

Perception versus Reality: Major Stakeholders and Progress towards Sustainable Development Goals in the South-West Indian Ocean

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ABSTRACT: The attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is a key objective for small island developing states (SIDS) and sub-national island jurisdictions (SNIJs). Despite progress in reducing poverty and social inequalities, improving access to education and health and reducing gender inequalities, many are highly vulnerable to shocks. To assess their ability to improve resilience, the paper investigates their advancement towards achieving the SDGs. The existing literature suggests a mismatch between the progress indicated in the official SDGs' reports and public perceptions about these achievements. Using online surveys of stakeholder groups undertaken in 2020; this research critically reviews the current literature on the progress towards achieving SDGs in two Indian Ocean islands: Mauritius and La Réunion. The study further juxtaposes public perceptions, categorises patterns and identifies gaps in policy design. The findings map out the actions needed at national, regional and international levels to address sustainable development challenges.

Keywords: Mauritius, Réunion, Sustainable Development Goals, small island developing states, sub-national island jurisdictions

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Introduction

About 20 percent of United Nations (UN) members are small island states, often organised in a lobby group called the Alliance for Small Island States (AOSIS), which was also instrumental in the setting up of three global UN conferences on the sustainable development of Small Island Developing States (SIDS). The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN-DESA) currently recognises 58 SIDS (38 UN-members and 20 non-UN members), located in three main geographic areas: i) Caribbean, ii) Pacific, and iii) Atlantic, Indian Ocean, Mediterranean and the South China Sea (AIMS). Additionally, there are at least 115 populated Sub-National Island Jurisdictions (SNIJs) across the globe (Stuart, 2009), and the taxonomy of their association to the mainland varies greatly, including unions, constitutionally decentralised unions, federations, confederations, federacies, associated states and overseas territories (Baldacchino & Milne, 2006).

The attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is a key policy objective for many SIDS and SNIJs. This process can be traced back to 1994 and to the importance given to Sustainable Development (SD) at the first UN global conference on the sustainable development of SIDS, held in Barbados. The Barbados Plan of Action (BPoA), followed by the 2005 Mauritius Strategy of Implementation (MSI), the 2010 MSI+5 outcome document, and the SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action (SAMOA) Pathway adopted in 2014 during the third international SIDS conference, cemented the importance of achieving SD for SIDS.

More recently, the review of the 2014 SAMOA Pathway undertaken in 2018 by the SIDS of the AIMS Region aligned the achievement of the objectives agreed in the 2014 third international conference on SIDS to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and that the monitoring of the progress in the implementation of the SAMOA Pathway “*was best carried out in the context of the monitoring of the implementation of the SDGs and their targets based on the SDG indicators*” (United Nations, 2018, p.16).

In light of these initiatives, the objective of this paper is to investigate the public perception toward SDGs in the two small islands of Mauritius and La Réunion, outlining useful implications for designing policy tools that will strengthen SDG actions. Public awareness and support of the SDGs is an important prerequisite for their implementation. It is also vital to understand public attitudes towards SDGs to facilitate and encourage public involvement in SDG actions. Hence, a better insight of public perception can support policy making in areas where there are gaps. The methodology rests on two online surveys of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), public officials, business owners, students, academics and private sector workers, amongst others across La Reunion and Mauritius.

The structure of the paper is as follows: Section 2 reviews the literature on small islands and SNIJs with respect to sustainable development. Section 3 describes the materials and methods used in the study whilst section 4 presents the case study and situational analysis of Mauritius and La Réunion. Section 5 sets out the findings and section 6 discusses the results. We conclude in section 7 with relevant policy implications.

Literature Survey

The literature on small island states and SNIJs has increased considerably during the past three decades, mostly due to the importance that small states are being assigned, or have acquired, in the international arena (Baldacchino, 2020a; Ourbak & Magnan, 2018). Existing

literature on SIDS generally agrees that vulnerabilities pose serious challenges to the attainment of SD on islands (Mycoo, 2018; Moncada & Bambrick, 2019; Shultz et al., 2019; Taglioni, 2011). In this regard, a prolific body of knowledge researching economic vulnerability has stressed that small size often implies poor natural resource endowment and low inter-industry linkages, resulting in a relatively high import content in relation to GDP. Constraints in diversifying their economies, especially when compared to larger states, leads to a relatively high dependence on a narrow range of exports, making SIDS more exposed to external economic shocks (Briguglio, 2016). Further constraints, driven by small size, can be identified in the limitations on domestic competition, potentially leading to oligopolistic and monopolistic organisations, high per unit cost of transport, mostly due to insularity from the main commercial centres that may also give rise to additional problems such as time delays and unreliability in transport services (Briguglio, 1995). Furthermore, small size may limit the ability of some states to reap the benefits of economies of scale, mostly due to indivisibilities of overhead costs, which also make administration, and in general the costs of running a country, more expensive, given the higher per capita costs when the population is small (Srinivasan, 1986).

However, these constraints and disadvantages should not be construed as an argument that small states cannot succeed in achieving SD. On the contrary, it is well known that a number of small island states and SNIJs are highly successful economically and that their financial and economic development is actually associated with an increase in environmental standards (Seetanah et al., 2018). Furthermore, many SIDS and SNIJs, generally, tend to feature strong and long-lasting democratic records (Corbett & Veenendaal, 2018). The literature on small states identifies various factors as having an effect on the performance of small states, some of which are inherent, including location, population size, and proneness to disasters, which therefore cannot be changed by government policy (Te'o, 2007; Briguglio et al., 2009; Briguglio, 2016). Other factors are policy-induced, such as economic, social, political and environmental governance (Briguglio et al., 2020). Many small states adopt policies which enable them to minimise the negative effects associated with small country size. In fact, a good number of SIDS are Middle-to-High income countries, indicating that they adopt policies that enable them to overcome their vulnerabilities (Moncada et al., 2018).

There are three major propositions that explain the generally good SD performance of small states, namely that (a) small states are no different from larger ones (Anklesaria Aiyar, 2008; Easterly & Kraay, 2000); (b) small states face inherent handicaps, but many inherent advantages and the latter can outweigh the former (Baldacchino & Bertram, 2009); and (c) small states face major economic problems but these can be offset by appropriate economic policy (Briguglio et al., 2009). Irrespective of whether small island states tap into people's 'resourcefulness' as indicated by Baldacchino and Bertram (2009), or into 'policy induced measures' as highlighted by Briguglio et al. (2009), external factors such as pandemics and climate change can affect the capacity of many SIDS and SNIJs to build long-lasting resilience, and to strengthen individual, collective and institutional responses to external shocks (Lincoln et al., 2020).

Evidence from recent research shows that small states have been highly impacted by the recent COVID-19 pandemic, with mortality rates amongst the highest (WHO, 2020; Randall, 2020; Telesford, 2021). However, it is also noticeable that many small island states have indeed reacted quickly and contained the spread of the virus, probably due to "island geography, remoteness and jurisdictional powers that enabled island and archipelagic jurisdictions to quickly lock themselves down and seal themselves in" (Baldacchino, 2020b, p.

4). Regional comparisons seem to confirm this view. For example, SIDS in the Caribbean have performed better than other mainland regions in Central and South America in containing the spread of the virus (Hambleton et al., 2020). Further research has also confirmed that small population size and island status can be an advantage in supporting public health measures to limit the spread of the virus (Taglioni, 2020), while more relaxed government approaches that tend to favour short-term economic priorities can lead to less desirable transmission rates (Cuschieri et al., 2020). SIDS' and SNIJs' response to shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic can play a crucial role in indicating whether progress towards achieving the SDGs is still attainable.

Public perceptions

There is substantial evidence that public perception/opinion is an important factor in the adoption of policy measures, with a sizeable amount of literature examining the influence of public opinion and social movements on government policy (Gamson, 1989; Goldstone, 1980, Rohrschneider, 1990). It is often argued that public opinion influences public policy; that the more salient an issue is to the public, the stronger the relationship is likely to be; and that this relationship is threatened by the power of interest organisations, political parties, and economic elites (Aldrich, 1995; Burstein, 2003; Dahl, 1992; Mueller, 1999; Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1995; Page and Shapiro 1983; Smith, 2000;). Burstein (2003) showed that the impact of public opinion is substantial and that it remains strong even when accounting for the activities of political organisations and elites. Predictions about the impact of opinion on policy range from it having a very substantial influence (Stimson, MacKuen & Erikson, 1995) to its keeping policy, rather vaguely, "in bounds" in its distance from public opinion (Jones, 1994, p. 238).

Less research is available on the impact of public perception on the adoption of SD policies, where the current body of knowledge has mostly focused on researching the links between public opinion and environmentally policy, suggesting that a positive outlook can lead to the adoption of environmentally friendly policy, but also that this can change when unfavourable public support acts as a major barrier to this change (Dasgputa & De Cian, 2018). In light of this, if pro-environmentalism public opinion tends to rise it may nudge policymakers to adopt pro-environmental policies, accounting for an increase in public demand for environmentally friendly policies (Dasgputa & De Cian, 2018).

Expert views as well as public opinions and a participative policymaking process provide useful tools to understand and address SDG achievements (OECD, 2020; Randall, 2020) and interactions (Weitz et al., 2018; Xu et al., 2020; ICS, 2017) Compared to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the process for working towards the SDGs is intended to be more inclusive with various groups having the opportunity to share their opinions at different levels. In effect, the SDGs are process-oriented, providing a forward-looking vision for governments to consider, anticipate and respond to some global changes and trends that influence and shape the policy environment. The extent to which countries are able to meet the SDGs will affect people and societies, with the impact being very much place-specific. Hence, there is a need for context-specific policies, which are more inclusive and people-centred. However, high unemployment, low wages, rising income inequality, gender inequalities and other poor socioeconomic outcomes have led to growing public discontent across many countries. This discontent has been amplified by the political and economic status quo: there has been a growing uncertainty and distrust from citizens about the capacity of their governments to ensure wellbeing now and in the future (OECD, 2019a). The SDGs offer an

opportunity for governments to design and implement public policies to foster equity, inclusion and cohesion. It is important therefore for both developed and developing nations to engage citizens and incorporate public opinion in the policymaking process.

Although many SIDS and SNIJs have advanced relatively steadily, albeit unevenly, towards achieving SDG goals, there seems to be a mismatch between the progress indicated in the official reports (Voluntary National Review Report of Mauritius, 2019; Direction de l'environnement, de l'aménagement et du logement de la Réunion, 2017) and public perceptions among major stakeholders about these achievements, with information over public perceptions being scarce, or outdated. Understanding and interpreting public perceptions can help guide policy-design and support policy in areas where there are still gaps to be addressed. This research tries to fill these gaps, with a focus on the small island state of Mauritius and the SNIJ of La Réunion, with the objective of informing policy in the area of SD.

Materials and Methods

An online survey was conducted across seven groups targeting academics, students, government and other local authority employees, Non-Governmental Organisations, trade unions, business leaders and households. The profile of respondents was captured in terms of their gender, age, educational background, employment status, occupation and income. The questions relate to the importance and performance of the authorities and institutions at both the municipal, regional and provincial levels. The second part of the questionnaire focus more on the perceptions on sustainable development (including the evaluation of the success of the island government in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals) as well as actions undertaken by the population in line with the SDGs. The questions on perceptions were closed questions with a ranking “extremely favourable” or “strongly agree” to “extremely unfavourable” or “strongly disagree”.

120 individuals were surveyed in La Réunion Island (63) and Mauritius (57) on the perception of sustainable development in relation to the objectives of the United Nations Development Programme. The surveys were conducted between January and March 2020. These questionnaires were carried out within the broader framework of a research project comparing small island states and sub-national island jurisdictions, which aims to bring together the knowledge and expertise of multiple researchers and partners from twelve islands spread across the globe. Under the UNESCO Chair in Island Studies and Sustainability, the overall objective is to better understand the sustainable development practices and potential of small islands, and in particular, the role that governance plays in achieving a more sustainable future.

This paper critically examines the similarities and differences in sustainability policies between a small independent island state (Mauritius) and a sub-national island jurisdiction (La Reunion Island). These policies and practices are examined through the lens of islanders' perceptions. In other words, the perception of islanders is questioned. At the same time, the aim is to see what spaces for dialogue are available to the population and how they express their disagreement or saturation in the face of inappropriate or insufficient decisions taken from the authorities.

Case Study Areas

One-hundred and eighty kilometres apart, La Réunion Island and Mauritius are located in the south-western Indian Ocean, some 700 km east of Madagascar and some 2,300 km from the African coastal strip (Mozambique). Together with Rodrigues, a Mauritian dependency, they form part of the Mascarene archipelago. They both started their colonial histories as French territories, with Mauritius passing into British hands in 1814. [Table 1](#) below provides a comparative snapshot of the main social and economic indicators in both islands. From the table, it can be observed that the population of Mauritius is higher than that of La Reunion. GDP per capita, literacy rate and life expectancy are higher for La Reunion compared to Mauritius. However, in terms of income inequality and unemployment rate, Mauritius fares better.

Table 1: Some social and economic variables for both islands.

	La Réunion	Mauritius
Population (million)	0.86	1.3
GDP (2019) per capita (US\$)	19,000	12,900
HDI (2019), value and rank	0.901 (26 th)	0.804 (66 th)
Life expectancy at birth (years)	80	74
Infant mortality rate (%)	7	10
Unemployment rate (%)	21	10.5
Gini Index*	0.53	0.36
Literacy (%)	99	91

Source: Mauritius: World Bank 2020; La Réunion: INSEE 2020.

* Gini index of 0 represents perfect equality, while an index of 1 implies perfect inequality.

La Reunion

La Réunion Island is located nearly 9,345 km from mainland France. Together with Mayotte, it is one of two French departments located in the Indian Ocean. More precisely, La Reunion is one of twelve French Overseas Territories. Among them, five, including La Réunion, have the status of DROM (French Overseas Department or Region). The DROMs are under the legislative identity regime (Article 73 of the Constitution). In other words, national laws and regulations are automatically applicable to them. Nevertheless, to take account of their specific nature, adaptations may be applied, except in the field of justice, public freedoms, etc. (Gay, 2017). In La Reunion, as in French Guiana, the Regional Council and the Departmental Council constitute the local decentralised government administration. The scope of action of the Regional Council encompasses ten main areas; economic development, training and youth, sustainable regional development, environment, transport and travel, tourism, culture and sport, purchasing power, European funds and regional voluntary actions. For its part, the General Council is mainly involved in social actions (e.g., protection of the elderly, integration of young people, and development of culture). Certain fields, such as tourism development and the integration of young people, overlap between the two Councils.

La Réunion covers an area of 2,512 km² and had nearly 860,000 inhabitants in 2020 (INSEE, 2020). It is characterised by the relative youthfulness of its population, with 35% of Reunion Islanders under the age of 25. Conversely, only 16% of Reunion Islanders are over 60

years old. Despite a significant ageing of the population over the last 30 years, among Overseas Departments only Mayotte and French Guiana have younger populations. Although population growth has slowed down in recent years to around 1% per year, it appears that the symbolic threshold of one million inhabitants will be crossed before 2040.

As is the case with many tropical small islands, La Réunion is very much exposed to natural risks, including drought in winter, torrential rains in summer, volcanic eruptions in the south-east, and tropical cyclones with devastating winds. Almost the entire population of La Réunion is concerned by these major natural risks, which are not without consequences for agricultural activity, regional planning policy, housing and biodiversity. Climate change, combined with existing natural hazards, is a cause of concern among the population (BRGM, 2018).

The state of socio-economic development on La Réunion, which is at the heart of sustainable development, is one of relative contrasts. Economic growth appears to be sustained but remains fragile. Admittedly, starting from a colonial plantation economy (sugar cane) at the time of departmentalisation, the French island has been able to build a relatively modern economy. Some sectors of activity (fishing involving the export of toothfish, agro-food, construction and public works, and tourism) breathe dynamism into the economy. This transition has also been driven by a French and European regional development policy, which has provided the territory with numerous facilities (Hermet and Rochoux, 2014). But, even if La Réunion is one of the most dynamic French regions in terms of job creation, demography and the annual rate of economic growth (around 3%) are not enough to create all the necessary jobs. In other words, La Réunion's economic model is struggling to generate an inclusive and job-creating economy.

In many areas, there are still significant differences with mainland France overall. The GDP per capita is lower (€21,500 compared with €32,900) and La Réunion thus ranks among the more disadvantaged regions of the European Union (in 2018, the GDP in purchasing power standards was 69 for the French island on a base of 100 for the average European region). The unemployment rate is 27% (compared with 10% in mainland France). This structurally low level of employment leads to household fiscal uncertainty, poverty and gender inequalities. The female employment rate is low in La Réunion, with fewer than 4 out of 10 women of working age employed. Similarly, the share of women in precarious employment remains high; women hold only a quarter of the positions in the senior civil service. There are few women at the head of companies with 10 employees (La Réunion Convergence Plan, 2017). Monetary poverty affects 40% of the population of La Réunion compared with 13% in metropolitan France (La Réunion Convergence Plan, 2017): households with a standard of living below €911 for a single person and €1,910 for a couple with two children are considered poor (INSEE, 2020). On La Réunion, the high cost of living, particularly for food items, renders this poverty and food insecurity more acute (Hermet & Rochoux, 2014). As a result, the income of some Réunion Islanders is heavily dependent on social assistance, with one quarter of households living on social benefits. Moreover, the level of education of young people is below metropolitan levels. The percentage of early school leavers is one of the highest among the French departments. Illiteracy is more than 10 points higher than in France.

In order to reduce these inequalities, a convergence plan was drawn up in 2017 between the State and the two regional Councils (La Réunion Convergence Plan, 2017). Its goal was to implement a long-term convergence strategy with a view to reducing the development gaps with the French Republic over ten years in light of the 17 UN SDGs. As of this date, La Réunion

still has gaps in four areas: SDG 1 (No poverty); SDG 10 (Reduction of inequalities); SDG 5 (Gender equality); and SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth) (La Réunion Convergence Plan, 2017).

Mauritius

Despite a different socio-economic situation, Mauritius is also facing its own challenges to meet the SDGs. With 1.3 million inhabitants, Mauritius has a population larger than La Réunion in a slightly smaller space (2,040 km²). Note that, although La Réunion is a single island, Mauritius is an archipelago, made up of Rodrigues Island (some 600 km to the east) and the Agalega Islands (some 1,100 km to the north). It has recently moved into the high-income category with a GNI per capita of US\$ 12,740 in 2019, a 3.5% increase over the 2018 figure (World Bank, 2020). The island's economy has gone through major structural changes in the last half-century. With labels like the "little dragon of the Indian Ocean" or the "tiger of Africa", Mauritius has often been cited as a model of success for developing countries (Jauze, 2012). Starting from a mono-crop sugarcane economy, Mauritius has diversified to manufacturing, financial services, tourism and information and communications technology (ICT). Today, the services sector contributes around 76% of the GDP (Statistics Mauritius, 2019). It also has a progressive social agenda. As such, Mauritius' Human Development Index (HDI) for 2019 was 0.804, placing it in the very high human development category, ranked 66th out of 189 countries and territories. Between 1990 and 2019, Mauritius' HDI rose from 0.624 to 0.804, an increase of 28.8% (UNDP, 2020).

Although Mauritius may be viewed as an economic success in the context of nearby Africa, the country still faces a number of challenges related to income inequality, a growing trade imbalance, budget deficits, and strong competition on the world market. As is the case with many small islands, Mauritius is highly connected with the rest of the global economy, with a trade to GDP ratio in 2019 of 92.81% (Statistics Mauritius, 2020).

Mauritius's inherent vulnerabilities as a SIDS can be attributed to its resource-poor economic structure, its distance from main markets, an increasing number of natural disasters, and the rising effects of climate change as well as being highly exposed to external shocks and global trends. To reduce its vulnerability, the island has invested in its welfare system incorporating free education, health care, universal old age pension and other measures aimed at providing a minimum social safety net. It is against this vulnerability that the SDGs are being implemented. The overall score of Mauritius' progress and achievement towards achieving all 17 SDGs is 63.8, a value that exceeds the overall regional score of 53.1. A score of 100 indicates that all SDGs have been achieved (Sachs et al., 2020).

Situational analysis

In La Réunion, the issues at stake concern SDGs 1, 5, 8 and 10. According to the report carried out by the CESER (Regional Economic, Social and Environmental Council) in 2017, poverty reduction appears to be one of the crucial issues in La Réunion. The extent of poverty, as the report shows, is not only monetary, but multidimensional. Although the figure of 40% of the population of La Réunion living below the poverty line is undeniable, the CESER insists that this abstract figure corresponds to 331,900 real people. SDG 1 resonates with SDG 5 and SDG 8. Indeed, in La Réunion, job insecurity is significant, with 59,900 employees earning less than 9,000 euros per month. These are workers and employees in temporary and/or part-time employment. Most of them are young people and women (75%) (Insee, No. 61, 2016). In

La Réunion, as elsewhere, women are more likely to work in lower-paying sectors, such as shops and local services. Their occupations are also less diversified than those of men: half of all employed women aged between 30 and 65 work in eight occupational categories, whereas the same share of all employed men is spread over fifteen occupations. Their wages are also lower because of shorter working hours: 29% of female employees worked part-time in 2015, twice as many as men. They are also more likely to be on fixed-term contracts (18% compared with 15%) and on subsidised contracts (55% of subsidised jobs were held by women in 2017) (Insee, No 151, 2019). The differences in wealth between the countries in the area are such that the actions carried out in favour of regional cooperation appear insufficient. In this respect, SDG 10 appears to have been missed.

As per the Voluntary National Review Report of Mauritius (2019), there has been progress in Mauritius over the years in a number of sectors in order to move towards the achievement of the different goals. It is postulated that Mauritius has achieved SDG 3: Good Health and Well Being and SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals. The other SDGs are well on track. However, the data for Mauritius shows that significant challenges remain in SDG 13 (climate change action) and SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions). With respect to SDG 13, it is observed that the sub-indicators have deteriorated over the years with the number of persons affected by disasters per 100,000 population rising from 795 in 2017 to 1,1009 in 2019 (Statistics Mauritius, 2020). Similarly, the total Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions per year have been increasing. In 2019, Carbon Dioxide (CO₂) was the main GHG representing 73.9% of total GHG emissions (Statistics Mauritius, 2020). There has also been a rising trend in average CO₂ concentration as well as methane concentration from 2010 to 2019 (Statistics Mauritius, 2020). The Voluntary National Review Report of Mauritius (2019) states that a National Adaptation Plan for Mauritius is under preparation and efforts have been made on SDG 13; however, the perceptions of local people are different as concrete actions from the authorities are lacking. With regard to SDG 16, still according to the National Review Report (2019), Mauritius is overall on track and has achieved three of the sub indicators. Hitherto, the sub-indicators show that the proportion of the population subject to sexual violence in the previous year had nearly doubled between 2010 and 2019 (Statistics Mauritius, 2020). Likewise, the number of victims who reported on offences such as homicide, assaults, sexual offences and other related offences related to children (e.g. abducting, abandonment, child trafficking, etc.) has increased by 4.5 times between 2010 and 2019. The two SDGs where major challenges remain are SDG 14 (life below water) and SDG 15 (life on land), arguably the SDGs most closely linked to life on small islands. For instance, the mean area that is protected in marine sites that are important for biodiversity is still low at 11.75% while the target is 100%. Moreover, the fish caught from overexploited or collapsed stocks as a percentage of total catch has been rising to 47.9% while the objective should be zero. For SDG 15, the index on the change in aggregate extinction risk across groups of species has decreased to 0.39 in 2019, while the objective is to achieve a value of one. In addition, the indicator measuring threats to terrestrial and freshwater species embodied in imports of goods and services per million population was 22.08 in 2018 while the long-term objective is zero (Sachs et al., 2020). In its attempt to meet several SDGs, Mauritius, like its neighbour La Réunion Island, still has a long way to go.

Results

Perceptions of institutions

Compared to Mauritius, where the population tends to be less satisfied with the district councils and the municipal government, in La Réunion, there seems to be greater dissatisfaction with the parliament and provincial government. Dissatisfaction seems to be higher in La Réunion for the judiciary and parliament compared to Mauritius and the mean value for Mauritius is higher (i.e., greater dissatisfaction) relative to La Réunion for most institutions (see [Table 2](#)). The unfavourable opinions in La Réunion are centered primarily on the Regional Council and the municipalities. More specifically, the management of the economy, public services, and relations with other actors on the island are perceived negatively. For Mauritius, there seems to be a clear association between the views on the insignificance of municipalities and district councils and respondents' level of dissatisfaction with the local government. The results are in line with the Afro barometer (2018), where Mauritians express less trust in their main public institutions, including municipal and district councils, but a higher level of trust for their judiciary.

Table 2: Views on satisfaction of different institutions in Réunion and Mauritius.

Public level satisfaction with different institutions	La Réunion				Mauritius			
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Judiciary	3.49	1.41	1	7	2.91	1.48	1	6
Parliament	4.26	1.50	1	7	3.69	1.37	1	6
Civil service	3.21	1.13	1	6	3.58	1.34	1	6
Police	3.52	1.30	1	7	3.69	1.40	1	6
Provincial government	4.04	1.27	1	7	4.09	1.38	1	7
Municipal government	3.94	1.32	1	6	4.15	1.39	1	7

Source: Survey Data, 2020.

Note: A value of 1 is rated as Extremely Satisfied to 7 as being Extremely Dissatisfied

It is claimed that local governments, whether urban or rural, are best placed to match all SDGs to their institutional responsibility for the benefit of local communities (ICLEI, 2015). Hence, in the case of Mauritius and La Réunion, those surveyed do not seem to appreciate the value and significance of these institutions and are dissatisfied with their services or activities. These results may suggest that these institutions are not working, or perhaps lack sufficient levels of autonomy or funding, towards achieving the SDGs

Perceptions of SDGs for La Réunion and Mauritius

Little is known about the attitudes of the public towards SDGs at the national level (Guan et al., 2019). Existing studies have focused primarily on developed economies and lack in-depth explorations of the perceptions of the public towards SDGs (Guan et al., 2019; Horn and Grugel, 2018) for developing and smaller jurisdictions. Hence, one of the contributions of this research is to examine public perceptions of SDGs on SIDs and SNIJs.

Among the 17 SDGs, it can be observed from the analysis of the Mauritius data that the three SDGs ranked as most important are SDG 4 (ensure a quality education), SDG 5 (gender equity), and SDG 3 (good health and well-being) (Table 3). Though Mauritius has a free education system from pre-primary to tertiary levels, the poor quality of education seems to be critical for those surveyed. In fact, as per Subrun and Subrun (2015), there has been a growing concern about the provision of quality education in the Mauritian educational system during the past few decades. The main concerns about the education system are the high failure rates of primary school students and increased dropout rates for students aged 16 and above. Another concern has been the increased education mismatch (i.e., jobs to graduates), which has contributed to a rise in the youth unemployment rate over the past years. In terms of Goal 5, Mauritius has been lagging in its objective of achieving gender equity. According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2020 (World Economic Forum, 2020), Mauritius ranks 113th out of 144 countries using their index, with an overall value of 0.652 (An index of 0.00 means imparity and 1.00 implies parity), an economic participation and opportunity sub-index value of 0.550 and a political empowerment sub-index value of 0.087. Relative to most other countries, Mauritian women are not participating enough in the decision-making and development process. Finally, despite the fact that Mauritius has a free health care system, there is a need for the island to increase government investment in this sector. For instance, the number of health workers per 1,000 people is lower in Mauritius than the global average for upper-middle-income countries (WHO, 2018). Given the importance to Goal 3 attributed by the Mauritian citizens surveyed, it seems even more crucial for government authorities to adopt multi-sectoral actions to address the priorities of the health sector, which still faces many challenges (Musango et al., 2020).

Table 3: Importance of Different SDGs in La Réunion and Mauritius.

Variable	La Réunion				Mauritius			
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
SDG 1	2.40	1.80	1	8	2.12	1.83	1	7
SDG 2	2.26	1.75	1	8	2.20	1.67	1	7
SDG 3	2.28	1.67	1	8	1.80	1.21	1	6
SDG 4	2.06	1.57	1	7	1.69	1.00	1	6
SDG 5	2.20	1.51	1	6	1.69	1.04	1	6
SDG 6	2.14	1.53	1	7	1.88	1.17	1	6
SDG 7	1.94	1.38	1	6	1.88	1.17	1	6
SDG 8	2.10	1.52	1	6	1.82	1.15	1	6
SDG 9	2.38	1.38	1	6	2.00	1.24	1	6
SDG 10	2.62	2.00	1	8	2.20	1.41	1	6
SDG 11	2.34	1.45	1	7	2.06	1.41	1	6
SDG 12	1.76	1.27	1	7	2.22	1.66	1	8
SDG 13	2.10	1.67	1	7	2.00	1.53	1	6
SDG 14	1.90	1.50	1	7	1.96	1.54	1	6
SDG 15	1.86	1.39	1	7	2.02	1.56	1	7
SDG 16	2.70	2.04	1	8	2.08	1.53	1	7
SDG 17	2.54	1.88	1	8	2.18	1.33	1	6

Source: Survey Data, 2020

Note: The lower the value, the greater the importance is of that SDG to the participants.

In contrast to Mauritius, the top three most important goals for the survey participants from La Réunion are: SDG 12 (Responsible consumption and production), SDG 14 (Life below water) and SDG 15 (Life on land). Goal 12 may be viewed as being the most important because, as living standards and lifestyles in La Réunion have changed, they have been accompanied by an increase in pollution and environmental degradation. This is a function of the increase in the number of vehicles on the road, which have more than doubled since 1990, accompanied by a rise in commuting distances with increased urban sprawl. Road transport generates 1.5 million tonnes of CO₂ per year. In addition, there has been an increase in energy needs that require the generation of more electricity, in turn obliging the full operation of oil, diesel and coal-fired power stations that emit high levels of sulphur dioxide and other dangerous pollutants. This activity generates an additional 2 million tonnes of greenhouse gases each year.

With respect to Goals 14 and 15, special attention is being paid to the preservation of biodiversity. The Department of the Environment, Planning and Housing has worked out a model with a set of twenty indicators monitoring biodiversity. One finding of the report is that 30% of the flora and 22% of the fauna are in danger of disappearing on the island. This attention may help explain the greater importance attached to this SDG.

An overall assessment on the importance of various SDGs for both islands shows that there is a statistically significant difference across the respondents' perceptions on the relevance of these SDGs. While Mauritian stakeholders tend to concentrate more on education, gender equality and health, La Réunion's views are directed towards biodiversity, sustainable production and consumption as well as environmental protection. The trajectory of Mauritius and La Réunion could be explained both by the critiques of the Kuznets curve (for Mauritius) and the environmental Kuznets curve (for La Réunion). In fact, increase in economic wealth does not seem to result in a reduction in inequality (for Mauritius) nor of environmental standards (La Réunion), prompting more profound questions, not being analysed by this paper, on the priority placed on economic growth.

The success of authorities in achieving the SDGs

Perception surveys have often concentrated on public attitudes towards one or more subcomponents of sustainable development (Leiserowitz et al., 2005) and these have failed to relate to actions taken by government and relevant authorities to achieve the SDGs in line with public opinions on the importance of specific goals. Hence, the paper next probes the perceived success of government in striving to meet the SDGs.

The scores in [Table 4](#) for both Mauritius and La Réunion imply a generally negative perception on the part of stakeholders to governments' success in achieving the SDGs. In particular, the mean values for La Réunion exceed those of Mauritius across most SDGs, with the exception of SDGs 6 and 15. The worst performances by government are with SDGs 10 (reduce inequalities), 13 (climate action) and 17 (partnerships to achieve the goals) for La Réunion. For Mauritius, the government was perceived to have performed poorly on SDGs 12 (responsible consumption and production), 13, and 14 (life below water). Participants on both islands believe that their governments have been unsuccessful in addressing climate change.

Given the attention paid to the outcomes of global warming on small islands it is understandable that special attention is focused on this area in the survey. When combined with concern about government success in areas of social inequities and economic progress, it suggests that those in La Réunion believe that their government does not meet basic sustainable

development criteria. More globally, the SDG programme for Overseas France, implemented locally, whose slogan is "zero carbon, zero waste, zero agricultural pollutants, zero exclusion and zero vulnerability", does not seem to have convinced the people of La Réunion.

Table 4: Governments success in achieving the SDGs in La Réunion and Mauritius.

Variable	Reunion				Mauritius			
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
SDG 1	4.85	1.68	1	7	3.82	1.72	1	7
SDG 2	4.50	1.82	1	7	3.86	1.65	1	7
SDG 3	4.23	1.64	1	7	3.64	1.59	1	7
SDG 4	4.10	1.80	1	7	4.00	1.74	1	7
SDG 5	4.44	1.72	1	7	4.36	1.74	1	7
SDG 6	3.92	1.69	1	7	4.11	1.47	2	7
SDG 7	4.44	1.72	1	7	4.32	1.52	2	7
SDG 8	5.00	1.47	1	7	4.27	1.52	2	7
SDG 9	4.67	1.63	1	7	4.05	1.48	1	7
SDG 10	5.50	1.80	1	7	4.57	1.65	2	7
SDG 11	4.68	1.56	1	7	4.34	1.57	2	7
SDG 12	4.85	1.49	1	7	4.68	1.49	2	7
SDG 13	5.48	1.50	1	7	4.66	1.43	2	7
SDG 14	5.15	1.74	1	7	4.70	1.55	1	7
SDG 15	4.30	1.76	1	7	4.63	1.41	2	7
SDG 16	4.94	1.77	1	7	4.45	1.55	1	7
SDG 17	5.50	1.88	1	7	4.41	1.48	1	7

Source: Survey Data, 2020

Note: The higher the mean value, the less successful governments are perceived to be in achieving the SDGs.

Mauritius is also perceived to lack effective climate policies. There is a greater need to focus more on adaptation and resilience and at the same time trigger the transition to a low-carbon economy. As was the case with La Réunion, Mauritius is already experiencing the adverse impacts of climate change with increasing frequency and intensity of “extreme” meteorological events, including tropical cyclones, heavy rainfall, and violent thunderstorms. The country suffers US\$110 million in losses annually as a result of natural disasters (World Bank, 2020). It is projected that economic loss will rise significantly to US\$ 1.9 billion per year by the end of the century as a direct result of climate change. The World Risk Report 2019 ranks Mauritius 47th among the countries listed, with the highest disaster risk and the 10th most exposed to natural disasters. In 2020, Mauritius passed a Climate Change Bill to address the adverse effects of climate change and develop into a greener economy. The Bill establishes a legal framework towards making Mauritius a climate-change resilient and low emission country. These are vital legislative steps; however, based on the results of this analysis, Mauritians believe that they still need to be transformed into concrete actions.

Public attitudes and actions in attaining the SDGs

Next, the study probed into whether supportive attitudes toward sustainable development translate into personal actions (Stern, 2000). For instance, abstract support for

renewable energy may not automatically translate into a willingness to personally pay more for fuel-efficient cars. Hence, an attitude-action gap may exist between what people think and what they are willing to do as individuals, and as a consequence, as nations. We gauge the attitude-action gap across both islands in [Table 5](#).

Table 5: Public actions in attaining the SDGs.

Variable	Reunion				Mauritius			
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Green Transport	0.57	0.50	0	1	0.49	0.51	0	1
Ethical investment	0.13	0.34	0	1	0.62	0.49	0	1
Recycle	0.94	0.25	0	1	0.70	0.46	0	1
Gender Equality	0.98	0.15	0	1	0.98	0.15	0	1
Sustainable Development Course (Training)	0.57	0.50	0	1	0.58	0.50	0	1
Poverty Help	0.62	0.49	0	1	0.81	0.39	0	1
Vote	0.85	0.36	0	1	0.91	0.29	0	1
Ecosystems	0.64	0.49	0	1	0.79	0.41	0	1
Household equality	0.74	0.44	0	1	0.67	0.47	0	1
Waste recycle	0.65	0.48	0	1	0.37	0.49	0	1
Ethical purchase	0.52	0.51	0	1	0.70	0.46	0	1
Green bulbs	0.93	0.25	0	1	0.95	0.21	0	1
Waste Reduction	0.80	0.40	0	1	0.93	0.26	0	1
No Chemicals	0.91	0.28	0	1	0.79	0.41	0	1
Volunteerism	0.17	0.38	0	1	0.65	0.48	0	1

Source: Survey Data, 2020

Note: The higher the value, the more likely the survey participants are taking personal action in achieving the SDGs.

There are several areas where personal implementation of the precepts of sustainable development is visible. In the case of La Réunion, it can be seen in gender equality, recycling and the use of green bulbs. Thus, it is above all in “the home” that these principles are mobilised. The use of low-energy light bulbs (free in France under the Energy Transition Act), the use of compost bins (distributed free of charge to every household that requests one), and the recycling of household waste are actions carried out by the majority of respondents in the survey. There are also many who choose not to use chemical fertilisers on their properties. Furthermore, the survey reveals that respondents try to ensure gender equity at home and at work (with the idea of sharing work and its added value) and implies cultural equality (which starts with fair schooling). The results show that they have adopted a lifestyle in line with their sensitivity to sustainable development. Clearly, Réunionese have integrated ecological principles into their lifestyles. However, it is indeed individual awareness of this requirement that makes it possible to reconcile economic efficiency, social equity and environmental quality.

For Mauritius, gender equality, use of green bulbs and waste reduction are the most frequently cited actions taken. In fact, over the years Mauritians have attempted to recycle as much as they can, have changed their lifestyle to reduce waste, adjusted to environmentally

friendly light bulbs, and adopted gender equity at home, in the workplace and in other environments. Nonetheless, it is observed that the mean value in [Table 5](#) remains low with respect to the use of green transport and recycling of waste. With respect to composting system, Mauritius still does not have an effective municipal recycling system. Though there is a Household Compost Scheme, there appears to be a lack of awareness on how to engage in composting. From the data, similar behaviour and actions can be noted across La Reunion and Mauritius with respect to gender equality and the use of green bulbs.

Even though it is outside the scope of this paper to explain the rationale as to why residents from La Reunion seem to have integrated ecological and equality lifestyles more prominently than residents from Mauritius, a possible interpretation could be a more active intervention by government authorities, especially in the command and control and economic instruments to promote those behavioural changes (Croson & Treich, 2014; John, 2018).

Discussion

Even if the objectives of sustainable development, as conceived by the United Nations, are not perfect tools, given that they tend to prioritise certain areas (e.g., human rights, social justice) while leaving out others (e.g., democracy, security, peace and disarmament, geopolitical aspects) (Skene, 2020), they are nevertheless important policy measures to assess, and question, the effectiveness of national and local governments in promoting sustainability.

From the original surveys conducted in the SIDS of Mauritius and the SNIJ of La Réunion, respondents point toward the inability of governing bodies to implement effective policies to reduce inequalities. For La Réunion, the respondents point to a failure in the performance of public action with this deficit leading to a real mistrust of certain areas of politics. On the other hand, there are also areas of satisfaction on the part of La Réunion respondents. The health system (SDG 3) and the relationship with France are viewed as successes according to those surveyed. For Mauritius, though there is trust and confidence in institutions like the judiciary, the same trust does not hold for other public institutions such as the district councils and municipalities. The mistrust around local governments arises as the latter fails to provide the necessary services to the communities. There seems to be a direct association between the negative perceptions on the importance of these bodies and their performance.

In terms of sustainable development, our study finds that there is a statistically significant difference in the perceived importance of particular SDGs across both islands. The three most important SDGs for La Réunion are SDG 12, 14 and 15, where stakeholders' views are directed towards biodiversity, sustainable production and consumption as well as environmental protection. Mauritians' tend to focus more on education, gender equality and health. In fact, though Mauritius has achieved high-income status in 2020, the basic services in terms of education and health do not seem to meet the standards expected by the citizens. Quality remains a major hurdle, which Mauritius needs to tackle via greater investments in education technologies and high-tech medical services. Providing free basic education and health services, although recognised as essential, if not paired up by high standards, might not help to meet the SDGs by the agreed deadlines.

Gender equality is an important SDG for both Mauritius and La Réunion. In Mauritius, there have been several initiatives to promote gender equality and each Ministry now has a gender cell to promote greater gender mainstreaming within their departments. Although

Mauritius has signed various conventions on gender equality, policies are highly gender neutral. Economic and social interventions, programmes and strategies overlook the new risks and vulnerabilities that have stemmed from the island's economic transformation from a mono-crop agricultural economy to one based on knowledge sectors. Gender norms, lack of appropriate for gender-sensitive labour market policies, and gender-neutral social protection measures are some of the areas that require immediate attention (Tandrayen-Ragoobur & Gokulsing, 2021). Further, in both Mauritius and La Réunion, participants believe government has not performed well overall.

One important dimension that this study focuses on is the attitude–action gap to assess whether stakeholders' supportive attitudes towards sustainable development in the abstract are translated into personal actions. For Mauritius, the use of green bulbs and waste reduction have been the most common actions taken. Nonetheless, Mauritians are less likely to adopt green transportation choices and recycle waste. From the data, similar behaviours and actions can be noted across La Reunion and Mauritius with respect to gender equality and the use of green bulbs. For La Réunion, waste sorting, the provision of composters for households, the disappearance of plastic bags in supermarkets and the creation of cycle paths are already a reality. Similarly, 40% of La Réunion Island has been transformed into a National Park so as to preserve its ecosystems. Réunion Islanders tend to be satisfied with these actions. However, the participants in this research believe that much remains to be done on their island to combat climate change.

The two islands are also not free of paradoxes. In La Réunion Island, for example, there is a profound gap between the actions of the governing bodies, at all levels, and the public satisfaction with those actions, which remains low. In Mauritius, there are gaps not only at the national level in local government actions but also a sense of inadequacies between public attitudes and public actions.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

Contributing to the SDG agenda can enhance a country's goals and aspirations since all nations are facing similar challenges in terms of climate change, demographic pressure, natural resource depletion and globalisation, amongst others. The SDGs therefore serve as a powerful framework to design better local and regional policies for better lives. Collective actions, coupled with political leadership and commitment can drive countries towards a radical transformation of their economies and societies to embrace the transition towards sustainable pathways for their people.

La Réunion and Mauritius are among the most developed jurisdictions in the south-western Indian Ocean basin. However, in certain fields of sustainable development, they may lag behind others. La Reunion “essentially aspires to the rapid implementation of concrete measures and investments that are fully in line with the real potential (environmental and societal) of the island, creating a necessary break with the current development ‘model’, which is as incantatory as it is ultra-consumerist” (Simon, 2010, p. 2). Moreover, the majority of survey participants are involved in sustainable development activities.

The awareness of citizens is an essential lever for exerting pressure on political decision-makers (Manolis & Manoli, 2021). It is true that on La Réunion Island, there are many plans and actions taken by decision-making bodies to combat poverty, improve housing, and protect ecosystems (inter-municipalities, the Regional Council and the Department of the

Environment, Planning and Housing). However, the measures adopted appear to be insufficient to erase the perception of persistent disparities and inequalities. Achieving the objectives of sustainable development requires better consultation and more fruitful collaboration between political actors. It involves joint political actions and requires collaboration with civil society and the scientific community (Manolis & Manoli, 2021).

More broadly, Mauritius has been signing various conventions to promote sustainable development and perform well on various international economic indicators. Nonetheless, there are still major gaps, which need to be addressed on services such as the quality of education, gender equality, climate change, protection of the marine environment, and building effective institutions to ensure good governance and promote a peaceful multicultural and inclusive society. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has brought the tourism industry to a halt in Mauritius and La Réunion. Regional and especially international travel restrictions have impacted all of the tourism-related sectors on the islands. Achieving the SDGs in this difficult time of the pandemic may prove to be more challenging. The COVID-19 crisis will therefore leave the two islands, like many other regions, in a very difficult situation. Future challenges may now be more numerous than they have been in many years.

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