

IRFD WORLD FORUM ON

SMALL ISLAND DEVELOPING STATES

**CHALLENGES, PROSPECTS AND INTERNATIONAL
COOPERATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

10-13 January 2005

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REVERSING THE DECLINE-SMALLNESS AND HUMAN CAPITAL IN MAURITIUS

ABSTRACT

Mauritius has for a long time used its 'smallness' as a tool of economic diplomacy. It has used the argument that it is small and vulnerable to obtain a number of preferential arrangements on the international market. The latter coupled with a visionary strategy of economic diversification and a 'human faced' structural adjustment programme have contributed to make Mauritius a beacon of economic development in the region. But this beacon is now beginning to experience a painful economic decline and the country's 'smallness' may no longer be sufficient at the negotiating table of the WTO.

The most important resource of the small island state is its human capital but the latter continues to remain inadequately trained. The paper undertakes an analysis of the most recent educational reforms including the Education Amendment Bill of 2004 which makes education compulsory up to the age of 16. This Act is however, in contradiction with the Labour Act which allows children of the age of 15 to join the labour market. The paper argues that the quantification of schools will not be sufficient to solve the major problem of wastage of Mauritian human capital. Instead a profound review of the educational contents and teacher training is required.

Most macro economic indicators are in the red. Unemployment figures have already reached double digit figures. The country is witnessing the growth of an informal sector. The unregulated nature of the latter and growing poverty in the small pluriethnic state of Mauritius is analysed. Relative deprivation in small multiethnic spaces can give new significance and meaning to identity politics. The riots of February 1999 bear testimony to kinds of social dislocations that the country can experience.

Keywords: Smallness, human capital, educational reforms, relative deprivation, identity politics

Introduction

The small, isolated, resource poor island state of Mauritius has for a long time used its 'smallness' as tool of economic diplomacy. It has used the argument that it is small and vulnerable to obtain a number of preferential arrangements on the international market. The latter coupled with a visionary strategy of economic diversification and a 'human faced' structural adjustment programme have contributed to make Mauritius a beacon of economic development in the region. But this beacon is now beginning to experience important economic and social difficulties. Not only would the country's 'smallness' no longer be sufficient at the negotiating table of the WTO but it may also pose problems when the gap between the rich and the poor widens. relative deprivation in small multiethnic spaces can give new significance and meaning to identity politics. The riots of February 1999 bear testimony to the kinds of social dislocations that the country can experience.

The first part of the paper provides a brief history of Mauritius and its socio economic development. The country is now wanting to make a great leap forward and transit to an information based economy but the education and training system is unable to respond to the new needs of the economy. Part 2 of the paper looks briefly at the educational reforms. The latter are more in the realm of quantification of schools rather than quality education. Although reforms have taken place, the outcomes of schooling are still largely inequitable. Part 3 addresses some of the challenges confronted by the economy and without intending to be too prescriptive, the paper points to some policy directions which can help to reverse the decline and ensure some form of sustainable human development.

Part one- Brief history and economic development of the island

Mauritius, located in the South Western Indian Ocean had no indigenous population when it was first discovered by the Portuguese in the first decade of the 16th century. (Toussaint, 1977). The island was first settled by the Dutch, followed by the French, after which it became a British possession. The Dutch did not stay long at all. According to Toussaint, the Dutch's failure to stay could be attributed not only to a shortage of food on the island but also to their deficiencies as settlers and administrators. The island was deserted by the Dutch in 1710 and the French took control of Mauritius in 1715.

Sugar cane was introduced by the Dutch but the French are the ones who expanded the sugar industry. Sugar until today remains an important foreign exchange earner of the country. In 1735, Governor Labourdonnais initiated a period of rapid development. He set up the first sugar mill and also succeeded in transforming Ile de France from an insignificant outpost in the Indian ocean into a prosperous French colony. The measures taken by Labourdonnais to transform the island also enhanced its importance as a port of call on the spice trade route.

With the arrival of the slaves, the ethnic set up started changing. The plurality of the island took an even more diversified form with the arrival of indentured labourers from India during British rule. Three main developments dominated life in Mauritius during the 19th century; the abolition of slavery, the bringing of indentured labour from India,

and the transformation of the Mauritian economy from one based on maritime activities to one based on the production of sugar for export.

Slavery was formally abolished in Mauritius on February 1st, 1835. The abolition of slavery in 1835 and the end of the apprenticeship system soon after, caused the settlers to try and tap new sources of cheap labour. Slavery left its legacy in Mauritius. Accustomed to exploiting the slaves, the plantocracy adopted very similar attitudes towards the indentured labourers who replaced the slaves. Mintz.(1985:71), leading scholar of the sugar colonies says:

The link between sweated, tropical colonial labour and non white labour was preserved, largely undisturbed by the end of slavery.

India provided a good resource to meet the insatiable demands of the plantocracy for cheap labour. And according to many writers including Tinker (1974), Beckford (1972), and Best (1965), the indentured labourers were introduced to carry out the function of the slaves, therefore the import of indentured labourers from India was tantamount to slavery.

At the end of French rule, social relations had become much more complex. A sharply differentiated society with extremes of wealth and poverty and an elite deeply committed to and dependent upon slavery were the major social legacies of the period. Slavery destroyed the African slaves' mother tongues and traditions. A new language, Mauritian Kreol, which is largely based on French, developed. Today Kreol is the common language of the different elements of Mauritian society but not officially recognised.

Ingredients for a social explosion

Mauritius was not united in its move towards independence. 44% of the population, mostly of the non Hindu majority group voted against independence. Bouts of violence sparked off both in the period preceding independence and the immediate post independence period. Violence flared in May 1965 between Creoles and Hindus. Several people were killed and the British sent in troops which remained until the end of the year. In order to reduce tensions and dampen fears of the different communal parties, the British brought forward a plan to establish a new electoral commission to deal with issues of representation and the system of 'Best Loser' was introduced.

In addition to the ethnic tensions, Mauritius had to grapple with major economic difficulties.. In the immediate post independence period, Mauritius confronted a major economic and social quagmire. It had to grapple with severe balance of payments of deficit, heavy external debts, soaring unemployment, inflation, rapidly expanding population. Many people writing about Mauritius described it as being on the verge of disaster. (Kearney, Naipaul, Meade). Mauritius, it seemed, had all the ingredients for a social explosion but in less than 2 decades, Mauritius became a middle income country and improved the quality of life of its citizens. At the heart of this success story was the state. The latter played a leading role in the country's development. Very quickly it realized the need to diversify its economy and set up an export processing zone. It also developed its tourism industry both of which are major foreign exchange earners of the island.

Mauritius's success story can be attributed to many factors – its ability to control its rapidly expanding population, taking work to the worker through a decentralized policy of industrialization, the Best Loser system and a strong welfare state. Mauritius is one of the rare developing countries which resisted IMF/World Bank conditionality of abolishing free education and health. Mauritius provided free education and health and these have helped to supply a pool of readily adaptable and cheap labour.

Smallness and social cohesion

Smallness as a variable is important in analysing social cohesion. Bray (1992:26) writes:

The small size of the social field, together with ingrained awareness of ecological and social fragility, fosters what another sociologist calls 'managed intimacy'. Small state inhabitants learn to get along, like it or not, with people they will know in many contexts over their whole lives. To enable the social mechanism to function without undue stress, they minimise open conflicts. They become expert at muting hostility, deferring their own views, and avoiding dispute in the interests of stability and compromise. In large societies it is easy to take issue with antagonists you need seldom or never meet again, but to differ with someone in a small society in which you share a long mutual history and expect to go on being involved in countless ways is another matter.

Whilst it is true that the small island state of Mauritius does not experience overt forms of conflicts, this does not mean that there are no tensions. (Bunwaree, 2000). Mauritius has for the past 30 years or so been relatively stable and peaceful but the growing asymmetry in the distribution of entitlements is a major threat for this peace.

Mauritius has often been cited as a model of social cohesion (United Nations Human development report, 1995, Eriksen, 1998) but the model of peace and harmony is being increasingly challenged. The Vision 2020 report mentions an array of societal breakdowns e.g drug addiction and drug trafficking, prostitution, domestic violence, divorce, suicides, child battering and sexual abuse. The report also argues that some of these problems are associated with poverty and deprivation. The social fabric study phase 2 (1999) confirms Vision 2020's argument that a number of these problems are associated with poverty and deprivation. If poverty hits particular groups within a small multiethnic society, the country runs the risk of having to face diverse forms of conflicts and social cohesion is threatened.

The Commonwealth Advisory Group (1997:133) argues:

Community and political security are particularly important for small states, given that dispute and discord can quickly spread throughout society and become magnified into major challenges to social and political order.

The creation of opportunities through a successful diversification of the economy during the 80s and mid 90s and political stability have contributed largely to a stable social order but the contemporary shrinking labour market and the parallel revolution of rising expectations exacerbate the frustration and alienation of certain groups thus bringing about a greater potential for conflicts.

Human capital and the Economic transition

The country was quickly transformed from a sugar bowl to a knitting island. The first wave of industrialisation in many ways demanded basic skills such as punctuality, discipline and some degree of literacy. Given that Mauritius had since the very start invested quite massively in education at primary level and schooling was made free at secondary level, there was a mass of readily available and adaptable labour to work in the EPZ.

The transition to an intelligent/network island

Now that the Mauritian EPZ faces so many difficulties and is finding it very hard to remain competitive, energies are being increasingly channeled into the 5th pillar- ICT. The question that surfaces up however is whether Mauritius will be able to effectively develop this sector given that it is lagging behind in manpower requirements.

Human capital in Mauritius has for more than 30 years been officially recognized as a critical component in the country's development, yet difficulties are encountered in trying to upgrade the country's human resource base. The First National Development (1971-1975:68) drew attention to the importance of the country's human capital:

“The most important resource of Mauritius is its human power. A well motivated labour force possessing the requisite mental and physical skills for a modern economy is the most valuable economic asset. There is a need to create the skills required to meet the demand generated by prospective economic development. This would require a change in the quality and content of education, from the present generally academic emphasis to more technical and vocational orientations at all levels.”

The emphasis however remains academic. Technical and vocational education has taken off the ground but not yet given its rightful place in the Mauritian landscape. As the country enters the next millennium the focus is still on human capital. The 1998-1999 Budget speech states:

‘Our people will be the central focus of our endeavour to be prepared for future challenges. We shall invest massively in education, training and human resource development.’

But whether a small state such as Mauritius which is already facing more severe financial constraints has enough resources to engage in the kind of investment required to render its education/training system more effective both from an economic and social point of view is the question that arises.

The country's human capital has no doubt played an important role in the first stage of industrial development. But now that the country has to meet new challenges, one finds that the country's human resource base remains inadequately trained. The skills and technological level of the country remains poor (Wignaraja and Lall, 1998).

When Mauritius was still in its first stage of industrialisation, it could perhaps afford the waste associated with the education system since the country did not at that time need very sophisticated skills. What it needed mostly in the first phase was a relatively large pool of cheap, disciplined and adaptable labour. The master Plan (1991:29) stated that:

“A major achievement of the system has been that it has provided the greater part of the manpower requirements for the first stage of Mauritian industrialisation.”

One can perhaps ask whether the achievement is tantamount to producing a well disciplined, adaptable and relatively literate pool of labour to serve the interests of capital in the Export Processing Zone or some slightly more trained for the tourism industry. Now that the Mauritian government speaks of shifting to a high tech economy, the emphasis is on the mental rather than the manual. The Master Plan (1991:24) itself implicitly recognized the inability of the educational system to meet the needs of the various new emerging sectors.

The Africa Competitiveness Report speaks of Mauritius as having a very low optimism index. If the latter does not improve; capital will be attracted to other destinations. Mauritian politicians are busy developing strategies to attract FDI to the country. The Minister of Finance at a recent meeting to discuss the ‘investment policy review’ drew attention to the insufficient incentives offered to attract Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and came up with a number of proposals, whilst the minister of Industry emphasized the role that FDI will play in moving the country to a net economy (*Le Mauricien*, 25 Nov 2000).

This paper however argues that moving the country to a net economy is not only dependent on Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and the right kind of infrastructure but that human capital plays a crucial role.

IT and the leap forward

The island’s vision is to become a regional IT or ‘dotcom hub’ and kick start its flagging economy, hit hard by fierce competition and the removal of preferential access to European markets for sugar exports and textiles alluded to above. In a paper entitled “Software strategies in developing countries” Richard Heeks argues that:

IT will be a cornerstone of every national economy in the 21st century and the sooner “will developing countries recognize this, the better.... But not just any IT will do... Trying to copy Microsoft as a major package producer will bring all pain and no gain.”

According to some, it is what is termed as ‘smart exports’ which are critical and Mauritius, according to some people is taking a three pronged smart export road. First, it hopes to export IT services by attracting Indian and other international firms to set up call centers, back office operations and programming centers. Second, Mauritius will build on its unique domestic strengths- French is widely spoken throughout the island and this will be useful in creating software packages for French language markets in Africa, Europe and Canada and thirdly, Mauritius hopes to become a regional center for manufacture of computer hardware.

In November 2001, Prime Minister Jugnauth at the launch of the cyber city project in Port Louis stated that:

“We have set ourselves the task of putting Mauritius on the digital map.”

But whether we will be able to successfully do so is the question that we wish to pose here. As pointed out above the poverty of science and technology needs to be tackled urgently. The emphasis is now on the mental rather than the manual and if the young people of Mauritius are not sufficiently attracted to the scientific and technological disciplines, the brains that are required to transit to a cyber-island will be lacking. On the other hand, the country may decide to import foreign labour from Bangalore - the ‘Silicon Valley’ of India for instance, but that may have other severe economic and social implications.

Retooling Mauritian labour and educational reforms

Another major challenge confronting Mauritius is the lack of skilled and qualified human power. Mauritius needs to upgrade its human resource base as well as minimise waste of its human capital. The International Herald Tribune of 20th Sept 1993 in a special report on Mauritius says that the ‘economy needs to retool to ward off stagnation’. In that same article, the Herald Tribune quoting the World Bank says:

Mauritius will need to foster increased labour productivity by improving technology and reallocating labour to higher productivity sectors. This will require an upgrading of skills and thus a greater emphasis on education and manpower training.

The question of upgrading its human resource base has also been taken up by Wignaraja and Lall (1998:75) but Mauritius has still not been able to address the inefficiencies of its education/training system. Many documents and policy papers have been produced. There was a Master Plan of Education in 1991 and an Action Plan in 1996 but none of them have been implemented. One of the major concerns of both plans is to reduce the inefficiencies and to provide a compulsory nine year schooling system but this is still at the level of rhetoric

In an interview accorded to the same Herald Tribune, Prime minister Jugnauth discussing the shift of the economy to a high tech one said that:

“ To succeed in our strategy... we are implementing a Master Plan on education that aims at shaping up a new education system that is more responsive to the needs of a modernising economy.”

However, the Master Plan was not implemented and it has been heavily critiqued. Virahsamwmy (1991) in an interview to l’Express, one of the leading papers in the country argued:

“The least we could expect from a Master Plan are the guidelines but it prefers the non committal vagueness. Nothing in the Master Plan throws light on numeracy or literacy. We are not told why after 6 to 9 years of schooling over 50% of all children attain a level of literacy proximate to

zero,'tu korek; no problem' in lieu of meaningful reforms a catch phrase is chosen: nine year schooling will now top the hit parade.”

There have been various attempts to reform the Mauritian education system- the Master Plan, the Action Plan and the most recent one- that of Minister Obeegadoo.

A new coalition government that came to power in 2000 proceeded with some of the reforms proposed by the preceding Labour government. But they did it, again, without consultation, which resulted in resistance from both parents and teachers. The teachers threatened to strike (*l'Express* 2002a), and the former head of the Mauritius Institute of Education, in response to parental opposition, pleaded for 'a little patient confidence as the results of the present educational reform which is slowing gathering momentum and public acceptance will be visible . . . in a few years time' (Saddul 2002). The reforms that were instituted included the abolishing the system of ranking students' CPE results; extending the normal minimum number of years of schooling by introducing a pre-vocational stream for those who had failed the primary school leaving exams (formerly the CPE); building secondary schools in each region of the country; and extending the hours of schooling; and reforming the basic curriculae (Mauritius, Ministry of Education and Scientific Research 2001a & b;).

It should be noted that there have been some problems with the implementation, perhaps because too much was attempted too quickly. Although the plan calls for a rapid hiring and retraining of teachers, the government seems to be quite sanguine about funding, and training, the required teachers when the Pay Research Board only two years before was deploring the lack of qualified teachers. The threatened slowdown by the teachers unions did take place. The inclusion of oriental languages, including Arabic, has been soft-pedalled but from an examination of the documents and interviews with staff and parents there seems to be little doubt that students who take one of these languages will be at an advantage. To the government's credit they are putting resources toward children who are considered 'at risk', many of whom are Creoles, but it is not clear to what extent these resources will be in place soon. The building program itself, intended to be completed by January 2003, became behind schedule and there were some delays in the start of the school year as a result. From interviews it is clear that the building program is widely perceived to be a highly corrupt process. Nevertheless, the fact that these essential ideas about the types of reform that are required have survived three different governments is an indication of the widespread recognition of the problems of the education system (Obeegadoo 2000).

The latest reforms are supposed to bring about a greater democratization of education but from mere observations, it seems that extended years of schooling are simply an 'extension' but the outcomes of this extension is of no significance in terms of mobility or quality of education.

The words of Kadress Pillay captures the extent to which the Mauritian education system preserves the status quo and excludes some important sections of Mauritian society. Pillay argues:

“C'est en terme du degre de l'exclusion sociale qu'on va pouvoir benchmark un projet educatif. Je trouve que les reformes timides entreprises par Obeegadoo font l'impasse sur l'exclusion sociale a

Maurice. Allez faire une analyse du profil social des enfants qui ont été admis au collège St Mary's, par exemple, dans le sillage du plan Obeegadoo, et vous allez constater que rien n'a changé... »

That nothing has changed is perhaps somewhat exaggerated and more importantly premature to pronounce on it. What might be interesting is to study the impact of the ZEP schools and the 9 year schooling in a couple of years and measure the extent to which these students have been able to get into the mainstream.

More recently, the education act has been amended to make schooling compulsory up to the age of 16 but the labour act allowing children to start work at the age of 15 has not been reviewed. This implies that some children, especially the poor and those who cannot meet the cultural and linguistic capital required by the school are the ones who would be out of the system first. Such inequity at a time of growing poverty and rising unemployment has implications for a small state such as Mauritius. The visibility of relative deprivation can take important dimensions in small spaces.

What is also clear is that the change so desperately needed for the survival of the economy is not happening. A lot is being said about the need to match our education system with the needs of the economy but science and technology so vital to this survival and the new niche- IT sector remains marginal to these reforms.

Another major weakness of the education/training system is the poor scientific and technological development of the country. Many reports, plans and documents refer to it but addressing the problem effectively seems to be more difficult. Suddhoo (2003) notes:

“As the world becomes increasingly driven by science and technology Mauritius cannot stay aloof of these developments. Our ability to remain competitive in the technological race will strongly depend on the quality, the scientific know how and technological skills of our human resources. Science education is nowadays a basic necessity for the citizen to comprehend and live in a world that is increasingly undergoing technological transformation.”

Not only is the level and quality of science and technology teaching and learning rather poor but it is also largely gender blind. Women and girls remain highly under represented this sector. (Bunwaree 2003).

Globalisation, smallness and the power of being powerless

The question that this section seeks to address is whether a small, isolated, dependent, resource poor economy which is caught in the throes of globalization will be able to survive and maintain sustainable human development.

The Economist of 28th Feb (1998:47) devotes a section to Mauritius and entitles it 'Miracle in Trouble'. The Economist writes:

...Surprises don't go well with the Mauritian private sector and the crisis in South East Asia came as a particularly nasty one. In the past decade Asian style policies in Mauritius produced an export led boom which transformed this previously sugar dependent economy into a mini miracle,

an African tiger cub. Now Mauritian textile prices are being undercut by cheaper Asian garments.

Cheaper Asian garments and the emergence of cheap labour countries such as Madagascar, Sri Lanka and Vietnam are certainly important difficulties for Mauritius, but the country has to face other significant challenges in the post General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) era. The globalization and liberalisation of trade under the aegis of WTO will adversely affect many of the semi-protectionist advantages enjoyed by Mauritius under the outgoing GATT regime.

The MFA which has enabled Mauritian firms to receive higher prices for its clothing exports to the European Union and the US runs out in 2005. The dismantling of the Multi Fibre Agreement (MFA). The protected markets enjoyed so far will disappear. Mauritian textiles and clothing will then be subject to the same rules of the ruthless market. The emergence of regional blocks such as NAFTA, ASEAN, the European Union has implications for Mauritius. Mauritius may find it very difficult to access any one of them.

The initial spurt of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) inflows that fuelled the boom is tapering off (World Investment Report, 1997). Lack of investment in the country impact on employment creation possibilities. The Labour Force survey (1995) mentions an unemployment level of 10% but there is no consensus on the actual level of unemployment in the country.

As Mauritius's economic difficulties abound and windows of opportunity become scarcer, it becomes imperative for Mauritius to establish a new educational order, one which equalises opportunities in the true sense, focussed on outcomes and not merely access. Whilst retaining the need to make education/training more relevant to the needs of the economy, the Mauritian education system should also beef up its social and cultural responsibilities, instill such values in citizens so that 'otherness' takes a new significance, becomes a factor that unite rather than divide.

Since our EPZ (Export Processing Zone) is heavily concentrated in textiles and conditionalities are most severe on textiles, capitalists are having to find ways and means to retain productivity and competitiveness. The two methods that they mostly adopt is either to relocate or to import foreign labour. The impact of foreign labour on local employment has not been studied but the presence of foreign workers especially if it goes on increasing, will certainly pose a new challenge to multiculturalism in a small place like Mauritius.

For quite some time, many countries including Mauritius have used their 'smallness' as a tool of economic diplomacy. Baldacchino (1993:38) explains how small states use the 'power of being powerless' and the 'importance of being unimportant' to negotiate in their interests. But in this increasingly liberalised and globalised era, one is not so sure whether such economic diplomacy will continue to hold good. Mauritius has been able to secure derogation for the "third country fabric" for one year but this is certainly not enough to ensure the growth of the economy as well as the creation of jobs which is so urgently required.

Conclusion

Trapped in ‘dependent development’ and having to confront the exigencies of the global economy, Mauritius has to juggle with various policies to try and maintain its competitive edge as well as its social cohesion. Smallness poses various dilemmas to Mauritius as it attempts to minimise waste along the educational continuum and upgrade its human resource base. Expanded schooling opportunities and extended years of schooling raises aspirations and expectations which are often unmet since a small country’s capacity to generate employment is even more limited than bigger countries.

Mauritius has to innovate to get out of its impasse and reverse the decline. Its thinking and strategy should concentrate on the following

1. Promote pro-poor growth.
2. Develop technology houses to bring value added to our products as well as those from the region.
3. Consolidate a cooperative culture and develop innovative clustering.
4. Mainstream the informal sector and build up linkages with the formal economy.
5. Tackle the skills deficit urgently and address gender gaps.
6. Strengthen the institutional framework.
7. Encourage the private sector to become an engine of jobs and services, promote the social conscience of the private sector.
8. Identify policy oriented research needs and building bridges between researchers and policy makers.
9. Develop a sector wise road map for further regional integration/commerce.
10. Consolidate our technical expertise and negotiation skills whilst developing new tools of economic diplomacy.

In other words, the ‘myth of the powerless state’ should be shaken off. The 3 sectors-government, business and civil society should channel their energies towards the promotion and implementation of the above. Without a holistic approach, it will be very difficult to reverse the decline and ensure sustainable human development.

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