the premise that all children are “rights holders”, is our motto at the level of the Ministry. But there may still be persistent perceptions in society generally which wrongly portray children in street situations as victims or delinquents rather than as rights holders and this has to stop to address stigmatization.
As I said earlier, children are the most vulnerable ones in society so we can imagine the situation when those children are living on the streets!!! They certainly represent one of the most marginalised and vulnerable populations in the world, denied of basic rights such as balanced diet, safe shelter, access to education and health, leisure and sport, and first and foremost the right to a family… I dare say that they exist as invisible citizens…

There are very few NGOs that are specifically dedicated to working with the population of children in street situations. SAFIRE is one of few and its mission is getting the children off the street situation for a start, and later, either reintegrating them into their families, home/communities or finding other secure environments where their basic needs for physical safety, medical care, nutrition, counseling, education, recreation, and spiritual growth can be met.

My Ministry has had discussions with SAFIRE, regarding the formulation of a project under the Special
Collaborative Programme for support to women and children in distress.

Consequently, in 2012, a project was submitted by SAFIRE regarding the funding of a 15 seater van, meant for an educational farm project for street children. The project was approved and a disbursement to the tune of Rs 920,000 was effected the same year, for the purchase of a minivan, hence reflecting the commitment of this Ministry as regards street children.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is the policy of my Ministry to intervene whenever cases of vulnerable children are reported. Support services are provided to these children who are followed by the Child Protection Team at the level of their families. In cases where a child is deemed to be in immediate danger and is exposed to harm, arrangements are made through the
issue of an Emergency Protection Order to have the child accommodated in a “Place of Safety”.

It is sad to note that the number of reported cases at the CDU is 3,429 for the period January to June 2016. The issue of child protection is not solely the responsibility of my Ministry but requires the collaboration of the private sector, Civil Society and NGOs. With regards to setting up a monitoring mechanism to follow up and evaluate national child protection policies, strategies and programmes, a “Working Together” Committee has been set up. It comprises of various stakeholders dealing with issues relating to the protection, development and welfare of children.

The main objective of the Committee is to look into avenues of collaboration between all parties concerned to ensure rapid intervention in cases involving children. It serves as a forum whereby the roles and responsibilities of each party are established with a view to give effect to collective action in dealing with such cases. The
discussions held at the level of the High Powered Committee have culminated towards the signature of Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) between this Ministry and each of the Ministries/Department concerned. As at date, 13 MOUs have been signed.

Ladies and gentlemen,
There is a strong need to take a more concerted, solution-oriented approach towards the challenges facing street children in Mauritius. We are strongly committed to include street children in our policies and I hope that street children in need of care, support and assistance are referred to the services of my Ministry for appropriate ‘prise en charge’.

I thank you for your attention and look forward to the report of the consultant for the proposed comprehensive strategy to address the issue of street children.
I also wish you fruitful deliberations during this consultative workshop and pray that the best interests of the child prevail in all circumstances.

Thank you