

Reflections on a Changing Agricultural Sector in Mauritius



Sugar Cane Plantation, Souillac, Mauritius. Photograph by Johanna Wandel

Mauritius is a small, but densely populated island located about 870 kilometres east of Madagascar in the Indian Ocean. There are two seasons: a warm and wet summer and a cooler and dry winter. The climate is characterised by an increase in the intensity of cyclones, the frequency of flash floods, prolonged and severe droughts and a more variable climate with inconsistent rainfall patterns and higher temperatures. These conditions are aggravated by climate change. In March 150mm torrential rainfall was recorded in Port Louis in an interval of three hours causing flooding, 11 people lost their lives, an estimated 300 cars were damaged and it is estimated that cost of foods were between 400-500 million Rupees (Business Mega Mauritius, 2013). The country's small size and isolation makes it vulnerable not only to natural disasters but external forces as well. Amongst other economic sectors, agriculture is susceptible to climate change and therefore critical analysis is needed to formulate appropriate responses to the changes it faces.

The Mauritian economy, predominantly based on tourism, textiles, sugar and financial services has been dubbed as the one of the fastest growing economies in sub-Saharan Africa. The economy shifted from a single crop sugar-dominated economy to a service-oriented one where 70% of the GDP is in the tertiary sector. The economy has seen growth above 5% for the past 30 years (Zafar, 2011). Recently, information and communication technology (ICT), seafood, hospitality and property development together with healthcare, renewable energy, education and training have emerged as significant contributors to the economy attracting both local and foreign investors. Throughout these changes, agriculture has remained a significant economic sector.

Historically, agriculture has been a key contributor to the Mauritian economy and it occupies more than half of the land area (194,494 hectares out of 110,796). Sugar cane cultivation remains the main agriculture activity. The country also produces fruits and vegetables on a small scale, tea, tobacco, flowers and small-scale livestock rearing such as cattle, goats, sheep and pigs. Although the industry makes a necessary contribution to the economy, agriculture is currently unable to meet local demand; hence Mauritius imports 70% of the country's net food requirement.

Embracing change

Post-Independence Mauritius received a sugar quota from the European Union which allowed for the exportation of sugar at two or three times the world price. This created substantial profits for sugar cane farmers and was equivalent to 5-6% of the country's annual GDP. When the quota came to an end the traditional sugar industry transformed itself into a sugar cane cluster producing several types of sugar as well as electricity from bagasse and ethanol.

Relying mostly on other countries for certain food products, the 2008 global food crisis had a negative impact on Mauritius and brought issues of domestic food production and food security sharply into focus. The country found itself in a vulnerable position with regards to food security as supply countries restricted export in order to secure food for their populations. This left import dependent countries such as Mauritius in a scramble to secure food for their population. The government recognised the need to increase local food production and promote self-sufficiency and this was expressed in the *Blue Print for Sustainable Diversified Agri Food Strategy for Mauritius 2008-2015*. More recently, the tourism sector has been badly affected as a result of the global economic crisis which precipitated a further need to diversify the economy to include other sectors such as the sale and development of real estate to foreign buyers. This has resulted in the conversion of agricultural land into other uses to accommodate development.



Fresh Tea leaves getting loaded onto a conveyor belt at Bois Cheri Tea Plantation and Factory, Mauritius. Photograph by Wadzanai Madangombe

Looking to the future and key concerns

The Mauritius *Blue Print for Sustainable Diversified Agri Food Strategy for Mauritius 2008-2015* aspires to establish food supply stability, secure domestic food supply, improve nutrition, ensure agriculture is competitive and sustainable, integrated, flexible and responsive to changes in consumer demand. The strategy aims to develop a multi-prolonged approach with actions and interventions at various levels of the agri-food supply chain. The 2008 global food crisis exposed Mauritius's inability to supply staples such as rice and wheat locally, hence the strategy aims to establish strong links to ensure continued supply of such food products. The strategy also encourages Mauritians to get involved in kitchen gardening (a garden in which vegetables, fruits and herbs are grown for household consumption) to promote self-sufficiency. In an attempt to further promote food security the government secured about 23, 500 hectares of land from the government of Mozambique to be used for agricultural purposes with 25% of all crops produced to be made available to both governments.

The Mauritian government is concerned with the development of the agribusiness sector particularly attracting foreign investment in areas such as large-scale hydroponic farming; animal feed production, cattle breeding and high value added food processing for export. The government encourages the use of technology to come up with innovative ways to develop a robust agricultural sector. They are currently facilitating technological upgrade of small cow breeding cooperatives, pasteurisation and packing plants by implementing hi-tech equipment. Mauritius already produces energy from bagasse (a sugar by product) and this can be up scaled and used as an alternative clean energy source. Innovative ideas are also being implemented to enable local cultivation of rice to supply local and export market.

The use of agricultural land for proposed development threatens food security in a country with limited land for food cultivation. Unsustainable practices such as sand mining, environmental degradation and unsustainable agricultural practices contribute towards making the Island vulnerable and cause serious threats to agricultural production. To add to this, the industry along with other sectors in the country is facing a labour shortage that needs to be addressed. Mauritius has impressively transformed its economy from being based on agricultural exports to manufacturing and now, more recently to one focussed on services. Although this has been a success, concerns about the role of agriculture in the economy remain, particularly with regards to promoting food security and the changing nature of the economy.

Reference

Zafar, A. (2011) *Mauritius: An economic success story*. Africa success stories World Bank

<http://business.mega.mu>

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