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“WE really had no choice. Given the small size of our country and the limited resource endowment, the only viable alternative was to bank on the enrichment of our human resources.” For M. R. Sithanen, Mauritius’ finance minister, this type of investment was an unavoidable step along the road to the island’s development.

Mauritius is the envy of much of the Third World. “A meeting of three continents: the charm of old France, the exuberance of Africa and the mystery of the East,” as the tourist brochures put it. The island is lucky enough to be able to offer to a growing number of tourists over 300,000 last year — the beauty of its country side and the lure of a cosmopolitanism probably unequalled elsewhere. It is home to an extraordinary patchwork of peoples of European, African, Malagasy, mixed-race, Hindu, Moslem and even Chinese origin; a little world of one million people living harmoniously in a democratic system and enjoying a higher standard of living than the average Third World country, with a per capita annual income of about \$2,000.

But with more than 500 inhabitants per sq km over a surface area of 1865 sq km, Mauritius also has one of the highest population densities in the world. With no possibility of claiming new territory, the amount of available cultivated land running out, and the engine which traditionally drove the Mauritian economy, sugar-cane, being insufficient to finance development, Mauritius looked to the outside world and its markets to fuel its growth.

This choice led to the “Mauritian miracle” of the eighties, with an annual growth rate of nine per cent. Small industries mushroomed, especially in the export processing zone where almost everything is imported, from raw materials to technology, and most of what is produced is exported. The service sector, including the civil service, employs 40 per cent of the work force and counts for almost half of the GNP.

This successful raid into the world market was helped along by a valu-

Educating To Grow

able asset: a cheap and relatively highly qualified workforce. In Mauritius, where schooling has been free for years, about 80 per cent of the population is literate.

But, in the context of world competition, no position is unassailable. Inflation has taken its toll, the cost of the workforce has risen, and growth has been such that the island is now threatened with a lack of qualified labour. “To sustain the growth momentum, we will inevitably have to rely on substantial improvements in productivity at all levels” concludes the finance minister. This means investing more heavily in sophisticated machinery, but even more importantly, giving the workforce a better education, especially at the secondary and higher levels.

Radical Reforms

Thus was born the idea of a new and “endogenous” development strategy based on a radical reform of the whole educational system. “The success of our future economic and social development is founded on the effectiveness of our education policies.”

Despite determined and constant efforts by the Mauritian authorities, the present education system is an area of major shortfalls. Predictions based on current data show that one quarter of the children who enter primary school will drop out at the age of 12 or 13 after having failed their Certificate of Primary Education twice. About half will have left before the age of 15. Some 48 per cent of children repeat the last year of primary school and 31 per cent the last year of Secondary School. Only eight in every 100 students who make it to Secondary School actually pass their Higher School Certificate. The schools, many of which are notoriously under-equipped, offer inconsistent and generally weak teaching methods, which means that academic success is dependent upon children getting outside tutoring at the expense of the family. Higher educa-

tion is still in its embryonic form; only 1650 students are enrolled at Mauritius’ university out of a total school population of 200,000. In other words, while most children (98 per cent) start school, very few complete their education.

The next phase — putting the idea into action — saw the preparation of “a plan designed entirely on Mauritian realities, prepared by Mauritians, for Mauritians, set up Mauritians,” explains Education Minister M.A. Parsuraman. This “Master Plan for the Year 2000,” as it has become known, was adopted last year after months of discussion to ensure that it would be truly intersectorial, interdisciplinary and reflect a national consensus. Since it is the main component of a “human resources development” whose end result is not only educative, but also economic, cultural, social, even political (to promote democracy), practically all state sectors contributed. It would be difficult to find a group of teacher or parents, an employer, professional or union organisation, or an educational institute — teachers and students — which has not had its say in this often passionate national debate.

Dialogue also took place with the inter government organisations (principally UNESCO, of course, but hand in hand with the UNDP, UNICEF, the International Labour Organisation, the World Bank, and the African Development Bank). “We are listening to you,” the minister was in the habit of saying to the representatives of these organisations, “but the plan will be our own.”

Amongst the advice suggested by these outsiders was that the initial plan, limited to technical and professional teaching, be enlarged to include the entire educational system so that it rest on solid foundations. They also offered their expertise to the Mauritians in the areas where it was lacking: permanent education as well as technical and professional teaching, and the “modelling” which

showed up all the implications of various choices and allowed the Mauritians to make a fully informed decision.

The result? A “remarkable” plan which will allow “the economy to advance and society to move ahead in good conditions with the changes necessary to maintain Mauritius in the group of newly-industrialised countries,” in the words of UNESCO Director-General Federico Mayor.

Across The Board Improvement

In its essence the plan aims to ensure basic education lasting nine years for all children, an improvement in the quality of teaching at all levels with special emphasis on teacher training a reduction in social or geographical inequalities through sustained attention on the weakest teaching establishment, a strengthening of links between the academic world, parents, the community and the workplace, and a more efficient management. The curricula will be broadened of different learning abilities. As Mauritius is a multi-lingual society more attention will be paid to improving the teaching of languages. More emphasis will also be given to sports and creative activities, and at secondary level, students will be encouraged to study scientific and technical subjects.

The plan is breaking ground in Africa. The message from the Conference on Education for All, held in Thailand in 1990, was a double one: apply the Jomtien message on the basis of a long-term education strategy that is rational, feasible and rooted in national consensus; help yourself and heaven will help you. Mauritius is among the first to have heard that message. Its plan fulfils the first criteria. It then turned to the international community to finance the project, which will cost an estimated \$61 million, of which Mauritius has undertaken to cover one third. A conference of donors, held at the UNESCO headquarters, last November, pledged \$49 million.

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