

Less conversation, more action

SADC member states need to 'dirty their hands' if the region's declarations are to be met

Lynley Donnelly

While delegates at last week's SADC conference on poverty and development pulled up in taxis and luxury cars to the Mauritian conference centre, Linda Marie L'Acariate took a bus to work at the canteen of the Sacota textile mill, just outside the town of Rose Hill.

While delegates stared at PowerPoint presentations, talking about the plight of the poor — stopping for tea then lunch, then tea again in the large banquet hall — L'Acariate got on with the business of changing her life.

L'Acariate does shift work in the canteen, cooking simple meals for workers at the mill. She lives with her husband's family, about 20 members strong, on a plot of land not far from the mill.

More than a year ago L'Acariate was retrenched by a textile mill much like the one where she feeds employees now. She had started at the mill as a 19-year-old and had worked there for 30 years when she lost her job. With nothing but a primary school education, the retrenchment came as a serious blow.

"It was very difficult, very hard," she says. "I was there 30 years. I didn't know where to go."



Sugar was one of Mauritius's key earners but, like the textile industry, it has seen a decline as a result of global competition. Photo: Reuters

L'Acariate's husband also lost his job at a fertiliser production company and has not been able to get permanent work — he supplements the couple's income doing casual labour. She is grateful she has no children to feed, "otherwise it would have been worse".

L'Acariate is one of many unemployed women who, after a series of retrenchments in Mauritius's once-flourishing textile sector, is attempting to make a new start.

Mauritius is a small country with a population of only 1.2-million people. However, the tiny island has seen its key money earners, namely sugar and textiles, slowly drown in the sea of global competition. To survive, it has begun a process of realign-

ing the economy towards industries such as tourism and IT. Under the government's Empowerment Programme, introduced in 2006, the aim is to uplift, reskill and aid the most vulnerable citizens, whose expertise needs to change with the changing needs of the economy.

Aline Wong, one of the drivers behind the island state's "special programme for unemployed women", part of the larger empowerment programme, says those most affected by retrenchments in the textile sector have been women of about 40 with limited educations.

However, the special programme offers women like L'Acariate a chance to learn new skills, such as

cooking and catering, which can be used in other sectors, opening the way to new opportunities. This includes teaching women how to become entrepreneurs and providing them with expertise to manage a small business.

Wong, herself a successful business woman, is involved in 27 projects across Mauritius, ranging from reskilling women as caregivers or baby sitters to helping them become entrepreneurs. All the projects are proving to be sustainable and replicable.

The programme is a partnership between the Mauritian government and the private sector and, despite these unusual bedfellows, it is beginning to get results. Partly because, says Wong, having the private sector involved means that the projects tend to be more results driven.

A reported 10% of Mauritians live in poverty. However, rural poverty is on the rise across the country. Unemployment is increasing and those who are already disadvantaged are sinking into deeper poverty, according to a rural poverty report by the International Fund for Agricultural Development.

Despite these challenges Mauritius has seen its GDP grow from 2% since independence to 6%, with the aim of reaching 8%.

"This is economic growth we have to sustain," says the country's Minister of Social Security, Sheila Bappoo. "And when we are able to sustain good economic growth it means it will create a lot of job opportunities ... decent work,

stability, security of a job."

Bappoo believes Mauritius has a great deal to contribute to the SADC.

"Mauritius can share its experience and its model of empowering vulnerable groups." She warns, however, that action must be taken. "We speak and we speak and we speak, but we need to implement. Things must be translated into action."

The issue of implementation is indeed the greatest challenge lying ahead for the SADC in the aftermath of the conference on poverty and development. With its ambitious plans for a regional poverty observatory, which will monitor how the region is succeeding in instituting its regional poverty reduction framework, much work lies ahead.

Last week's meeting was marred by concerns that implementation has been a consistent weakness in the SADC's operation, the downfall of the region's progressive protocols and declarations.

For the first time a conference of this nature included not only member states and international funding partners, but also civil society. Yet engagement with actors who participate at grassroots level is worthless if it does not translate into action.

"We need to go out there and dirty our hands," says Malcolm Damon, director of the Economic Justice Network. "Governments need to do more work at national level with civil society. SADC national committees in the different countries need to be strengthened."

Wanna be a BIG fish? Widen your net.

"There are so many big fish in the water nowadays since we made the mesh of our nets bigger"

Tendai has been fishing the waters of the Zambezi river for over 12 years. "We used to catch many small fish and very few big ones," he says, "because the more small fish we caught the less small fish there were to get big! We cannot survive without the fish. If I come home with no fish, my family will go hungry!"

The waters of the Luangwa and Zambezi rivers provide food for more than 300 000 people. The African Wildlife Foundation was awarded the 2007 Drivers of Change Award in the civil society category for their positive engagement with local government and the communities dependent on these rivers. Through their work, they are ensuring the continuation of this great resource for generations to come.

Nominations for the 2008 Drivers of Change Award are now open. Nominate innovators and you will raise up a deserving individual, organisation, government agency, or business as a leader in innovation and best practice to end poverty. This includes you!

Entries close on Friday 4 July 2008. The winners will be announced on 23 October 2008 at a gala event in Johannesburg.

Please contact Sudley Adams on +27 11 250 7300 or +27 82 900 0776 or go to www.southernafricatrust.org for more details and entry forms.

