

This is an interview of Dr. R Balasubramaniam that appeared in one of the prominent magazines of Mauritius, interview questions ranged from the developmental model, models suitable for Mauritius, how the local youth talent can be optimized, the reasons why health and education of citizens should be a priority, similarities between India and Mauritius and other thoughts regarding Mauritius.

Questions to...

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[**Balu Balasubramaniam**, founder and chairman,
Grassroots Research and Advocacy Movement]

By Touria PRAYAG

You are here to talk about developmental progress. What is the model you have in mind?

Development is usually confused to mean just income growth or growth in the GDP or just visible infrastructural growth. My view is based on the capability approach and I believe that human development cannot be just limited to having better roads, airports and ports. Apart from better social goods and services, I feel that a constant expansion of human and social capital is needed. This expanding human and social capital will surely result in huge economic consequences for all.

Why do you think this model is suitable for Mauritius?

Mauritius is going through some fascinating changes. On the one hand, we are seeing a growing youth population which is more aware and is also getting more restless... Jobs are not growing at the same rate at which their aspirations are growing. Mauritius has chosen the path of focusing more on its financial services sector. While this is a critical component of the economic growth story, we need to bear in mind that this sector needs a highly-qualified talent pool and can provide very limited jobs. There is also the danger of importing talent to sustain the demands of the sector that can further marginalise the local youth.

How can you prevent that?

Mauritius should have invested in training the required manpower more than a year ago. But I also see another opportunity for Mauritius – with the shrinking of the primary agriculture sector, we should capitalise on the tourism sector. This can absorb the multi-linguistic talent that this society already has. We can also explore other alternate options that Mauritius is also good at – textiles, food processing and seeing if the country can provide transit facilities for movement of goods, services and



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people. Strengthen the ports and airports and market the openness and democracy that this society presents to the world.

You suggest that health and education for example should have a bigger chunk of the budget than projects like infrastructure. Isn't that over-idealistic? Without infrastructure, how can any type of progress be achieved to create the kind of wealth needed to pay for health and education?

No, this thinking is not over-idealistic but an essential feature of what should be good human development. When I say that health and education should get priority, I do not mean that other sectors should not be focused on. What I mean is that the health and education of citizens will allow them to become part of a healthy human capital and they can contribute in a big way to exploiting opportunities that present themselves. Mere infrastructural growth will in fact be wasted investment if we do not

find local people and talent to use them and maximise the gains. Investing in people first and the rest next is my slogan. Today, most governments, including Mauritius, have the resources to do this. What is needed is good prioritization of allocation of resources and a stable political climate.

You founded a youth movement group called the Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement. What lessons can we learn from their work?

Through my work over the last three decades and more, I have successfully demonstrated that this theory of development is practical too. I have shown through the more than 50 projects serving close to 2.5 million people over the entire state of Karnataka that building human and social capital can result in tremendous economic gains. This model is something that works at the grassroots and we need to study and learn from such models and explore possibilities of replication.

Your work has been mainly in India. Surely, India has few similarities with Mauritius ...

My work has been mainly in India. My leadership work has been in India, the US and in various South Asian countries. Fundamentally, I feel that most countries are today looking at eliminating poverty and making the lives of their citizens better. This is the undercurrent that I see in many of the countries that I have visited and worked in. I feel Mauritius is also grappling with the problems of fighting poverty, reducing inequity and providing its citizens with an acceptable degree of social and welfare services.

What would you wish to see in Mauritius at your next visit?

I would like to see Mauritius as a country to be as welcoming as it is today. Strengthening the tourist infrastructure with adequate global marketing efforts; serious efforts to reduce economic inequities; more space for citizen engagement in matters affecting their lives and development; social infrastructure to provide high quality health and education services in the public sector; and stronger enforcement of global regulatory frameworks for the financial sector.

What are your views on Mauritius after your first visit?

Mauritius in my view is God's own country. It is so beautiful and the people are so warm and multi-cultural. We need to ensure that we preserve this diversity without losing out on narrow divisions that the rest of the world is grappling with. Coming from India with its own set of social issues including the caste system, I would be worried if we let our diversity be exploited politically. We need to make our history and culture our strongest resources and not let them be used for narrow personal gains. Mauritius is strategically located and though a small country, can have its own place in ensuring peace and harmony in the region. ■