

POSITION PAPER

MRIC'S HEADWAY IN THE PROMOTION OF SOCIAL AND GRASSROOTS INNOVATION IN MAURITIUS

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ABSTRACT

This position paper seeks to present the headway being made by the Mauritius Research and Innovation Council in the promotion and development of Social and Grassroots Innovation in Mauritius particularly in the wake of the ‘Les Assises de La Recherche et de l’Innovation’ (ARI) held in 2022. ARI 2022 was an important milestone to chart the way forward in promoting and harnessing innovation in a wide array of sectors including the thematic area of Social and Grassroots (S&G) Innovation for Mauritius. The multi-stakeholder and participative consultations culminated in a Roadmap, identifying strategic orientations, resources and relevant timeframe to promote, develop and support innovative initiatives in the area of S&G innovation, in order to address current gaps and challenges and pave the way to reap the multiple social, economic and environmental benefits of S&G innovation.

This paper therefore highlights the main developments in this area since implementing this Roadmap, including the different projects being funded under 2 calls for proposals under this thematic area as well as the lessons learnt and reflections on the way forward. The S&G Research Team of the MRIC has also built on insights from sector experts, including practitioners and project leaders and expert reviewers/ independent evaluators of applications to complement the findings and analysis.

In a nutshell, the Council is systematically driving initiatives to promote a shared understanding of the notions of S&G innovation and the need to tap into their potential strengths in order to address enduring societal problems in Mauritius using novel approaches. With the funding of projects which put emphasis on hands-on approaches and capacity building of interested stakeholders – particularly NGOs, social entrepreneurs and engaged citizens - in ideation and design thinking to drive S&G innovation in practice; the facilitation of online networks and digital technologies to enable stakeholders to interface and mutually learn from each other and collaborate, some advances in reinforcing our local ecosystem in S&G is under way. Nonetheless, given that these initiatives are recent and in early development, there are inevitably further grounds to cover in order to see a wider adoption of these approaches and the multiple benefits that they entail.

Keywords: *Social innovation, Grassroots Innovation, social economy, sustainable development goals, vulnerable segments*

1.0 Introduction

Mauritius is striving to become a high-income economy where innovation becomes the key driver of socio-economic development¹. However, the conventional and restrictive views of innovation as being seen exclusively in terms of Science and Technological breakthroughs with essentially industrial and commercial applications have been progressively expanded to include *Social and Grassroots* Innovation. Across the world, there is widespread acknowledgement of the immense potential of Social and Grassroots Innovation in addressing, in a pragmatic manner, enduring social and environmental challenges. Social and Grassroots Innovation is set to grow in importance not only concerning issues such as social integration, equal opportunities and dealing with environmental issues but also with regard to preserving and expanding the innovative capacity of local communities as well as enterprises. In fact, numerous national governments and large organizations like the OECD, the European Commission and UNESCO have adopted these notions and even have specialized departments and units to drive, promote, foster and coordinate initiatives in these areas. Given the promises of Social and Grassroots Innovation, the Mauritius Research and Innovation Council aims to promote and tap into the full potential of these approaches in order to benefit the economy and society.

In line with this ever-growing realisation at global level that the ‘social’, ‘grassroots’ and ‘inclusive’ dimensions of innovation cannot be overlooked, but in fact hold the key to bring about positive transformations in ordinary lives by potentially addressing enduring social, economic and ecological challenges using novel and more effective approaches, ARI 2022 includes ‘Social and Grassroots Innovation’ as an important thematic area inviting views as to how to promote and develop an enabling environment and strategic initiatives in this field.

Social and Grassroots Innovation, envisages to fill a gap in terms of a new set of approaches to address social problems and come up with practical solutions for vulnerable social groups whose needs are not being adequately addressed by existing social policies. Fostering and adopting a culture of social innovation holds many promises in terms of how many longstanding topical social issues which Mauritius has to contend with, can be addressed for the greater good of Mauritian society as a whole thereby meeting the goals of a more inclusive, fairer, healthier and sustainable society.

In particular, as it has become increasingly clear in development practice elsewhere as well as in Mauritius, the limitations of top-down prescriptions to address enduring socio-economic or environmental vulnerabilities faced by local communities or specific social groups are now well established. Under the ‘Social and Grassroots Innovation’ rubric, the focus is about fostering a bottom-up, inclusive and participatory approach to (1) raise awareness and foster learning processes (2) promote the emergence of an enabling environment and (3) encourage the adoption of socially innovative solutions to enduring social problems faced by people in their ordinary lives for positive and sustainable transformations and where possible celebrate and encourage the upscaling of these innovations.

This position paper seeks to present the headway being made by the Mauritius Research and Innovation Council in the promotion and development of Social and Grassroots Innovation in Mauritius since the organisation of ARI in 2022. It builds on first-hand insights and feedback

¹ See MRC (2018) ‘National Innovation Framework 2018-2030’

from interactions with S&G Innovation practitioners - particularly those who apply for MRIC grants developed following ARI - and their beneficiaries, as well as consultations with sector experts including independent evaluators of applications.

It is organised as follows. The first part outlines definitional issues and usage of the notions of Social and Grassroots innovation in the local context before providing an overview of the state of knowledge in S&G based on the consultations from the ARI. It then unfolds to highlight the main developments in this area since implementing this Roadmap, including the different projects being funded under 2 calls for proposals under this thematic area as well as the lessons learnt and reflections on the way forward.

1.1 Definitional Issues

A review of relevant literature on ‘Social Innovation’ and ‘Grassroots Innovation’ reveals that they are polysemantic concepts without consensual definitions. Yet they are concepts that have seen a rapid uptake in research and policy in the last decade. Many definitions are used, which all converge on taking the social as object of innovation and potential source of solutions to address complex societal challenges. For sake of clarity, it is important to delineate at the outset how these concepts are employed in context of ARI and by extension in this position paper.

In a nutshell, borrowing from OECD (2000), social innovations are new ideas that meet social needs, create social relationships and form new collaborations. These innovations can be products, services or models addressing unmet needs effectively. The benefits of social innovation, wherever it arises, accrue to society as a whole rather than individuals, although in some cases socially innovative projects can also produce profits and investment returns. A core feature of social innovation is that the Return on Investment is not measured in terms of money but rather in terms of social good particularly for vulnerable segments of the population (Foroudi et al., 2021).

Grassroots Innovation lays emphasis on innovative solutions developed by disadvantaged people themselves (Stanford Social Innovation Review, 2016). The traditional approach to help disadvantaged people is a top-down one, in which government, NGOs, or businesses create solutions and provide them to the poor. Many large corporations, for example, have convinced themselves that they can serve the poor by producing and delivering goods and services at an affordable price—the bottom-of-the- pyramid approach. These businesses, governments, and aid organizations seldom consider acquiring ideas or innovative products and services designed at the grassroots by the people they are trying to assist. The question of reciprocating what those people have shared with them seldom arises.

The benefits of grassroots innovations for sustainable development derive principally from their creation of a space for the development of new ideas and practices, for experimenting with new systems of provision, and for enabling people to express their ‘alternative’ green and socially progressive values, and from the tangible achievement of environmental and social sustainability improvements, albeit on a small scale.

1.2 Scope of the Social and Grassroots thematic area

Social innovation does not refer to any particular sector of the economy but to innovation in the creation of social outputs, regardless of where they emanate. As such, social innovation can take place in all four sectors or any combination of them:

1. the non-profit sector
2. the public sector (both in terms of policy and service models)
3. the private sector and
4. the informal sector and grassroots movements

All these social partners have the potential to adopt social innovation in order to make society a better place by assisting the national goals of inclusive and rights-based development for all Mauritian citizens.

The scope of this important thematic area is therefore to promote and develop Social and Grassroots innovation by recognizing the potential to turn societal challenges into opportunities and develop sustainable solutions for people in the Republic of Mauritius across different institutional settings, across NGOs/CBOs, corporate and public sectors, and to enhance bottom-up responsible inventiveness towards integration of social, economic and environmental objectives.

Social innovation particularly when intersecting with grassroots innovation could enhance and develop Mauritian society's capacity to achieve sustainable development goals. Enabling local communities and individuals to convert their ideas into products and services—by blending modern science and technology, design, and risk capital—constitutes the heart of social and grassroots innovation. Some priority grand challenges which readily lend themselves to social innovation programmes include addressing Non- Communicable Diseases, substance abuse, poverty, adolescent reproductive health, ageing population, national heritage conservation, education, gender-based violence, among others.

1.3 Main guiding principles

The main guiding principles of Social and Grassroots Innovation as adopted by the MRIC are as follows:

Cross-Sectoral: Social and Grassroots Innovations are not the province of any single sector exclusively. Instead, they cut across and occur in all sectors, move among sectors and also occur at the interfaces between the different sectors.

Open and collaborative: The social and grassroots sectors are inclusive and bottom up, including grassroots at local level but they also engage a wide range of actors. Collaboration rather than competition is the basic attitude. To ensure this, the many actors in the system, who may have different perspectives and needs, are still working towards the common goal, and the activities are still mutually reinforcing each other, constant alignment is needed between actors and activities.

Mutualism: Mutualism is the notion that individual and collective well-being is obtainable only by mutual dependence.

Better use of assets and resources: S&G Innovations often recognise, exploit and coordinate assets and resources, which would otherwise be wasted, under-used or not used at all. In some cases, these assets and resources can be latent (i.e., skills that communities have at their disposal), intangible (finance) and/or physical (i.e., buildings and physical spaces).

Develop assets and capabilities: Many S&G Innovations explicitly aim to develop the capabilities of beneficiaries enabling them to meet their needs over the longer term, highlighting human agency and advocating participation.

Creates new roles and relationships: Social innovations can also be identified by the type of relationships they create and also by new roles for users and beneficiaries. For instance, boundaries between producers and consumers seem to be less defined and individuals are not seen only as passive recipients of services anymore.

2.0 Lessons Learnt from ARI 2022 Consultations– An overview

The MRIC organized Les Assises de la Recherche et de l’Innovation (ARI) 2022 to provide a platform for a national scientific dialogue between all stakeholders with the view to set the foundations for a national roadmap to foster research, innovation and the use of technology in various thematic areas of national importance. In fact, ARI 2022 was the first ever national multi-sectoral dialogue event focusing on national requirements for driving innovation on various thematic sectors that are of high priority for Mauritius (MRIC, 2022). More particularly, ARI 2022 was an important milestone to chart the way forward in promoting and harnessing innovation in the thematic area of Social and Grassroots (S&G) Innovation for Mauritius.

The specific objectives were to:

- Provide an overview of the social and grassroots sectors
- Provide insights of international social and grassroots innovation trends
- Identify the gaps, challenges and needs of the social and grassroots sectors
- Identify specific sub-areas where social innovation could be promoted more aggressively
- Identify strategies and emerging technologies which may be applied to the sub-areas
- Recommend incentives, schemes and policies to help in the progress of the sub-areas in an integrated way that drives economic growth
- Determine activities and their duration to be performed to achieve social and grassroots innovation
- Find out ways to promote commercialization of innovative products originating from local business

2.1.1 Methodology of ARI

Prior to Les Assises de la Recherche et de l’Innovation 2022, the MRIC invited several leading NGOs, Umbrella institutions and CSR Arms of large Corporations who operate closely with grassroots organisations, international development partners and academics in the social and grassroots sectors. A scientific dialogue on the sectors was initiated by two working groups composed of representatives from these institutions. The working groups also sought input from other relevant stakeholders who were not part of the group in the form of key informant interviews. The working groups convened several times at the MRIC from February to March 2022. In particular, the working groups focused on the following specific tasks: stock-taking of underlying issues of the social and grassroots innovation; comprehend the goals, aspirations or growth target for the social and grassroots sectors; understand the needs of the social and grassroots sectors in terms of research and innovation. In addition, from a more practical perspective the working groups were also a means to curate the big questions and discussion point to be focused upon during Les Assises de la Recherche et de L’Innovation as well as to identify and enlist speakers, panelists and moderators for the social and grassroots innovation’s discussion during Les Assises de la Recherche et de L’Innovation and to organize and facilitate the thematic discussion during Les Assises. Ultimately, the working groups were also tasked to recommend incentives and policy mechanisms to effectively engage development of the social and grassroots sectors in Mauritius.

Subsequently, at the Assises de la Recherche et de l’Innovation 2022, a sectoral forum was organised to facilitate a broader dialogue among national, regional and international stakeholders on the social and grassroots sectors. The forum aimed to validate and enrich the strategic orientations that emerged from the working group sessions. Figure 1 shows the process of defining the strategic orientations that can foster a culture of innovation in the social and grassroots sectors.

The multi-stakeholder and participative consultations culminated in a Roadmap, identifying strategic orientations, resources and relevant timeframe to promote, develop and support innovative initiatives in the area of S&G innovation, in order to address current gaps and challenges and pave the way to reap the multiple social, economic and environmental benefits of S&G innovation.

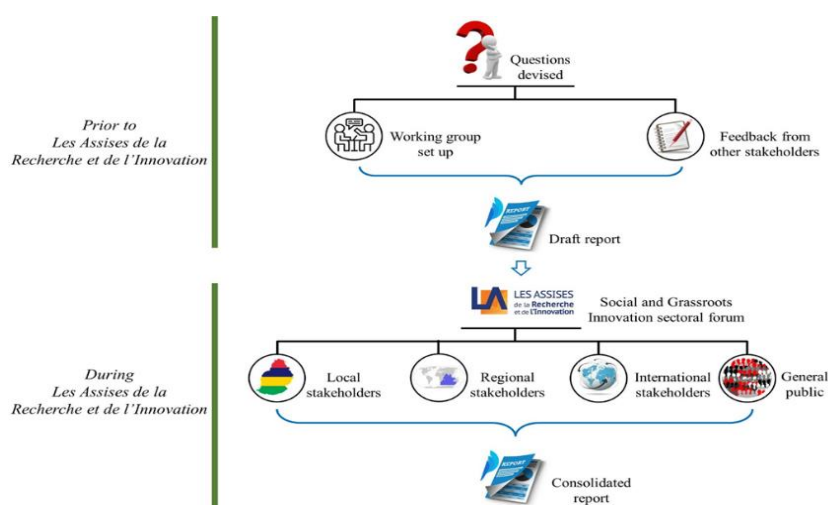


Figure 1: Process for formulating strategic orientations to promote economic growth in the social and grassroots sectors

3.0 Outline of salient points

A comprehensive ‘state of the art’ of where Mauritius stands with regards to Social and Grassroots Innovation emerged from the preliminary as well as actual Assises consultations and engagement of stakeholders. These were further informed and complemented by insights and lessons learnt from operating the Social Innovation and Research Grant Scheme (SIRGS), the first grant scheme launched by the then MRC to promote social innovation. The ARI 2022 Roadmap documents the state of the art with projects funded under SIRGS, collaborations and partnerships in pushing forward the agenda of Social Innovation as well as lessons learnt from good practices in social and grassroots innovation internationally. This section will therefore limit its scope to highlighting some of the main lessons learnt from this stock-taking exercise, highlighting in particular the SWOT analysis conducted and the main gaps and challenges which need to be tackled. In brief, at this juncture it is clear that social and grassroots innovation is best described as in a nascent stage with much ground to be covered in order to tap in its full potential.

3.1 Gaps and Challenges of Sector

From the ARI workshop the main gaps and challenges identified by the stakeholders were identified as outlined below. In many ways, the recurring issues which emerge from the pre-Assises consultations, imply that there are common challenges which hamper progress in engaging in social and grassroots innovation and there is a call for action in order to address these gaps.

Knowledge and Practice Gaps

A common finding which emerged during the engagement with stakeholders was that whilst there was a general recognition and appreciation of the value and potential of Social and Grassroots Innovation to contribute to inclusive and sustainable development, nonetheless there was a general concern that these notions are yet to find currency in the local jargon. There is a clear need to further popularize and vulgarize the notions of S&G Innovation to promote their adoption

In fact, concern was expressed in the technical working groups and corroborated in one-to-one interviews with high profile NGOs and social innovation practitioners that the majority of NGOs and grassroots organisations may have been exposed to the theoretical benefits of adopting S&G innovation, but in practice there are but a handful of NGOs which are sufficiently aware of and indeed adopt socially innovative approaches in their activities.

Gaps in Innovation Culture: Aversion to Change and Risk-taking

A culture of innovation generally, more particularly a flexible mindset which is not averse to change, risk-taking and experimentation are by and large considered to be lacking.

Compliance v/s performance – Civil servants from Ministries with a social vocation are paradoxically considered as not innovation-friendly as they have rigid procedures to follow and which at times are not compatible with day-to-day practical requirements of grassroots clients. Bureaucratic and procedural mindsets allegedly remain important Systemic Constraints.

There were also criticisms of a siloed approach and lack of collaboration among stakeholders whereas many issues are multidimensional and would be most effectively resolved if addressed in a multipronged manner.

A Fragmented Ecosystem

Collaboration between multiple stakeholders such as the private, public, and non-profit sectors is paramount in scaling social and grassroots innovations. The technical working groups agreed that each sector has its own set of knowledge, resources, and networks, however, the shared awareness and significant coordination are rock-bottom. Most of the organisations are operating on a scattered manner, resulting in major hindrances to develop innovative strategies to obtain formal support. They further argued that current motivations do not vitalize collaboration and very few agencies have the capacity to knit together efforts, resources, and activities from the various sectors to drive social and grassroots innovations on a higher scale.

Mechanisms to facilitate and support multi-disciplinary approaches and collaboration need to be put in place. Public/ private (industry and SMEs)/ academia partnerships should be strengthened. Regional and International partnerships need to be encouraged.

Disconnects between Decision-makers and Ground Realities – Need for Live Action and Participatory Research to Bridge these Disconnects

CSR arms and foundations of large corporates which have extensive reach of local-based grassroots communities warn that there are often disconnects between policy makers and grassroots realities and more particularly between arguably theoretical Western approaches and adaptability to our local realities. Our local specificities may mean that what works elsewhere may not necessarily work in the local context and argue that the adoption of prescriptive approaches or tried and tested formulae from other settings to address common problem areas – e.g., eradication of poverty, waste disposal, integration of marginalized groups etc may not meet with the same outcomes.

Capacity/ Resources Gaps and Challenges

A wide array of points pertaining to limited capacity and know-how to innovate among NGOs as a key potential player in the field of social and grassroots innovation were raised in the ARI consultations as summed up below:

- Severe constraints and limitations in civil society participation in general – capabilities, resources, interest, capacity
- NGOs are not trained enough to innovate and apply their creative thinking.
- NGOs have limited research capabilities, lack resources and sometimes, lack the skill to innovate their services.
- Social work, which is an important interface with vulnerable segments, is not adequately valued in Mauritius.
- Most NGOs are operating with staff who do not necessarily possess any qualifications in social work- difficulties in conducting administrative tasks and applying for schemes.
- Even though many courses are being offered at tertiary level in social work, less youth are willing to work as fieldworkers for NGOs and reach out to grassroots.

- Confusion between social projects and socially innovative projects.
- Focus of applicants tends to be more on research rather than innovation dimensions.
- Limitations in assessing social innovation and the impact of these projects.
- Poor networking, poor communication and limited capacity within the sector.
- Negative competition for resources also undermines the reputation of the sector and the effectiveness of NGO activities at community level. As a result, there is a great deal of suspicion among NGOs, secrecy and lack of transparency.
- NGO politics: one fighting another, one with resources but no community presence, another with community presence but no resources.

Information, Communication and Technology Gaps

- Internet and email as fundamental for all organisations. Lack of online resources or a website that enables the creation of networks locally and internationally. A website makes it easier for sharing of results and data.
- Need for stronger links between research and policy making

Financing and Incentives Gaps and Challenges

- Access to financial support for social missions are lacking particularly in terms of social financing/social business angels.
- Funding grants from institutions such as the MRIC, EU, National Social Inclusion Fund are deemed as complex and more assistance is required to enable a broader application base.
- Corporates or social entrepreneurs are often operating at a loss and injecting their own funds to fulfil social and ecological missions. This is a deterrent for broadening the social innovation space.
- Recognition and facilitation are lacking.
- Long term sustainability and upscaling of social projects are lacking.

Policy/ Regulatory Gaps and Challenges

An overarching and explicit National Social Innovation Policy as there are in certain advanced countries with the vision, authority and resources to galvanise key stakeholders to engage in Social and Grassroots Innovation is lacking.

3.2 SWOT Analysis of the S&G Innovation in Mauritius

A SWOT analysis was done on the state and needs of the sector based on the discussions during the working group meetings with various stakeholders. This is summarised below in Figure 2.

S Strengths	W Weaknesses	O Opportunities	T Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclusive growth • Increased well-being and human development • Educational accessibility • Environmental sustainability • Compatible with the circular economy • Relationship building • Positive mindset of stakeholders in the social and grassroots sectors • Existing incentives to innovate • Interest of NGOs and private sector • Deliver solutions that respond to the local situation based on communities' knowledge, interests and values. • Innovations from local groups or individual inventors. • Local empowerment and community engagement. • Collecting, documenting, and disseminating innovations and practices at the grassroots level by bringing together individuals and organizations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insufficient diffusion of the concept and its adoption/ • Absence of norms and standards • Absence of skills and competencies • Lack of resources for voluntarism • Lack of data sharing culture and collaboration amongst institutions • Inadequate research and innovation culture • Lack of awareness of • Insufficient knowledge transfer • Insufficient funding available for engaging in S&G Innovation projects • Time-consuming • The process of innovation is costly • Limited incentives • Limited upscaling • Limited visibility of international good practices in S&G Innovative projects • Lack of networking possibilities and cross-country collaboration with regional and international S&G innovation practitioners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skills development • “L’Approche Communautaire”-community-based projects have been shown to be very successful around the island • An increase in the level of trust and collaboration amongst stakeholders • Improvements to the decision-making processes within authorities • Emergence of new social norms, values, and practices that institutionalize innovative behavior and thinking • Provide feedback routinely and communicate how the situation is evolving on the ground • Get to know the people, culture, and environment to take the innovation and better implement it on the ground • International and local partnerships to access innovative technologies platform and expertise 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resistance to change • Rigid and cumbersome procedures to gain resources to undertake research • Competition for resources from other economic sectors • Lack of follow-through • Keeping up with fast-paced changes • Too focused on the bottom line, therefore innovation often never gets off the ground • Unclear goals • Complexity of law • Lack of resources to sustain projects

3.3 Vision and Recommendations proposed for the Sector

The vision of the working groups on social and grassroots innovation is to develop and promote social innovation by recognizing the potential to turn societal challenges into opportunities and develop sustainable solutions for people in the Republic of Mauritius across different institutional settings, across NGOs/ CBOs, and public sectors. This is in line with the Government Programme 2020-2024 and vision for the social and grassroots sectors discussed by different stakeholders from the two working groups.

The vision statements from different stakeholders converge into the following strategic orientations:

- Shared understanding of S&G innovation
- Enabling environment/ ecosystem
- Encouragement of social entrepreneurship
- Capacity building/ skills development – civil society as a pillar of social innovation
- Open data and research

Within the above framework of these strategic orientations, several recommendations have been put forward during the engagement process to put social and grassroots innovation to work in the country. The strategic orientations will also benefit from the implementation of pilot projects, feasibility studies and proof of concept initiatives with societal impacts.

To foster the execution of projects aligned with the strategic orientations, policies to encourage more engagement of grassroots/civil society with State, Private Sector and Academia alike as well as improving the accessibility of funding in research and innovation are needed. Furthermore, the acquisition of national and international expertise and consultation, cross-fertilisation of ideas and approaches from multiple disciplines and sectors and where applicable relevant technologies and software will support the advancement of projects in this field.

Given the multi-sectoral, multi-disciplinary and multi-perspectival reach of social and grassroots innovation, the recommendations for the proposed strategy are designed to support an ecosystems approach where all stakeholders more particularly grassroots having a role to play in improving outcomes in our communities and solving our common challenges. This strategy is intended to work across all social issue areas (poverty, unemployment, circular economy, disability, social exclusion) and sectors, including all levels of Government.

These strategic orientations have been categorised as short term, medium term and long term, as shown in Figure 3. Projects under these strategic orientations are being identified and prioritised for implementation.

Social and Grassroots



Figure 3 illustrates the Short-, medium- and long-term strategic orientations identified to promote Social and Grassroots Innovation in Mauritius

4.0 Implementation strategies – Funding of Projects to build capacity, enable the emergence of the relevant ecosystem and facilitate exchange of expertise and data

A key step to initiate development in the strategic orientations has been to invite proposals for projects falling under the ambit of these sub-themes subject to the availability of funds. Thus far the MRIC has funded projects under two successive calls for applications within the framework of the strategic orientations outlined earlier.

The aim of the calls for projects and indeed the criteria for selection have been in terms of how far these would promote the adoption of Social and Grassroots Innovation, build hands-on capacity of stakeholders to engage in Social and Grassroots Innovation, as well as favour exchange of expertise, skills and know-how.

4.1 Projects funded under the first call for proposals

The first call was launched through the Smart Innovation Support Mechanism on 28th March 2023 with the aim to support *short-term* innovative projects in specific thematic areas namely: (1) Social Innovation Lab. (2) Online Repository of S&G practitioners with up-to-date sector specific S&G solutions/best practices to facilitate scouting and application and (3) Regular Research and Innovation Grant Development Course.

32 applications were received under the Social and Grassroots Innovation thematic area of which 6 applications were effectively shortlisted after a rigorous administrative screening and independent technical evaluation process. The independent evaluation panel retained 4 projects for funding as follows:

Sub-Theme 1 - Social Innovation Lab.

Social Innovation Lab - Empowering Women-Led Innovation through Design Thinking Skills Labs
The proposed project is the setting up of a Social Innovation Lab for women-led grassroots initiatives that will conduct a series of interactive skills labs designed to provide participants with the skills and knowledge necessary to implement design thinking methodologies within their organizations. The Social Innovation Lab will help to ensure that the solutions developed are relevant, meaningful, and effective in addressing the specific needs of their communities. Additionally, design thinking emphasizes experimentation and iteration, allowing women-led initiatives to test and refine their solutions in a low-risk environment. This approach can help to build confidence and skills, as well as promote a culture of innovation and collaboration among participants.

APEIM Art Academy

A.P.E.I.M Art Academy seeks to use art therapy, more specifically visual arts to enrich the lives of individuals with disabilities. By exploring different creative activities, beneficiaries with disabilities learn how to uniquely express themselves and build technical skills along the way. This

integrative and creative therapy has numerous benefits that include not only the building of self-esteem, enhancing communication and growing social skills but also to tap into the potential of commercialising art created by disabled participants for social entrepreneurial purposes.

Sub-Theme 2 - Online Repository of S&G practitioners with up-to-date sector specific S&G solutions/best practices to facilitate scouting and application

Impactors.io - A platform for social and grassroots innovation ecosystem of the Indian Ocean:
The project Impactors.io proposes, at fruition, a technological platform for the social and grassroots innovation ecosystem. Impactors unites innovators, social enterprises, research institutions, angel investors, venture capitalists, academia, impact investors, corporates, government institutions, civil society organisations on one platform. Impactors.io's primary function is to be a social network for the social and grassroots innovation ecosystems, first in Mauritius and subsequently in the Indian Ocean.

Upping Cloud

The aim of upping.cloud is to foster collaboration and co-creation among stakeholders to develop innovative solutions to societal and environmental challenges in Mauritius. The project aims to provide a space for experimentation, testing, and scaling of innovative solutions, promoting learning and adaptation. Additionally, it aims to nurture talent and skills in areas such as design thinking, data analytics, and digital technologies, promoting a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship. Ultimately, the goal is to drive positive social and environmental impact and contribute to the development of a sustainable and knowledge-based economy in Mauritius.

It is noteworthy that no application was received under sub-theme 3 '**Regular Research and Innovation Grant Development Course.**' In fact as a funding body, the MRIC has identified that there have been consistent shortcomings in applications for grants in terms of lack of clarity and limited elaboration of key elements which enable evaluation panels to determine the merits of projects, their feasibility and the metrics to measure objectively the outcomes sought. Applicants from NGOs, particularly when they do not network with academics or other agencies which have experience in project write-up and grant application submissions have difficulties to defend and convince evaluation panels of the merits of their projects as they tend to lack the know-how of grant application. This is an area which clearly needs to be addressed for instance through boot-camp style grant-writing exercises.

4.2 Projects funded under the second call for proposals

A 2nd Call for Proposals, for the Innovation Boost Grant, was launched through the Smart Innovation Support Mechanism on 31st August 2023 with the aim to support short-term (one year) and medium-term (two years) innovative projects in specific thematic areas.

The priority area for the *short-term/medium-term* strategies under the Social and Grassroots thematic is as follows: ***Capacity Building/Skills Development with a particular attention to empowering grassroots communities and civil society as pillars of social innovation (both short-term and medium-term)***

21 applications were received under this thematic area of which 15 were retained after administrative screening and subsequently after being evaluated by the independent panel of experts, 2 projects were effectively retained for funding. These two projects are as follows:

Sprint4Change: Cross sectoral capacity building to boost social innovation.

Drawing from international expertise and the Innovation Sprint methodology, the project proposes to run two cross-sectoral workshops where 100 participants will learn hands-on to generate innovative tech-oriented solutions that tackle social and environmental challenges. Each Innovation Sprint will focus on a critical social and environmental challenge, notably Poverty and Waste and will leverage the power of collective intelligence to develop innovative solutions. The project is expected to have tangible and impactful results:

- 100 people will learn and experience first-hand internationally recognized innovation methodology and best practices
- Cross-sectoral stakeholders will meet and initiate collaboration during the activity
- 20 social and grassroots innovation projects will emerge

AgriSanté

The project seeks to combat malnutrition by facilitating access to healthy foods and imparting ecological knowledge and skills mainly to youth. Recognizing the health challenges in the country, the "AgriSante" project adopts a comprehensive and innovative approach ensuring that the environment is not compromised in the pursuit of better nutrition and increased revenues. The project places a strong emphasis on education and capacity-building. It conducts workshops and programs to promote skills and knowledge on ecology and nutrition. By empowering the community to sustainably manage their health and well-being, the project promotes self-reliance while alleviating the negative impacts of poverty on youth development. Its pragmatic and systematic design, complemented by a robust monitoring framework, ensures that it can effectively address the community's needs and foster innovation at the grassroots level. Through continuous learning and adaptation, 'AgriSante' is poised to make a meaningful and lasting impact on youth development in Roche Bois while contributing to the broader goals of social and grassroots innovation.

4.3 Some critical reflections on the grounds covered

Calls for projects such as described above and appropriate projects developed and implemented along those lines will go a long way towards meeting the strategic orientations of the ARI 2022 for the S&G Thematic area.

Some key outcomes expected from these projects which will start to show results in 2024-2025 are in terms of the following:

Evidence and knowledge sharing

Online Platforms such as Impactors and Upping Cloud will contribute towards the establishment of a social innovation evidence development and knowledge sharing networks. This will enable the scouting of S&G initiatives locally, regionally and internationally as well as the sharing of data. Open data and research are widely known to be crucial to inform social innovation.

Social business incubation, skills labs and capacity building in social and grassroots innovation

The projects mentioned above are also expected to develop the social innovation ecosystem. Capacity-building, empowering and improving NGOs and grassroots innovators access to innovation and social entrepreneurial skills, such as design thinking, social business development, relevant soft and technical skills required in their problem area are important skills to impart if we want to see qualitative and quantitative improvements in social and grassroots innovation projects.

With the collaboration of social business incubators, such as Trampoline which is running the Sprint4Change Methodology as well as Social Innovation Lab led by Ripple, there is increasing potential to co-create ideas and incubate potential social enterprises. There is an increasing potential through such projects to multiply the number of adherents and by extension, impact more tangibly on society.

In addition, the development of an entrepreneurial mindset particularly at the grassroots level is lacking. Risk-taking is a critical concept that should be imbibed in our younger generation since it enables and develops innovative thinking which can lead to differentiation of products and services.

Awareness and mobilisation for a shared understanding of S&G Innovation

The MRIC is also seizing every opportunity to raise awareness and mobilise the community for a shared understanding of S&G innovation. Over and above these regular calls for projects there are also national prizes, challenges and campaigns such as the National Innovation Challenge which seek to incentivize innovators including enterprises and grassroots to showcase their innovative ideas and products.

These regular national competitions and awards focusing on themes of national interest of topical relevance can have the dual role of incentivising uptake of S&G while generating widespread interest in this area.

Among further ideas that need to be explored are more nation-wide innovation initiatives, such as social and grassroots innovation fairs, to improve community relationships, develop routes for local talent to access opportunities, and enhance the potential for innovation activities to support and strengthen local grassroots community. Moreover, displaying promotional videos of social and grassroots innovations on national television and at crowded places like metro stations, workplaces, malls, and major local bus stops will help attract the focus of the the community at large and make them aware about the various social and grassroots innovations of Mauritius.

MRIC schemes, hand-holding support and facilitation of uptake and upscaling

Related to the point made above about the need for grant application training workshops, there have been numerous representations among different quarters during the consultation process that MRIC diverse schemes could include social innovation and social impact as evaluation criteria to promote this field.

Given the large number of applications as opposed to the number of projects retained and likewise given also the large number of expressions of interest for SIRGS as opposed to the actual number of applications, as well as the unfavourable ratio of successful v/s unsuccessful applicants, it is also recommended to devise regular grant writing course with emphasis on specifying and elucidating the social innovation dimension in the ‘theory of change’. In fact, NGOs are often confronted with shortage of staff with the technical ability to write and submit grant applications in prescribed formats.

In order to ensure that innovative projects funded by the Council are sustained beyond the grant and have due social impacts, it has also been recommended that the services of the Council be extended to hand-holding from pre-application inception stage through to connecting grantees to end-users and facilitate networking.

It has also been recommended to re-introduce the Solicited and Unsolicited Research and Innovation Grant Schemes to encourage applied social research where there are direct linkages with socially innovative outcomes.

Research and Innovation Facilitation and Coordination between Social Innovation Practitioners, Researchers and Grassroots

As also hinted during the ARI 2022, MRIC and researchers could develop research partnerships between community organisers and researchers to improve scoping, framing and impact of research and develop their roles as civic institutions. In fact, local networking for mutual learning and sharing; educating and supporting individuals who can functionally bridge the fragmented ecosystem and promoting local/regional NGO networks for research, resource sharing, management and capacity development can also contribute towards a strong culture of innovation in this field.

Funding and capital

The issue of funding and capital for the development of projects which are socially or cause- driven rather than profit driven is an issue which impedes on this sector to take-off. Recommendations have been made to the effect that a special social innovation fund be put to the disposal of potential applicants on the merit of socially innovative submissions with high impact value.

Moreover, in order to meet the requirements of grassroots projects, due consideration be given to shifting rigorous reporting of activities to flexible pursuit of outcomes.

To increase the success rate of Grassroots Innovators, it could also be fruitful to match seasoned entrepreneurs with Grassroots Innovators. The collaboration would bring the best entrepreneurial brain to try their hands in making the grassroots innovations reach its potential.

Closely related to the above point, the need has been impressed by the working group to address the legal and regulatory issues impeding NGOs and non-profits from engaging in social innovation and social enterprise. While many able social innovators and entrepreneurs are interested to serve the community, it is often detrimental to their own time and funds and along these lines, there is another important recommendation to review the legal framework for social enterprises in order to enable them to emerge.

There are many aspects to develop a legal framework that underpins social innovation, from tax relief to procurement rules that oblige public bodies to consider how services to be procured can improve the economic, social and environmental well-being of communities (such as the UK's Social Value Act, 2012). At present, Mauritius does not have a legal framework for social enterprises, sometimes known as "mission-led" (rather than profit-led) businesses.

A twin track approach is required. On the one side, we require research and policy that come up with the establishment of multiple social and grassroots innovations projects which generate sustainable practices. On the other, all stakeholders should adopt a reciprocal learning approach to social and grassroots innovations, that is, action research. We need to learn from the wealth of information that other agencies possess and work on it to promote sustainable innovation.

5.0 Conclusion

In sum, while a range of initiatives are emerging and the ecosystem is gradually firming up its foundations, it can be argued that Social and Grassroots Innovation in Mauritius is slowly but steadily taking shape.

Worldwide, it is clear that social innovation is already a force for positive change in many developed and developing markets alike; that it is being incorporated into more administrations, analysed by more institutions, and pursued by more entrepreneurs and investors. Future studies, and future innovators, will therefore have more data to draw on, and social innovation will move further from a concept towards a science that is applied and tested.

With the efforts of the MRIC, in close collaboration with its parent Ministry of Information Technology, Communication and Innovation, Mauritius has not missed this band-wagon. However, there is still a long way to go to fully tap into the promises of Social and Grassroots innovation to complement the welfare state and address the needs of vulnerable segments of the population as well as environmental and cultural issues using innovative approaches.

Taking regular stock of the state-of-the-art in S&G Innovation, the gaps and challenges which persist, the vision for this complex sector and the recommendations for addressing these gaps and enable its adoption to harness its potential, will contribute to positive transformations in Mauritian society.

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