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Community Visioning: A strategy for Sustainable Island Living?

The case of the Indian Ocean Islands with especial reference to Mauritius

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1.0 Introduction

Sustainable Development has become a popular cliché in the development literature and among development practitioners. Coined in 1992 at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development at Rio de Janeiro, the concept remains an abstract term for the people. Nevertheless, basically, development is the process by which individuals and communities are able to enhance their capabilities to use resources and improve their welfare in an equitable manner. In this context, a certain number of 'Small Islands Voice' practitioners and partners together with the *Coastal and Small Islands platform* of UNESCO have started, based on their fieldwork, to move forward the concept from a community perspective. Consequently, the concept of 'Sustainable Island Living' has emerged. The development of this concept is very timely since the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) are presently moving forward the *Mauritius Strategy* for the further implementation of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of SIDS. This also coincides with the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014), which is an additional opportunity to consolidate Sustainable Island Living in SIDS. The integration of Education for Sustainable Development in the education system is one way of keeping local wisdom such as traditional agricultural methods and traditional rules and techniques of fisheries in everyday life.

Sustainable Island Living embodies a process that enables everybody to enjoy a decent living and a good quality of life in terms of satisfying their needs and it creates an enabling environment for the next generation to fulfil its aspirations. In so doing, Sustainable Island Living addresses the control and distribution of resources, the decentralisation of decision-making, the culture of partnership, good governance, people's rights, autonomy of the community and participatory approaches. In concrete terms, Sustainable Island Living is rooted in local development at grassroots or community level. The ambition of the concept of Sustainable Island Living is to contribute in translating the abstract concept of sustainable development into reality for the world's islanders

Community Visioning is not new in terms of technique especially with reference to participatory methodologies. However, as a process, it can be a powerful tool for new forms of partnership in island communities. At this stage it is important to remind ourselves of the term community. The latter implies a group of persons living in the same locality, and by extension a body of persons leading a common life. In this context, the community is just one member of the continuous ecosystem of the natural environment and therefore it is necessary to understand human beings based on this precept. The community should also be based on equity, inclusiveness and sustainability in order to achieve an inclusive island development system. In this perspective, community visioning is an attempt by practitioners to bring a shift in the way of thinking of communities and empower them to make their own decisions in the context of the development process.

Nevertheless, community visioning should not be confused with the endless cycle of problem solving approaches. Community visioning aims at making people take development decisions that lead the community towards a defined future. This future is shaped by a holistic goal set by the people who make up the community. However, community visioning does not preclude seeking advice, technical assistance and support from outside partners and other national development stakeholders. Indeed, community visioning should be recognised and considered as an integrated part of national development strategies of islands, if this approach is to contribute meaningfully in the policymaking process and add value to programme implementation. Consequently, community visioning is a challenge as well as an opportunity in opening new pathways in popularising and moving forward Sustainable Island Living.

2.0 The Indian Ocean Islands

The Indian Ocean region is made up of a set of islands, which are in majority archipelagic states namely Comoros, Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, Sri Lanka and Zanzibar. However, in the context of this paper, the analysis will be confined to Comoros, Maldives, Mauritius and Seychelles. A thorough analysis will be made of the regional context including the geopolitical and socio-cultural context, the existing vulnerabilities and the potential resilience as factors impacting on the development process. In spite of the heterogeneity and diversity of the island nations of the region in terms of different geopolitical affiliations, history and culture, they share as SIDS common problems and issues. However, these islands have not experienced community visioning per se or even participatory development as part of the sustainable development process. The latter has known varied degrees of success in the Indian Ocean region. In fact, the islands concerned continue to be buffeted geopolitically, politically, economically, socially and culturally by joint internal and external forces, which have seriously hindered the development process.

2.1 From Decolonisation to Nation Building

Indeed vulnerability is a common feature of the small islands of the region, and this makes them ecologically, economically and geopolitically the prey of internal and external shocks. Vulnerability is not a new concept, but its impact is growing due to new challenges. Development has always been a challenge and it dates back to the colonisation period. As the islands were uninhabited, they had no pre-colonial history except Comoros and Maldives who had their own indigenous cultures before the imposition of the European colonial rule. Consequently, the islands were mostly immigrant island-nations, crossroads of Indian, African, Chinese and European peoples. With the decolonisation process, nation building became a priority for the political leaders of the day. As in most post-independence nations, the political elite had to unify the whole country behind the government of the day. The drive in such a process came from the political movements of the respective island states and who later assumed the political leadership of their respective countries. The post-independence period was very difficult for most of them in ensuring the development of the islands and in addressing the burning problems of their respective societies. Consequently, the nation-building process was undertaken through the modern state with its centralised system and its bureaucracy having its own rules and rationality. This process of consolidating the nation-state is going to impact seriously on the development process in the post-independence period and will leave its footprint in the way forward towards sustainable development.

However, the experiences of nation building varied according to the political circumstances, philosophy, historical heritage and values. In this context, the Seychellois experience of democratic government and multiparty system was short-lived, as the coalition government was overthrown in 1977¹ through a military coup nearly nine months after the independence of the archipelago. This event heralded the instauration of a one-party system with a very powerful centralised bureaucratic system on the Seychellois society. The one-party state was considered as the only instrument for developmental change and through its party branches, the whole archipelago passed under its absolute control. Consequently, the participation of the citizen was channelled through the one-party system leaving no room for an autonomous participation of the people in the development process and in developing their own initiatives. This legacy of the one-party state has left its footprint on the Seychelles development strategy and programme. Everything is still centrally controlled in spite of the existence now of a multi-party system. The private sector and civil society have not been able up to now to consolidate themselves and occupy the role that they should in the development process. People's participation has still a long way to go.

In the case of Comoros, the decolonisation experience was different from that of Seychelles. Comoros unilaterally declared its independence in 1976. Independence from

¹ Seychelles became independent in 1976 and a coalition government was formed with a sharing of power by the two major political parties of the archipelago. In 1977, Abert René of the Seychelles People's United Party, the then Prime Minister, initiated a military coup against the President of Seychelles, Sir James Mancham from the Social Democratic Party.

France was never prepared and the decolonisation process led to the excision of Mayotte² from the other three islands of the archipelago. The independence of Comoros marked the beginning of a decade of instability characterised by mercenary actions against successive governments and in-fighting within government leading to military coups. During the past decade, Comoros has gone through chronic instability jeopardising the economic development of the archipelago and creating such frustration that it took the form of an attempt of the break away of the two other islands namely Anjouan and Moheli from Comoros. Consequently, the archipelago has suffered serious set back from all points of view and the villages (community) were mostly left to themselves. As the government of Comoros was in difficult financial situation, the population survived from remittances from abroad especially from France. Following the political agreement and the granting of devolution to the three islands of the archipelago last year, the situation is slowly returning to normal under the aegis of the African Union. The reconstruction of the economy, the development of stable institutions and the consolidation of the democratic space, in the context of a federal state, are current priorities. Confidence building in the current leadership remains to be seen. Thus, community visioning could be an opportunity for the villages of Comoros to contribute their share in mainstreaming Sustainable Island Living in government development policy and in promoting an autonomous local development at village level. This approach can contribute in developing alternative development strategies to contribute in overcoming the vulnerabilities of the archipelago.

In the case of Maldives, the colonial history is not that dissimilar with the other Island States, except that the archipelago was a British protectorate until it gained its full sovereignty in 1965 and was transformed from a Sultanate to a Republic on 11 November 1968. This period marked the beginning of a strong personalisation of a presidential regime without any political parties and a democratic culture. The State consequently has become until today the main, if not the only, instrument of modernisation and change. This situation is reinforced by the fact that the government owns all land except for a few plots of private land on Male. There is therefore no effective experience of multi-stakeholders approach in development.

Mauritius has a long track record of a parliamentary democracy, which dates back to the decolonisation process with a strong and powerful executive through a cabinet government and a powerful private sector. However, the civil society movement is relatively weak. As a multicultural society with people originating from the three continents namely Africa, Asia and Europe, nation building has been an on-going complex process. The main concern has always been how to ensure the coexistence of such a diversity of people. As the population is divided on ethnic lines and is exploited politically to create division through the practice of communalism against the principle of meritocracy, the sense of belonging to a nation is relatively weak.

The development of a policy of welfare state has reinforced the process of nation building through a free health system and education for all and a social aid system for the

² The Comoros is made up of four islands namely, Grande Comore, Anjouan, Moheli and Mayotte. The latter was excised from the archipelago at the time of independence and has remained a French territory.

disadvantaged groups. This policy is deep rooted in a centralised system of government with few powers to local authorities (municipalities, district councils and village councils). The centralised policy system has consolidated the power of the state and reinforced the political culture. The latter contributes in reaffirming the supremacy of the political class in the field of development. Politicians including ministers, mayors, presidents of district councils and MPs are perceived by the community in the villages and towns as the only persons to have solutions to their problems including sorting out petty things such as simple administrative hassles. In the end, the politicians pose themselves as problem solvers without necessarily in a sustainable development perspective. This creates a culture of dependency on State institutions and little space is left for community initiatives.

In spite of different historical process, nation building, in the island states of the region, is an on-going process and it has experienced varied degrees of success in each island state. There is an absence of democratic processes and values in island states like Seychelles, Comoros and Maldives, that favour participation of the island communities through the villages as the basic community structure. Unfortunately, the task of the government of the island states is made complex by other considerations such as ethnicity, racial considerations, separatist forces and external foreign interference. If Sustainable Island Living through community visioning is not promoted and developed, the issue of disintegration of the island states such as Comoros will emerge again. Otherwise, a closed society without any prospects for the development and consolidation of the democratic space may lead to a brain drain of its professional and other trained personnel. The situation in the Seychelles and Comoros and to a lesser extent in the Maldives illustrates quite well the seriousness of this issue.

The few available financial resources from the international aid system are absorbed by the State, and the power of NGOs and Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) is so weak and lacks visibility that they cannot attract resources or the government through its bureaucracy that very often objected to the allocation of resources to structured civil society organisations. The actual practice in the Seychelles and Comoros are cases in point. The dependency syndrome in the case Mauritius is also a challenge for the consolidation of the democratic process and governance. In any case, sustainable development is closely linked with democracy and freedom. The greater the space for participation of the community in the development process, the greater will be the degree of freedom of the people. Most communities are used to having decisions made for them and they are still not used to the idea that they have the right to decide their own future.

The challenge lies in the development of a sense of belonging to the State while favouring both the consolidation of the nation and the community in the various local geographical areas in order that each entity can support the other through the community visioning process in their quest for Sustainable Island Living. Such an approach requires the consolidation of the development process so that there are more policy options and autonomy in fulfilling the development objectives. However, during the past decade, the autonomy of the State has been under pressure as the globalisation process unfolds itself.

2.2 Globalisation and Vulnerability of Islands

The inter-state system and especially the nation-state structures governing the diverse island societies of the Indian Ocean region are increasingly under stress and they are more and more powerless in controlling the impact of globalisation. Instead, globalisation has become a permanent threat to nation-state and it is exacerbating the frustration of minorities and the grievances of marginalised groups in relation to equity and social justice in the development process. In certain cases, it may lead to devolution if not to the disintegration of the nation-state. The creation of three autonomous States in the case of Comoros and the devolution granted to Rodrigues island in the context of the Republic of Mauritius illustrate quite well the limits of having a centralised State. Indeed macro-economies are not necessary operating in coherence with local micro-economies.

As globalisation unfolds, more opportunities are created in terms of liberalisation and privatisation of the economy. In the wake of liberalisation, the national economic landscape of the islands is being transformed. Consequently, the local environments at community level or at village level are under severe pressure from big economic projects in sectors such as tourism, fishing and development of infrastructures. These projects are imposed without any prior consultation and this practice leads to the weakening of local communities and it challenges the stability and livelihood of the community of these regions. Very often national governments are powerless to resist the conditionalities of foreign investors and other multinational firms. It is also difficult for the community and other civil society organisations to campaign against globalised inequities and the weakening of local communities, their skills and trade. The expansion of tourism activities in Mauritius is currently challenging the livelihood of artisan fishermen and at the same time reducing the access of communities to the beaches. In the same vein, the WTO rules and the end of protectionism are having serious impact on the main exports of islands of the Indian Ocean such as tuna in the case of Seychelles, and sugar and textiles in the case of Mauritius. The economic restructuring of the islands of the region is marginalising more and more communities and is creating a new category of poor people. The laying off of Mauritian workers in the sugar and textile sectors respectively illustrates quite well how worldwide trade liberalisation is impacting on communities.

3.0 Community visioning, a form of resilience for islands of the region.

At a time when sustainable development has not provided the expected results so far, the search for sustainable development alternatives is more than a necessity. In a globalised world, community visioning sets the stage for a more decentralised and participatory framework at community level. Indeed, it can contribute to a form of managing change through the development of economic alternatives. However, the adaptation to change requires the integration of the ways in which communities do things. Consequently, community visioning can contribute in assisting island states in promoting and fostering local development and democracy.

3.1 Participation

Participation of the people through their community (the villages or urban areas) constitutes the basis of community visioning. Participation is not a new concept and it flourishes in most of the UN documents on sustainable development, but too often it is used only as part of the wishful thinking discourse. Indeed, concrete participation of the people in development processes is what is lacking in the Indian Ocean region. As it has been indicated in the other sections, the challenge is how to change to the current development paradigm and to demonstrate that there can be a win-win situation for both the state and the people by creating an enabling environment for community visioning.

Participation of the community provides a sense of ownership of the development process and it constitutes an essential element in the appropriateness, the implementation and the sustainability of actions. The communities know their special needs better and they are better placed to shape their destiny by getting more engaged in the development process. Based on our own experiences³ in project implementation at grassroots level in Mauritius, it is clear that a collegial management style and the recognition of the traditional knowledge of the community are more conducive to build confidence and trust among beneficiaries and support organisations. This is a key to organisational quality for the development of popular participation in the life cycle of developmental projects at community level. Everybody knows about these principles, but it is another story when it comes to policy implementation.

Finally, participation should be viewed as a process in order to ensure that the community is motivated enough to have a stake in its own development. The danger is in the dynamics generated by the project whereby participation could be reduced to a way of getting people to agree with the objectives of the project. Consequently, participation should go beyond fulfilling technical objectives and really focussing on the issue of motivation for their involvement in the local development process.

3.2 Community Mobilisation

It is important to understand that participation is a basis for Sustainable Island Living as a fundamental building block. In this context, participation must be thought as motivating people to become stakeholders of their own development, and the community must be able to influence decisions that affect its members. Consequently, the islanders should internalise that they have a productive role to play as members of the family, the community and the society. As far as possible, the decision making process must be close to them. In this perspective, the structuring of community life at village and urban area level is a necessity so that they can become effective support structures. This should be accompanied by an empowerment programme in order for the community to ascertain its autonomy in relation to all structures of power.

³ CEDREFI has been working during the past fifteen years in collaboration with Community Based Organisations in Mauritius and has been developing projects for the empowerment of the community. The latest project took the form of a pilot project in a coastal village on Climate Change in the context of GEF/SGP.

In order for local people to lead development, one should not focus on the community to the detriment of the individual. The individual must be involved as part of the group and it is human nature for individual actions to be based on a certain degree of self-interest. Consequently, community visioning should ensure the existence of enough incentives for individuals to engage themselves in community processes and to become a change agent in the community visioning. This engagement will require helping them to have choices in moving the Sustainable Island Living agenda and also empowering them as individuals who are part of the community.

3.3 New Policy Framework

Community visioning requires be promoting and fostering while bearing in mind the commitment and the national priorities of the state. In this context, it is vital to change the mindset of policymakers and that of the bureaucracy responsible for the programming and the implementation of policies. Policy implementation requires dialogue and the community visioning must be mainstreamed in policies. However, dialogue is not automatic, and it requires a culture and it must be nurtured. This is the difficult part of changing mindset of people in the implementation of community visioning. Indeed, what is required is not a set of guidelines on how to dialogue and promote participation. The priority is to remove the barriers that are part of the culture of work within the government administration in order to develop high quality promotion of participation and dialogue. This situation can also be altered by valorising the traditional knowledge of the community such as that of the artisan fishermen, the small farmer and the sugarcane labourer, and recognising the fact that the community does have knowledge and know-how on the ways to address problems facing local development. Otherwise, sustainable development will be confined to technocratic approaches, which may eventually lead to a crisis of confidence in professional knowledge. The current relationship which exists between the fishermen community and the Government of Mauritius illustrates quite well this situation.

3.4 A New Political Discourse

For community visioning to take shape in the region, it requires a new political discourse that recognises the community as the focus of development at local level. Unfortunately, up to now, local authorities in Mauritius for example, do not have a local development agenda, and what exists at national level in terms of national development strategy is not implemented in a decentralised manner at local level. Due to lack of capacity, local authorities' leadership does not have a clue of the policy implications of local development and implementation. This is an additional reason for the community to act as pressure group in order to force Government to put in place new policies with the participation of the community at local level. Consequently, this requires a change of political discourse in terms of autonomy of local authorities and the role of local communities. There is also a need to refocus the political discourse which is confined to 'alleviating of poverty' and 'job creation' to how one can change people's engagement and commitment in their own development process and by extension how government

will create space for the mainstreaming of the community visioning process in national policies.

4.0 Conclusions

Community visioning is one way for the islands of the Indian Ocean to become more resilient in finding new ways of ensuring a Sustainable Island Living for their people. There is not a model of one size fits all, but there is a common thread which is the development of Sustainable Island Living based on certain community principles such as putting the community at the core of policy-making, sustaining effective practices through participatory approaches, building community resilience and ensuring common ownership of the process. In spite of the fact that the constitutional status of each island state varies, some basic principles of community visioning can be introduced by civil society organisations themselves in moving forward the agenda of the Mauritius Strategy. In this context, the first challenge for civil society organisations themselves is their preparedness to recognise and promote the autonomy of the community in the context of their own work. The development of the autonomy of the community by civil society partners will contribute in making community visioning take off in island-states like Mauritius and Comoros.

Community visioning also has the potential to promote the motto “Think globally and act locally”. In concrete terms, the villagers and people living in urban areas should have the opportunities to undertake a critical evaluation of their local environment. Local development should become the cornerstone of Sustainable Island Living and the community alone will not be able to forge its way forward. The development of strategic alliances with NGOs, Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) and other civil society organisations is a determinant factor in moving the agenda forward. In this context, capacity building on how to work in a cross-sectoral manner is necessary if we want to engage ourselves in Sustainable Island Living.

How resources are being used, exploited and abused needs also to be understood locally, regionally and at international level. Consequently, regional collaborative programmes among the Indian Ocean Island States need to be explored as very often the solution to the local developmental problems are found over and above the changes in action in the field or at national level. This requires regional partnerships and the raising of awareness and mobilisation of governments of the region.

Finally Sustainable Island Living must be rooted in community visioning based on a change in lifestyle, a decentralisation of power and a return towards more participatory community processes.