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LOCAL GOVERNMENT (RURAL) IN MAURITIUS

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Local Government in Mauritius can be traced back to the middle of the 18th century when Mauritius was a French possession. The island was then divided into eight quartiers administered by conseils de commune. During the French revolution municipalities presided over by mayors took the place of the conseils de commune.

2. In 1803, the municipalities were abolished and the responsibility for administration in each of the eight districts was shared by an agent general de police, a conseil de commune and a commissaire civil. The agent general de police was responsible for order, sanitation and collection of taxes; public works were entrusted to the conseil de commune, whilst the commissaire civil dealt with registration of births, marriages and deaths, etc. This system prevailed for many years after the occupation of the island by the British in 1810. It was, however, gradually supplanted as the Central Government assumed increasing control in the administration in the rural areas.

3. In 1839 a municipal charter was granted for the establishment of an elected municipality in the capital town of Port Louis. Towards the end of the 19th century, three Boards of Commissioners were established in the District of Plaines Wilhems to administer the towns of Curepipe, Quatre Bornes and Beau Bassin-Rose Hill. They were composed of members nominated by the Governor and were concerned mainly with the provision and maintenance of roads, water supplies and sanitation. They were allowed to levy a small tax to assist with the cost of small amenities.

In each of the nine districts, were established District Boards, with the aim of decentralising the work of local administration which had hitherto been performed in Port Louis. These District Boards ceased to exist in 1939 and their powers vested in the Director of Public Works. In fact they exercised no great powers and instructions continued to be issued from the centre.

4. The need for local government by elected bodies charged with administration and executive duties in matters concerning the inhabitants of a particular district or village and vested with powers to make by-laws was acknowledged after the labour disturbances which occurred in the northern part of the island in 1943. A committee set up to enquire into these disturbances reported that a conspicuous gap in the administration of Mauritius was the lack of senior, responsible and independent officers of Government to whom the people in the rural areas could turn for help with their troubles. The Committee also regretted the lack of any form of district administration and of adequate contact between the administration and the people administered.

5. It would be a good thing to consider the conditions prevailing at that time in Mauritius. The main industry in Mauritius had become sugar, and there were about twenty five sugar factories spread over the island and belonging to a few families who owned most of the land. Mass migration had taken place from Port Louis and the coastal regions, as a result of the outbreak of malaria, to the healthier plateau in the middle of the island, where

the main towns are situated. In the rural areas, the people lived near the sugar factories. The prices of sugar had gone down, and the wages were very low. The labourers were living in huts, without any sanitary conditions at all, and could not make both ends meet.

6. Government then decided to encourage the setting up of village and district committees and to appoint senior Government officers or Civil Commissioners to take charge of rural areas. The District and Village Councils Ordinance was passed in 1951. The Civil Commissioners were the Governor's representatives and the principal administrative officers in their districts. They were also to be responsible during a transitional period for the development on healthy lines of village and district councils and for ensuring the welfare of the inhabitants.

7. However, as the Civil Commissioners had no executive powers; they had to refer to the centre all questions raised by the inhabitants of rural areas and thereafter relay the decision to them. In this way they functioned as mere post offices.

8. The activities of village councils include the maintenance of small roads, the provision of scavenging services and of certain social services such as adult education classes, youth clubs and sewing classes. District Councils were responsible for the collection of entertainment tax, water supplies, bus shelters, unproclaimed roads and bridges.

The District Council meetings were presided over by the Civil Commissioners, a not-too-fortunate measure because these officers found it very often easier and quicker to perform almost everything by themselves rather than allow the members to decide on their own, and to learn the lesson the hard way, through trial and error. District Councillors wanted the rules of democracy to operate and in this endeavour of theirs the chairmanship of their meetings by the Commissioners was certainly not a boon.

9. In 1955, the problems of rural administration, its relationship with Central Government, the position of the Civil Commissioners and the future of District Councils were reviewed by Government. In 1956, a sessional paper on the development of Rural Local Government in Mauritius was accepted by the Legislative Assembly. Some of the proposals were as follows:

- (a) District and village councils to cease to be agencies for distribution of funds from Central Government;
- (b) These authorities should raise their own funds, through rates, etc.;
- (c) The authorities to have their own trained staff.
- (d) Government officers no longer to be members of the authorities.

10. In 1962, the Local Government Ordinance was passed and new elections were held on the basis of Adult Universal Suffrage. The new legislation brought considerable changes in local government policy in the rural areas as regards the election of chairman of District Councils, the election and appointment of councillors, the appointment of secretaries, treasurers and staff. The pattern of the Ordinance follows the legislation in the United Kingdom, modified and adapted to meet local circumstances. The committee system was established although it is not yet fully understood. The authorities are now empowered to make rules, bye-laws and regulations for the welfare of the inhabitants of the areas under their jurisdiction.

11. It is now still too early to comment on the effects of the new legislation and the wider powers entrusted to the District and village councils, as they are still in a transitional period. But it can be said without hesitation, that in many cases the councillors are not yet ready to assume such increased responsibility. Every effort is being made with the help of the newly created University of Mauritius, to educate both the councillors and the staff.

12. It is not yet easy for them to understand the role they have to play in the planning and execution of development projects, and that the most important function of the councils is in fact related to the economic development of its area, to prepare the ground for industrialization or for the development of tourism.

Ministry of Local Government and C.D.,
Port Louis.

9 September, 1969.

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