

PRIMARY & SECONDARY

GENERAL ISSUES

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

SME EMPLOYMENT SCHEME - YOUNG UNEMPLOYED GRADUATES

(29.11.2022)

(No. B/1169) Mr P. Armance (Third Member for GRNW & Port Louis West) asked the Minister of Industrial Development, SMEs and Cooperatives whether, in regard to the SME Employment Scheme for Young Unemployed Graduates, he will, for the benefit of the House, obtain from SME Mauritius, information as to the number of young unemployed graduates registered thereunder, indicating the –

- (a) number of requests for placement thereof received, and
- (b) quantum of funds disbursed thereunder.

Mr Bholah: Mr Speaker, Sir, the SME Employment Scheme was first introduced in August 2018. The main objectives of the scheme were to reduce unemployment among youth by placing 1,000 young graduates with SMEs to gain crucial hands-on industry-based work experience. SMEs on their side would simultaneously have benefited from the scheme by availing themselves of young academically qualified personnel to sustain their growth and development.

The SME Employment Scheme was initially meant for university graduates and diploma holders but given the necessity of supporting SMEs, especially through the headwinds caused by COVID-19 pandemic, the Budget Speech 2021-2022 announced an extension of qualification eligibility criteria to include MQA approved holders of TVET Level 3. As such young people holding valid qualifications in plumbing, electrical, culinary skills, automotive mechanics and electronics amongst others also became eligible for placement with SMEs.

Mr Speaker, Sir, regarding part (a) of the question, I am pleased to inform the House that since Financial Year 2020-2021, SME Mauritius Ltd has received applications from more than 1,800 young Mauritians with qualifications in various fields. Some 1,619 young people or 88% of all those who have applied, have been placed in different small and medium enterprises around the island.

Regarding part (b) of the question, I will now proceed with the breakdown of placements and related cost by financial year. During the Financial Year 2018-2019, 169 graduates and diploma holders were placed with SMEs at the cost of Rs25.7 m. During the financial years 2019-2020 and 2020-2021, the figure of placements increased to 471 and 553 graduates and diploma holders at the cost of Rs73.9 m. and Rs85.9 m., respectively. For Financial Year 2021-2022, 860 placements were effected at the cost of Rs135.6 m. For the present financial year, up to 31 October 2022, namely end of last month, 559 graduates and 287 diploma holders were still in placement at the cost of Rs41.9 m.

Mr Speaker, Sir, to summarise, a total of Rs363.2 m. has been disbursed up to now under the SME Employment Scheme and Government has recently extended the scheme up to June 2023. I seize this opportunity to appeal to both SMEs and qualified graduates, diploma holders and those from the vocational stream to enrol on this Scheme and further the development of SMEs and the Mauritian economy.

Mr Armance: Thank you. Can the Minister inform the House whether, after placement of the graduate, there is any follow-up, monitoring at their place of work?

Mr Bholah: Given the number of graduates, it is physically impossible to monitor by visits. Certain sample visits are organised; otherwise, attendance is taken before any funds are disbursed to the graduate or diploma holder.

Mr Armance: Thank you. And after the period of the placement, how many graduates have opened their own business, as I understand the employment scheme is to be able to have experience and then open your own business? So, how many graduates have opened their business and have reverted back to the Ministry?

Mr Bholah: Well, what happens is that some of the SMEs do employ these graduates or diploma holders directly. Most of them on the strength of their experience gained at the place of work, they get another better job either in the private or even the public sector. I understand that some go otherwise, set up their own business again by gaining experience here and there but we don't have an exact number of where do they go after their placement period.

Mr Armance: Last question hon. Minister...

Mr Speaker: Let me give one question to hon. Uteem!

Mr Uteem: Thank you. Has the attention of the hon. Minister been drawn to cases of fraud where certain SMEs have been employing members of their families and relatives and

set up different companies to benefit from this scheme? Have this been brought to the attention of the hon. Minister?

Mr Bholah: In as far as possible, we do check if any SME register different companies in order to benefit from this scheme. So, checks are made before any placement is done. I, personally, I have not been made aware of any forged payment to any graduate or diploma holder as of now.

Mr Armance: Okay. My last question is still about the SME Employment Scheme. Is it still active because it's been brought to my attention in September that no more placements are being effected by the SME?

Mr Bholah: Well, what happened is that initially in the Budget, there was Rs100 m. that was provided for under the National Resilience Fund (NRF), but given the success of the Scheme, we have approached the Ministry of Finance and the latter Ministry has accepted favourably to bring another Rs50 m. by way of official letter. So, the Scheme will be there up to June 2023, as I said earlier.

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DRUG OFFENCES – MINORS & YOUNGSTERS UNDER AGE 25 – CASES & INQUIRIES

(29.11.2022)

(No. B/1149) Mr N. Bodha (Second Member for Vacoas & Floréal) asked the Prime Minister, Minister of Defence, Home Affairs and External Communications, Minister for Rodrigues, Outer Islands and Territorial Integrity whether, in regard to minors and young people under 25 years old, he will, for the benefit of the House, obtain from the Commissioner of Police, information as to the number thereof involved in reported drug offences cases since 2019 to date, indicating where matters stand as to the inquiries initiated thereinto, including the number of inquiries completed and cases lodged.

The Prime Minister: Mr Speaker, Sir, the House, the country, and the nation are fully aware that my Government is relentless in its fight against the drug scourge. In fact, the street value of drugs seized amounting to Rs14 billion since the year 2015 bears ample and convincing testimony to this fight of ours, and to our unflinching commitment to track down the drug peddlers and keep the drug problem at bay.

I am thus particularly sensitive to the plight of many families whose children have been caught in the drug trap.

Mr Speaker, Sir, I am informed by the Commissioner of Police that since January 2019 to date, 3,598 cases relating to drug offences involving minors and young people under the age of 25 have been reported to the Police. Out of these 3,598 cases –

- (i) 2,964 cases continue to be under enquiry; and
- (ii) 634 cases have been completed, out of which 614 cases have already been lodged before the Court and the remaining 20 have been referred to the Office of Director of Public Prosecutions for advice.

Mr Speaker, Sir, currently, the sentencing of the juvenile shall be in accordance with Section 62 of the Children's Act.

As the House is aware, the Government has taken a major policy decision with regard to people who use drugs. It is in this line that amendments have recently been brought to the Dangerous Drugs Act with a view to diverting people who use drugs from the criminal justice system towards treatment and rehabilitation.

The setting up of the Drug User Administrative Panel (DUAP), under the Ministry of Health and Wellness, is one of the milestones of my Government in the fight against drugs.

The DUAP would enable drug abusers to be diverted from the criminal justice system towards treatment and rehabilitation services to facilitate their reintegration in the mainstream society. Moreover, diversion of people, who use drugs, from the criminal justice system would allow them to have a Certificate of Character wherein there is no criminal record linked to drug use.

The Panel would direct a drug user, whether a minor or not, to undergo the process of rehabilitation which encompasses education, counselling, treatment, aftercare, social reintegration or any other relevant and required therapy. It would monitor the progress of a drug user during the period of rehabilitation and recommend such other measures as may be necessary to assist the drug user to overcome his addiction to drugs.

A protocol will be worked out by the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions and the Police to establish the necessary procedures and processes for referral of cases to the DUAP. The DUAP is expected to be operational by early next year. In fact, the Ministry of Health and Wellness has already started mobilising resources in terms of infrastructure, human resources as well as other requirements relating to the DUAP. In view of the setting up of the DUAP, the Ministry of Health and Wellness has considerably scaled up its drug addiction related services. If required, these services will be further scaled up.

Currently, there are 14 different treatment and rehabilitation service centres to cater for people who use drugs, as follows –

- (i) 5 Addiction Treatment Units, one in each of the five health regions;
- (ii) 5 day care treatment and rehabilitation centres;
- (iii) 2 residential treatment and rehabilitation centres;
- (iv) 1 residential detoxification centre, and

- (v) 1 dedicated centre for minors and young people.

The Nénuphar Centre, which was set up in August 2018 at Long Mountain Hospital with a bed capacity of 10, caters for minors and young people who use drugs. Patients who are admitted at the Nénuphar Centre are mainly those who have consumed synthetic drugs, cannabis and/or heroin. Counselling services and activities and psychosocial support are carried out by a multi-disciplinary team comprising psychiatrists, psychologists, doctors, nursing officers and social workers from NGOs. Minors and young people are referred to the centre by the Addiction Treatment Units of the Ministry of Health and Wellness, by general practitioners of the private sector, by NGOs or even by self-reference or by being accompanied by relatives.

Mr Speaker, Sir, with a view to combatting drug trafficking, the Police Department is implementing a series of repressive and preventive measures, as follows –

- (i) gathering of intelligence on drug peddlers to disrupt the supply of illicit drugs;
- (ii) drug mapping to locate ‘Areas of Concern’ where drug activities are being carried out and drug addicts tend to loiter;
- (iii) profiling of ‘Persons of Interest’ through discreet surveillance to identify their role and involvement in the drug nexus;
- (iv) arresting drug offenders and ensuring their successful prosecution;
- (v) addressing crime generators like prostitution and larceny, often linked to drugs;
- (vi) conducting targeted operations in hot spots in its adjoining areas and since the past few months, the ADSU is conducting regular crackdown operations islandwide, and
- (vii) increasing the operational effectiveness of the ADSU in terms of vehicles and manpower, and ADSU personnel have also been provided with training and sophisticated equipment to enhance their operational capabilities.

The ADSU is collaborating extensively with other law enforcement agencies involved in the fight against drugs and related offences, such as money laundering, with the single aim to disrupt drug and other criminal networks.

Moreover, the ADSU also forms part of the Supply Reduction Committee of the National Drug Secretariat together with other agencies such as the MRA Customs Anti-Narcotics Section, the Ministry of Health and Wellness, and others. This consultative platform allows the sharing of information and statistics among the different agencies thereby enhancing the operational capacity of ADSU.

The Education Cell of the ADSU, with the support of the ADSU Field Units, is actively engaged in carrying out sensitisation and awareness campaigns, in Educational Institutions, Youth Forums, Private Companies and Socio-Cultural Groups on the ill-effects of drugs and its legal implications. The prevention strategies are geared towards providing relevant knowledge and information on the ill-effects of dangerous drugs and drug abuse, personal and family problems associated with drugs abuse, the legal consequences with different types of offences under the Dangerous Drugs Act.

Mr Speaker, Sir, it must also be pointed out that the Ministry of Health and Wellness, in collaboration with the National Drug Secretariat, has launched the first phase of a communitybased and community-led anti-drug campaign through the Youth Empowerment Programme Against Drugs (YEPAD). The first phase of this programme, which has already been implemented in 20 regions of the island, is targeted to build capacity of young people and community leaders by providing them with knowledge and skills to design and implement drug prevention activities in their respective localities and surrounding regions.

Mr Speaker, Sir, the Community-based Drug Prevention Programme involves people who are concerned with the drug issue, including youth, parents, teachers, Police, religious organisations, citizens, community groups as well as drug related service providers. Result oriented community-based drug prevention activities should be focused and ongoing rather than being a stand-alone approach. Thus, to ensure that this community-based prevention programme is sustained, the second phase has already been initiated through the Community Welfare Task Force project. In fact, the Minister of Health and Wellness has launched the second phase on Thursday 24 November 2022 whereby 30 community leaders from 18 different regions have been empowered during a two days' workshop for the setting up of a Community Welfare Task Force in their respective regions, and it is expected that these Community Welfare Task Force, with the support of existing NGOs, the Ministry of Youth Empowerment, Sports and Recreation and the Ministry of Health and Wellness, amongst others, will become actively involved in the primary prevention against drugs.

Mr Speaker, Sir, my Government has been working on all fronts to deal with the drug scourge. In addition to sensitisation campaigns by the Police and the Ministry of Health and Wellness, the Ministry of Education, Tertiary Education, Science and Technology is implementing a series of measures and actions in the educational institutions comprising, *inter alia*, the following –

- (i) a structured, extensive sensitisation and prevention programme at the level of educational institutions conducted with Ministry of Health and Wellness and the assistance of ADSU, the *Brigade pour la Protection des Mineurs* and NGOs to address the drug problem as well as share information. A total of 1,246 sensitisation sessions have been held from 2019 to 2022;
- (ii) an evidence-based drug use prevention programme, known as the “Get Connected Programme”, which is in line with the international standards for drug use prevention as well as the National Drug Control Master Plan 2019-2023, has been introduced in the secondary schools across the island. The programme uses a life skills concept model with the aim to deter tobacco, alcohol and drug initiation amongst adolescents;
- (iii) introduction of the REBOUND Programme, which is a drug use prevention programme, for students aged 14 to 25 years to achieve long-term effects in contrast to quick fix attempts. Its goals include cognitive, developmental and environmental dimensions;
- (iv) regular patrols and surveillances are effected by relevant authorities in high risk schools;
- (v) cameras have been installed in 75 primary schools and 82 secondary schools at strategic points to identify irregular activities;
- (vi) a protocol has been put in place to act as a guideline for management to handle a case whereby a student is caught in possession of a suspected illicit substance. This protocol also advocates close monitoring and follow-up at the level of the school, including pastoral care and support from Educational Psychologists;

(vii) the Ministry is currently working on a Policy framework for Drug Free Schools;

(viii) provision in the National Curriculum Framework for both Primary and Secondary subsectors to integrate drug abuse prevention within the curricula, and

(ix) setting up of a Health and Wellness Directorate to look into the Drug Use Prevention in schools, amongst other roles and responsibilities, and revisiting the School Health Clubs to better address health issues.

Mr Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Youth Empowerment, Sports and Recreation has conducted various campaigns and sensitisations programmes targeting minors and young people under 25 years with a view to enabling our youth to resist peer pressure to indulge in substance abuse. These measures and actions include, *inter alia*, the following –

(i) collaboration with the “Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America” (CADCA) to reduce drug demand in Mauritius, in terms of facilitation and liaison with young people in the community;

(ii) organisation of “Line Up, Live Up programme” in 2020 which combines life skills training and sports activities to sensitise around 400 vulnerable young people as well as inmates of the Rehabilitation Youth Centre and the Correctional Youth Centre against drug use;

(iii) capacity building workshop on “Prevention of addictive behaviour” in September 2021 with the *Brigade des Mineurs*, ADSU and NGOs for 20 *Animateurs*/Youth Officers working with young people;

(iv) since year 2019 to date, more than 4,000 young people have followed the Life Skills Education Programme, which is a 10-week comprehensive youth health programme designed to support adolescents to make healthy lifestyle choices and help them become more resilient, and

(v) conduct of the Special Outreach Programme targeting those young people who are deemed furthest left behind. Individual social support and informal sensitisation sessions on “substance abuse prevention” are provided to 400 vulnerable young people at grassroots level in different regions.

Mr Speaker, Sir, I need not repeat and overemphasise the undisputable and blatant fact, and widely acknowledged reality, that my Government shall indeed not leave a single stone unturned in our zero tolerance approach, to clear and clean our country of drug trafficking. Thank you.

Mr Bodha: I thank the Prime Minister for his extensive reply. In view of the fact that the situation is very critical, I will just give a few figures, Mr Speaker, Sir. In 2021, *il n'y a eu que deux condamnés pour importation d'héroïne, deux pour gandia, zéro pour drogue synthétique, et trois pour autres drogues. La question pour moi, M. le président:* out of 2,964 cases, which have been mentioned by the Prime Minister, enquiries have been completed in 634 cases, that is, about 20%. May I ask the Prime Minister what are the reasons as to why only 20% of the enquiries have been completed so far?

The Prime Minister: Mr Speaker, Sir, the hon. Member should know, being himself a lawyer, that these enquiries do take some time. We are talking about figures from 2019 till to date, and, as I have said, a number of cases have been completed, that is, a number which originates from 2019. But for the more recent cases, there is, of course, a process whereby advice is being taken, and, eventually, the DPP will have to take a decision. So, the process is taking some time, but we shall also see to it that cases do not linger on for too long. There is thus a follow-up on the part of the Police so that enquiry is completed at the earliest.

Mrs Luchmun Roy: Thank you, Mr Speaker, Sir. Can the hon. Prime Minister indicate the number of minors under the age of 18 who were remanded for related offences at the Correctional Youth Centre since January 2019 to date? Thank you.

The Prime Minister: Mr Speaker, Sir, in accordance with records available at the Correctional Youth Centre for Boys and Girls, no minor under the age of 14 had been remanded for drug related offences since 2019 to date.

I am also informed that there is a total of 61 minor boys aged above 14 but less than 18 years who were remanded at the Correctional Youth Centre for Boys and 2 minor girls aged 15 and 17 years who respectively were remanded to the Correctional Youth Centre for Girls for drug-related offences for the period 2019 to date. And out of the 63 minors, only one boy was sentenced by the District Court of Lower Plaines Wilhems, and is detained at the Correctional Youth Centre for Boys since 05 February 2021.

Mr Abbas Mamode: Thank you, Mr Speaker, Sir. Can the hon. Prime Minister provide information on the value of drugs seized from 2019 to date?

The Prime Minister: Mr Speaker, Sir, in my reply, I gave the figure for 2015 to date, and indicated that the value of drugs seized amounts to Rs14 billion, and the figure for the value of drugs seized from 2019 to date amounts to Rs8.5 billion. This is again ample testimony of our relentless fight against drugs, and I think it is good to try to imagine what chaotic situation would have prevailed in the country, on the health and on the social fronts, had those drugs, in fact, been able to enter our community, and been consumed by people.

Mr Bodha: Thank you, Mr Speaker, Sir. The situation is horrendous. We have 60,000 people using synthetic drugs, Mr Speaker, Sir. May I ask the hon. Prime Minister whether he is aware that addiction is starting at a lower age now and we had people going for disintoxication at the age of 14, and drug barons are using children as vigils, *jockey*, at the entrance of drug territories to scrutinise people coming for drugs or otherwise? May I ask the hon. Prime Minister whether the Police are aware of this and whether there have been cases where the drug barons have been charged with child abuse, for using children for their trade?

The Prime Minister: Mr Speaker, Sir, whenever the Police will carry out an investigation, all those who are involved, in one way or the other, including what the hon. Member is saying, by using minors or young persons will, of course, be taken to task because the enquiry will reveal any offence that has been committed by those people. The hon. Member is saying that the situation is horrendous. I think I need to *aussi rafraîchir la mémoire de l'honorable membre. Quand il faisait partie de la même équipe, il disait aussi la même chose. J'espère qu'aujourd'hui il ne renie pas ce qu'il avait dit auparavant, parce que quand on était ensemble, il avait dit que* the situation is horrendous, and rightly so, at that time ! It was horrendous. We quoted those reports that were published by the United Nations, the International Narcotics Control Board in 2009. I hope you do remember when we were sitting together in Press Conferences and you were saying that the Labour Party was not - in fact, I can quote the exact words; the words that I still use today; that the Labour Party people were closing their eyes to the obvious, that they were tolerating those drug traffickers, and we quoted, if you can remember, this report of 2009. I quote what was said in this report –

“There is evidence of an increase in the smuggling of heroin to the islands of the Indian Ocean, particularly Mauritius. Opiates from India and Pakistan are smuggled into Mozambique and then South Africa, and from South Africa into Europe as well as into East African Countries, notably Mauritius and Seychelles. Mauritius...”

Hon. Nando Bodha, listen also to what I am saying, because I hope you will remember...

Mr Bodha: I am listening!

The Prime Minister: We emphasized on what was said in this report, and I quote –

“Mauritius now has one of the highest levels of opiate abuse in Africa, a spillover effect of the heroin trafficking in that country.”

Now, there is not only that 2009 report. In 2010, again the World Drug Report of UNODC mentions that, and I quote –

“Mauritius, Kenya and Egypt are the countries in the region with the highest prevalence of opiate use. Mauritius has also high prevalence of injecting drug use and a concentrated HIV epidemic among those users.”

We also quoted the 2012 report, wherein it was reported that heroin abuse is increasing, notably in Mauritius. I can quote other statements that we have been making together in previous Press Conferences at that time. But I am not saying that because of this situation that existed, we do not have to redouble our efforts. In fact - for Government, Authorities concerned -, I can assure the hon. Member that we will continue to do our utmost in our fight to combat those drug traffickers.

When I also look at those figures and figures which have been increasing from 2005 to 2014 - I do not want to take time of the House -, I note that they have regularly been increasing in terms of cases for minors and for juveniles. So, the fight is on. We have to be vigilant, but, again, it is a permanent fight, because those people are always trying to find ways and means of carrying out their illegal trade.

Mr Speaker: You are right! The time is over!