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### Contemporary Trade Union Engagement in the Indian Ocean

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**Abstract:** This research addresses the influence of public sector unions in the Indian Ocean and the trends that are likely to influence them in their engagement at the workplace. A few key issues have been developed to understand the influence of public trade unions in the Indian Ocean Islands. They are bargaining power, innovation, employee protection and employee engagement. Bargaining power of public trade unions in the Indian Ocean do vary. In settled economies like Mauritius and the Seychelles, public unions do fight for their employee rights but this remains stronger in Comoros and Madagascar due to their prevailing economic situation. Innovation in public union organisations remain broadly similar in all nations under the survey like the use of information technology, flexible working hours and work-life balance. Regarding employee protection, scores were moderate although all island state constitutions had legislations favouring them while their application differed. Employee engagement was considered as moderate in most island states considered from the point of employees at board level and in key decisions while public unions timidly engaged women in prominent positions in public unions.

**Keywords:** Trade unions, engagement, comparative study, Indian Ocean states

#### A comparative analysis of public unions engagement in today's workplace in selected Indian Ocean States Problem Statement

This research addresses the influence of public sector unions in the Indian Ocean and the trends that are likely to influence them in collective bargaining. It is an admitted fact that public unions are strong in most societies since they are supported by the government and legislation that abound employee relations. Indian Ocean Islands like the Republic of Mauritius, Madagascar, the Seychelles, Reunion Island and Comoros have broadly similar employment relations structures that are mainly guided by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) initiatives. In between, each government has its own style of managing the public sector while it is clearly seen that public bodies operated within a well-defined framework. The central issue posited that public sector unions in the selected environments predominate over private unions owing to advantages like their desire to attract and unionise members, freedom from the State to recruit members and engage them in union activities as well as permanent and pensionable jobs that create security on

behalf of the incumbents. As such, public unions remain strong in the selected environments, are likely to grow steadily in size while they might not enjoy the same dynamic involvement as private sector organisations. The question here is that although size matters, it does not reflect a clear statement of public sector influence over private ones. Today's unions are challenged with upcoming issues like reviewing their bargaining power, developing better employee engagement, seeing that they can adopt innovative tools to attract and retain members and also engage them in a more concrete way to ensure their sustainability.

#### Island nations in the survey

Figure 1 below briefly describes the five island nations considered for observation in this study. Madagascar is the largest island in the Indian Ocean and is a sovereign state since 1960. Mauritius and the Seychelles are independent nations since 1968 and 1976 respectively and are members of the Commonwealth. Reunion Island is a French department (Department Outremer) and the Comoros are an independent Islamic state in the North West of Madagascar.



**Figure 1: Indian Ocean States in the survey**

Source: <http://arnobrosi.tripod.com>

### Key Issues

A few key issues have been developed to understand the influence of public trade unions in the Indian Ocean Islands. These have been considered by taking into consideration the current issues debated in public unions. Taken as a matter of fact that public unions are more protected and freer to demonstrate themselves compared to private unions, common agendas have been sought as applicable to all countries involved in this survey. The key problem areas will be developed in the sub-sections below namely bargaining power, innovation, employee protection and employee engagement. A discussion of each issue is firstly developed followed by a comparative analysis.

#### *Bargaining power*

A key determinant in trade union power today is their bargaining power. It illustrates the extent to which unions can bargain collectively with management. Craver (2008) suggests that representative unions can no longer sit down with employer agents and simply negotiate the terms they would prefer to have. In the global economy, they must understand the impact of their bargaining decisions on firm competitiveness. Public unions are today keener to bargain with the government as it is their main employer. Quite often, public unions bargain on key issues like wages, conditions of work and their right to freedom. In recent times, public unions have apprehended to some extent the privatisation of certain ministerial departments. This has been evidenced by the State's decision to corporatise departments that were either ineffective in the past or that might have the chance to operate independently with some good financial support. Unions have viewed privatisation as negative in most countries under study.

#### *Innovation*

Innovation in public union organisations remain broadly similar. All nations under the survey are in favour of innovation like the use and diffusion of information technology, flexible working hours, work life balance and improvement in benefits from public workers. Emerging and developing economies are competing globally for talent, resources and market shares (Lanvin et al, 2013). Such innovation is a necessity as to have a positive impact in terms of service provision to the respective communities. Regarding public unions, innovation comes mainly from their approach towards attracting new members. From a general point of view, union membership has declined globally since there are mechanisms like state control, the nature of jobs and unemployment that have, to some extent, surpassed the power of unions. Public as well as private unions have to innovate in order to retain their members.

#### *Employee protection*

Public union organisations in the island nations of the Indian Ocean follow broadly similar patterns. Employee protection is supported through permanent jobs, decent salaries for employees and lower mobility around jobs. Employee protection might be enhanced if this would address upcoming issues like ageing, social security and pension schemes. In Mauritius, pension schemes are paid by officials, the same applies to Reunion Island through 'côtisation'. It remains to be seen how employee protection becomes a key bargaining tool for public unions in the Indian Ocean. Employee protection could have been taken for granted in a near past where public jobs were fully supported by government. Governments in the Indian Ocean have

considered this aspect particularly in the public service which is an important employer in most countries in the research. There might possibly be lifelong occupations in the public service but the guarantee is affected by increasing costs of operation of government services, bureaucracy and inherent inefficiencies coupled with poor innovative work concepts.

**Employee engagement**

Employee engagement refers to the extent to which employees are involved in public sector unions. Macey and Schneider (2008) view employee engagement as the positive feelings that employees have towards their jobs and the motivation and effort they put in. So far, with established parameters for union creation, operation and management, engagement is focused only on union leaders. Employee engagement is in context limited to indirect participation like payment of union membership fees and benefiting from public sector welfare. Engagement is considered more in the form of the membership of employees but, in States like, the Seychelles and Madagascar, higher engagement is seen from the economic standpoint of the countries. The case differs

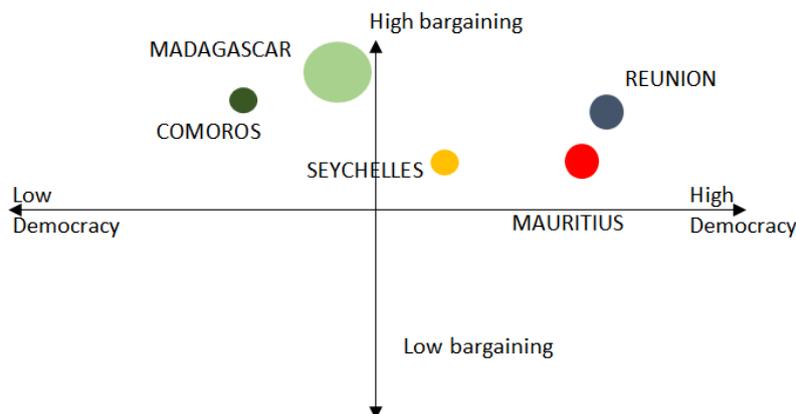
in Mauritius where such engagement is more visible during collective bargaining concerning wage rises but not in work conditions.

**Comparative Analysis**

The comparative analysis uses the variables listed above to show and make comparisons or assess similarities among the countries in the Indian Ocean. It shows how each nation rates itself under the variables and how such differences do matter. It briefly explains the causal factors creating commonness among public unions and what conjectural factors might create differences in the assessment.

**Theme 1: Bargaining power of public unions in selected Indian Ocean Islands**

To understand the bargaining power of public unions in a comparative manner, a two-dimensional chart explains the positioning of each nation with regards to bargaining and constitutional democracy. Different colours highlight differences among nations. The size is reflective of each nation’s population and comparative public union membership. The illustration is explained in Figure 2 below.



**Figure 2: Comparative bargaining power of public unions**

Public unions in Reunion Island have remained quite buoyant over the years especially regarding demands for better conditions of work. This has followed partly trends in mainland Europe with strong demands for higher wages. At the same time, a high level of unemployed people in the country presses unions forward to better negotiate with the State for the creation of jobs, the opportunity to provide placement and training to the young and unemployed people. At the Mauritian level, the bargaining power has remained fairly mild since the right to strike is a last resort in the same case as the Seychelles. There are new agendas for bargaining in Mauritius particularly the increase in the age of retirement, the management of state pensions and wage rises. Madagascar scores highest in this area

as a result of ongoing negotiations with the State to bring about better welfare for its workers.

**Theme 2: Innovation in public unions**

Innovation was another variable worth considering in the research since the survival of public unions depends on how they could better communicate with their employees. A similar model was used compared to the previous one where the two dimensions focused on the level of technological development and the extent of innovation of public unions. Regarding technology, it is clear that three nations lie ahead namely Reunion Island, a French territory benefiting from the latter’s technological prowess, Mauritius positioned as a cyber-island and the Seychelles trying to be connected with the latest submarine connections.

Although it was quite complex to get clear data on innovation of public unions opting for information

technology, certain plausible observations could be made. The interpretation is illustrated in Figure 3.

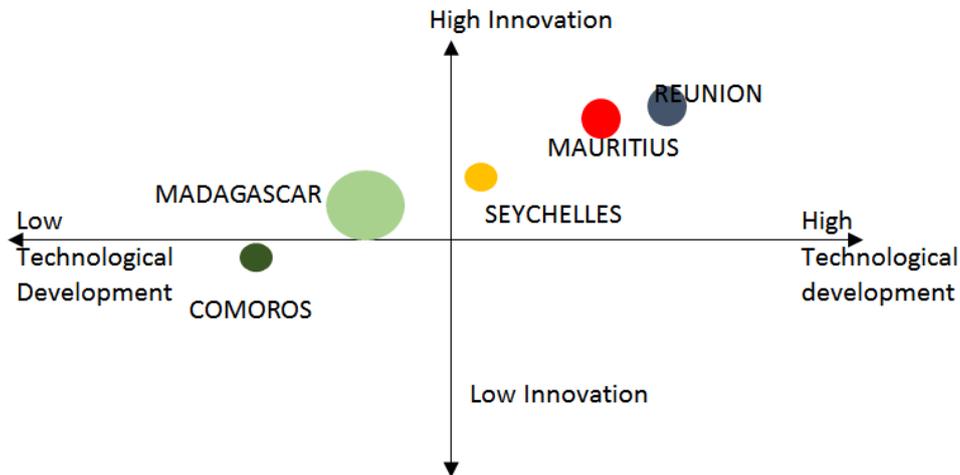


Figure 3: Innovation of public unions

Many trade unions recognise the need to keep their affiliated organisations and members up to date with new trends and developments in technology, and at the moment the focus is on information and communication technology (Eurwork, 1998). Innovation in communication and the harnessing of Information and communications Technology (ICT) by unions is fairly weak in the Indian Ocean islands. Although, institutions favour the wide use of such technology, the diffusion of such innovation has not clearly reached public unions and their employees. Reunion Island is quite well developed technologically. It was labelled FrenchTech in 2016 and its digital ecosystem relies on several incubators (Arhimmobilier, 2016). Public unions in the country are affiliated with their French counterparts and certain common platforms are used. Publications, websites and communication are quite well fostered through ICT and there is a likely impact on public officers. Mauritius, positioned as a ICT hub has influenced the use and application of such innovation. Political and worker movements do have their websites to channel information and decisions but such use is not widespread. It is still the hard copy and the traditional modes like the use of posters and circulars that help

bringing trade union leaders and members together. In the Seychelles, a mild use of ICT as innovative tool to communicate with employees exists but the comprehensive application of such a technique is still in its infancy. It is in this aspect that less financially-endowed nations like Madagascar and Comoros score low. Comoros have now shifted to satellite technology to provide internet access to the residents (Jensen and Minges, 2017). So far, it remains to be seen how public unions opt for such innovation to better appeal to their members.

**Theme 3: Employee protection**

Employee protection has always gained high importance on the agendas of various unions and applies to most countries in the survey. Protection, although instated legally, may not be permanently granted be it in public or private jobs. There are certain key concepts regarding employee protection that are assessed here. They are: knowledge of employee rights, freedom of association, pension schemes, ratification of international Labour Organisation conventions, employee data protection. They are tabulated below with a range between weak, moderate and high.

Table 1: Employee protection in public unions

Country	Employee rights	Freedom of association	Pension and retirement schemes	Ratification of ILO conventions	Employee data protection
Mauritius	Strong	Moderate	Strong	Strong	Moderate
Reunion	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong	Moderate
Madagascar	Moderate	Strong	Moderate	Weak	Weak
Seychelles	Strong	Moderate	Strong	Strong	Moderate
Comoros	Moderate	Moderate	Weak	Weak	Weak

Employee protection is here evidenced through a rating scale based on information obtained on each country. Since there are public unions in all the states concerned, employee protection is maintained. In Mauritius, Reunion Island and the Seychelles, employee rights are protection according to the enactment of respective laws as per country concerned. The fact that these island states accepted ratifying the ILO convention pertaining to employee relations, it is clear that there have been applications of such schemes. Certainly, differences could be deeper if private unions are considered. The 2005 law reform on employment in Madagascar stipulates a high level of employee protection regarding wages, wage settlement, employee protection, etc. and this proves that there is room for progress in that country (Code du Travail, 2005). The same applies to the Comoros where the right to strike is recognised (Art.227) and conciliation terms are jointly agreed by employee unions and the works inspectorate (Art.219, Afrique.com, 2016).

**Theme 4: Employee Engagement**

Employee engagement has been the hallmark of public unions in recent times throughout the Indian Ocean. The call for industrial democracy has been heralded on all fronts since this effort brings in participation, coordinated effort and a sense of identity among unions. Public unions are likely to consider employee engagement on the following points: engagement at union board level, democratisation of public institutions and female participation. The latter is an important concern today since the Millennium Development goals call for higher engagement of women in union activities.

In a similar configuration as in the previous table, the public unions of the different countries are assessed on scales like weak, moderate and strong.

**Table-2: Employee engagement in public unions**

Country	Engagement at union board level	Democratisation of public institutions	Female participation
Mauritius	Weak	Strong	Moderate
Reunion	Moderate	Strong	Moderate
Madagascar	Moderate	Moderate	Weak
Seychelles	Weak	Strong	Moderate
Comoros	Moderate	Moderate	Weak

It might be correct to say that employees show high level of solidarity when it comes to engage themselves for a common cause in union activities. If problems meet with suitable solutions, the engagement gradually dwindles. Although public unions remain stable in attracting employees in the Indian Ocean, employee engagement remains moderate. These evaluations are tallied with the state of democracy within nations but also their human development index.

Public institutions are strongly rated in the developed economies of the Indian Ocean namely Mauritius, Reunion and the Seychelles and they are moderate in the Comoros and Madagascar because of some recent political upturns. These might be initial assessors of employee engagement since the more public institutions encourage employee participation, the greater it might be for the union members. At the board level, leaders tend to predominate and offer little chance for ordinary members to join in. In politically stable countries, the bureaucratic structure might be less in favour of promoting ordinary members to sit at the board level while in the Comoros and Madagascar, there might be that urge to be better represented in boards, hence greater engagement.

Female participation has been included as an element of the checklist concerning employee

engagement. The empowerment of women is encouraged nationally in all the island states of the Indian Ocean but their engagement in union activities is still marginal. This might illustrate the weak framework of engagement in general. The scores are moderate for Mauritius, Reunion and Seychelles but weak in Comoros and Madagascar. Only one Indian Ocean Rim country, Seychelles, approximates anywhere near equal representation, with women in 41 per cent of management positions (Johnson, 2015).

**Discussion**

The discussion focusing on the four variables namely bargaining power, innovation, employee protection and employee engagement provide a general consensus that bargaining power of public unions remain fair with slight variations in certain countries. In labour-intensive economies like Comoros and Madagascar, union bargaining powers are strong both in public and private sectors. In public unions, this might be weak in more prosperous countries like Mauritius, Seychelles and Reunion Island. Due to some economic stability in the region followed by higher capital influx from trade and better integration in Africa, the bargaining power has slightly slumped over the years. Regarding innovation, upper-middle economies like Reunion and Mauritius are more likely to innovate both in terms of usage of information technology and

communication with members. This is an eventuality because of the level of technology diffusion in such countries. There are possibilities for public unions to innovate particularly on using communications technology since this will attract younger generations willing to join unions. Regarding employee protection, here again, advanced economies are better able to protect the public employees while low-wage structures might critically affect weaker economies. Employee protection is however safeguarded through the existence of legislation and the ratification of ILO conventions on employee relations. Such abundance empowers governments and public unions to stick to principles of effective employee protection. Employee engagement is weakened in the richer economies like Mauritius, Seychelles and Reunion but could equally address the Comoros with an established 'cahier de charges'. In Madagascar, such engagement might be higher. The extent of engagement could be either systemic namely in terms of powers and limitations of influence of public unions but also in socio-cultural terms. For instance, engaging women in union activities is important but this might be hampered by a lack of information, education and awareness in lesser developed economies like the Seychelles and the Comoros. The interpretations were also tallied with the human development index (HDI) of the different countries to reduce bias in observations. The positions contrasted between Reunion (27), Seychelles (63), Mauritius (64) compared with Madagascar and the Comoros (158 and 160 respectively). These classifications also give insight into key variables like employee engagement and freedom (UNDP, 2015). Additionally, the human development approach considers two fundamental freedoms—the freedom of well-being, including functioning and capabilities, and the freedom of agency, including voice and autonomy which fits well in the analyses made (Ariely and Duke, 2016).

### Limitation and Conclusion

It is not altogether easy to create a research instrument in evaluating trends in public sector engagement in employment relations in more than one country. Specialists from different countries might be needed for insightful research. This paper seeks secondary information available from websites and selected research articles that purport the contribution of public sector unions to the respective economies. It makes an appreciation in the form of comparative checks among the countries in the survey.

It is generally seen that the well-organised structure of public unions in each of countries in the Indian Ocean allows room for a good and appealing union membership. The stability is caused by the surrounding conditions of employment, government job, public sector framework support and decent wages.

This trend is likely to predominate over private unions that are shrinking in size and less likely to grow. Private unions will matter more in economies like Madagascar or Comoros given their existing economic condition while public unions might have an extended power over them in Mauritius, Reunion and Seychelles. Insofar, public union engagement still prevails but will be forced to become stronger with changing times like privatisation, foreign direct investment and a more precarious economic environment that calls for higher privatisation. Through tradition and history, public unions will remain strong but their long-term sustainability is still under question. Schillinger (2005) summarises that in many countries trade unions remain an important political force which has to be taken into account by the political power holders. Despite their massive membership losses, trade unions continue to be one of the very few societal organisations in Africa with a sizeable constituency, country-wide structures and the potential for mobilising members on social or political matters.

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