Good morning Ladies and Gentlemen

I am pleased to welcome you all this morning at the launching of the Trade Obstacle Alert Mechanism which we have developed with technical and financial assistance from the International Trade Centre.

Let me extend a special welcome to our guest from the International Trade Centre, Mr Mathieu Loridan.

I wish to avail of this opportunity to thank the International Trade Centre for its continued support to Mauritius. We have been collaborating with the Centre on several projects, the latest one being on the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement. We are also in the process of finalising a more comprehensive project aimed at strengthening the export competitiveness of Mauritius.

Regarding the Trade Obstacle Alert Mechanism per se, a first workshop was held in October last year to introduce the mechanism to the stakeholders. Since then, my Ministry has been working with the International Trade Centre to finalise the project which we are launching today.

Ladies and Gentlemen

The vision of Government is to position Mauritius as a business hub for the region. Government is therefore committed to facilitate business by eliminating obstacles to trade and investment. In this regard, substantial progress has been made over the years to eliminate tariff barriers. Mauritius has thus registered the highest tariff cut from an average of 26.5% in 1995 to 0.85% in 2015 from among the WTO Members.

A number of trade facilitation measures are also being implemented, such as paperless customs and online tracking system, amongst others, which have contributed to improving trade competitiveness.
The results of these initiatives are best reflected in the various international and regional rankings of Mauritius. We are ranked the 10th freest economy in the world with an economic freedom score of 76.4, well above the world and regional averages of 60.4 and 54.9 respectively. Mauritius out-performs many developed countries on several indices, namely Business freedom with a score of 78, Trade Freedom-88.4, fiscal freedom-91.9, investment freedom-85.0 and monetary freedom 77.6.

Mauritius ranks 29th globally (out of 138 countries) in terms of trade facilitation and remains the best performer in Africa according to the Enabling Trade Report 2014 (World Economic Forum, 2014). The country scores highly in terms of market access, availability and quality of transport infrastructure and the operating environment.

The World Bank Ease of Doing Business Report 2014 has further ranked Mauritius 20th as the most attractive place to do business worldwide.

In some areas, though, namely on Property Rights, among others, and on some other forms of Non-Tariff Barriers such as cumbersome licensing requirements, additional efforts will have to be made to improve performance.

We are also constrained by Non Tariff Barriers on many of our export markets. A study carried out in 2013 on the impact of tariff and non-tariff barriers in some sampled export markets such as India, China and Russia has revealed some interesting findings.

Indeed, in the absence of tariffs, the value of exports would have increased by USD 1.45 billion over a period of three years on these sampled markets. However, the impact is far higher by USD 1.84 billion as a result of existing Non-Tariff Barriers which in 2012 would have amounted to 5.32% of our GDP. The impact is obviously huge.

We need to put in place a system which will allow operators to report such Non Tariff Barriers on a timely basis so that we can seek to have them addressed either bilaterally or on a regional or multilateral basis, as the case may be.

While we have travelled a long way already in improving the business environment, the momentum has to be maintained until Mauritius is positioned among the very top performers
and becomes one of the most attractive and uncontested business platforms, especially for Africa.

This is where the Trade Obstacle Alert Mechanism comes into play. It will be operated, using the Trade Portal of my Ministry and will enable Government, through its various agencies to:

- Take stock of, and address where appropriate, obstacles to trade and investment as they arise on the local front and on international markets.

- Ensure an all-inclusive approach towards problem solving in trade matters.

- Improve public and private sector dialogue as well as promote inter agency dialogue.

The building up of trade and encouraging investment is vital for development, but it depends on confidence and collaboration: confidence of entrepreneurs and business leaders, confidence of investors and consumers. To build such confidence, we need to develop a platform to exchange ideas and to act on the confidence expressed by all these important actors. The Trade Obstacle Alert Mechanism will play a crucial role in this regard.

This mechanism will however only live up to expectations if all the agencies concerned with implementation of trade and investment related policies participate effectively in the process. Some of the important Agencies, without whose collaboration the system will not deliver, include the MRA, Customs, the Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Consumer Protection, the Ministry of Agro-Industry and Food Security, the Ministry of Health and Quality of Life, the Ministry of Business, Enterprise and Cooperatives and the Board of Investment. We look forward to working with them to ensure the success of the Alert Mechanism. The International Trade Centre will provide training on how to use the Mechanism and how to act on the Alerts received.

To ensure that the Mechanism is jointly operated by the public and the private sectors, the Mauritius Chamber of Commerce and Industry will act as the focal point to receive Alerts from the operators and my Ministry will spearhead the National Monitoring Committee to coordinate between the focal point and the Agencies concerned.
We are therefore embarking on a new platform to improve public-private sector interaction. Success will depend on our determination to make sure that the Trade Obstacle Alert Mechanism delivers on the objectives we have set to reduce, if not eliminate trade obstacles and to create a more conducive environment for business to thrive. We remain hopeful that we will achieve this objective.

With these words, I now have the pleasure to officially launch the Trade Obstacles Alert Mechanism.