



Low-income housing provision in Mauritius: Improving social justice and place quality[☆]



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ABSTRACT

This study considers how housing need is, and can be, addressed through the provision of low-income housing in Mauritius. Informed by collaborative planning theory, the research seeks to understand the nuances of the Mauritian context and the relationship between governance processes surrounding low-income housing provision, and social justice and place quality outcomes. It finds that the planning and delivery of housing by the state often fails to provide for those in greatest need due to being highly centralised and driven by the land available and a desire to meet political targets. Also evident is the lack of resident participation in the planning of government housing despite it being recognised internationally as fundamental to creating sustainable housing solutions. It concludes by arguing that resident participation together with a collaborative planning approach can lead to greater social justice and place quality, and in turn more sustainable communities. Finally, it outlines the criteria that should be considered when developing low-income housing on the island.

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1. Introduction

This paper considers the provision of low-income housing in Mauritius. Its first concern is to explore the Mauritian cultural landscape to understand the challenges to achieving sustainability in the country, and how these challenges relate to the existence of inadequate housing on the island. Secondly, it highlights the general governance approach to low-income housing provision by the state. An awareness of how social relations and institutional structures are influencing housing need and delivery, helps illustrate what changes are needed to meet the nation's housing need. Thirdly, it examines two low-income housing projects that involved residents in the planning process to assess how resident involvement can help meet housing need in the Mauritian context.

1.1. The Mauritian cultural landscape

It is estimated that by 2030 2 billion people will live in

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inadequate housing conditions, predominantly in the southern hemisphere (UN Habitat, 2003). UN Habitat have defined adequate housing as possessing minimum standards in the following areas: security of tenure, availability of services, affordability, habitability, accessibility, location, and cultural adequacy (UN Habitat, 2010). The right to adequate housing was acknowledged by the Mauritian government in 1996 at Habitat II. However, a recent review of affordable housing in the urban global south has indicated that 'limited incomes and weak national and local housing policies in a number of countries, [has ensured that] affordable housing is out of reach for millions of low-income families' (Bredenoord, Van Lindert, & Smets, 2014, 1), and this is certainly the case for many in Mauritius Fig. 1.

The country is a small tropical island in the Indian Ocean that sits 1000 km east of Madagascar and 2000 km from the African mainland. Uninhabited until the mid-seventeenth century (Yung Yoon & Bunwaree, 2006), it is now home to nearly 1.3 million people. By the eighteenth century, under French rule, the country was dependent on a large number of slaves to cultivate the land. Drawn predominantly from Madagascar, the African mainland and Southern India (Vaughan, 2005), the slaves, and later indentured labourers, contributed to an ethnically diverse society. It is estimated that the population now consists of 68% Indo-Mauritian, 27% Creole, 3% Sino-Mauritian and 2% Franco-Mauritian (Indexmundi, 2015), with a far greater diversity of



Fig. 1. Location of Mauritius (Google Maps, 2015).

religions and languages.

Today, Mauritius is widely regarded as a 'success story' within the developing world, partly because of the strength of its economy and partly because of its embrace of democracy (Kasenally, 2011, 160). Gaining independence from the British in 1968, who themselves wrested the island from the French in 1810, Mauritius became a parliamentary republic in 1992 and a model for other nations in the region. There are, however, reasons for concern.

A decline in the domestic economy in the early 2000s and a rise in neoliberal economic policies has coincided with a number of worrying trends, such as high unemployment, violent crime, increasing poverty and deprivation, and an expanding drug trade (Kasenally, 2011). Some observers have argued that the Creole population, descendants of African and Malagasy slaves brought to the island to work on sugar plantations, is excluded from civil society and the political process (Laville, 2000), an argument that contains some legitimacy given the prevalence of individuals of Indian heritage in the major political parties. A second criticism, aired by Rambaree (2013), concerns the ownership of land and the prevalence of Franco-Mauritian landowners. Finally, it has been noted (Srebrnik, 2002) that strong communal divisions exist in Mauritian society.

Perhaps the most pressing concern, however, concerns the Creole community.¹ A group that suffers social and economic marginalisation, and commonly experiences low social esteem (Kasenally, 2011). The plight of Creole people in Mauritius has been described by one commentator as 'La Malaise Creole' (Boswell, 2006, xvii). Boswell claims this is caused by: 'the loss of land (experienced after the abolition of slavery) and the feeling that one does not occupy a positive space in the Mauritian cultural hierarchy, because of one's slave ancestry and blackness' (2006, xixx), while in other communities she finds that it can be traced to 'socio-economic marginalising by dominant groups since Mauritius experienced industrialisation in the 1970s and 1980s' (2006, xixx).

¹ This is not to say that people from other ethnic groups in Mauritian society are not also marginalised but that Creole people are a significant group in society that experience marginalisation to such an extent that it affects a large number of the group. Brautigam notes that there are also 'many poor among the majority Hindu population, especially those who still live and work in the sugar-producing areas' (1999, 231), who are likely also descendants of slaves or indentured labourers. Both low-income communities that are a focus of this study have predominantly Creole inhabitants as well as three households of Indian heritage.

1.2. Land use and ownership

Mauritius' colonial history and neoliberal economic policies do not only impact on the cultural identity of its inhabitants, they also have a large influence over the ownership of land and resulting access to adequate housing and other resources. The 2011 Truth and Justice Commission (TJC) report produced for the Government of Mauritius assesses the consequences of slavery and indentured labour during the colonial period up to the present, and recommends the reforms needed to increase economic and social justice on the island. It finds that land use and ownership is directly related to the history of slavery and indenture on the island (2011, 431), while UN Habitat (2012) note that most land is still owned by the descendants of slave owners. This means there is a lack of state-owned land available where low-income government housing can be built, with many existing communities being classed as squatters, and therefore unable to receive basic sanitation services from the government. The TJC states that, 'people of slave descent are among ... the less envious citizens of the Republic ... they are poorly housed ... devoid of basic amenities and in over crowdedness' (2011, 2).

There are a significant number of squatter settlements on the island, 'concentrated in the periphery of the capital of Port Louis as well as in some coastal regions, especially in the south-western coastal region' (UN Habitat, 2012b, 9). UN Habitat note that in the Black River district, despite three decades of 'development' in the country, some areas have 'not benefited from growth, and poverty has continued to increase in these localities' (2012, 8). The TJC report finds in fact that the majority of Mauritians are being priced out of the property market as an increasing amount of land is being used for economic developments and being sold to expatriates (TJC, 2011, 431), with social polarisation between the wealthier and poorer members of society becoming increasingly evident in the Black River region Fig. 2.

1.3. Property development and marginalisation in Black River

Since 2002, as Rambaree (2013) has pointed out, much of the development in the area has been spurred on by the introduction of the government's Integrated Resort Scheme (IRS), which allows non-citizens to buy luxury villas over \$500,000 in particular locations, which are commonly accompanied by leisure facilities such

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