

Ms. Vanitha Mohan, President, Indian Chamber of Commerce, Coimbatore

Mr. Ramanathan Muthu, Honorary Consul of Switzerland in Chennai

Esteemed guests, dear friends,

It is a special pleasure for me to address words of welcome to you, an audience interested to learn more about vocational education and training generally and about Swiss vocational education and training in particular. I warmly thank the Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Coimbatore, and the Swiss-Indian Chamber of Commerce, which have played a leading role in bringing us all together today.

Although I arrived in India almost two years ago, I am still discovering this large and fascinating country. I am happy to visit the city of Coimbatore for the first time.

Coimbatore, I am told, is called the "Manchester of South India", due to its cotton production and textile industries, and referred to as the "Pump City". Coimbatore is also important to Switzerland. This region supplies woven garments to many Swiss supermarket chains. One of Switzerland's better known pump manufacturing companies has a sales office in this city, one of only three outside Europe. Other Swiss companies had factories or service centres in this city. Moreover, a large Swiss supermarket chain contributed significantly to setting up a school for children of parents with low incomes.

Coimbatore is also one of the partner cities of a project of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, which aims to strengthen the capacities of Indian cities, to identify, plan and implement measures for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and for enhancing resilience to climate change in an integrated manner. Within this project, I inaugurated earlier today an air quality monitoring system, laid the foundation stone of a biomethanation plant and participated in the removal of a community dustbin, which has now been replaced by a plantation.

Now, coming to the topic of this conference: the Indian population is a young one, with several million young people entering the job market every year. It is a major challenge to provide them the necessary skills to find appropriate employment.

The Indian Government is acutely aware of this and has set itself ambitious targets for skilling the youth. It has also undertaken reforms and put in place several initiatives to pave the way for the introduction of vocational education and training in India.

In Switzerland, vocational education and training constitutes an important pillar of the education system. It is credited with being one of the driving forces of Switzerland's global competitiveness, innovation and thriving economy. Two-thirds of all young people coming out of compulsory education in Switzerland enrol in this pillar. This path enjoys wide recognition, support and respect within the Swiss population. You will learn more about it later in the programme.

Since coming to India, I gradually discovered the rich and varied world of Swiss vocational education and training in India. Valuable efforts are being made by many different players and stakeholders, by large companies, the non-governmental sector or even individuals. I have visited several Swiss companies offering vocational education and training to young Indians and was impressed by what I saw. Efforts to address the training needs of school dropouts and withdrawals complete the panoply.

Ten years ago, the *Swiss VET Initiative India* was launched as a pilot project. Considered a success, it is now being implemented in Swiss, as well as Indian companies. In Jaipur, the Bharatiya Skills Development Campus was set up by the Joshi Foundation and has now become the first skills university in India.

On the official side, Switzerland and India have signed a Memorandum of Understanding covering skill development and vocational education and training. We are now putting together a roadmap for our future collaboration with India, which will also aim at enhancing industry collaboration in vocational education and training.

You are probably aware that Switzerland is by far not the only actor interested in this field in India. With many different players involved, is there competition or rather added value to be sought through closer cooperation? With many bottom up, pilot experiences, how can the top down, intergovernmental track add an umbrella of coherence, direction and sense of common purpose? These are questions which I hope we can discuss at this conference today. Our deliberations will help us in better structuring our cooperation.

The experiences and needs of both Indian and Swiss actors, be they officials, institutions or private investors, should be the starting point. On this basis, we can identify together concrete actions and steps forward: sharing of good practices, development of curricula, scaling up of pilots, fostering contacts between relevant institutions, these could be some of the paths to consider.

This year India and Switzerland are marking a special anniversary: 70 years of official diplomatic relations. Over this time, our relations have transformed into a full-fledged partnership. The official Swiss network in India is celebrating this partnership with a series of public events, which were kicked off during the State visit of the Swiss President to India in August last year. Today's conference is a part of these exchanges. I take this opportunity to thank our valued sponsors who have made the celebrations possible. The initiative aims at encouraging what we do here today: connecting Swiss and Indian personalities innovating in all fields, in business, research and technology, governance, art and social inclusion.

We want to celebrate our common past: in the field of VET for example, Switzerland has been present in India since the early 1960s. Even more, we want to look forward, by connecting minds, minds that inspire and shape our common future; I look forward to such inspiring discussions over the next hours, focused on the future of our societies and youth, seeking concrete paths to more quality of life and sense of purpose.

Thank you.