

Box 1 Strategic Plan for the Non-Sugar Agricultural Sector: 2003-2007

The agricultural sector has played a prominent role in the economic development of Mauritius, with the sugar industry as the backbone. However, with developments that have taken place on the domestic front in the form of reduced land resources and high cost of labour and agricultural inputs, coupled with increased competition on the international front, the sustainability of the traditional approach to agricultural practices has been questioned. Bearing those factors in mind, a **Strategic Plan for the Non-Sugar Agricultural Sector** has been prepared as a blueprint to give a new thrust to the non-sugar sector and thus enable it to account for a larger share of the agricultural sector and to complement the sugar industry.

The Plan, which was published by the Ministry of Agriculture, Food Technology & Natural Resources, is a five-year plan that covers the period 2003-2007. With the increasing use of technology across all sectors of the economy, the Plan lays emphasis on the adoption of new technology in the non-sugar sector to modernise practices and increase efficiency and productivity. With a multi-pronged approach, the Plan seeks to: *"...focus on attaining a certain degree of self-sufficiency, meeting quality exigencies, developing the local agro-processing industry, promoting entrepreneurship, optimising export opportunities, conforming to international norms governing food safety and maximising on the potential benefits of regionalisation."* By 2007, the Plan seeks to transform the local agricultural scene with a high-technology focus and enable the emergence of the island as a regional nursery and agro-processing hub.

The development of the agricultural sector has been hampered by natural and structural constraints. By assessing the main impediments and putting in place the right framework, the Plan seeks to harness the full potential of the

sector by optimising the use of the limited resource endowments. The main proposals of the Plan are highlighted below:

1. To enable more focused formulation of policies, it is proposed that the Central Statistics Office conducts a census for the whole agricultural sector that will help in the creation of a solid database.
2. Agricultural production is currently being carried out haphazardly or through rules of thumb. To foster a more scientific approach, the Ministry aspires to provide up-to-date, timely and accurate data to planters through the setting up of an **Agricultural Information System** and a **Land Data Bank**. This is expected to provide the logistic for more judicious planning among planters and promote optimal use of resources.
3. Given binding water constraints, proper irrigation remains of utmost importance. An **Irrigation Liaison Committee** will thus be set up to monitor irrigation-related issues whilst simultaneously sensitise planters on efficient irrigation techniques. A joint public-private sector **Irrigation Association** will primarily address policy issues.
4. Whilst on the one hand, the profit margin of planters has been squeezed by auctioneers, on the other hand, poor sales environment has affected the quality and marketability of the produce while potentially jeopardising the safety of customers. The Plan proposes to restructure and review the present system to put in place a proper market-driven marketing framework. It suggests to set up a **Market Information System** that will allow the speedy collection and dissemination of information to potentially mitigate price fluctuations. It also proposes to establish a regulator, under the purview of

the Agricultural Marketing Board, for the local and export markets in the form of a **Market Intelligence Unit**.

5. To boost the development of the agricultural sector and export opportunities, it has been decided to inculcate the notion of quality across all spectrum of the agricultural process, in conformity with international standards. This will require capacity building at the human, technological and information levels. Modern cultivation techniques, which allow a more efficient monitoring of quality parameters, will be fostered in the form of greenhouse cultivation and hydroponics. A proposed **Food Technology Laboratory** will monitor food quality.
6. The setting up of a centrally located '**One-Stop-Shop**' that will provide specialised fast-track services, as well as information and technical guidance to agricultural stakeholders is also proposed.
7. To tackle the issue of cultivable land scarcity, the Government has already made necessary changes in legislation to bring in greater flexibility in the acreage of land that may be rented to small planters by sugar estates. It is also proposed to promote the adoption of modern intensive cultivation techniques. Planters will be provided with the necessary training to facilitate the adoption of such practices.
8. To increase production capacity, feasibility studies will be undertaken to explore various avenues for using regional countries as production bases.
9. To modernise the non-agricultural sector, the Plan proposes to strengthen Research & Development (R&D) to support the adoption of technology in all sectors. R&D programmes, in line with national priorities, will be established to enhance agricultural productivity. Biotechnology figures prominently in the modernisation strategy and the setting up of a **Mauritius Agricultural Biotechnology Institute** is expected to give the island a technological edge in the region.
10. The implementation of the Plan may be severely inhibited if the use of technology is not optimised. In this connection, it is proposed to enhance the capabilities of all stakeholders through specialised training courses and sensitisation programmes.
11. The fundamental shift in agricultural strategy will be complemented with appropriate legislative reforms. Over and above fostering the uptake of biotechnology, the **Genetically Modified Organisms (GMO) Bill** will also ensure that dealings with GMO are properly regulated. The **Plants Act** will be amended to cater for Plant Breeders Rights in line with the World Trade Organisation rules.
12. Opportunities in the exploitation of the agro-industry and agro-processing on a local and regional basis will also be promoted.
13. The concept of clusters is being recommended to ensure an efficient interactive platform and synergy between stakeholders. A **Food and Agricultural Cluster** will coordinate activities at the institutional level whilst an **Agro-Industrial Cluster** will regroup local agro-industry, research and other institutions.
14. To give a much needed boost to the declining livestock sector, farmers will be initiated to modern farm management practices. Food safety issues pertaining to meat are also addressed. Means to increase the export of venison and livestock derived products are also considered.
15. The development of the agricultural sector in Rodrigues, with emphasis on the promotion of exports of endemic products, is also on the agenda.
16. To complement the reforms, the institutional setup will be reviewed to ensure a demand-driven and market-oriented approach. An **Institutional Review Taskforce** will be set up.

The implementation of the Plan represents a paradigm shift in strategy of the island and sets the base for the transition from the traditional to a modern high-technology agricultural sector. The Plan thus pursues reforms in line with the newfound high-technology aspirations of Mauritius.