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Pathway for a green, fair, and resilient Food System in the Republic of Mauritius

National Dialogue Report: first step for Food Systems Transformation Strategy

BACKGROUND

The Republic of Mauritius is made up of a group of islands including the Chagos Archipelago and smaller islets located in the Southern Indian Ocean, about 2,500 km off the east of the African continent. It covers an area of 1,865 km² and has a population of about 1.3 million people. The second largest island, Rodrigues, lies further 560 km to the east and has a population of nearly 42,000 on an area of 108 km. The islands are volcanic in origin and are surrounded by coral reefs. Mauritius Island has a small coastal plain, mountains and a central plateau.

With a view to achieving the strategic objectives of the agricultural sector, namely in terms of food security, it is imperative that the challenges linked to the food safety system be addressed. Mauritius can produce a wide range of crops and livestock due to its geographical location and varied climatic conditions. The Mauritian agriculture, excluding forestry is dominated largely by sugar cane cultivation. Due to limited land resources, the country is constrained in its agricultural production and it is considered to be a Net-Food Importing Developing Country (NFIDC) where it imports almost about 77% of its food requirements and the contribution of agriculture to the national GDP was estimated at 3.3%. In 2019, some 45,000 ha of agricultural land were devoted to sugar cane production, about 7,300 ha to food crops (including strategic crops such as potatoes, onions, garlic) and nearly 700 ha to tea. Livestock production is undertaken in cattle, goat, sheep, pig, deer, and poultry farming. Milk and dairy products are also important components of this sub-sector. The island also has an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of 1.9 million km² with a stock of various fish, including pelagic and demersal species. Apiculture is another sector which is gaining momentum.

Agricultural production activities in Mauritius (excluding Sugar cane production) are undertaken both by the corporate sector and a large number of small holder farmers (11,000 in the crop sector and 5500 in livestock sector). There is also an emerging group of farmers growing fruits and flowers servicing both domestic and exports markets. Some of the farmers have vertically integrated into food processing hence they add value to their products. In the sugar sector, there are around 12000 small farmers with fields of less than 10 ha, while corporate farmers (about 33) own on average more than 100 ha of land. The Mauritian fisheries industry consists of two quite separate sectors namely: domestic fisheries, which include lagoon fishing and banks fisheries and high seas fisheries, which is done mainly by foreign vessels fishing for tuna.

The Covid 19 pandemic has revealed the fragility of our food systems and has affected all countries poor or rich. Beyond a health calamity, it has caused economic hardships, severe

disruption in services and restrictions on movement. The poor and vulnerable ones faced serious threats in their immediate food security, health and nutrition. Our food system, health systems and economic system have all been under threat and the weaknesses have been highlighted. Our food system is also faced with other challenges such as climate change, water scarcity, land degradation, flash floods, loss of biodiversity, pest, and disease outbreaks amongst others.

Given the indispensable need for food supply stability, the national challenge thus is to restructure our agriculture to improve food self-sufficiency. Addressing this challenge effectively demands a multi-pronged approach, with actions and interventions at various levels of the agri-food supply chain: (i) resource management and utilisation, (ii) production systems, (iii) marketing systems, (iv) regulatory framework, (v) international trade, (vi) distribution systems and (vii) consumer demand.

NATIONAL DIALOGUE

“Our vision is that we need to get organized to produce more of what we consume and to consume what we produce. The Mauritian agriculture has to be more resilient, fair, sustainable, and inclusive.

Our agriculture will have to be transformed towards modern production systems and technology based with the participation of all stakeholders including the community.

In that regard, the Minister for Agro-industry and Food Security of the Republic of Mauritius and the UN Resident Coordinator for Mauritius and Seychelles launched a National Food Systems Dialogue in June.

This was followed by 6 thematic consultation sessions held during the months of July and August organised in a hybrid manner.

Participants were invited to present their vision for 2030 and their contributions to its realization, according to the 5 proposed tracks of action:

- Ensuring access to safe and nutritious food for all
- Moving to sustainable consumption patterns
- Stimulating nature-friendly production
- Promoting equitable livelihoods
- Building resilience to vulnerabilities, shocks, and stress

The first four thematic (Crop, Food processing, Livestock and value chain), were organised regionally, close to the producers and stakeholders. The national convenor, and facilitator of the Dialogue as well as a number of participants were present. However, most participants joined through the zoom platform. .

Only a few contributed to the fifth session on Fisheries, organised jointly with the Ministry of Blue Economy, Marine Resources, Fisheries and Shipping.

The sixth session was an online symposium organised by the Ministry of Youth Empowerment, Sports & Recreation in the context of the International Youth Day on the theme: “Transforming Food Systems: Youth Innovation for Human and Planetary Health”.

Main findings:

- Sustainable Production
- Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation
- New Technology in the food value chain
- Accessibility to land and other production resources
- Development of the Livestock sector
- Addressing labour shortage
- Youth involvement
- Addressing food loss and wastage

Discussion Outcomes

Sustainable Production

- Minimum use of chemical inputs
- Create enabling environment for the adoption of sustainable production/systems
- Shift toward agro-ecological production systems
- Use of environment friendly pest control strategies

Local Crops

- Develop local seed industry
- Encourage production and value addition of local crops
- Diversify crop base

Climate Change Adaptation/Mitigation

- Sensitize and involve farmers on climate change adaptation and mitigation/strategies
- Develop the small ruminant sector
- Develop climate resilient agriculture
- Reduce energy expenses and promote use of renewable energy
- Adopt farming practices that prevent land degradation.
- Further promote Agroforestry.
- Promotion of efficient organisation systems
- Regenerate soil health.

New Technology

- R & D for the introduction of new technologies to increase productivity
- Digitalisation of local agriculture
- Use of ICT tools for improving extension and training services
- Develop Information Systems to align production and marketing
- Acquisition of new technologies e.g. vertical farming, controlled environment agriculture

Land

- To make maximum use of arable land.
- Agricultural land to be considered in land planning
- Facilitate access to land and other production resources

Livestock

- Assist farmers in acquiring new breeds adapted to local conditions
- Develop fodder production, produce quality fodder
- Production of small remnants including venison
- Reinforce the Poultry Sector

This pathway will reflect the commitments of all stakeholders engaged with the agricultural sector. However, several Ministries, organisations and institutions will have to coordinate actions to meet the challenges and achieve the goals. The scale and challenges of the transformation of our food systems over the decade require the mobilisation of all public services, including other ministries: Health, Education, Business, Cooperatives, Tourism, Environment, etc.

In order to ensure Food security, environment stability, health benefits and to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, this dialogue will need to be pursued at a cross-cutting level and at an international level, again with the support of the UN agencies.

Cross border initiative level

- Given limited resources in most states of the Indian Ocean, joint ventures, and contractual arrangements is to be given the highest priority for the development of the agricultural sector.
- Governments may consider investing in the agricultural sector by providing the right environment (fiscal, financial, security of investment) at the disposal of investors to materialise such regional cooperation initiatives.
- With the support of development partners investment opportunities for agricultural production have to be prospected.
- Our countries can benefit in terms of research ventures since we have similar problems to some extent. Collaborative research ventures with countries with industrial capacity could also be envisaged.

Cross sector approach

For sustained food security it is also a critical prerequisite that Mauritian consumers change their food habit so as to reduce staple food import. Consumers should adapt to locally produced food items (cassava, potato, breadfruit, eddoes), while also taking initiatives at household level in terms of kitchen and roof gardening, urban agriculture, and diminishing food wastage.

Our concerted actions at all levels will undoubtedly bring tangible changes in the Food system of the Republic of Mauritius. This will also:

- Strengthen the attractiveness of its territory to tourists, experts, and investors
- Boost the dynamics of cross border cooperation;
- Continue to build a fairer and more inclusive society, in particular by involving the youngest and addressing gender issues.

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