

Republic of Mauritius

1Q2018/19

Land Reform and Rural Transformation

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Mauritius was discovered by the Portuguese in 1505 and then subsequently colonised by the Dutch and the French before the British colonised it in 1810. Mauritius became an independent state within the commonwealth in 1968 and then a Republic in 1992. When Mauritius was first discovered by the Portuguese the island had no indigenous inhabitants¹, this is an important factor to consider when discussing land reform and rural transformation in this country.

Land tenure has always been the most contentious issue in Mauritian political, social and economic discourse since the Portuguese first discovered it. The Dutch were the first to exploit Mauritius' resources but they never established a settler colony or a system of land tenure. When the French took over Mauritius from the Dutch they renamed it to 'Isle de France' (French Island). French settlers were provided a grant to occupy Mauritius which was pivotal in shaping the colonial economy especially in agriculture. It provided them an opportunity to establish an agricultural society and build a regime of plantation economy. However, under the British Mauritius was no longer a free port. To compensate for the resulting loss in trade, the government encouraged sugar production. In 1825 Britain equalised the duty on sugar from all of its colonies, providing a strong stimulus for Mauritians to produce more sugar and by 1854 production exceeded 100,000 tons. By the mid-nineteenth century, Mauritius had reached the apex of its importance in the world sugar market: it was Britain's main sugar-producing colony and produced 9.4 percent of the world's sugarcane between 1855 and 1859².

Although overall production would continue to rise into the twentieth century, declines in world prices and a massive increase in production in other countries robbed Mauritius of its dominant role in subsequent years. Nonetheless, as sugar increased in economic importance, the percentage of food crop production dropped accordingly, and landownership became concentrated in large, profitable estates³.

However, in the 1860s, the island's sugar economy declined in the face of varied pressures. As sugar beet production and sugarcane production in other countries increased, world prices declined. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 shifted trade routes away from the Indian Ocean. And, in addition

¹ GoM 2018. *The History of Mauritius*, on the Government of Mauritius Website, viewed on 27 May 2018, from <http://govmu.org/>.

² Metz, H.C. 1994. *Mauritius: A Country Study*, H.C. Metz (eds), US Government Publishing Office: Washington, D.C. Available At: <http://countrystudies.us/> [Last Accessed: 27 May 2018].

³ Salverda, T. 2015. *The Franco-Mauritian Elite: Power and Anxiety in the Face of Change*, Berghahn: New York.

there were regularly occurring droughts and cyclones, and deadly malaria epidemic between 1867 and 1869⁴.

This resulted in several responsive ways; they cut costs by centralising sugar production in fewer factories. Furthermore, to increase the profitability of their operations, from the 1870s to about 1920 the planters sold the less productive portions of their landholdings. The process was known as the *grand morcellement*, and it permitted many people of Indians descent (due to the indenture system) to put together enough capital to become small landowners. This meant that for the first time, sugar was produced on small plots with free labour. By 1921 Indians owned about 35 percent of the island's cultivated land. The grand morcellement contributed immensely to the working classes' social mobility, and the purchasing of small land plots helped achieve some economic emancipation⁵.

The first year of Mauritian independence however was mired by poverty and unemployment amongst other socio-economic problems faced by the country in the early 1970's. The then government looked for solutions by seeking aid from international institutions like the World Bank which resulted in the first four-year plan of 1971-1975 for Mauritius⁶. This plan was adopted as a charter for socio-economic development with technical and financial assistance from the World Bank. A Rural Development Unit (RDU) was created in 1971 and it functioned under the aegis of the Ministry of Economic Planning. Together with a team of experts from World Bank, the RDU worked on a project to raise the quality of life of rural inhabitants. At the initial stage, on a pilot basis, 9 villages were provided with the necessary infrastructure like access to good roads, village councils, village markets, electricity, water, health centres and provision of social amenities. The success of the project in raising the quality of life of the inhabitants was so visible that the development programs were extended to another 29 villages. Given that the objectives of the first phase of rural development programs were achieved, the authority went on to design a second phase for rural development. The main objective, amongst others, was to improve the income of small farmers. The projects developed were the Arsenal Litchis Project, and the Riche Terre Cooperative project⁷.

The Arsenal Litchis project and the Riche Terre Cooperative project allowed for small farmers to have access to credit loan facilities through the Mauritius Credit Bank and provided availability of funds from the International Fund Agricultural Development (IFAD). There was also the creation of appropriate schemes for small entrepreneurs where highly productive cows from New Zealand and Anglo Nubian goats were distributed to some farmers with a view to increase milk and meat production. During the late 1980s more particularly in 1988, the Rural and Development Unit (RDU) was renamed as the National Development Unit (NDU)⁸ and shifted to the Prime Minister's Office. The government nominated Private Parliamentary Secretaries, who were elected members of the

⁴ Metz, H.C. 1994. *Mauritius: A Country Study*, ibid.

⁵ Metz, H.C. 1994. *Mauritius: A Country Study*, ibid.

⁶ Chitoo, H.B. and Suntoo, R. 2012. 'Rural Development in a Fast Developing African Society: The Case of Mauritius', *Global Journal of Human Social Science*, Vol. 12, No. 4, pp.:19-23. Available At: <https://globaljournals.org/> [Last Accessed: 27 May 2018].

⁷ Chitoo, H.B. and Suntoo, R. 2012. 'Rural Development in a Fast Developing African Society: The Case of Mauritius', ibid.

⁸ Chitoo, H.B. and Suntoo, R. 2012. 'Rural Development in a Fast Developing African Society: The Case of Mauritius', ibid.

Legislative National Assembly, to manage the NDU. In 1997, the government created a full-fledged Ministry of Urban and Rural Development with a view to bring development at the doorsteps of all inhabitants. The government motto for an integrated and holistic development 'putting people first' was given high priority on the national agenda.

The Mauritian State made tremendous penetrative efforts to reach people in rural areas since independence. The proper implementation and execution of the various policies and programs have been successful to a very large extent. However, land lies at the heart of the economic, social and political life because most SADC economies rely heavily on agriculture and natural resources⁹; Mauritius is especially dependent on its very limited land. Land-based activities such as agriculture and tourism are fundamental to rural livelihoods.

Although the Mauritian government is assisting with rural development, no land allocation is being distributed. The development of land distribution in Mauritius is unique because there were no indigenous settlers like in most former colonies. Consequently, in Mauritius there is no traditional form of land ownership. Instead there is mainly private, corporate, church as well as crown state owned land¹⁰. There has never been large-scale redistribution of land either after the abolishment of slavery or post-independence by governments. Most of the current smallholder farmers and proprietors have bought plots of land at various moments in history, leaving those without the means landless¹¹.

In fact, if you seek out land in Mauritius, you will have to lease it from the government as the remainder of lands are crown lands; meaning there is no ownership and tenants have to pay rent. The old sugarcane estates owned by Franco-Mauritian are being turned into luxury hotels because of the tourism boost and government is encouraging more people and funding projects that no longer look into the acquisition of land as a means for development but rather they seek out more modern ways such as facilitating ICT training and development and manufacturing of textile so that their economy can be less dependent on the production of sugar and agricultural cultivation in order to diversify the country's economy.

Land however is more than an economic asset given its historical and political context; it holds a cultural and spiritual significance in the African context. It is the primary concern in so far as effective political institutions and processes of managing land are fundamental to ensuring that the economic, social and environmental benefits that land can bring to development¹². Therefore, it is critical to balance the roles and processes of land management of both state and non-state actors in order to enhance accountability to society and ensure economic development. Policy

⁹ UNECA 2010. *Land Policy in Africa: Southern Africa Regional Assessment*, United Nations Economic Commission for Africa: Addis Ababa. Available At: <https://uneca.org/> [Last Accessed: 27 May 2018].

¹⁰ TJC 2011. *Land Reform: Legal and Administrative Aspects*, Truth and Justice Commission: Mauritius. Available At: <https://researchgate.net/> [Last Accessed: 27 May 2018].

¹¹ Bunware, S. 2014. *The Fading Developmental State- Growing Inequality in Mauritius*, University of Mauritius: City. Available At: <http://africainequalities.org/> [Last Accessed: 27 May 2018].

¹² UNECA 2010. *Land Policy in Africa: Southern Africa Regional Assessment*, ibid.

should balance the rights and interests of the weak against the powerful, while also ensuring the inclusion of all sections of society in realising the variety of social, environmental and economic benefits that comes with having land; this is fundamental when it comes to the agenda of 'putting people first'. The achievement of this vision to modernise and improve land administration and management system will result in the improvement of confidence and certainty in land ownership between government, landholders and the people granted the rights to use the land. Good governance of land, improving land administration and encouraging equitable distribution of land has a central role in the African development.

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PESA Editorial – Republic of Mauritius, 1Q2018/19

Political Economy Southern Africa: Johannesburg, South Africa. 2018

Political Economy Southern Africa Editorials

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Note:

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