Port Louis unavoidable player in the Indian Ocean

Ranked 23rd out of the 183 nations of the "Doing Business Index 2012" of the World Bank, Mauritius is positioned far in front of numerous developed or fast growing countries. This ranking reveals the vitality of this country of 1.27 million inhabitants which a number of investors and economies of the region regard with attention. In this context, the port of Port Louis, which handles 99% of the foreign trade of the country, obviously plays a major role.

This port also enables the essential connections to be made with the islands of the Indian Ocean and the peripheral regions, but over and above its strategic position at the crossroads of Far East / Africa and Europe / Australia shipping lanes, strengthens its ambition to become the major transhipment port in the region.

The ambitious port

In fact Mauritius Ports Authority, who celebrated their 35 years of existence in 2011, are displaying optimism. Following a record year of 2008 (6.3 million tonnes), the port was certainly affected by the crisis with a fall back in 2009 (5.89 million Tonnes). However it found an upwards trend in 2010 (6.23 million tonnes) and recorded in 2011 a record tonnage of 6.47 million tonnes thus registering a growth of 4%. The growth was in particular due to the very dynamic sectors of transhipments (+5.1%), containers (+5.4% with 350 624 TEUs) and the number of calls in general (+22.2%). The investments and projects undertaken over the last decade are thus bearing fruit.
In an increasing number since 2006, cruise liners did not have a dedicated infrastructure and berthed amongst the other vessels. This situation has incited the port authority to launch their Cruise Terminal project for a safer environment more suited to the requirements of cruise passengers. Costa Cruises made Port Louis their regional base as from December 2007 and their "Costa Romantica" was the first liner to berth at the new terminal in “Les Salines” district on 30 January 2010. The quality of this terminal was rewarded a first time in 2010 at the Seatrade Cruise Shipping Convention of Miami with the "Most Improved Cruise Terminal Facility" award, and again in 2011 with the "Indian Ocean’s Leading Cruise Port 2011" trophy received at the World Travel Awards at Sharm el-Sheikh in Egypt.

On the liquid bulk port side, an oil quay was created in 2008 in the “Mer Rouge” sector enabling at the same time to increase the security of the site and to move these risk activities away from the city. Close to this, the construction of a LPG terminal began in 2011 on a nearly one hectare site. It will be run by a private Mauritian operator, Petredec, and could generate a traffic of 60 000 to 90 000 tonnes right from the start.
The initial investment should be around US$ 30 million. The announced objective here is to position Port Louis as a LPG hub for the islands of the Indian Ocean and the countries of the East coast of Africa.

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In this same Mer Rouge sector, "Binani Cement Factory Mauritius Ltd", a subsidiary of the multinational installed in India, Dubai and in China, have signed an agreement in 2010 with Mauritius Port Authority for a 6.5 hectare site on which they plan to construct, as from 2012, a cement factory with a capacity of 1 million tonnes a year, destined in a first stage for export. This production could boost the traffic of the port by 30%. The emerging African markets are aimed at as well as Europe which also constitutes a potential target.

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In the field of container traffic, and still in Mer Rouge sector, the dredging works undertaken in 2006 have rendered possible the reception of container vessels of over 5000 TEU, which are becoming a very frequent size of vessel in the region. Although the present length of quay could suffice until 2024, it may not correspond to the expressed desire of the main shipping companies (MSC, Maersk, CMA-CGM) to deploy larger vessels in this region.

To face this, modernisation and a quay extension of some 240 metres are planned so as to simultaneously berth two vessels of 8 000+ TEUs and the depth will be taken down, in a first stage, to 16.5 metres. Works should commence in 2012 and the new terminal with a capacity raised to 750 000 TEUs (against 550 000 at present) should be operational in 2015. The cost of these works is estimated at some US$ 125 Million.
If the port wish to comfort their asserted ambition to become a transhipment hub, it will be necessary to develop additional capacities to correspond with the estimated growth for a horizon of 2030 and to be positioned against the competition from other projects of container terminals in the region. In this context the lack of available spaces risks to pose difficulties.

The Port have thus ordered a masterplan for the last available space, that of Fort William / Bain des Dames, from Louis Berger Group. This plan, delivered to the authorities in September 2011, studies the various options possible, and notably the compatibility between port functions and urban utilisations which could also be installed in the zone bordering “Les Salines”.

Fort William / Les Salines: developing the port, laying out a new district of the city, two compatible objectives?

On “Les Salines”, a 25 hectare port plot has been granted to ”Les Salines Waterfront Development Ltd”. This land is adjacent to Caudan Waterfront, a district close to the city which celebrated 15 years of existence in 2011. Launched in 1996, the revitalisation of Caudan Waterfront had been initiated to absorb more easily a strong urban growth which was weighing down on the old colonial town and its urban heritage. It also answered the desire to make a city centre, little frequented by tourists and deserted at the end of the working day, become alive. The sector has since become an attractive commercial and tourist waterfront.
The project on “Les Salines”, called "Neotown" is of another size. Officially launched by the Prime Minister in March 2010, "Neotown" will combine business district, shops, housing accommodation (250 units in a first phase), hotel, casino, marina, the "Tourist Heritage Centre" dedicated to the cultural heritage of Mauritius, water gardens, etc.

It is being developed by Patel Realty, an Indian Group, through their subsidiary "Les Salines Waterfront Development Ltd." It will be developed in three phases over 10 years. Investments of US$600 million at the start and the creation of 10 000 direct jobs are announced.
At the centre of the project, the cruise terminal corresponds to the desire both to bring visitors to this sector and to offer cruise passengers immediate infrastructures and activities before even going towards the Caudan Waterfront and the city centre. It is a question here of a strategy more and more frequent in port cities who strengthen the attraction by integrating cruise activities to a new more or less ambitious part of the city.
As previously evoked, if the "Neotown" project is adjacent on one side to the "Caudan Waterfront" with which it will give a continuity towards the city centre, this project will also be situated in the immediate proximity with port activities and the sector of Fort William / Bain des Dames on which the Port want to base the reinforcement of their ambitions. Its immediate neighbour will be the sugar terminal, the concession of which has just been renewed for 10 years, which, in the short term, reduces the possibilities for the port development of the site.

Louis Berger Group Inc. submitted in September 2011, the Masterplan for Fort William. This obviously integrates the present constraint connected with the presence of the sugar terminal. Four different alternatives have been studied going from the "all port" with two options, to the "all urban" which would extend the real estate operation of “Les Salines” to the Fort William sector, and a "mixed alternative" to which they more especially pay attention.

The conflicts of possible utilisations between commercial and residential functions planned for "Neotown" and the various types of port utilisations are evaluated in it, as are the complementarities of the port activities themselves. Amongst these, the fishing activity, which beside corresponding to the desire of the Government to develop the sea products economy, is presented, like other light industries, as being able to constitute a transition zone.

This transition could be gradual by reutilising, subsequently, one of the two warehouses of the sugar terminal for the treatment and packaging of fish whilst the second, closer to the residential and commercial functions of "Neotown" would house markets and restaurants.
Other light activities (port services, maintenance) could fulfill this function. The installation of office zones at the interface with the "Neotown" project has also been studied as well as the extension, more or less large according to the scenarios, of "Robert Edward Hart Garden". All of the options, their advantages, economic and environmental inconveniences, as well as their costs have been evaluated.

The four alternatives are at present in the course of being examined and are evaluated in the light of the strategy of sustainable development which the authorities wish to undertake in this sector. The type and volume of complementary activities which will be necessary and compatible, notably concerning ship repairs and commercial activities also remain to be decided.

One may also think that the "Neotown" project could also be led to evolve in function of the choices which will be made on Fort William, to privilege here also rather more non residential functions (office, shops…) at the interface with the port zone. Whatever, the towers and buildings which will be constructed will be with "views over the port", that of the Mer Rouge sector situated opposite. We shall not fail to relay on our site the choices which will be finally made.

"Aappravasi Ghat" : port and heritage, an advantage for the city

Beside the old port, in the fishing port sector of Trou Fanfaron, Port Louis possesses an exemplary site with Aappravasi Ghat, a site listed as world heritage by UNESCO and also listed as national heritage. This site, right in the port zone, is associated with the memory of nearly half a million workers, who coming from India, landed at this spot to come to work in the sugar cane fields in place of the liberated slaves.

The Port Authority actively contributes to the protection of this site and also to the preservation and development of the buffer zone which surrounds it in order to preserve its historic character.

In this context, Mauritius Port Authority are working in close collaboration with the Government for the reconversion in the buffer zone of a former military hospital built under the French occupation (1740) and listed as a national monument in 1999, into an art gallery (National Art Gallery). The site possesses a real potential with several other listed buildings.
such as the 19th century civilian hospital, the old port office (become Post Office Museum) or again the "Grenier", a massive building the reutilisation of which is under study.

It has also been decided to put the area between Aapravasi Ghat and the Sea Front of Port Louis back into value so, as to give it the historic stamp of olden days and to facilitate thus the access for the growing number of visitors. The conversion of the city centre and the historic heart of Port Louis into a pedestrian area programmed by the Municipality goes in the same direction. However, over and above this, it is part of a much wider voluntarist strategy aimed at making Port Louis the first carbon neutral city in Africa by 2020.

Search for a balance between the enhancement of heritage elements and the needs of the city and its inhabitants; zero carbon strategy and new parts of the city; reinforcement of the tourist attraction; economic revitalisation and port competitiveness; all the problematics and all the potential of a sustainable city are at work. A sustainable development, the success of which will be, once again, also depend on the complementarity and dialogue between a port and a city where the spaces, the functions and the future are all closely linked.

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Are members of AIVP:
- Mauritius Ports Authority
- Municipality of Port Louis

These two organisations are also members of the « Indian Ocean Observatory of Cities and Ports »