

**GOVERNMENT AND UNIVERSITY IN PARTNERSHIP IN THE
DEVELOPMENT PROCESS OF SMALL STATES -
SOME MAURITIAN REFLECTIONS***

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Universities in developing countries, particularly those in small states, cannot be just centres of higher learning dedicated to the pursuit of academic achievement, pure and simple. They have to act, and be seen to act, as instruments in national development strategies, being fully integrated in the development process. Universities must be able to convince Governments that they can be privileged partners for national development, with constant interactions between decision-makers at the national level and university staff.

Academic freedom is important but cannot be divorced from national priorities. Academics must play a significant role in the search for solutions to national problems. This must be so, not only because in many countries the Governments have to finance almost the total budget of their universities, as in Mauritius, but also because Governments attach considerable importance to the inputs from the University in all spheres of national life.

Universities are centres of research par excellence. Scientific research for the sake of research, devoid of practical application, cannot be encouraged at a time when resources are scarce, at a time when countries are going through a bad economic spell. At a time when there is real pressure to reallocate resources from theoretically unproductive activities to productive ones, the temptation to slash university budgets becomes hard to resist. This is not a problem faced only by poorer nations: Britain has not hesitated in reducing the budget on tertiary education. I am not in any way suggesting that universities must not have substantial state financial support certainly for the present. However, universities must be tuned to the social, economic, industrial and technological problems of the nation, if they are to avoid indictment. In any case, Universities must lead the way and cannot be followers.

One area in which, as a lawyer, I have been closely involved, namely the challenge of the sea for development. Mauritius exercises jurisdiction over an immense extent of maritime space, and which certainly does not lack in renewable and non-renewable resources. The time has come for the University of Mauritius to tackle the problem frontally, as, indeed, it proposes to do - for its own good as well as that of the country. Hitherto, for a variety of reasons, it has tended, in the area of marine resources, to restrict itself to piecemeal studies or some training activities.

Proposals for short-term strategies must be included within the framework of long-term plans. The Mauritian Government accepts that a comprehensive programme of applied research relies on continuing basic research specially to underpin technologies that could be harnessed for a country's development. Nevertheless it is highly desirable that any research undertaken by the University produces results in as short a time as possible. Scarce resources cannot be bound up in time consuming research with esoteric aims and marginal benefits. Pure research as a mere slogan must give way to research which has relevant, direct and, as far as possible, immediate bearing on national development.

* Extracts from welcoming address to the conference.

Nations must develop and utilise indigenous expertise within and outside the campus, in their quest for solution of development problems. Recourse to foreign expertise can no longer be justified in areas where we have better practical experience. Rather than supporting programmes of technical assistance when the need for such assistance does not really exist, foreign governments would make a greater contribution by helping to strengthen local expertise.

Shridath Ramphal in his address at the Thirteenth Congress of the Universities of the Commonwealth urged Vice-Chancellors (and others) to widen their enquiry when addressing the question of the role of universities in relation to technological innovation within the context of small states. He went on:

"What technology?", of course, becomes a pertinent question; but, even more to the point, "what university?". Such necessary questionings will inevitably lead you into exploring a range of co-operative measures at the regional, inter-regional and Commonwealth-wide level in supplementation of the resources of these very small states. For them, a part of the challenge of technological innovation is innovation in the role of universities, innovation that emerges out of the traditional springs of university improvisation and perhaps out of technology itself.

Similar considerations led to the establishment of the University of Mauritius in the mid-1960s, with generous help from the UK. The University, indeed, was conceived in the developmental context as the one appropriate and relevant for Mauritius.

The university has had to continually adapt and make provision for new courses warranted by the changing economic climate of the country. Government-university collaboration in teaching and training is likely to grow. Moreover, since we have adopted a pragmatic approach to development, we have to look towards more and more effective government-private sector-university linkages.

To promote multi-disciplinary research and consultancy for the practical solution of our manifold societal problems, in what, after all, is both a small and a poor country, the university drew up proposals known as the "Mauritius 2000 concept". The thinking, aims and objectives of this concept are in broad agreement with those in the Report Science for Technology for Development of the Commonwealth Science Council. Within the framework of the "Mauritius 2000 Concept" the University of Mauritius is being transformed to contribute fully in the development process in Mauritius whilst retaining its position and standards among the Universities of the Commonwealth.

The Higher Education Division of the British Council has been staunch supporter of the Mauritius 2000 concept. The help and support of international agencies such as the Commonwealth Science Council, UNESCO and other United Nations agencies, is vital in the promotion of North-South and increasingly South-South, collaborative efforts such as "Mauritius 2000".

Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, Governor-General of Mauritius, in his message to this Conference stated:

"Mauritius is proud of her African heritage and traditions. Our Continent, of vast potential, is currently facing innumerable difficulties. But many of these would be solved or attenuated considerably were Africa to

obtain, and exploit rationally, cheap, reliable and plentiful supplies of energy; hence the need both for research and development of appropriate renewable energy technologies, and for proper monitoring and evaluation of endeavours therein, and hence the need for the International Conference."

The Conference itself, structured in four broad scientific subject areas, namely energy resource assessment, energy conversion technologies, energy utilisation technologies, and energy policy formulation and planning, has the following three broad objectives:

- (1) to report the results of research projects on renewable energy technologies in Africa covering both the activities of the Commonwealth Science Council's African Energy Programme, and of other institutions and agencies;
- (2) to provide an opportunity for the international exchange of research ideas and information between African scientists and colleagues from elsewhere;

and

- (3) to provide a forum for scientists and potential donors to explore modalities for future collaboration on energy research and development in Africa.

I have deliberately steered clear of energy issues in Mauritius although these are, inevitably and inextricably, connected with several of the points I have raised. These issues will be covered elsewhere in the Conference.