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FURNITURE AND JOINERY INDUSTRIES IN MAURITIUS*

by

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INTRODUCTION

Mauritius covering an area of some 1800 square kilometers has an estimated population of 900,000. The country has practically no natural resources or minerals and is mostly agricultural. It is only in the past decade that the industrial sector has gained some importance mainly due to the setting up of an industrial free zone.

Furniture making in Mauritius can be traced back as far as the eighteenth century when the island was under French administration. The fine craftsmanship of that early period has been handed down through generations and so even today the Mauritian furniture industry can be regarded to be more or less a "Craft Industry".

THE INDUSTRY TODAY

(a) Labour

Because of this "Craft" element, furniture making enterprises are very small and the 400 existing units employ in all not more than 1200 workers. The table below illustrates this distribution:

<u>No of workers</u>	<u>No of firms</u>
1 - 4	322
5 - 9	68
10 - 19	5
20 - 29	5
30 - 49	2
50 - 79	3

Total employed: 1,068

Only the few largest enterprises are mechanized, to various degrees. All the rest tend to remain with the artisanal methods of production. The former have started manufacturing on small series production while the latter are still on their "one off" production.

The range of furniture produced is very wide and consist mainly of wooden furniture (other types i.e. metal and rattan having a product mix of less than 25%). Wooden furniture itself varies from antique

reproductions to the range of cheap popular functional types. The quality and standards of the products varies considerably, the best is excellent but the average is fair.

(b) Materials

Raw materials employed are mostly imported. The country's supply of furniture timber is very limited due to scarcity of forests. Other materials such as lacquers, fittings, glues and adhesives are also imported.

One serious drawback that exist is that the individual enterprises being small do not have neither the financial requirements nor the administrative facilities for bulk purchase of their materials direct from overseas suppliers.

Timbers employed in the industry are mainly imported from South East Asian and West African countriss.

(c) Market

The local demand for furniturs and joinery is met by the home industry, import being very low. Some manufacturers are export oriented, however, only the goods of highest quality are of interest to overseas markets.

In the past five years four rather large factories have been set up, all of them manufacturing top grade furniture. Part of their production is exported to the neighbouring countries: Reunion Island, South Africa, Seychelles, Comores Islands and Australia. Small quantities of special high grade rproduction furniture are also exported to France and the United Kingdom.

FUTURE PRODUCTS

Furniture manufacturing being a secondary industry in Mauritius, its development and expansion till recently were very slow. The Government programme of diversification has led to certain progress in this field. With the assistance of The World Bank government is setting up a number of Technical Training Schools which will include in their programme of studies the formation of skilled machinists, cabinet makers, joiners and upholsterers.

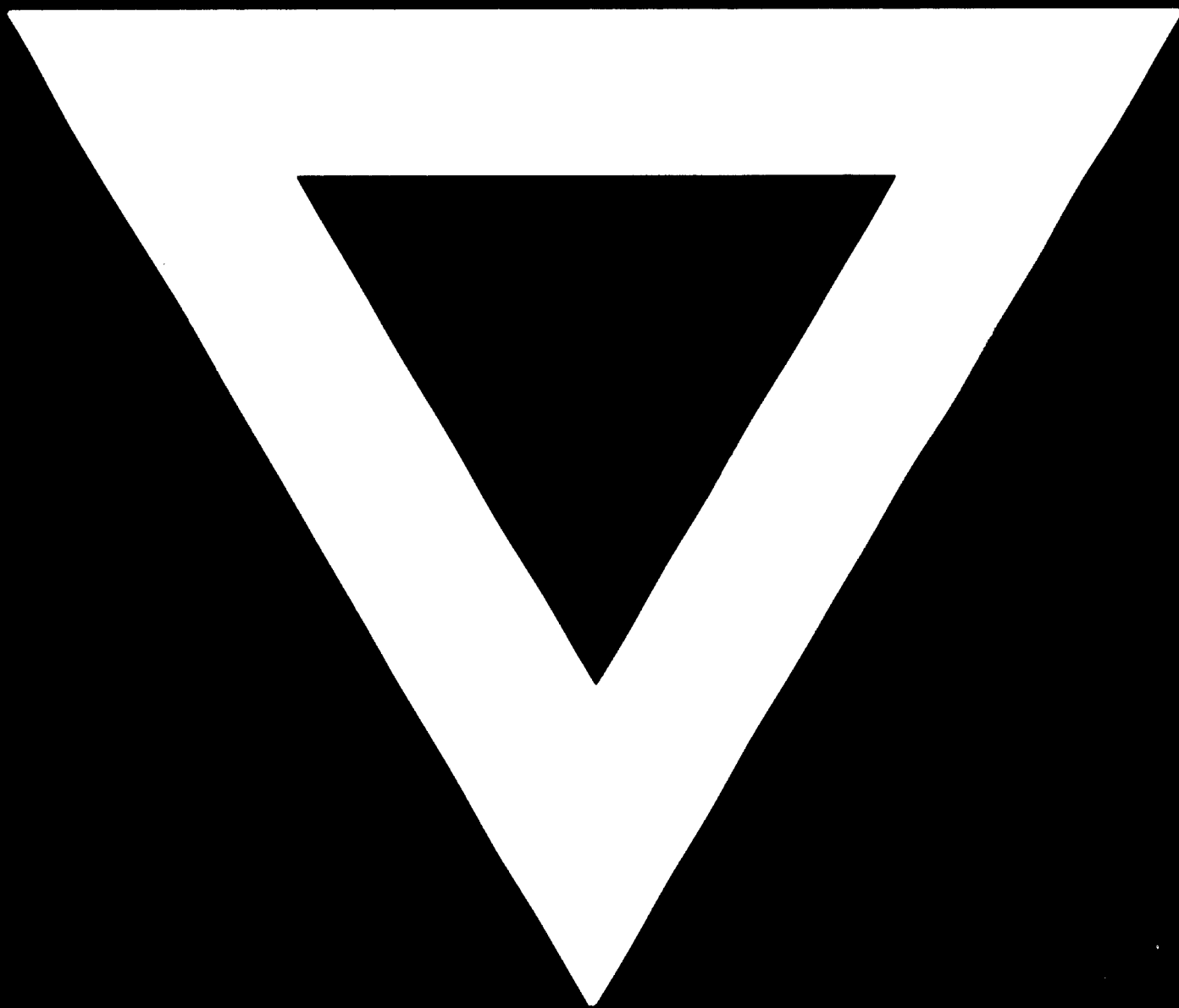
The managerial skill of the industry is progressing rapidly. With the highly appreciated help of UNIDO through international seminars and visits to International Fairs, the managers are now fully aware of modern processes in the furniture and joinery industries. The industry is also indebted to UNIDO through their woodworking industry consultants who visited and advised nearly all the manufacturing units in the country.

From the foregoing, the rate of progress of the industry should gather momentum. But it could grow faster if only our government would consider the possibility of removing or reducing the very high custom duties levied on the raw materials and accessories used in furniture manufacturing.

In conclusion we would say that with the increasing standard of living and the annual growth of population (3%), the demand for houses and furnitures will increase considerably during the next 10 years. Therefore the furniture and joinery industriss should keep pace and we are confident that they could meet the challenge for local demand and also develop their export potentials.



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