

11 Education in the Indian Ocean and the Regional Dimension

Ranjit Goordyal and Zotique Pragassen

This chapter is a fusion of two contributions; from Ranjit Goordyal in Mauritius and Zotique Pragassen in Seychelles.

Following a brief contextual discussion, aspects of the education systems of small states in this region are reviewed highlighting contrasting situations as reflected in indices such as scale, language and external links. Sri Lanka and Malagasy Republic, although island nations in the Indian Ocean, have been excluded on grounds of their relatively large scale. Regional co-operation is examined in terms of the associations that have been formed, such as the Commission of the Indian Ocean and the Association des Institutions de Recherches et de Developpement dans l'Ocean Indien.

The small Commonwealth states of the Indian Ocean region

Some six independent countries and one French Departement, La Reunion, make up the Indian Ocean region. These island territories are situated in the western part of the Indian Ocean. Four of them, Mauritius, Maldives, Seychelles and Comoros, fit into the category of small states. Of these, Comoros is not a Commonwealth member.

A clear difference between the Indian Ocean region and the Caribbean and South Pacific regions is immediately apparent, for the Indian Ocean small states are fewer in number and less clustered. Maldives in the north is about two thousand kilometres from Seychelles at the equator, which is in turn about the same distance from Mauritius in the south. This partly explains why the type of regional co-operation, *inter alia* in education, which has developed in the Caribbean and South Pacific, is almost entirely lacking in the Indian Ocean region.

There are, however, numerous similarities between the small Commonwealth states of the region. They are all tropical island countries which have experienced British influence, have limited resources, have in recent times turned to tourism as a major source of income, and, since attaining independence, have committed much of their resources to education, which is seen as a key element in national development.

Alongside these similarities there are significant differences. In terms of geography, the main land area of Mauritius is a compact island 1,100 miles square, separated by 350 miles of ocean from its smaller island of Rodrigues. By contrast, both Seychelles and Maldives are archipelago states, the former consisting of over 100 islands, a third of which are granitic islands, whereas the population of the Maldives is distributed over some 200 islands (out of a total of 1200) with a heavy concentration on the main island of Male. Both Maldives and Seychelles experience transportation and communication problems on a larger scale than Mauritius. By contrast, the topography of the main island of Mauritius has facilitated a well developed road system which permits easy access throughout, leaving only Rodrigues relatively isolated from the national core. Mauritius has a plantation economy with sugarcane as the main crop, but it also has the resources and conditions to sustain a viable range of industries for local consumption as well as for export. Thus it has a much more diversified economy than most other small states of the Commonwealth. Seychelles and Maldives, less fortunate in land

resources and potential, have placed much hope and trust in the development of marine resources within their respective economic zones. They are relying on fishing and eventually fish processing to provide further employment, though in common with Mauritius they have both developed tourism.

There are also dissimilarities between the island states of the Indian Ocean region in terms of colonial legacy. Mauritius became independent in 1968, and Seychelles eight years later in 1976. The Maldives had never really been part of the British Empire and had always administered itself, only turning to Britain for its defence and in foreign affairs, a role which Britain relinquished in 1965. It was only in 1982 that Maldives joined the Commonwealth. Politically, Mauritius is a monarchy with Queen Elizabeth II as its head of state, whilst Seychelles and Maldives are republics with a president as both head of state and of government. A further difference is that Seychelles is a one-party state. Whilst all three belong to the non-aligned movement, Seychelles is often considered as the most radical of the three, *inter alia* in terms of educational reform.

There are also cultural, linguistic and religious differences between the Indian Ocean states: Maldives is Islamic; Seychelles is Christian; Mauritius is multi-faith with Hinduism, Christianity and Islam being the main religions.

The people of the Maldives have successfully preserved their culture, and it is only now, as the country opens up, through tourism, that outside influences are slowly influencing traditional patterns of life. The Maldives Government sees education playing a major role in responding to the changing aspirations of its people. The degree to which they succeed in reaching a workable language policy in education as between Divehi and English will be fundamental to possibilities of reaching their developmental objectives.

Mauritians have traditionally maintained close ties, through family connections and otherwise, with their countries of origin, in particular India. Thus they have been more successful than Seychelles in resisting the fragmentation of the social structures of their countries of origin during the colonial period; and have retained much of their

own cultures, which have been strengthened since attaining independence. Both Mauritius and Seychelles experienced the successive colonial attentions of France and Britain, paralleled to some extent in the Caribbean by Dominica and St Lucia and in the South Pacific by Vanuatu. In consequence, Creole is the social language of many Mauritians and Seychellois. Indeed in the latter Creole enjoys the same official status as English and French. By contrast, in Mauritius, Creole, although spoken by the majority, is not officially recognised, and Mauritians find it more prudent to maintain English as their official language, while supporting French, along with a number of oriental languages.

While the Maldives was populated long ago by direct migration from Asia, the population of both Mauritius and Seychelles was a product of European colonialism, there having been no indigenous population prior to that event. In consequence, ethnic diversity is a feature, especially of Mauritius, with African, Asian and European components all represented. As in the West Indies, slavery was fundamental to the plantation economies established, with indentured labour arriving upon the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1833. Not surprisingly therefore, complex associations of race, colour and class exist and have implications for education.

Education systems

The education systems of the small Commonwealth states of the Indian Ocean have inevitably emerged from the mixed cultural and colonial legacies outlined above.

Maldives

Education in the Maldives is not compulsory, and schools are both state and privately run, the latter being in the majority. Pre-school education exists mainly in the form of Koranic Schools where the principal activity is the learning of the Koran in Arabic. Formal education continues after that in traditional Koranic Schools, Divehi-medium primary schools, or increasingly in English-medium primary

and secondary schools. The latter have also adopted a formal curriculum which leads to 'O' level examinations and facilitates further 'A' level study at the local Science Education Centre established in 1979. Opportunities also exist for further academic, technical and professional studies abroad. The majority of Maldivians are literate. A basic education programme established in 1980 has attracted 10,000 adults to date.

One of the main problems caused by geographical isolation and the size of the communities on the 200 or so inhabited atolls is the provision of adequate facilities. It is only on Male, the main island, that adequate facilities and well trained teachers are available. Consequently school attendance is low. This has led to increasing interest in distance teaching methods, including educational broadcasting.

Mauritius

Responsibility for education is vested in the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture. Education is free at the primary and secondary levels up to the age of 20 but not compulsory. At the pre-primary level there are more than 1,000 schools providing education to some 20,000 children in the age group 3-5. Within the core of the system, Mauritius has a 6 + 5 + 2 structure. Primary education lasts six years for most of the pupils and a seventh year for those who are unsuccessful at the Certificate of Primary Education (CPE) examinations. Those who pass the CPE are admitted to secondary schools where after five years they take the Cambridge School Certificate examinations. Those who pass the School Certificate Examinations with at least four credits and have not reached the age of 19 years on 31 December of the previous year qualify for the two year Cambridge Higher School Certificate course.

There are three major tertiary institutions in the country; the University of Mauritius (UM 1965), the Mahatma Gandhi Institute (MGI 1969) and the Mauritius Institute of Education (MIE 1973). The University has three schools: the School of Agriculture, the School of Administration and the School of Industrial Technology. It provides certificate, diploma and degree courses, and is growing.

For example, a department of law and a medical research centre were opened in 1986. Mauritian students who are awarded scholarships by the French government do part of their course at the University of Reunion. The Mahatma Gandhi Institute has as its main aim the promotion of Indian culture in Mauritius and runs specialised courses in languages, humanities, sociology, philosophy, art, vocal and instrumental music, dance and sculpture. The Mauritius Institute of Education is responsible for curriculum development and teacher training at all levels. It is presently reviewing the primary and lower secondary school curriculum and running certificate, diploma and post-graduate certificate courses in teacher education for teachers at the primary and secondary level. All three tertiary institutions are also involved in research work.

The Mauritian system of education is relatively large, complex, well-supported and with distinct areas of innovation as illustrated by the development of the Lycee Polytechnique and the Mauritius College of the Air.

Seychelles

Unlike the other two states, all educational institutions in Seychelles are state run and non-fee paying. There is also a compulsory primary phase of nine years duration, from age six to fifteen approximately. A two-year pre-primary phase admits all children of three and a half years of age.

Since taking control of pre-primary education in 1980, the state has spared no effort in providing adequate facilities and qualified personnel for this level. Of the children eligible in 1985, over 80 per cent attended the first year and close to 100 per cent the second year of pre-primary school. Secondary education is also accessible to all who apply on completion of their primary education; close to 90 per cent of 1986 primary school leavers have opted for it. This phase of education takes place in four residential villages of the National Youth Service, and is of two-years duration. During this time the students follow a secondary curriculum, share a common learning and living experience, and participate in activities aimed at developing

self-reliance, commitment to society, and community spirit. The National Youth Service also has as its objective to prepare students for either the world of work or for further academic and vocational studies at the Polytechnic.

Established in 1983, the Polytechnic regrouped all the former separate vocational schools and the 'A' level college. It has since expanded its range of courses to respond to the manpower needs of the country. Selection to the different courses is based on the number of places available, the student's own interest, and his performance profile within the National Youth Service.

The latter is largely based on continuous assessment. The courses of the Polytechnic are of one to four years' duration, and prepare students for both locally and externally moderated examinations. Almost all the external examinations are from British examination bodies such as London and Cambridge Universities (for 'O' and 'A' levels), the City and Guilds of London Institute, and Pitman, reflecting continuing dependence on Britain. This also provides international recognition and permits ready access to foreign institutions for further training which the country requires and which, due to its size, it is unable to provide. However, the cost of training outside Seychelles, and usually outside the region, can be very prohibitive. Even assistance, when obtained, converts into fewer training awards than would be possible were Seychelles not so small and remote.

This forces Seychelles to search for alternatives such as part-time Diploma courses and post 'A' level courses in fields such as teacher education within the Polytechnic. There are plans to obtain external recognition for these courses as equivalent to year 1 or 2 of a degree course, which can then be completed abroad. This could effectively reduce the overall cost of education abroad. The Polytechnic also organises a wide range of courses for adults, including literacy classes which are held in the districts.

Educational issues

Curriculum development

Maldives, Mauritius and Seychelles all engage in curriculum development programmes. In the case of the Maldives, the aim is to equip the future citizens with knowledge and skills to cope with the modern world. Expanding tourism and the development of the fishing industry demand expertise for which new forms of training are needed. Thus a marine studies course has been developed with assistance from Unesco. There are also bilateral agreements whereby countries such as Australia are assisting the Maldives with general education programme development in Mathematics, Science and English at Primary level, and to enable students to have access to 'O' and 'A' level education and further training abroad. In a sense there is a transformation from a culturally unique Maldivian curriculum to one which increasingly reflects outside influences.

Seychelles and Mauritius, on the other hand, having inherited a British-based education, are searching for something culturally more appropriate and more relevant to their needs. Whereas Mauritius has a sufficient number of trained people in the field of curriculum development, Seychelles still relies on help from outside, and its curriculum units remain inadequately staffed. Despite such constraints, Seychelles decided in 1981 to teach Creole, the mother tongue, and to use it as a medium of instruction in the early years of the primary cycle. This launched a major curriculum reform which was introduced in schools in 1982.

To a large extent expertise had to be local, in view of the language involved. This meant that the training of personnel and materials development had to take place concurrently. The overall cost of this ongoing reform is high in relation to the size of the population. It has involved a considerable amount of translation work. Mistakes could have been avoided if people had been more experienced, and if they had had more time. The time constraint did

not permit either the testing of materials or teacher involvement. However, the demands of this accelerated reform programme have given the country a core of about 20 fairly competent and confident curriculum developers, in a relatively short period of time. But there are limits to localisation imposed by its continuing dependence on British examinations, such as Cambridge.

In Mauritius, attempts by the Mauritius Institute of Education to localise the curriculum have also met with many difficulties, despite the fact that the Institute is very well equipped in comparison with Seychelles. Mauritius insists on internationally recognised certificates which give them access to further studies as well as employment abroad, and which many Mauritians seek.

Teacher supply

In Seychelles and Maldives, there is an acute shortage of teachers to cope with their expanding systems. Both countries still depend on expatriate teachers. Seychelles for instance recruits teachers from Mauritius, Sri Lanka, Britain and elsewhere; and Maldives is beginning to do likewise. But Maldives must face the particular problems of inducing teachers to serve on remote atolls with often inhospitable conditions, and poor educational facilities. More able teachers are attracted to the capital, Male, thus maintaining and even deepening a marked disparity in the quality of education as between the islands. Mauritius, with more teachers than it needs, is focusing on improving the quality of its teaching force for both primary and secondary levels. Training is given by the Mauritius Institute of Education. In Seychelles, considerable importance is being given to attracting young and suitably qualified Seychellois to take up teaching, as well as raising the level of teachers already in the service. Less fortunate Maldives must, for the time being at least, resort to unqualified and temporary personnel, particularly for the more isolated communities. However, considerable efforts have been made there in recent years to target particular groups for professional development overseas, especially the atoll head teachers and tutors responsible for initial teacher training utilising facilities in Britain, Singapore and Malaysia.

The regional dimension

Regional co-operation in the socio-economic sector in the Indian Ocean is still in the budding stage. Co-operation amongst the countries started only a few years ago and very few regional projects in the education sector have materialised. The basis for regional co-operation starts with exchanges in the commercial and economic fields which are the priorities for the countries in the Indian Ocean. In 1986 a convention was signed between Mauritius and Madagascar to encourage trade between the two countries. According to the agreement trade will take place on an exchange basis and after a period of time only the excess of the import over the export is paid for in foreign exchange. Such a policy is to the advantage of both partners.

Regional associations

In addition to such bilateral arrangements, wider associations are beginning to take shape. Traditionally the people from the Indian Ocean states usually meet in international fora and very often outside the region. Regional co-operation was merely talked about until in 1982 the Governments of the Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius and Seychelles established the Commission of the Indian Ocean. Later, Reunion, because of its location, took up membership. The object of the Commission is to promote regional co-operation in economic, commercial, cultural, judicial, scientific and social areas. It is presently involved in the implementation and planning of several projects in the following fields:

- 1 Agriculture and fisheries - tuna fishing, sugar cane, rice, meat and maize;
- 2 Meteorology, aviation and telecommunications;
- 3 Tourism and handicraft - production of a film and a book on the islands of the Indian Ocean, regional tourism and handicraft;
- 4 Education and culture - exhibitions of paintings, a regional training centre for trainers of technical and vocational training, an 'Academie Creole';
- 5 Energy - renewable energy and development of biogas.

A second organisation worthy of mention is the Fonds d'Aide a la Co-operation. Here the French Government has commenced the financing of a regional co-operation scheme beginning with Mauritius and Reunion. So far, the following aspects are developing in the field of education:

- 1 At the pre-primary and primary levels - fellowships for the education and training of teachers and inspectors;
- 2 At the secondary level - computer education, a school of music, and the training of technical education teachers.

Thirdly, there is the Association des Institutions de Recherches et de Developpement dans l'Ocean Indien (ARDOI). This was set up by Reunion in 1979 as a non-governmental organisation. Its major objectives in the fields of regional development and training are:

- to provide and co-ordinate exchange programmes in member states for teachers/researchers, consultants and experts
- to develop a comprehensive information, documentation, and dissemination structure in the region
- to initiate joint research projects in the fields of education, development, research, science and culture

The Chairmanship rotates from year to year among its member states - Reunion, Madagascar, Mauritius and Seychelles. AIRDOI was initially involved in language research but is now getting more involved in scientific and technological research in such fields as oceanography, energy and agrosiences. Its activities are financed through grants from the Commission of the European Community.

The Centre de Documentation, de Recherche et de Formation Indian-Oceanique (CEDEFRI) is a non-governmental organisation founded in Mauritius in 1981. Focusing on co-operation in research, documentation and training, it works in close collaboration with the ministries and parastatal bodies in Mauritius. A number of branches of CEDEFRI are working on the implementation of an 'Issue-Based Indian Ocean Network'.

CEDEFRI has already carried out several research projects, such as the evaluation of the research potential of Mauritius, agricultural diversification amongst small planters grouped into co-operatives, adult literacy and technical education.

Finally, there is the Association des Universités partiellement et entièrement de langue Française (AUPELF) which is a regional body dealing with university co-operation. The main objective of AUPELF is to promote inter-university exchanges and co-operation among its member states through the movement of professional and academic staff, exchange of research ideas and documents and participation of joint research ventures. The most recent AUPELF meeting was held in 1986 and was hosted by the University in Reunion. On that occasion participants discussed further co-operation in the form of a programme for information dissemination and development. The current Chairman of the AUPELF is the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Mauritius.

Prospects for regional co-operation

The five organisations listed above, while representing nascent regional co-operation have strong bilateral and external elements. This is partly due to the relative fragmentation of the region. Against such a background, where few obvious bonds exist between the small Indian Ocean states, it is understandable that little significant co-operation exists between them in the area of education. It is doubtful moreover that mutually beneficial co-operation as seen elsewhere can be successfully developed in this region between the Commonwealth member states, apart from exchange of information and recruitment of teachers, as in the case of Seychelles which recruits Mauritian and Sri Lankan teachers, as well as teachers of other nationalities. This phenomenon of recruitment of foreign teaching personnel is also being experienced by Maldives as its educational provision expands.

Mauritius is large enough to satisfy some of its more basic needs and is more pre-occupied with the tertiary level of education, which

by its very nature is more susceptible to bilateral and international co-operative agreements. Its primary and secondary level of education can find support from its comparatively well-developed tertiary level for programme development, for research and for training of its personnel.

By contrast tiny Seychelles, over fifteen hundred kilometres from the African continent and sharing few bonds with the Eastern African states, is perhaps the one most affected by the problem of isolation and limited resources, and is forced to venture further afield for assistance and co-operation. Even within the aforementioned Commission de l'Océan Indien, which groups the French-speaking states of the South-Western Indian Ocean, projects have yet to be formulated which are of concrete benefit to member states, and nowhere is this more apparent than in the field of education. Given this perspective, Seychelles seems to suffer particularly from the adverse affects of smallness and isolation, unable to pool its resources with compatible neighbours, as is the case for small Caribbean and Pacific states of the Commonwealth. Yet each of these states realises the necessity for links with the outside world if there is to be progress in the development of education. These countries are pursuing goals which cannot be met entirely by their own individual capacity, and which are not shared by their Indian Ocean neighbours; therefore, they have to turn to the neighbouring continents and further afield. Maldives for instance hosted an international meeting in July 1984 concerned with the formation of a South Asia association linking India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Nepal and the Maldives. Given its Islamic dimension, the Maldives may well find and develop stronger bonds within such an association, and this will certainly have a bearing on its educational development.

Regional associations are very fragile and it takes a lot of give and take to make them function. At times national interests take the upper hand over regional interests and the association breaks down. Susceptibilities and mistrust between the member states add to the tensions and complexities of running such associations. In any case, the financing of regional exchanges and co-operation is a major

problem. It is noted that such exchanges materialise so long as it does not involve expenditure from the member states which already have balance of payment problems. So far, most of the regional co-operation that has been manifest in the Indian Ocean region has been financed by external sources such as the European Development Fund, the French Government and Unesco.

As far as the trio of small Commonwealth states in this region is concerned, the geographical, locational and cultural differences between them add further to the difficulties of co-operation in any regional sense. Maldives with its centuries-old Islamic culture, and not having undergone the usual colonial experience, has been able to retain its own distinctive form of education. It is only very recently that it has been forced, as a result of increasing involvement with the outside world, to introduce changes which it feels are necessary to cope with the demands arising from international interaction. On the other hand, Seychelles and Mauritius inherited at independence the usual pattern of British colonial education which has since been subject to scrutiny and varying degrees of change, with a view to developing a more appropriate and relevant system. The Seychelles has gone a lot further in this direction, despite a shorter post-independence history. This is due to the greater homogeneity of the Seychelles people, the country's insistence on its right of self-determination, and above all, the political will of the people in their determination to create a socialist society. In Mauritius, changes and reforms have been limited largely to the tertiary level, whilst the primary and secondary levels have remained virtually intact, as parents insist on the academic curriculum they are familiar with since colonial days. It should be no surprise, therefore, that different patterns of educational development are emerging in these three states.

Given this situation of disparity it is not likely that the kind of regional co-operation in education that exists in the clusters of small Commonwealth states of the Caribbean and South Pacific will be possible in the Indian Ocean region. The absence of a regional university is, of course, a constraint upon co-operation in this field.

It is much more likely that lower level co-operation through the organisation of workshops, seminars and conferences, funded from outside sources, will develop between the Maldives, Mauritius and Seychelles. Despite the fact that each has its own network of external links, there could well be mutual benefit in educational development from drawing upon their common membership of the Commonwealth and the experience of small member states in other regions.