

Ninety-second Session of the IOM Council
28 November to 1 December 2006
Geneva - Switzerland

Mauritius is privileged to be present today at this 92nd Session of the Council Meeting, especially as just a few months after we were officially unveiled as a member of the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) in June this year. From then to the present time, the IOM has come a long way to make Mauritius feel at home in the IOM family. We have had the privilege of having the visit of the Regional Director Mr Hans-Peter Boe in July to discuss our migration policy and the assistance that could be provided by the IOM. Soon after Mauritius was privileged to host the Regional MDSA Workshop in October and which was attended by some 15 African countries and International Organisations. We were deeply honoured by the presence of the Director General, Mr Brunson Mc Kinley, who made it a point to come for the workshop. This shows the goodwill and cooperative spirit, which prevail in the IOM.

Mauritius is situated in the middle of the Indian Ocean, and has been rightly described, as a “land of migrants”. In fact, Mauritius was an uninhabited naturally endowed paradise island. It began to be settled as from the 15th century by people coming, from the North, South, East and West. Over the years, the Mauritian population was constituted of the

European, African, Indian, Chinese and other Asian Diasporas. Its population is 1.2 million.

Historical Background

As a small country with its population concentrated on a small landmass resulting in high population density, we have seen our people moving abroad for a variety of reasons at different periods. In the 1960's during our accession to Independence, there was massive emigration to Europe, Canada and Australia, Canada and South Africa for political and other reasons, especially emigration by those preferring the colonial set-up or those dreading independence. In fact, the deteriorating economic conditions of workers and the high unemployment (1970 = 11.8%) prevailing then necessitated planned emigration of workers on a temporary or permanent basis to certain countries. Unfortunately, this element of brain drain was not structured and many have faced the problem of irregular migrants with the result that we have forged our own Mauritian Diaspora spanning the globe and stretching across oceans and continents.

Since 1989, Mauritius began to experience acute labour shortage in the manufacturing, construction and hotel sectors due to the mismatch of

skills. Bulk importation of skilled labour was resorted to as a functionary measure to make up for such shortage. Government provided the regulatory framework to ensure that the rights of migrants are protected.

In fact, by the 1990's unemployment rates had significantly dropped from 11.8% in 1970 to 3% in 1990. Imported labour force has contributed to the economic development of the country.

As at September 2006, there are about 27,211 work permits issued. The largest number of expatriates is in the Manufacturing and Textile Sector – 21,734.

Globalisation

With the challenges brought in big globalization the pattern of migration has changed. The need for specific expertise was felt in the services, offshore and ICT sectors.

Mauritius is once again at a critical juncture of its economic history. The Country faces unprecedented challenges with the triple shocks of the dismantling of the Multi-fiber Agreement, soaring oil prices and the sharp cuts in the guaranteed sugar prices. In addition, the

economy is being constrained by numerous rigidities and economic imbalances that undermine its prospects for sustained growth, investment and job creation. The sustained high budget deficits over the past few years have substantially increased the public debt burden.

Mauritius is again facing a high rate of unemployment which has been continuously on the increase from 6.7% in 2000 to 9.5% in 2005. Mauritius today hosts a great majority of foreign workers in the so-called “skilled category” (93%) mostly from China and India, as well as Bangladesh, Madagascar and France. This has filtered into the manufacturing, construction as well as in the business sectors. Similarly, the falling sugar cane prices have added to the unemployment statistics. Our major concern is the high level of unemployed among women, which has increased from 9.4% in 2000 to 16.5% in 2005.

Owing to the current economic circumstances and according to recent projection made, the rate of unemployment in Mauritius could be over 13 per cent by 2010 – 2015 if no action is taken. The present situation in Mauritius is not one of overall labour shortage, but rather of qualitative mismatch between the demand for workers and domestic supply.

New Policy

Mauritius is now embarking on its 10-year reform programme. This reform programme will result inevitably in labour retrenchment in our two key sectors: Sugar and Textile, estimated to be around 12,000 over the next three years. Coupled with this, we have the problem of growing unemployment (around 9.5% in 2005) due to an increasing number of new entrants in the labour market constituting mainly of young graduates and relatively unskilled labour and the inherent mismatch of skills. In addition, we are very much concerned with the relatively high rate of female unemployment rate which is estimated to reach around 16.5% in 2005.

To encourage foreigners with specific skills to help in the development of Mauritius, investors, self-employed professionals and retired persons are issued with an "Occupation Permit" which enables them to work and live in Mauritius for a period of 3 years. After the 3-year period they are eligible for a permanent residence permit.

Planned Migration Policy

Mauritius has a planned migration policy. Mauritius is a receiving country. It imports skilled foreign professionals, coupled with strategies

for skills transfer and counterpart training for nationals. Workers from various countries, including India, China, Bangladesh, in scarcity area, are allowed to work if they have a signed contract of employment. To encourage planned migration a Bilateral Labour Service Cooperation Agreement between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Mauritius was signed on 24 January 2005. A first working group of the Bilateral Agreement was held on 7 and 8 September 2006 in Mauritius where the recruitment and working and living conditions of Chinese workers were discussed. The Chinese side was informed of the measures put in place to ensure that the rights and interests of Chinese workers were duly protected in line with the Bilateral Labour Service Cooperation Agreement, as well as, the ILO Convention 97 of Migration for Employment which has been ratified by Mauritius. Discussions are underway to arrive at a bilateral agreement with the Republic of India and the Republic of Mauritius to ensure that the rights of migrant workers from India are safeguarded.

Proposed Migration Policy

It is a fact that there is no structured/centralized database on emigration in Mauritius. Skilled migration has increased substantially, especially in the health sector. An increasing number of Nursing Officers

and Doctors have left the country for greener pastures. It is estimated that a Diaspora can be somewhere between 120,000 and 200,000.

We have approached IOM to carry out a study on the Mauritius Diaspora with the following objectives –

- to assess the number and diversity of the Mauritian Diaspora;
- to identify mechanism that can facilitate the interaction between the Diaspora and Mauritius;
- to investigate the potential for developing strategies and programmes that can be of mutual benefit to Mauritius and the Diaspora in terms of socio-economic development, human resources, capacity building, innovation and technology transfer.

We expect to devise temporary migration programme that would offer an opportunity to those skilled workers who lose their jobs or those whose skills do not help them to find suitable jobs here to spend a few years in Europe, Middle East, Australia or elsewhere to build their skills before returning home to find employment in new sectors or to start business. Such programmes will also enhance capacity building,

encourage remittance flows and enhance their development impact. In this connection China and India has been successful in harnessing the intellectual and financial resources of its Diaspora.

In July this year a first symposium on the Mauritian Diaspora was held bringing together over 1,000 representatives from the Diaspora. We realize that the Diasporas are a source of remittance and are potential investors. There are many highly skilled professionals who can constitute knowledge networks able to pass on information and contacts, and could play a significant role in promoting the knowledge economy and be instrumental in job creation. The University of Mauritius is constituting a bank of those professionals to whom it can appeal to lecture to young students.

In our efforts to mobilize Mauritian Diaspora abroad, our Prime Minister in a recent mission to London appealed to the Mauritian Diaspora to come, invest and to bring their skills to the development of the country. He also invited them to avail the facilities the government is providing to attract investment in this country. It is a known fact that migrants who have developed and improved their skills abroad can be actors of the “brain gain” by transferring and infusing knowledge, skills

and technology into their countries of origin. In addition, remittances sent home by migrants can be used to sustain development.

In recognition of IOM's role as the leading migration agency, the Government requested IOM's assistance in the development of migration interventions. In June 2006, Mauritius became an IOM member state and the Government's main the following requests to the IOM:

- (i) Provide assistance in reaching migration agreements with countries like South Africa, Australia, United Kingdom, Canada and countries in the Middle East;
- (ii) Provide assistance in mobilizing resources from the Mauritian Diasporas by facilitating their return home, bringing with them new skills, knowledge and financial resources; and
- (iii) Provide funds for a study of labour demands/opportunities abroad.

The many issues concerning migration should be considered in a coordinated, focused and well-structured manner. This has been recognized at the High-level Dialogue on Migration and Development held in New York, 14-15 September 2006.

