Falisie Pinas, Minister of Transport, Communication and Tourism

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Suriname has come a long way in the past decade. The inflation has stabilized and the economy has experienced an enormous growth that peaked at nearly 7% in 2008, and has remained buoyant ever since. What is your evaluation on the state of the economy in Suriname?

As I was informed, the authorities on the economy of the Republic of Suriname have already answered this question, although I might add that certain investments in the policy areas will further elevate the Transport, Communication and Tourism industry.

The Ministry of TCT plays a strategic role in the socioeconomic development of Suriname. What has been the evolution of the Ministry?

According to the State Decree of 10 October 1991, (1991 SB. No. 58), and imposing mandates of departments of general administration, the Ministry of Transport, Communication and Tourism (TCT) is responsible for the following areas. The first one is Transport, including water, air and road transport, as well as public transport and   supervision. This Ministry is also responsible for the facilities for water and air, particularly with regard to safe and efficient handling of passengers and goods, steering, and the management of all ports. The second one is Communication, telecommunications and ICT's. The third one is Tourism and all matters related to these topics alone.

The transport sector is divided into three sub-sectors, namely road transport, air transport and water transport. The section in charge of transport is contributing to the development and implementation of our transport policy, and is responsible for the regulation and modernization of the public transport sector.

The Communications section is responsible for developing policy in the communications industry. This is about telecommunications, information and communications technology, and

broadcasting. The department advises the Minister and the Director on issues of importance to be developed within the aforementioned areas. The section is also in contact with stakeholders at a national, regional and international level. It is responsible for the revision of the current legislation, which should stimulate more investment within the total communication sector.

The Tourism section is responsible for the policy development and monitoring of tourism in all its facets. The Suriname Tourism Foundation (STS) is the policy executing agency for the section, and will be monitored from the section. The section is responsible for establishing the tourism board, which will guide the development and steering of the tourism sector as a whole, and will further develop the sector. This is based on Public-Private-Partnerships.

The transport and communication sector is crucial when it comes to increasing the efficiency of the companies, as well as interconnecting the Surinamese people. What is your evaluation on the competitiveness of the water, air, and road transport facilities?

Suriname is strategically located, and therefore, provides a lot of opportunities. In addition, Suriname is the maritime hub to both the Caribbean and the Latin American market, which means exports to both markets are a lucrative possibility, and exports through French Guyana are also feasible. Suriname is part of the regional integration process in the Caribbean. It is a member of CARICOM, CARIFORUM and the Association of Caribbean States, and maintains close relations with South America.

The Government states that the relations with its neighbors, Brazil, Venezuela, and France, will be developed further, and the EU-LAC cooperation will be strengthened. Suriname is active in the Latin American Economic System (SELA), the Regional South American Infrastructure Initiative (IIRSA) and the OAS. The country is considering accession to the Association for Integration in Latin America (ALADI), and supports the resumption of FTAA negotiations. Suriname progressed well in lifting legal barriers for the CARICOM Single Market & Economy (CSME). The Revised Treaty of Chaguaramas has been incorporated in national legislation, and the law to implement the CCJ (Caribbean Court of Justice) has been promulgated. As for cooperation with France (Guyane), Suriname and France have worked together on a cooperation treaty. This treaty, with the intended rehabilitation of the road from Paramaribo to the French border, could have important economic impacts on the border areas. In 2005 the Surinamese and French Customs (Guyane) signed a protocol of collaboration regarding 'mutual administrative help'. The two parties have also discussed how to deal with cross border smuggling, and a bilateral dialogue has taken place on re-admission. In addition, a bilateral agreement is under ratification.

What projects would you highlight from those currently underway, or from the ones that will be undertaken in the near future?

Recently there was a commission installed to give advice on the policy regarding road (bus and goods) and boat transport. That work is done, so we have to start implementing the advice for security and efficiency on the road and the water ways. We have several projects, such as the Institutional Strengthening of the Transport Sector Project (ISTS), the rehabilitation of the Port of Paramaribo has been completed, and the Port of Paramaribo has been recently awarded as the

Best Port of the Caribbean. We also have other processes planned or already in progress, such as the dredging Suriname River, MAS is busy with that and it will lower the costs for the companies, the rehabilitation of several roads is in progress, like the rehabilitation of the road to Albina (border with French Guyana), which will facilitate the transport of goods to French Guyana. We also have the rehabilitation of the Port and the Airport of New Nickerie, and the rehabilitation and security upgrade of the JAP Airport in progress. The Zorg en Hoop Airport is being upgraded for domestic air transport as well, and the Civil Aviation Department will be converted into an authority, so you can see that the initiatives are already being taken.

In these developments, it is very important to focus on quality, international standards and certifications. What is the status and what are the goals regarding the international standards accomplishments?

Most of our companies and authorities are certified, such as Surinam Airways, the Port of Paramaribo, or the MAS. We have others that are not certified yet, such as the CASAS, which will be certified in the future, and the Public Transportation Company, but we're working towards international standards.

Telecommunications are a key factor for the connectivity among the Surinamese people, but also for the attraction of foreign direct investors. What is your evaluation on the competitiveness of the telecom sector?

The current situation of Suriname's telecommunications industry is that we have three telecom providers (Telesur, Digicel and Uniqa) operating under the Telecommunication act that came into force in April 2007. Telesur has both fixed and wireless telecommunication infrastructure. Digicel and Uniqa have wireless telecommunication infrastructure. All three telecom providers have certain areas in the hinterland where they need to help bring development with ICT, but my evaluation of the liberalization of the telecom sector, is that more people have access to ICT now.

I can illustrate this with some figures from the Suriname Telecommunication Authority and the telecom providers. Based on these facts and figures we can conclude that the liberalization in Suriname delivered in some way what was expected. Some of the results are the increased amount of mobile subscribers, and the usage of the internet, which is increasing steadily.

My view is that the regulation in Suriname supports competition in a limited way. It is one of my priorities to create a sound legal framework to stimulate competition in Suriname. As Minister responsible for the telecommunications, I am aware of the fact that this is vital. Recently a commission has been installed to do research and advise me in revising the Telecommunication Act. This is one of my priorities, to create a sound legal technology-neutral framework in order to stimulate competition in Suriname.

What other challenges and goals for the future would you highlight?

The main challenge is to create an environment where the whole community of Suriname can have equal access to Information, Communication and Technology. The priorities for Suriname

in terms of policies and regulation of mobile internet are the availability of broadband for both wireless networks and broadcasting. Cyber security is also an issue and challenge.

The policy of the Ministry of TCT is to make ICT accessible and affordable to the entire Surinamese community. This is also a challenge, because the availability of broadband is an issue. The prices for internet for example, are not available and affordable for every household in the country. We need to plan better. Not everyone in our country has access to ICT, especially the communities in the rural areas.

We don't have community based radio stations and television stations in some parts of the hinterland, and information through radio and television stations for the local people is important.

Some of our goals are the following:
Suriname is now in a phase to conduct some studies to switch from analogue television to a digital television transmission. The regulator (TAS) will undertake steps to test the different standards in order to make the right decision for Suriname.

In order to make a better planning and to make the right decisions for Suriname, we need a different approach. In order to position ourselves in a better way, we need to collect more data on telecommunication, the usage of ICT etc. Regarding the better approach, one of the initiatives of the government of Suriname is to establish a Council for Science and Technology.

Initially some steps had been taken to create a government portal, but, because of different circumstances, the project came to a standstill. The government needs to continue with this project, because it is important to have a backbone for Suriname.

In order to ensure some harmony with the rest of the region, Suriname takes part in the regional strategy ICT4D, and also takes part within the HIPCAR Project (Harmonization of ICT policies, legislation and regulatory procedures), meant to harmonize our legal framework with the rest of the region. We are currently in the phase to translate the legislation, and the next phase will be the implementation phase.

The regulator (TAS) is involved with a school connectivity project, and it's in close cooperation with the ITU. There is also an initiative with the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of TCT, and the ITU, called the Basic Education Improvement Programme (BEIP), and the TAS has to implement a pilot project called 'computers for schools'. The target groups are preliminary schools.

On a different note, one of our goals in Suriname is to create conditions for the persons in the rural areas to have access to ICT's. My Ministry is working on a project together with the UNDP to reduce disparities in access to information and services in the hinterland. Our aim is to reach this goal within a period of 2 years.
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Your Ministry has a big social responsibility aspect as well, such as increasing the access to ICT in the rural areas, but also training the people on how to use them. What is your vision regarding this social responsibility?

My Ministry is aware of the situation in the rural areas of Suriname, and of the fact that the people in the hinterland do not have access to ICT. The Ministry of TCT is therefore working together with the UNDP on a project based on reducing disparities in the access to information

and services among hinterland communities in Suriname, through the use of ICT's. One of the achievements is that ICT is being incorporated in the curriculum of the Poly Technic College and at the tertiary level of our education system, and there are also specific practical training programs in ICT.

With the development, initiatives and goals of the Ministry of Transport, Communication and Tourism, as well as the whole government of Suriname, we will be working hard on this issue; it's one of our priorities.

We believe that Suriname is the yet to be discovered gem of the Amazon. What is the potential of the tourism sector?

Yes, you are quite right. Suriname is the only country where descendants of slaves (maroons) have maintained and developed their unique culture. We have a history of tolerance amongst the diverse ethnic groups, we also have the uniqueness of having a Muslim mosque side by side to a Jewish Synagogue, and they peacefully greet each other in the morning and the evening prayers. There are a lot of elements that are relevant tourism attractions in Suriname, such as a unique biodiversity, river cruising, bird watching, sport fishing, tracking and jungle adventure tourism, visits to traditional indigenous villages, heritage, culture and specific events, such as Miss India Worldwide in 2012.

Bearing in mind our strong media impact, all our interviewees are acting as ambassadors of Suriname's image at an international level. In this sense, what final message would you send to the international community about Suriname?

Any tourist will be in awe when exploring the culinary and cultural diversity that Suriname has to offer. The diaspora tourism is one that also can be developed, cultured and explored. Suriname delivers every sampler of its cuisine a unique explosion of culinary treats unrivaled by any other. Suriname is both the port to the Caribbean and Latin American market, the bunkering strategic location for the cruise industry is also interesting. Suriname has a lot of potential for investors in all the production sectors, labor in Suriname is relatively cheap and Suriname is in its preliminary stages of development, getting a piece of the pie while there is still pie to go around is advisable.

The depiction of Suriname as the yet to be discovered gem of the Amazon says it all, we are the other Caribbean, the heart of the Caribbean and the city of smiles, therefore, I think this short description could be enough to persuade new visitors to come to my beautiful country. I hope I have met your expectations in sharing this information with you.