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Governance and Food Security in the Era of Globalization: The Case of Mauritius

Kirsten Koop

1 Introduction

Given their slight landmasses and lack of resources, small island states enjoy only limited opportunities for achieving nutritional self-sufficiency. Most of them are burdened, moreover, by a heavy colonial heritage. The introduction of the plantation system (mostly in the form of sugar cane plantations) meant that the vast majority of arable land was monopolized by the production of export crops. This system has been perpetuated up to the present, with a consequent loss of actively or potentially cultivable land suitable for producing crops for local consumption (Hills 1996: 71). Thus, small island states are often forced to import considerable quantities of food for local consumption, and, as a consequence, find themselves dependent upon export production to obtain the foreign currency they require.

The island of Mauritius, located in the Indian Ocean, is often referred to as one of the very few developing countries to have overcome poverty and hunger by participating successfully in the globalization of the world market (see Nunnenkamp 1998: 32). In fact, the export-oriented industrialization policy followed by the Mauritian government in the 1980s resulted in a remarkable economic boom and led to secure food access for the population. The island's extreme dependence on the world market, however, poses risks for the sustainability of its food security.

The following article analyzes the potentialities and limitations of Mauritian policies aimed at securing food availability and access to food in the era of globalization.

2 Mauritius after independence:

Export-orientation and problems of food security in the 1970s

Under British colonial administration (from 1810 to 1968), the economy of this small island state,¹ which lies 800 km east of Madagascar, was wholly oriented toward sugar export on the world market. When Mauritius gained its independence in 1968, 94% of its arable land was under sugar cane cultivation, and the sugar sector produced over 95% of the country's export earnings (Durand and Durand 1975: 47).

¹ The island covers an area of 720 square miles, and has 1.1 million inhabitants.

Half of the land under sugar cane cultivation belonged to a few Franco-Mauritian planter-families who owned 21 large agro-industrial farms, the so-called 'sugar estates'. Already during the 19th and early 20th centuries, the remaining land had passed into the hands of 32,000 Indian grower's families. Only 5% of the total cultivable land was available for local food production. This land was used mainly for tea and tobacco production, and only a few Indo-Mauritian small planters grew vegetables. The island's population, hence, was almost completely dependent on food imports.

Despite repeated recommendations from international development organizations and scientists in favor of agricultural diversification and increased self-sufficiency (Meade 1968),² the government maintained its one-sided export orientation during the 1970s (Keller and Nuscheler 1993: 264). Its key rationale is to be found in the Commonwealth Sugar Agreement (from 1951 to 1974) and the Sugar Protocol of the Lomé Convention, passed in 1975, which guaranteed Mauritius large quotas of sugar export, and at higher prices, above all, than those of the world market. Mauritian sugar export production, hence, was not exposed to the risks and uncertainties of fluctuating world market prices, and sugar remained a lucrative business for both the Franco-Mauritian sugar oligarchy and for a few hundred Indo-Mauritian cane growers holding large properties.³

This monostructural economy, however, was unable to ensure food security for the people of Mauritius. The population had grown considerably,⁴ while production processes in the sugar industry had been rationalized. This had led to an unemployment rate of 20% at the beginning of the 1970th, while non-official statements assumed a rate of 40% (Durand and Durand 1975: 84). For this reason, a high proportion of the population lacked sufficient monetary resources, and as a result, experienced difficulties in gaining access to food.

The government tried to tackle this problem by stressing export-oriented industrialization in order to increase the number of income-generating workplaces. Already in 1971, it declared the whole island an Export Processing Zone (EPZ)⁵ to attract foreign investors. But the crisis of the world market in the second part of the 1970s put a provisional end to an emerging pattern of promising investments. Mauritius faced serious socio-economic problems. The official unemployment rate rose

² The cultivation of climatically adapted products such as wheat, peanuts, pineapples, bananas, onions, potatoes and tomatoes was recommended (Patureau 1988).

³ Under these circumstances, the national development plan proposed by the opposition party, the *Mouvement Militant Mauricien*, which aimed at restructuring agricultural production in order to attain national self-sufficiency, was also completely ignored (Cheeroo and Treebhoohun 1986: 4).

⁴ Due to an extensive family planning program, population growth had fallen from 4% in the 1950s to 1.5% (1972-1983). Nonetheless, 62% of the population was younger than 25 years of age (Statistisches Bundesamt 1993: 29).

⁵ Export Processing Zones are territories, limited in space, where states offer fiscal advantages and provide infrastructure to export production firms either free of charge or at low charges. Under their terms, moreover, national labor laws are at least partially suspended (Currie 1985). In the case of Mauritius, the whole of the national territory has been declared an EPZ.

to 27.9% (1983), salaries stagnated at low levels, and nearly 70% of the population was living below the poverty line⁶ (Koop 2002: 24). The affected population groups were the Indo-Mauritian sugarcane plantation laborers and most of the small sugarcane growers, who are descendants of Indian contract laborers in rural areas, as well as Creole fishermen, casual workers and dock workers living along the coast, who are descendants of African slaves brought to the island until 1835. In a study carried out between 1998 and 2000, affected individuals reported one-sided and restricted nutritional intakes (see Koop 2001). Their limited financial resources allowed only the purchase of imported rice, wheat and pulses, subsidized by the government, as well as oil and dried fish. For many families, an often adopted survival strategy to supplement resources was home gardening and small animal farming (i.e., chicken, goats and pigs). This additional subsistence economy was carried out in rural as well as urban areas,⁷ and allowed families to supplement the basic food they acquired in local shops, with vegetables and spices providing essential vitamins and minerals. Fresh meat was eaten only on holidays. Nevertheless, the affected people reported periods of hunger during which the sole daily meal consisted of round, flat wheat dough cakes with sauce. Anemic illnesses were frequent, and were the result of one-sided nutrition (Paratian 1994: 228).

When the poor economic situation had an increasingly adverse affect on food accessibility, the government attempted serious reforms in the agrarian sector for the first time (Helmschrott et al. 1992: 143f). Contrary to recommendations by the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) of the World Bank, which proposed export-oriented agricultural diversification (Keller and Nuscheler 1993: 265), the government adopted a four-year plan (1983-1987) aimed at reducing the dependence on food imports and increasing national food self-sufficiency. From this point, agricultural producers were guaranteed sales of predetermined amounts of selected foods such as potatoes, maize, onions, garlic and ginger. The Agricultural Marketing Board (AMB) obtained a monopoly for the import of these products, for cases when local products could not cover local needs (Dukhira 1994: 23). Already by 1984, national self-sufficiency in potatoes had been attained (Patureau 1988: 220).

Furthermore, the government made it compulsory for 'sugar estates' to produce vegetables. They introduced interline cropping during inter-harvest seasons and leased parcels to laborers and their families, increasing their opportunities for achieving self-sufficiency. At least in rural areas, consequently, problems of food access could be reduced, if not eliminated.

⁶ The poverty line is here defined as the minimum income that permits the satisfaction of basic needs, i.e., according to the standards prevailing in a given society.

⁷ Urban households without gardens often used fallow land for this purpose.

3 Successful export-oriented industrialization and food security in the 1980s

On a long-term basis, however, food security for Mauritius depended on improving its export economy. As mentioned above, the effects of the global economic crisis severely limited government efforts toward export-oriented industrialization. The recovery of the world oil market at the beginning of the 1980s, however, induced a crucial change in Mauritian development trends. In the industrialized countries, production methods approached the limits of profitability already by the mid-1970s (Hein 1995: 53). Now the consequences of this Fordist crisis came to light: enterprises in labor-intensive industrial branches such as clothing and textile, and automobile and electronic industries increasingly dispersed production to developing countries with low labor costs. Many authors (see Hirsch and Roth 1986) consider the increasing spatial mobility of firms and the resulting 'new international division of labor' between industrial and developing countries as the beginning of globalization. In order to profit from this development, many developing countries set up Export Processing Zones (over 200 world-wide; Fröbel et al. 1986). The Mauritian government also provided all the necessary preconditions for an optimal investment and export climate. The Mauritian currency was devalued twice under the SAP. It also allocated high sums of money to the global marketing of Mauritian products and created numerous semi-governmental institutions for the logistical support of its EPZ-firms (Leffler 1988: 265). The success of this economic policy became evident from 1983 onwards. Investments by firms from industrialized countries like France, England and Germany increased rapidly. Moreover, because of their cultural proximity and economic relationships with the island's Chinese population, entrepreneurs from the textile and clothing industry in Hong Kong showed great interest.⁸ In just eight years, the number of EPZ-firms shot up from 115 (1983) to 586 (1991), and the number of employed individuals tripled, reaching 90,000. The textile and clothing industry employed 90% of the EPZ-work force.

From this point on, the EPZ employed 30% of the active population and became the island's main employer, even outranking the sugar industry. Increased export production led to a decrease in the ratio of dependence on food imports, which fell from 26% (1980) to 12% (1994) (CSO 1999). Alongside this development, tourism began to flourish, developing into the third main pillar of the Mauritian economy. Other economic branches like commerce and construction also profited from this development.

Nearly all population groups, in rural as well as in urban areas, became involved in this economic boom.⁹ The younger generation of Indo-Mauritian and Creole plantation laborers, along with dock workers and casual workers previously

⁸ 3% of Mauritius' population originally came from China.

⁹ In order to reduce local unemployment, the government has been promoting the distribution of EPZ-enterprises throughout rural regions.

affected by unemployment also found employment in the EPZ. As a result, the rate of unemployment dropped to 2.7% (1991). Moreover, as salaries rose because of full employment, the total household incomes of formerly poor families increased considerably. At this point, they were not only able to satisfy their basic needs, but also to acquire consumer goods such as refrigerators, stereos and televisions.¹⁰ Hence, a large lower-middle class, which had previously been non-existent, began to develop. Food purchases became unproblematic, and daily nutrition intake could be varied and enriched through the higher consumption of fresh meat and dairy products. Kitchen gardens and small animal farming were increasingly abandoned. Household food consumption as a share of total household consumption dropped to 24%, while daily calorie consumption per capita rose to 2,886 (1995) (CSO 1999).

Population living in regions with less developed infrastructures, and where EPZ-firms had not settled, were the only ones to remain untouched by the general amelioration of living conditions. Among those left out must be counted Creole fishing families in coastal regions, as well as Indian families of plantation laborers in some remote rural areas. Still, even in those regions, opportunities to engage in income-generating activities were sufficient to secure access to food.

The Mauritian government, hence, was capable of securing the supply of food for its population by means of a successful import-export strategy, supported by a minimal national self-sufficiency in vegetables, but without any real structural agrarian reform. Thus, at first sight, the globalization of the world economy seemed to enable even smaller states with restricted means of self-sufficiency to guarantee food security for their populations.

However, the literature on the Mauritian success story rarely notices that this positive socio-economic development did not occur under free market conditions, but instead in an environment of market distortion (Woldekidan 1994: 2). The Lomé Convention guaranteed fixed sugar purchases at prices above world market rates. Furthermore, it allowed the tax-free export of EPZ-products to European countries. Hence, the textile and clothing industries were not subject to the Multi-Fibre-Agreement (MFA). The MFA is a restrictive agreement limiting access of apparel from developing countries—especially from Asian countries with low labor costs—to markets in the industrialized countries. Two of the main pillars of the Mauritian economy, the sugar and the textile and clothing industry, therefore, were protected from global competition.

It remains to be seen whether Mauritius' achievement in overcoming poverty and establishing food security will also turn out to be sustainable under conditions characterized by the intensified globalization dynamics which have emerged since the early 1990s.

¹⁰ The following material goods have become a social standard for middle income households: refrigerators, rice cookers, instant water heaters, gas cookers, furniture, electric fans, radios, TVs, stereos, VCRs and motorcycles (Koop 2001).

4 Intensified globalization dynamics and their impact on Mauritian food security at the dawn of a new millennium

4.1 Persistent dependence on food imports

Not least because of its successful export economy, the Mauritian government made no additional efforts during the 1990s to strengthen national food self-sufficiency. Until today, agricultural policy has continued to concentrate on promoting the sugarcane monoculture. As shown in Table 1, the food supply of the island's population is still strongly dependent on food imports. Only vegetable production, subsidized by the government, approximately meets domestic needs,¹¹ while cereal imports are especially high. A prime example of the neglect of limited natural resources as the basis for self-sufficiency is the inadequate exploitation of abundant supplies of fish in the maritime economic zones, where Japanese, Taiwanese and Russian fishing fleets are already over-fishing especially tuna (Keller and Nuscher 1993: 265). At present, 75% of increasing domestic and tourist fish requirements must be imported (see Table 1).

Table 1: Food balance of Mauritius (2000)

Product	National production (metric tons)	Imports (metric tons)
Cereals (excluding beer)	612	302255
Vegetables	94082	17156
Fruit (excluding wine)	11077	33281
Meat	25576	15918
Fish, seafood	12089	37251
Total	143436	405861

Source: www.fao.org

In conformity with the World Bank credit policies, current national development programs do not include any measures to diminish this external dependence in the near future. They rather aim at expanding the export economy into the service sector (Government of Mauritius 2001).

¹¹ 90% of the land (8,000 ha) planted with vegetables is worked by around 10,000 Indian small planters. The 'sugar estates' use the remaining 10%.

4.2 Changes in world market conditions

The recent intensification in the dynamics of globalization is characterized by trade liberalization, increased spatial mobility of firms, and increased global competition between economic sites. Given their proneness to the uncertainties and fluctuations of the world market, smaller export-oriented island states are especially vulnerable to such developments (Baker 1998: 113).

In fact, the conditions of production and sales for Mauritius's export economy are changing fundamentally under the conditions of this new external framework. The new agreement replacing the Lomé Convention stipulates a gradual cutback in the current trade advantages enjoyed by the ACP countries. The sugar market will be liberalized from 2006 onwards. Only the 46 ACP states classified as Least Developed Countries will be guaranteed fixed purchased quotas from 2009 onwards (PROSI Magazine 2000). Mauritius, meanwhile, has been classified a Middle Income Country (MIC), so the Mauritian sugar quota will no longer be guaranteed in the future, and sales prices can be expected to drop drastically. The Multi-Fibre Agreement too will be reduced gradually until 2005. As a consequence, Mauritian textile and clothing enterprises will face severe competition from Asian low-cost countries, especially China (Roy 2000: 14). Since Mauritian labor costs increased considerably during the economic boom, they are much higher than those of other developing countries. Future free market conditions are likely to induce a structural crisis in two main pillars of the Mauritian economy: the sugar industry and the textile and clothing industry. As shown in Table 2, the clothing industry in particular will no longer be competitive on an international level in standard mass production:

Table 2: International comparison of salaries/hour in clothing industry

	Country	Hourly wage (in US \$)
1	Indonesia	0.16
2	Madagascar	0.17
3	Bangladesh	0.17
4	Vietnam	0.22
5	India	0.39
6	China	0.43
7	Thailand	0.60
8	Mauritius	0.85
9	Morocco	1.36
10	South Korea	2.69

Source: Werner International and Kurt Salomon Associates (1998) in Roy (2000: 15)

4.3 Actual economic development

While the above-mentioned trade liberalization measures will come into effect only some years from now, the Mauritian government and Mauritian enterprises are already using their 'grace period' to carry through the necessary economic restructuring.

In the sugar industry, which is very labor-intensive by international standards, mechanization of production and the centralization of factories have been accelerated to unprecedented levels. These changes have been accompanied by reductions in the work force. To avoid the consequences of trade liberalization, some Mauritian holdings bought up sugar industries in Mozambique and Tanzania. As LDCs, these two states will be guaranteed fixed quotas by the European Union.

Reactions within the Export Processing Zone have been various. A high number of large foreign enterprises recently terminated activities in Mauritius and delocalized to developing countries with lower labor costs.¹² Assisted by a large number of governmental support programs, the remaining firms have shifted to producing quality goods, where the labor costs factor is less important, while labor-intensive production units such as T-shirt cutting are being outsourced to Madagascar. Only capital and knowledge-intensive units such as design, final assembly and sales departments are staying in Mauritius. Another strategy adopted by the firms is the employment of low-cost foreign labor from poor developing countries like China, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Madagascar. These laborers already represent 18% of the total EPZ-working force (CSO 2002). As a consequence of these restructuring strategies, the number of clothing enterprises dropped by about 30% between 1991 and 2002, and the number of local EPZ-employees dropped by 20.4% during the same period (CSO 2002).

Hence, two of the three main economic pillars are experiencing an irreversible reduction in jobs. Mauritius's only chance to thrive in the context of global competition without suffering a considerable loss of jobs is to engage in the rapid and successful expansion of its capital- and knowledge-intensive service sector—which is the 'classical' path of economic development in industrialized countries, as well as in Asia's Newly Industrialized Countries (NICs).

Like many other small island states, in fact, Mauritius has already become a popular offshore site for the banking and insurance sector. Furthermore, the government has shown great foresight by installing an information technology park with EPZ-status next to the capital, Port Louis. Another cyber-park is under construction. But despite high growth rates, averaging at 7% per annum, such non-labor-intensive services have created only an insignificant number of jobs. Only the tourism sector, meanwhile, succeeds in employing 10% of the active population.

Altogether, the 'promising sectors' of the Mauritian economy have failed to compensate for job reductions in labor-intensive sectors until today. Consequently,

¹² Many firms, however, were bought up by local investment companies. Consequently, the proportion of enterprises with local or predominantly local capital rose to 68%—an unusually high rate for an EPZ.

the official unemployment rate rose from 2.3% to 9.8% between 1991 and 2001 (CSO 2003).¹³ But economic restructuring along the lines of post-Fordist modes of production not only means considerable reductions in the income-generating opportunities available to the Mauritian population. Salaries in the industrial sector and in areas of low-cost services are also stagnating, resulting in a growing mass of working poor. They have even diminished for machine operators in the clothing industry (CSO 2001).

4.4 Impact of the economic changes on poverty and food security

The changes mentioned above find their expression in the country's social structure. Since the second half of the 1990s, a social re-polarization of Mauritian society has been observed (Koop 2001). Given their lack of economic, social and cultural capital, the large lower middle class—which developed during the economic boom—has not always been successful in adapting to evolving economic conditions. Especially women and young people with a lower level of education are affected by unemployment, low wages, and the permanent threat of job loss. Living conditions for such individuals have deteriorated constantly in recent years (Koop 2001). Such processes of re-impoverishment, affecting parts of the middle classes, and induced by their either partial or total exclusion from the economy, have meant a rise in relative poverty rates from 17.8% (1991) to 31% in 1999 (CSO 2000). Particularly urban suburbs and remote rural areas show a high concentration of re-impoverished households.

Affected families have fewer opportunities to acquire the consumer goods that had become social standards during the economic upswing. Income reductions have also forced many households to make cuts in the domain of nutrition. As shown in Table 3, they are increasingly buying the less expensive basic foodstuffs of the 1970s such as pulses and dried fish—at the expense of 'luxury' consumer goods like cheese, biscuits or juices.

An index of such diminished access to food is a renewed recourse to traditional survival strategies, which had been largely abandoned by the early 1990s. In recent years, a sharp increase in the number of home gardens and of small animal farming (Baker 1998: 113) has been observed (Koop 2001). But affected families are not experiencing a simple relapse into the *status quo ante*. Because so much land has been used for new construction, less is available today for home gardening. Moreover, the 'sugar estates' do not offer subsistence parcels as previously. And as a consequence of increased pesticide use in the sugarcane fields, there are fewer weeds available to feed animals. Another decisive factor is the fact that traditional networks of solidarity within extended families and settlement communi-

¹³ This development is occurring against a background of constant economic growth, averaging 5% per annum. As in many industrialized countries, Mauritius is actually experiencing jobless growth (more precisely: a job *loss* growth) as a consequence of economic restructuring in a free market environment.

ties—which facilitated survival during the 1970s—were partially dismantled during the economic boom (Koop and Scholz 2001).

Table 3: Food consumption of re-impooverished households (example)

1970s	mid-1990s	1999
low-quality rice	Basmati rice	low-quality rice
oil	oil	oil
sugar	sugar	sugar
-	butter	margarine
tea	tea and coffee	tea
-	milk powder, sometimes fresh milk	milk powder
-	cheese	-
-	biscuits	-
pulses (+)	pulses (-)	pulses (+)
vegetables (+)	vegetables (-)	vegetables (+)
tinned foods (+)	tinned foods (-)	tinned foods (+)
fresh meat and fish: once monthly; dried fish	frozen meat: daily; some fresh meat or fish	frozen meat: weekly; dried fish
water	water, Coke, Fanta, juice	water (+), Coke (-)
local rum	wine, whiskey, beer	local rum
<i>subsistence activities</i>	---	<i>subsistence activities</i>

Notes: (+) = more; (-) = less

Source: Koop 2001

5 Final remarks

In the wake of globalization, numerous economic poles, integrated into the global economic network, have developed in Mauritius in recent decades. Agricultural cash-crop production, Fordist and post-Fordist production of consumer goods, as well as high tech service centers and tourism have spread across the island and have succeeded in integrating a sizable portion of the population. However, new spaces of poverty and exclusion are developing simultaneously, a ‘new periphery’ (see Scholz 2001) whose residents experience reduced access to food as a consequence of limited job opportunities. Such socio-spatial polarization processes, reducing the middle class in those countries where it existed, are a structural consequence of the new dynamics of globalization. In fact, a growing number of recent theoretical and empirical analyses have demonstrated that globalization tends to develop network structures that link integrated poles of socio-economic development, while at the

same time marginalizing the spaces lying between them, as we have shown in the case of Mauritius (Veltz 1996; Hein 2001 and 2003; Scholz 2003).

From the perspective of development policies, therefore, it is insufficient to simply increase national self-reliance, with the objective of providing security in the face of short- or long-term periods of reduced competitiveness, as conditioned by the rapidly evolving conditions of the world market. It can be demonstrated that food security is not merely a question of food availability, but also one of accessibility to food by the population. For this reason, it is absolutely essential for the Mauritian state to tackle the problems of food access faced by excluded sections of the population living in marginalized regions. On the one hand, there must be an increase in the capacity of affected populations to obtain adequate incomes (entitlement). But in view of the fact that globalization seems to generate the structural problem of economic exclusion and marginalization, it is also necessary to create spaces and means for affected populations to supplement incomes via subsistence activities that are relatively immune to fluctuations in the world economy.

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