



**Bureau for Workers' Activities
INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANIZATION**

National Trade Union Forum in Mauritius

on

Employment Policy, Gender Mainstreaming and Freedom of Association

Organized by ILO Bureau for Workers' Activities and ILO Country Office for Mauritius

In collaboration with
Confederations of Trade Unions in Mauritius

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Introduction: the economy and labour markets

The economy of Mauritius has undergone remarkable transformation since it gained its independence in 1968. In fact, Mauritius' economic performance has been invariably labelled "*the Mauritian miracle*" and the "*success of Africa*". It has developed from a low-income, agriculturally based economy to a middle income diversified economy. Mauritius now has large and growing industrial, financial, and tourist sectors. The country had consistently achieved high annual growth of the order of 5% to 6%. The economy has been generating an average real GDP growth of 5.3 percent between 1969 and 2013 compared to 3.8 percent for Sub-Saharan Africa. This has been reflected in increased life expectancy, lowered infant mortality and improved infrastructure. Mauritius' economic policies and banking practices helped to mitigate negative effects of the global financial crisis in 2008-09. GDP grew in the 3-4% per year range in 2010-12.

The economy of Mauritius is mainly dependent on sugarcane plantations, tourism, textiles, and financial services. However, other sectors such as seafood processing, information technology and medical tourism are reported to be rapidly developing as well. The future economic growth potential is nevertheless more uncertain. The long-term trend could be declining, partly as a result of zero population growth and the expiry of trade preferences. A general growth slowdown in Mauritius's main trading partners (United States and Europe) following the financial crisis may limit the potential pickup in growth from traditional sources.

The structure of the labour market in Mauritius has also evolved over time, with the rapid development of the manufacturing sector in the leading to the quick expansion of relatively low-skilled job creation to meet the need of the fast growing EPZ sector. However, the emergence of new sectors in the field of tourism and financial services required higher skilled manpower. The demand for high skilled labour was further

accentuated as the government moved forward to promoting new poles of growth in high value added services such as the ICT sector.

Moreover, the labour market in Mauritius since the 1990s has been characterized by a rising share of foreign workers in the labour force (from 0.2 percent in 1990 to 4 percent in 2009) and a rise in female unemployment over the same horizon from 2 to over 10 percent, driving up the total unemployment rate to over 8 percent in 2013.

In spite of the positive attributes, Mauritius still faces serious obstacles in achieving decent work for all. One area showing critical decent work deficit in Mauritius is on minimum living wage. There exist a National Remuneration Board which fixes wages in several sectors but there is no national minimum wage level. The trade union movement has been struggling for years for a national minimum wage that could allow workers to meet basic needs. According to the US Department of State Human Rights Report of 2008, 562 Mauritian rupees per week for an unskilled worker in the *Export Processing Zone* (EPZ); 734 rupees per week for an unskilled factory worker outside the EPZ; set by the government by sector, and increased each year based on the inflation rate. These wages falls far short of the average incomes in the country.

Another area of concern is that the labour market appears rather complex. For instance, the government establishes a separate set of labour market regulations, called Remuneration Orders, for each industry, which specify the exact duties and compensation scheme for every type of worker. The rigid system of determining pay increases and complex labour regulations tend to limit the principles of collective bargaining, especially at the firm level and sector-specific levels. There are also concerns that unemployment will remain at high levels.

Introduction: trade unions in Mauritius

Historically, trade unions in Mauritius were powerful as they represented the interest of workers in the sugar industry. Due to the harsh conditions that followed the Great Depression in the 1930s that affected the world economy and the rapid decline in the price of sugar, farmers and labourers were compelled to resort to union activism to raise their concerns. This was coupled by the fact that management of the sugar sector was characterized by a feudal system where employees were very much servile to their managers. Sugar industry workers lived in labour camps and had to struggle hard to earn a decent living.

With the advent of the expansion of the Mauritian economy, much of the early activism of trade unions has lessened. The strapping economy of the country encouraged people to involve in activities other than that of trade unions. Further to fragmentation, trade unions in Mauritius have been on a relative decline. Moreover, the 'close shop' of enterprises has given rise to revolt against the trade unions, blaming that people losing their jobs are due to erroneous negotiations undertaken by the trade unions.

Nonetheless, the trade union movement still fights for the rights of workers. In adverse economic conditions when employee's rights are threatened by

unemployment, coercion and pressure, employees can and do rely on trade unions to address such issues.

Objectives and structure of the forum

The overall objective of the trade union forum is to enhance the trade union capacity in Mauritius to understand and develop long term social and economic policies, with particular focus on national employment policy, gender issues and freedom of association.

The forum will comprise of plenary discussions categorized in the following thematic areas:

(a) Mauritius national employment policy and the role of trade unions

In the context of the *Decent Work Country Programme* (DWCP) for Mauritius (2012-2014), it was envisaged that a *National Employment Policy* will be developed. This falls under Country Priority 1: “*Creation of decent and productive employment with the provision of adequate social protection*”. It is also indicated in the DWCP under Outcome 511: “*appropriate policies including the National Employment Policy, and programme put in place leading to an increase in decent and productive employment*”. In this regard, the Ministry of Labour, Industrial Relations and Employment has set up a Technical Tripartite Committee to discuss the issue and consider a draft National Employment Policy.

The aim of this theme is to strengthen the capacity of workers’ organizations to be able to effectively participate in the formulation and the implementation of the Mauritius National Employment Policy. The forum will also discuss trade union strategies that could address the employment challenge in Mauritius, especially arising from the impact of the global economic and financial crises.

(b) Gender mainstreaming and trade unions

Globally, studies show that women comprise 44 percent of the labour movement, but a smaller percentage of union leaders. The situation in most countries in Africa is much more desperate, in spite of tremendous efforts in the last four decades. Despite the numerous attempts at discussions around gender issues in the trade unions, it is very clear that the pace at which gender equality is moving in favour of women has been nothing but disappointing. It is therefore important for trade unions to do some serious introspection if the situation has to change. In any case, the labour movement should be setting imitable trends if it is to be taken seriously with regard to gender equality.

In the case of Mauritius, there has been heavy investment in gender issues, but the level of women participation in trade union activities remains very low. The forum will focus on the importance of having a leadership that is representative of the membership: address some of the differences between male and female leadership; and why the labour movement needs more women leaders. Some of the initiatives may include a national-level study to investigate the current state of gender relations and the situation of women in trade unions in the country. In order to enhance the role of women in trade union work, some of the relevant areas for consideration will include development of gender policies, allocation of budget to gender mainstreaming, support to Women's Committee as enshrined in the

constitutional amendments, and all campaigns and activities must ensure the promotion of gender equality.

(c) Freedom of association and trade union unity

Mauritius has a population of about 1.3 million people, with about 553,000 working population. The rate of unionization is about 20 percent of the working population (111,582 union members), scattered around 19 federations and nine national confederations. It is not merely the low percentage of membership that is alarming, but also the glaring fragmentation amongst the confederations.

The challenge of forming a united front amongst federations and confederations in Mauritius has been discussed in many forums, including at the international level. In the 2000s, the then *African Regional Organisation of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions* (ICFTU-AFRO) made special attempts at uniting trade unions. In 2010, with the support of ILO, trade unions in the countries established the *Conseil des Syndicats* (CDS) in a bid to create one common platform for labour. This was in line with their needs as stipulated in the DWCP, and especially under Priority 2: Strengthening Social Dialogue.

The forum participants will have to utilize their experience and understanding to foster a united and strong labour movement at the national level. By bringing the nine national confederations together at the forum it is expected that the value and advantage of working together, union solidarity and establishing of common national action platforms will deliver positive effect in union actions in the country. This approach will have to be continued in future activities and can be undertaken through capacity building and training, as well as support to organizing through national common action platforms and networks.

Target group

This forum will bring together 100 senior trade union leaders from all the nine national confederations in Mauritius. The forum will be graced by the presence of the Director of the ILO Bureau for Workers' Activities, Ms Maria Helena Andre and other ILO officials from Antananarivo, Pretoria and Geneva.