

**Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Regional Integration and International Trade
(Human Rights Division)**

Materials for the report on COVID-19 pandemic: lessons learnt and moving forward

1. What were the most significant challenges and obstacles for your Government during the pandemic and the recovery period related to ensuring responsible business conduct? What kind of support or/and guidance would your Government welcome to prepare better for business-related human rights abuses linked to other, future crises?

1.1 Following the surge of the COVID-19 pandemic, Mauritius went into a sanitary lockdown for a first time from 20 March 2020 to 01 June 2020 and a second time from 10 March 2021 to 30 April 2021. However, certain business activities were allowed to re-open, subject to strict sanitary measures being complied with. The Covid-19 pandemic has entailed tremendous human and economic costs on businesses, increasing poverty, inequality and lowering standard of living. The impact of the pandemic invariably affected, among others, the business environment and employment. Some of the significant challenges encountered during the pandemic include amongst others:

- (i) increased number of unemployed jobseekers;
- (ii) lack of Job vacancies due to uncertainties;
- (iii) redundancies and reduced workforce due to business inactivity and closures. Some enterprises have reduced their personnel to cope with decreasing production and sales, while others have simply closed down or sought financial assistance from the Government. The functioning of our labour market is disrupted, entailing job losses and high unemployment. (11.5 in 2nd quarter 2020);
- (iv) the Government has been to sustain growth of businesses and save them from closure as well as save workers from unemployment or from changes in their terms and conditions of employment such as reduced number of hours of work, reduced wages etc whilst preserving their dignity in a decent and productive work environment;
- (v) the cooperatives sector has reported constraints such as inadequate business support, access to market and finance, access to technology and shortage of labour.

1.2 Support and/or guidance that Mauritius would welcome to prepare better for business-related human rights abuses linked to other future crises would include, *inter alia*:-

- (i) financial support to empower organisations such as “Association de Pecheurs”, Fishermen Welfare Fund, Fishermen Cooperative Federation and Cooperative Societies, which are cognizant with the vulnerabilities and needs of fishermen;
- (ii) other financial support to empower business enterprises
- (iii) access to finance;
- (iv) access to raw materials;
- (v) Mauritius issues fishing licences to distant water fishing nations in respect of their vessels to operate in its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Repatriation of crew and access to shore services was not possible due to sanitary measures in place. In this context, guidance on how to assist fishermen/crew of foreign vessels during the future crises may be required; and
- (vi) assistance for implementing, embedding, and integrating new technologies and practices into the fishing business in relation to issue of licence and permits.

2. What were the most important lessons learnt from the crisis and how can these lessons help in addressing business-related human rights abuses linked to other, future crises?

2.1 The important lessons learnt from this crisis include:

- (i) there is no guarantee for job permanency. Even the tourism sector has been unexpectedly impacted during the pandemic thus leading to closure of some hotels and restaurants;
- (ii) there is a need to increase our local production enough to sustain ourselves during any crisis situation and be less reliant on importation. Mauritius is a net food importer, with an overall self-sufficiency ratio of less than 30 percent. Due to its limited size, the absence of economies of scale, and the comparative advantage of sugarcane in economic terms, Mauritius imports many of its essential food requirements;
- (iii) the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the vulnerability of our food system and the agricultural sector, especially with respect to food crop production. There is a need to streamline activities for more efficient distribution using e-platform;
- (iv) the heavy reliance on import of basic food also need to be addressed as disruption in the supply has impacted on food availability and affordability;
- (v) more actions should be laid of setting up of storage facilities that ensure provision of buffer stock of good quality food;
- (vi) cooperatives need to adopt new ways of doing business, modernise their activities, make use of ICT, use online marketing platform and diversify their operations for business continuity.

3. Please outline any positive initiatives (highlighting those that were the most effective), including policies, legislation, and plans through which your Government contributed to:

- (a) creating and strengthening an enabling environment for businesses to respect human rights in their operations during challenging times and when emerging from the crisis;**
- (b) mitigating the negative human rights impacts evident during the pandemic and likely to be present during future crises;**

3.1 During the COVID-19 crisis, Mauritius has tightened its measures through procedures, guidelines and laws and regulations to avoid unfairness. It ensured that there is no ethical, social and discrimination and equal treatment for each and every body and. A high-level committee on COVID-19 chaired by the Prime Minister was instituted on 31 January 2020 to monitor both local and international epidemiological situations and for rapidly sharing of key information among the different ministries; Measures adopted by Mauritius include, *inter alia*:

(i) Vaccination

Mauritius started, and is effectively implementing, its national vaccination campaign against COVID-19 since 26 January 2021. The aim was to achieve herd immunity to minimise the transmission of the virus in the community. As at 22 February 2022, it was noted that 996,840 people have received their 1st Dose of vaccine, 958,778 people received their 2nd Dose and 464,942 people were recipient of the Booster Dose.

(ii) Social assistance to vulnerable people:

The Government also embarked on temporary policy measures such as free distribution of food packs and facemasks to vulnerable families which could be classified as a major part of the COVID-19 crisis response to all households living in absolute poverty registered under the SRM as well as to other vulnerable families. Pursuing the national lockdown and closure of all supermarkets, markets, shops and bakeries during the month of March 2020, a home

delivery service had been worked out jointly with the collaborative support of NGOs, for the distribution of basic food commodities to cater for the needs of those vulnerable groups who are facing scarcity in terms of acquiring basic food supplies.

Some 35,000 food packs had been distributed to vulnerable citizens, who are on the SRM and to those who receive a Carers' Allowance, as well as residents of Homes and beneficiaries receiving the Basic Invalid Pension. The National Social Inclusion Foundation pursued with the distribution of food packs to vulnerable families through the support of NGOs.

Moreover, necessary arrangements were made by the Government for the payment of pensions, Carers' Allowance and the Basic Invalid Pension at the doorstep of beneficiaries.

(iii) Agriculture and food security:

With regards to the agro-industry, no one was left behind during crisis situation of Covid-19 and Mauritius has set the example for others to follow. Despite the difficult moments more precisely during the lockdown, the farming population and other business operators in the sector were given access to their plantations and harvest their produce for sale and put on sale for the population. Importation of essentials commodities for the population and animals thought limited was continued to address the needs of the population.

As from 23rd March 2020, by regulations, the price of onions and potatoes were prescribed. A maximum mark-up was also prescribed in respect of certain commonly used food and non-foodstuffs. For the island of Rodrigues, the price of food and other products including canned fish, oil, infant milk and adult diapers were fixed by regulations. Subsidies were also provided on some essential food commodities.

The Government also planned to reduce the dependency on imported food by promoting local crops, agro-processing, and smart agriculture. In the 2020-2021 budget, the government announced the development of a National Agri-Food Development Program that aims to reduce dependence on imports. A centralized land bank was set up to supply land for agricultural production among others.

(iv) financial support

The Government stepped in to provide support to the population to meet their essential needs and provided the following financial assistance:

- a) the introduction of Self-Employed Assistance Scheme (SEAS) through the Mauritius Revenue Authority (MRA) to assist self-employed persons who have suffered a loss of revenue as a consequence of the lockdown in the fight against COVID-19;
- b) the introduction of Wage Assistance Scheme for employers where employers affected by COVID-19 may after payment of the salary, apply to the MRA for financial support under the scheme. Through this scheme, the Government provided a wage subsidy to employers in the private sector, with a view to ensuring that all their employees earning wages up to Rs 50,000 were duly paid their salary, capped to an amount of Rs 25,000 monthly. The subsidy was extended to businesses related to the Tourism sector after 01 June 2020 until January 2022.

The Wage Assistance Scheme and the Self-Employed Assistance Scheme to workers and self-employed individuals of the tourism sector in Rodrigues was extended for an additional period of three months after the opening of its borders. An employer would be required to undertake not to lay off any employee during that period, failing which Government may claim back the assistance paid. Moreover, the Wage Assistance Scheme

to employees of bus operators providing public transport for the months of November and December 2021, provided that the employer undertakes not to lay off any worker up was extended to 31 March 2022.

- c) the Business Facilitation Act 2019 was amended to take on board all necessary measures for ease of doing business and be able feed the population even during the lockdown period;
- d) a COVID-19 Projects Development Fund was created as a special fund under the Finance and Audit Act for the financing certain projects in the context of the implementation of an investment programme following the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economy;
- e) Value Added Tax on hand sanitizers and protective masks was decreased from 15% to 0% as from 24 March 2020. The **Value Added Tax Act** will be amended shortly to provide the legal foundation for this measure;
- f) a Special Relief Programme of MUR 5 billion through commercial bank loans from 16th March to end July 2020 was introduced so that businesses can meet their cash flow and working capital requirements;
- g) the launching of the State Investment Corporation (SIC) Equity Participation Scheme to overcome the financial difficulties of enterprises;
- h) financial support in terms of Transitional Unemployment Benefit to Redundant workers;
- i) in accordance with established criteria, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) that were negatively impacted by the pandemic were eligible for the following schemes, namely
 - i. the SME Interest-Free Loan Scheme which would be made available to SMEs with turnover not exceeding Rs50 Million. An interest-free loan of Rs100,000 with a moratorium of 5 years on repayment would be granted to some 18,000 employers;
 - ii. the Self-Employed One-Off Grant Scheme which would be available to all those registered with the Mauritius Revenue Authority under the Self-Employed Assistance Scheme registered as at 15 March 2021;
 - iii. the COVID-19 Special Support Scheme which would be implemented by the Development Bank of Mauritius whereby SMEs would be able to apply for unsecured loans of up to Rs1 Million at an interest rate of 0.5 percent per annum with a moratorium of 1 year on payment of capital and interest;
 - iv. the DBM One-Year Moratorium Scheme which would provide a one-year moratorium on payment of capital and interest on all its existing loans under its various schemes; and
 - v. the postponement of VAT Payment from end March 2021 to 15 July 2021; and

(v) labour sector

- (i) amendments were brought to the Worker's Rights Act (WRA) to protect employees from unemployed or redundancies. Additional information on the provisions of the WRA can be found at **Annex**;
- (ii) training and re-skilling of unemployed jobseekers in certain categories of jobs that will be in demand in the near future. In this context, the Government has developed the National Training and Re-skilling Scheme to provide opportunity for some 6,000 unemployed jobseekers to enter the labour market with the required skills; and

(iii) to minimise physical contact and protect employees, the Government has provided full support to promote the “work from home” and “flexitime”.

(vi) cooperatives sector:

The following support was provided to the cooperative businesses, namely:

- (i) access to Market – Cooperative Market Fairs are held to provide a marketing platform to cooperative societies;
- (ii) training and Capacity Building – Online training programmes are organised by the National Co-operative College; and
- (iii) financial schemes to Cooperative Societies to boost local production of food. The Scheme has financed equipment, machineries and other related accessories to a maximum of Rs150,000 per co-operative society related to local production of agricultural produce and food items. Co-operatives have been encouraged through this scheme to embark on or increase the local production of agricultural produce and food items to give a boost to our economy and also assisting the country in attaining food security. For the Financial Year 2020/2021, 30 co-operatives have received financial assistance of some Rs 4.4million under this Scheme.

(c) ensuring effective access to remedy for business-related human rights abuses caused during times of crisis.

3.2 The State of Mauritius ensures the availability of essential commodities to the population and the safeguard the rights of consumers. The Consumer Affairs Officers carry out on-site inspections to ensure that there is no abuse on the part of traders where prices are fixed or controlled, and it enforces protection legislations to safeguard the rights of consumers. As such, it ensures that businesses do not infuse human rights by preventing profiteering and excessive pricing for essential commodities through various forms of price controls.

The State of Mauritius condemns all forms of business-related abuses. State-based grievance mechanisms do exist in Mauritius with a view to safeguarding the rights of an individual, deterring and dealing with business related human right abuse issues. These include:

- (i) the Citizen Support Unit (CSU) of the Prime Minister’s Office through its internet-based complaints management platform, the Citizen Support Portal (CSP) which has been developed and put in place to facilitate the registration of complaints/ general inquires and suggestions online. The CSU caters complaints from NGOs, vulnerable groups, migrant workers, trade unions, persons with disabilities, etc.;
- (ii) the Consumer Support Portal which is a decent grievance mechanism with State involvement in Mauritius. This mechanism is in fact improving the trade-related human rights situation and helping in reducing future grievances and harms. A hotline **(185)** has also been put at the disposition of the public to report any abuse; and
- (iii) the Consumer Rights App, which is the mobile application of the Ministry of Commerce and Consumer Protection for reporting abusive practices amongst others.

4. What are those opportunities that would allow your Government to build back better by ensuring stronger and more decisive action to protect human rights in the context of business activities?

4.1 Opportunities that would allow to build back better by ensuring stronger and more decisive action to protect human rights in the context of business activities would include:

- (i) a full-fledged and dynamic Tripartite Council to seek avenues for quick recovery measures and their implementations;
- (ii) give opportunities to the younger generation to embark on realistic and reliable projects for sustainable agricultural development. Training and education should be a major component to empower the farmers. Several opportunities are put at the disposal the SMEs and agri-business operators among which are the various supporting schemes such as Sheltered Farming Schemes, Schemes for the purchase of seed, etc. Provisions to relaunch the agricultural sector through planned and smart agricultural production remains a priority for the Government;
- (iii) supports/schemes provided to cooperatives;
- (iv) training and capacity building for multitasking to secure jobs in other sectors;
- (v) access to technology and science and technology should be massively used to contend the spread of the virus;
- (vi) adoption of digital technology to better promote the work from home protocol and maximise e-commerce in so as to keep the economy running;
- (vii) encourage women participation in decision making process;
- (viii) fostering strong Public Private Partnership (PPP) that will provide necessary support to business in terms of softening taxes and protect investments from FDIs; and
- (ix) a new human resource strategy to adapt to the needs of the labour market.

5. What efforts were made by your Government to engage in constructive and meaningful dialogue with various stakeholders, including civil society actors, to address business-related human rights abuses during the pandemic, including to protect workers and to build a resilient society and economy based on inclusive recovery able to prevent human rights abuses in future crisis situations?

5.1 In order to engage in constructive and meaningful dialogue, various sensitisation programmes and meetings were held with the various stakeholders. Public and Private Sector Meetings were held to work on the strategy to reboot the economic and the tourism industry. In the context of the budget exercise, meetings were held with the private sector represented by the Business Mauritius, trade unions and civil societies.

5.2 Moreover, no related case of abuse was noted during the crisis situation, in fact the Government of Mauritius has addressed the pandemic with all the necessary measures for continuation of business and to avoid loss and their closure. Several measures such as working from home or operate the business with reduced staffing have being very encouraging. Several financial packages as mentioned above in Part 3 were introduced by the Government to take care of the vulnerable groups, the self-employed and business operators and no one is left behind.

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