

Sociaal Economische Raad
Social Economic Council

Letter of Advice

Concerning remigration to Sint Maarten

SER /16/BP/39
June 8th, 2016



Information

The Social Economic Council Sint Maarten (“Sociaal Economische Raad”, referred to below as “SER”) is an independent advisory body to the government of Sint Maarten. The SER advises upon request by one or more Ministers (solicited) or on its own initiative (unsolicited) on all important social economic issues.

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Colophon

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To the honorable Prime Minister, Mr. W. Marlin,
the honorable Minister of Education, Culture, Youth and Sports Affairs,
Mrs. S. Jacobs
Clem Labega Square

Philipsburg, June 8h, 2016

Letter Of Advice

Our reference: SER /16/BP/39

Re: Letter of advice concerning remigration to Sint Maarten

Honorable Ministers,

Between February and August of 2015 the Social Economic Council (SER) in collaboration with the University of St. Martin (USM) executed a scientific research regarding the decision making process of highly educated Sint Maarteners abroad to return to Sint Maarten. The SER initiated this research because the return of highly educated Sint Maarteners is economically and socially important, but it is unclear which factors determine the decision of Sint Maarteners abroad to return or not. The research and this advice aim to provide effective policies to increase the number of highly educated Sint Maarteners returning to the island.

One of the drivers of social and economic development in a service based economy is education. The government of Sint Maarten provides education for its youth on the island. However, this investment in human capital development is lost when students graduate from secondary school and emigrate to other countries, often for educational purposes, but don't return. From the perspective of country Sint Maarten, this is a brain drain and constitutes a loss. From the perspective of the students, they follow their ambition to further their education; it is an opportunity for them. The government of Sint Maarten rightfully supports students abroad with study financing, and has an interest to see them return to the island to fill the demand for highly educated labor. Next to this economic reason to stimulate remigration, the Sint Maarten community on the island would be strengthened if more Sint Maarteners abroad would return.

The labor market in Sint Maarten requires highly educated workers which, often, the local labor market can not provide. The Census in 2011 measured the educational attainment of the total population. In Sint Maarten 1.5% of the population has a tertiary 2 (university master or higher) education, and about 16% has a tertiary 1 (college, university bachelor, hbo) education. Therefore, employers regularly attract foreign labor, and this creates tensions in society. The evident solution is to have Sint Maarten graduate students return to Sint Maarten after their education abroad to fill the demand for highly educated labor. But are they willing to return? Which factors determine their intention to return? Are they received with open arms?

Research report

The research report is attached to this letter of advice, and deals extensively with the research method, the theory of planned behavior, the results, and how the determinants of remigration, such as attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control, are weighed. The SER refers to the research report for all these aspects; this letter of advice will only briefly mention the research method and more fully discuss the main conclusions in relation to policies to stimulate remigration of highly educated Sint Maarteners. This letter of advice leans fully on the research report.

The SER is thankful for the assistance of the University St. Martin (USM) provided to the research. The students of USM helped to find respondents for the online survey by using their personal network of friends and family abroad, and collected data of secondary students in their final year on the island.

The factors that determine the intention to remigrate

According to the theory of planned behavior, the intention to remigrate to Sint Maarten is determined by three factors: the attitude, the social norm and the perceived behavioral control regarding remigration. These factors were measured by different items, and each item was also evaluated by the respondents. The attitude was measured with 8 items, the social norm with 4 items, and the perceived behavioral control with 18 items.

For example, regarding the attitude towards remigration respondents were asked if it is likely that they will have more contact with their family if they return (one item), and how important more contact with their family is to them (evaluation of the item). If both scores are high, then they would have a high(er) score on the attitude towards remigration because the scores are multiplied. The 8 items together show the attitude

regarding remigration, and it shows which items are positive or negative influences on remigration. The same reasoning is applicable for the social norm and the perceived behavioral control. The SER refers to the research report for a full explanation how these factors determine the intention to remigrate.

How was the research data collected?

The SER created an online survey to reach four different subgroups. In total, 266 respondents fitted the subgroups and completed the survey.

1. Students who graduated from secondary school in Sint Maarten in 2015 (graduate students).
2. Students who graduated from secondary school in Sint Maarten, and who are currently studying abroad (students).
3. Persons who graduated from secondary school in Sint Maarten, who studied abroad, and who returned to Sint Maarten (remigrants).
4. Persons who graduated from secondary school in Sint Maarten, who studied abroad, and who now live/work abroad (non-returners).

Results of the research

The attitudes of the respondents towards remigration consist of beliefs and the evaluation of those beliefs on 8 items. The data showed that the attitude towards remigration mostly is determined by career opportunities (very negative), the appreciation of their expertise (positive) and the opportunity to be close to family (positive).

The social norms regarding remigration, the behaviors and opinions of friends and family, consists of 4 items and the evaluation of those items by respondents. The influence of social norms on remigration is limited. The data showed that family ties are important, but families and friends don't pressure respondents to return to Sint Maarten. This conveys that the choice to return is a personal one, and each Sint Maartener needs to make up his or her own mind about remigration. The SER interpret this as a sign of maturity of the population regarding this decision because families have dealt with this question for generations.

The perceived behavioral control regarding remigration consists of the expectations of 18 items and the evaluation of those expectations. The data showed that the perceived behavioral control mostly is determined by a difficult job market (very negative), the recent economic and political developments in Sint Maarten (negative), the financial

expectations of living and working in Sint Maarten (negative) and assisting parents regarding health/aging problems (positive).

Conclusion from the research

What was assumed by many Sint Maarteners can now be concluded through this scientific survey: the job market and the quality of life that sufficient income from job opportunities bring are both key for remigration. All other factors have less negative influence over the decision to remigrate.

The attitudes, social norms and perceived behavioral control together determine the ‘intention to remigrate’, and this is the best predictor that remigration will actually take place. The intention to remigrate is relatively low among survey participants. This does not mean that the intention to remigrate would necessarily remain at this level. Attitudes and especially the perceived behavioral control are changeable determinants; they are formed in the minds of Sint Maarteners abroad.

The survey also included open questions. The open questions gave the respondents an opportunity to express their opinion in their own words, and many stated that they needed jobs and a fair chance to make a decent living in Sint Maarten (see Appendix A of the research report). These answers also clearly communicated the frustration of the respondents. This indicates that Sint Maarteners abroad are willing to remigrate, or are at least thinking about remigration, even though the intention to remigrate remains relatively low. The intention to remigrate is relatively low because the attitudes and perceived behavioral control regarding the job market are negative even though their willingness to remigrate is apparent.

Moreover, respondents feel very involved with Sint Maarten and their family. 82 percent of the respondents currently studying and working abroad still call Sint Maarten home. This should be considered a strength for country Sint Maarten, and not a frustration to Sint Maarteners abroad who are willing to remigrate but who expect that they will be unable to reach this goal. Remigration is to certain extent also a window of opportunity in the lives of individual Sint Maarteners abroad. The more years they spend abroad, the less likely it will be that they will return. Once they are settled in another country with a job, housing and a family, remigration will become increasingly unlikely.

Policies shaped by the perspective of Sint Maarteners abroad can make a difference. These policies must be aimed to increase the access to the job market for Sint Maarteners abroad, and increase the expectations of Sint Maarteners abroad that they will succeed in obtaining a job before they settle or become disappointed regarding

their chances on the Sint Maarten labor market. In other words, before their window of opportunity closes. Any policy that serves this goal will have the most influence on remigration. The policies should be aimed at students and persons working abroad who graduated secondary school in Sint Maarten; the data shows that current secondary students in Sint Maarten are not yet concerned with remigration. The SER is aware that, next to improvements of the access to the labor market of Sint Maarteners abroad, the economy needs to produce sufficient opportunities for all. The research on remigration shows that the opportunities on the local labor market also affect social well-being of Sint Maarteners abroad.

Advice


Considering the above, the SER unanimously advises the government of Sint Maarten

- To allocate resources to actively support highly educated Sint Maarteners abroad who are willing to remigrate with practical information regarding the labor market. This should include the creation of a database of highly educated Sint Maarteners abroad, and keeping them informed about job opportunities in the public and private sector. On request employers should be able to access the database to receive information on which persons (skills) the database contains.
- To cooperate with existing online platforms which serve the labor market in Sint Maarten. If the demand for highly educated labor is transparent and accessible for Sint Maarteners abroad, this will increase their expectations that they will be successful, and therefore will increase remigration.
- To cooperate with existing education institutions, relevant student associations, the cabinet of the minister Plenipotentiary and other relevant organizations abroad to create awareness of the new database and increase remigration.
- Some incentives should be given to increase remigration of highly educated Sint Maarteners abroad.
- To increase awareness of existing incentives to return

Respectfully,

Oldine V. Bryson- Pantophlet
Chairwoman

Gerard M.C. Richardson
Secretary-General



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