IMPLEMENTATION OF EDUCATION REFORMS IN MAURITIUS

Setting the scene

Education, it is agreed today, has the function to reform and transform society instead of maintaining the status quo. It is thus its underlying responsibility to promote social justice specifically in schools and more generally, and through the spin-off factor, in society at large.

In this connection, the world of education and training rests on the major assumptions that political and social participation, and self-fulfilment are inherent to the kind of instruction and knowledge being transmitted. At its heart therefore lies the inculcation of the notion of democratic rights and responsibilities, respect for Human Rights, Accountability and Ethical behaviour.

At a more pragmatic and down-to-earth level, there are other issues that need to be considered, of which the following are central:

- Attending to differences in gender, race, social class, and ability, that result in political, social, economic, and educational disadvantage and inequality;
- Environmental and ecological concerns;
- School leadership and the teaching/learning process;
- The development of critical thinking and problem-solving attitudes;
- Inclusiveness in education, such that the needs of not only those with special needs but also the talented are catered for.

With around 1.2 million people living in the Republic of Mauritius with few natural resources, Mauritians know that to survive and prosper, they must make themselves relevant to the world and provide services and products which are required by the international community. Undoubtedly, the key to value-added is an internationally benchmarked quality education and training. We believe that a good education system is the key to maximize the talents and potential of our population and to give our people the means to support themselves and build a better life for themselves and their children.

It must be stated, however, that not only have all successive governments emphasised the centrality of education as a primary driver of development but also that the successive transitions in the economy have dictated the type of education to be provided to the population. In fact, if the first level of development in Mauritius in the ‘60s and early ‘70s threw into relief the need for basic education and functional literacy and numeracy for all, today, as the country surfs on the third wave of economic and technological expansion with the identification of new niche areas, the conditions for success have changed drastically.

Indeed, after analysing the difficulties being faced by our textile industries and sugar factories, everyone agrees that our country needs to rethink its development to meet the new daunting challenges. The future competitiveness of the Mauritian economy is challenged by the erosion of the trade preferences and the emergence of low-cost competitors like China and India. According to the International Monetary Fund Mauritius is one of the economies that are most vulnerable to a fall in export revenues following the phasing out of trade preference treatments. Therefore, in order to have sustainable economic growth, Mauritius will need to explore other areas of development. The suggested potential areas of opportunity like ICT, Financial services,...... require skilled human resources. Therefore, we cannot afford to waste our human resources.
In the Mauritian context, it is all the more accepted today that the Education sector will be called upon to supply the human capital required for higher value-added, more innovative knowledge- and skill-intensive activities. These would serve to unlock the knowledge-based future and transform Mauritius into a Knowledge Hub.

The Development of the Education System

The Mauritian education system had for long been shaped by primarily private enterprise with the role of Government being reduced, even insignificant to a large extent. Inevitably, inequalities presented themselves and this provided the impetus for free primary education for all (the ‘40s) and, after independence in 1968, this resulted in an expansive primary-school building programme that would extend free primary education to all Mauritian children. Mauritius has accordingly, and since then, witnessed an evolution from a small-scale primarily private enterprise to a large-scale, national, publicly-funded education system, an ‘evolution’ largely due to the high social demand for education following the economic prosperity of the ‘60s and ‘70s.

In fact, as stated earlier, successive Governments set for themselves the task of placing a premium on education in their overall development policy for the sustainability of social and economic development of the country. This policy was translated in investment in the country’s human resources. Several Commissions of Enquiry and various reports accordingly made recommendations for an education system more responsive to the systematically emerging needs of society. This culminated in a landmark development in education in two watershed years, namely 1977 when education became free at the secondary level and the amendment of the Education Act in 2005 to make education compulsory till the age of 16.

It is vital to note that formal education at all levels is governed by the Education Regulations of 1957 and the Education Act of 1982 and their various amendments.

Since then, all efforts have been geared towards not simply adapting the education system according to the needs of society but also aligning it with both regional and international practices and directions as witnessed by Mauritius being committed to achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the Education For All (EFA) Goals and the Commonwealth Education Goals as well as the policies encapsulated in the UN Decade for Sustainable Education and Environment.

In the wake of the Jomtien Education for All world conference in 1990, and in line with its recommendations for each country to develop an Action Plan for Education based not only on facts and figures, but clear objectives and realistic goals, accompanied by a well-planned strategy to achieve these goals and objectives, the Ministry of Education produced a Master Plan on Education in 1991, which was not only used to guide reforms in Mauritius at that time, but was considered by the Donor Community (at that time) as a ‘model’ plan upon which to base similar plans for the developing world.

However, although there was progressive implementation of the Master Plan of 1991, the development of a clear and precise Action Plan for Education (as recommended by the Jomtien conference in 1990) did not materialize until 1998, and by this stage, Mauritius was being called upon to respond to new demands set by a shift in the economy - from a mostly agricultural to a more industrial and diverse one.
Education Structure

Early development and education (0-5) is organized in two separate systems covering two distinct phases, with the infant/toddler period (0-3) known as the Early Childhood Development placed under the responsibility of the Ministry of Women’s Rights, Child Development and Family Welfare, and the 3-5 year olds attending Pre-Primary schools under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Scientific Research.

From Primary schooling onwards, it is a 6-5-2 system whereby the Mauritian child follows a minimum of six years of free and compulsory Primary schooling leading to an end of cycle examination called the Certificate of Primary Education (CPE). This is followed by a minimum of five years of secondary education in state or private secondary schools leading to the Cambridge School Certificate (SC) or the General Certificate of Education – Ordinary level and a minimum of two more years to obtain the Cambridge Higher School Certificate (HSC) or the General Certificate of Education- Advanced level.

For those students who have failed the CPE twice or who have reached the age of 12 but failed in the examination, a Pre-Vocational stream exists in secondary schools for a period of three years but with a specific, skills-based curriculum.

Post-A level studies are characterized by students seeking admission to public or private Tertiary Education Institutions locally or overseas.

Need for reforms in the system

However, there are severe shortcomings in the system, not least of which is the fact that the system remains sharply pyramidal. The large number of children leaving the education system at various stages indicates the inherent level of wastage and the serious difficulties faced by our children to progress through the existing educational set up. There are unacceptable large number of drop-outs and under-achievers.

Illustratively, a cohort analysis over 13 years of education (6 years primary and 7 years secondary) reveals that only 28 percent of the cohort entering the first grade of the primary cycle in 1994 had successfully completed the last grade of secondary education in 2006, inclusive of those having repeated a grade. On the other hand, not all of the secondary graduates found their way to the tertiary subsector, either for reasons of ineligibility or limited access, or again lack of funds.

Educational reforms accordingly are shaped along the following contours — which are also the pillars on which sustainable development is based:

- **Democratisation of access** creating opportunity of greater number of students to access across the subsectors and specifically tertiary.
- **Improving the quality** dimension and ensuring higher achievement goals.
- **Increasing equity and parity** in the system with specific attention to vulnerable groups and people with special education needs.
- **Increasing relevance**
- **Promoting effective management**

Hence, to respond to present challenges the following policy orientations constitute the guidelines for the coming years:-
(i) **Cumulate building blocks of quality initiatives** towards quality education capable of ensuring,
- further learnability,
- skills development,
- employability,
- decent, comfortable and healthy school life

(ii) **Alignment of educational programmes to country goals** in matters regarding ICT, Science and Technology, knowledge boom, research and development from early age of the students to higher learning.

(iii) **Empowerment of the personnel** in the education sector with the knowledge, skills and the right environment to enable effective outcome-based sustainable education along new career paths within a dynamic National Human Resource Development framework.

(iv) Expansion and enlargement of scope of studies of **post secondary, vocational and technical education** by creating further avenues in polytechnics, virtual learning, life long skills development prospects, vocational training, on the job learning initiatives

(v) **Expansion of the tertiary sector** for lifelong learning opportunities, virtual learning, increased access to higher learning, joint institutional ventures with centers of higher education overseas and added overseas learning opportunities.

(vi) Putting in place new **mechanisms and devices**, as well as improving/enhancing/expanding those that exist so as to encourage, facilitate learners into becoming providers, financing agents, enablers and supporters to every Mauritian citizen – irrespective of gender, learning deficiency, socio-economic status or physical disability in alignment with social justice and universal human rights.

**Relationship between Policy Making and Reform implementation**

(a) A number of factors have to be kept in view here, including especially the fact that, irrespective of the changes in government that the country has witnessed over the years as a vibrant democracy, there has been **continuity in change**. All successive governments since education have come up with strategies that might have been different — but the goals had been the same.

(b) Also, the reforms have always been guided by some fundamental tenets: they had to be **implementable and sustainable** in terms of resource allocation. And the level of “implementability” was itself guided by reality at the grass roots level. More often than not, policy has been informed by a mix of top-down and bottom up approach. Illustratively, when the need was strongly felt for a Curriculum Renewal to respond to new needs, a document entitled “Towards a Quality Curriculum: Strategy for Reforms” was produced in September 2006 only subsequent to a National Debate (with more than 200 participants from different sectors) on Curriculum Reforms that was held in December 2005. Again, the provision of free transport to all students across the different levels only became a reality in 2005 when it was universally agreed that, though education was free (and compulsory for all up to the age of 16), the heavy costs associated with travelling was acting as a barrier to the democratisation of access.

(c) Nor can the importance of **partnership** with different stakeholders be minified. Partnership between the public and private sectors as well as with the community at the grassroots level is well-ingrained in Mauritian tradition – and not only within the education sector, but within all productive sectors of the economy.
Three illustrations will reflect how the partnership has been put in action.

(i) When the Government made the decision to provide free secondary education to all as from 1977, it was only natural that the private sector should step in to provide the facilities to meet the demand. A system of grants operates such that private providers of education can sustain the national effort of providing free education.

(ii) The Programme for the Zone d’Éducation Prioritaires (ZEP) schools is part of the equity drive. Through a solid support of the community, these schools are given a special consideration, dealing as they are with children coming from underprivileged areas. The Corporate sector is readily fulfilling its social responsibility by partnering with these schools.

(iii) A number of new players are now joining the Higher Education Sector. Over the last two years, more than 20 new institutions comprising private/local institutions, private institutions set up with Foreign Direct Investment and one branch campus set up by an overseas university have applied for registration with the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC).

(d) Another essential component that guarantees the acceptability of reforms in education resides in their perceived relevance to the needs of the country. Traditionally, there has been a mismatch between the products of the education system and the demands of the workplace. To plug this gap, the Human Resource Development Council (HRDC) has already published the National Human Resource Development Plan (NHRDP) which is a policy framework for education, training programmes and career progression to meet the country’s skills and competence needs.

The objectives of the plan are accordingly to

(i) estimate the demand for manpower in key sectors in terms of different skills/knowledge,
(ii) eliminate the mismatch between the demand and supply of manpower and
(iii) develop proactive human resource development policies. Nine sectors have been considered in the formulation of the plan: Agriculture, Financial Services, ICT, Manufacturing, Tourism, Seafood Hub and Land-based Oceanic Industry, Education Sector-Towards a Knowledge Hub, Rodrigues and the Public Service.

The implementation of the NHRDP thus aims at contributing to make Mauritius competitive in the world market by upgrading and empowering its human resources in a systematic and planned way.

In brief, therefore, it can be safely averred that the conditions for the effective implementation of reforms in education resides in

- The high social demand for education
- Consultations with stakeholders to ensure that the reform agenda is home grown
- Inter-sectoral dimensions of an educational reform agenda
- Relevance of reforms to the global vision of society
- Generating the financial resources
- Enforcement of the principles of good governance and accountability;
- Empowerment through capacity building; and especially
Managing the transition.

Problems Faced and Lessons Drawn

There obviously have been a number of constraints and difficulties faced in the implementation of reforms in the past — which was inevitable, keeping in mind the problems that are inherent to a small island developing state like Mauritius. *Inadequacy of human resources* is certainly one of them as is the *variety of players and stakeholders*, each having a personal agenda to defend and safeguard. But also significant was certainly the *failure to effectively communicate* the very purpose and rationale behind the planned reforms.

Accordingly, lessons drawn are multiple and, very simply put, can be thus summarised:

1. **Mindset change**

   The ultimate objective of any educational enterprise is to improve student achievement so that individuals may fulfil their personal aspirations and become contributing members of society. This requires meaningful change in the way educators do their work. It requires new structures, new tools and new knowledge. But more than anything, the culture of the education system must change. And creating a culture of achievement throughout an education system requires a different mindset altogether.

2. **Need for effective monitoring**

   When investment in education becomes a financially massive enterprise, especially in times of economic crunch, it is vital to identify a set of key indicators that are commonly agreed upon by the different stakeholders in order to ensure smooth co-ordination and co-operation. This will allow the assessment of progress made and results obtained on the basis of objective targets set. Different types of indicators (relating to input, process, output and impact factors) are needed according to the level at which the monitoring is taking place. At the highest central level, monitoring needs must concentrate mainly, if not exclusively, on output and impact of the different programmes.

   Because the usefulness of the indicators identified will depend on the quality of the information available, efforts must be made towards setting up a reliable and functioning Education Management Information System (EMIS) — an essential pre-requisite for efficient planning and monitoring.

3. Managing the private and public sectors can also pose major challenges. Often, hard decisions need to be taken, for instance, clear-cut policy guidelines need to be established to ensure that the quality of educational service provided does not suffer — to the extent that quality-deficient institutions in the private sector have to be closed down, with all the attendant problems that emerge, e.g. redeployment of redundant staff, compensations to be paid to private owners, and so forth.

4. The difficulty to ensure ownership of reforms, especially when vested interests are involved (e.g. the personal agenda of Unions)

5. Change in political leadership may result in a slow-down of the implementation of the reform process. On the other hand, political will to take bold decisions (as evidenced by the
maintenance of free education and the provision of free transport for all learners) certainly
goes a long way to ensure the success of reforms.

6. There is a dire need to evaluate policies, something many countries are sadly deficient in. Only a careful evaluation based on empirical evidence can determine in a rational manner which policy has worked and which hasn’t — all of which would go a long way towards changing direction if the need arises.

7. Strengthening the institutional framework is also a conditio sine qua non: any inherent weaknesses which tend to see them not in line to drive reforms must be transformed into enablers for success.