

# 1

Permit me to start by thanking the Board of the AICESIS for this opportunity to present the Social and Economic Council Sint Maarten to the General Assembly. It is a great honor for the Social Economic Council of Sint Maarten to be represented here amidst the representatives of other Social and Economic Councils and Similar Institutions.

I am very excited to be here today and present our Council to the General Assembly because the Council; together with our new Country; is at the moment in an important phase. And I would like to share some of our goals and principles by which we are trying to construct the future of our Caribbean Island. If you permit me I would like to begin by telling you what makes our Island, promoted by the tourist industry as 'the friendly island' not only worthwhile to visit but also economically, socially, institutionally and environmentally a challenge which we as a Council have taken up only one year ago.

# 2

On 10-10-10 the country of Sint Maarten was born. That day the Dutch Antilles were dissolved and their 5 geographical separated territories also separated constitutionally: The smallest three islands; Saba, Statia and Bonaire; became municipalities overseas within the country of the Netherlands. Curacao and Sint Maarten became autonomous countries within the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

To give you an idea of the scale of our new country and its economy: St. Maarten has a GDP of roughly 1,421 billion guilders (2009). The unemployment rate was 12,2% in 2009 but youth unemployment (15-25) is much higher at 29%. To a large extent our rapid economic growth of the last ten years has strong ties with the tourism and construction branche. About 1,5 million Cruise ship tourist visit the Island annually and some 500.000 visitors fly into the Juliana International Airport to spend their holidays on the Island every year. Against these large number of visitors stands a small community: Sint Maarten has about 40.000 legal residents. This also means our new country depends to a large extent on a , at times, volatile global economy.

The former local government departments from the Dutch Antilles are being adjusted to their national tasks because most of the national governmental institutions of the Dutch Antilles were already on Curacao and remained there. A number of new institutions are being established of which the Social Economic Council is one. Like any other democratic country checks and balances are necessary for good governance. Part of these checks and balances are provided by the Advisory Councils of State and their independent position. There is much more to say about our nation building project but I will limit myself to the Social Economic Council.

The independent position of the Social Economic Council is anchored within the ordinance of the Social Economic Council; which became law on 20<sup>th</sup> of December 2010. With that ordinance the Sint Maarten government also recognized the importance of participatory governance and coupled economic development with social progress (well-being of the individual and community) and regard for the natural environment upon which the prosperity of our nation, through tourism, so much depends. Which aspects has Sint Maarten formalized within the ordinance? What is the 'reality on paper'?

### 3

The executive government requests advice from the Council on all important social economic issues. This advice has at least two functions. First, the government seeks societal support and suggestions for modification on draft law and policies: participatory governance. Second, the government can profit from the expertise being build up within the Council.

Unsolicited advice has strong ties with checks and balances. The Council also advises on issues which are not convenient for the government.

### 4

The Councils knows a tripartite setup. Our board members are representatives of employers and employee's organizations and independent experts. Within these boundaries the government can to a certain degree steer the council through the appointments of its members. They are appointed on a personal title which you could call the wise men and women formula. Together these three factions of the Council, in our logo represented by three Caribbean colors, form a circle and only together they stand strong and form an independent body.

### 5

The government is obligated by the ordinance to provide the Council with sufficient information in order to fulfill its responsibilities. At times Information is not readily at hand or does not exist at all due to the small scaleness of the island. To overcome this challenge the government is committed by law to provide sufficient information.

### 6

The Council uses a broad concept of wealth acknowledging the different aspects influencing 'wealth'; not only material prosperity but also aspects like a clean environment, safety and security, respect for human rights and possibilities for personal development add up to the 'quality of life'. The Council views therefore social economic development as two sides of the same coin: economic growth and 'quality of life'. Both areas influence each other. On St. Maarten the council restricts it's advice to four pillars that connect both areas. These pillars are the labor market, government finance to provide for key services, the regulatory framework, and social cohesion. This analytical framework will each and every time be applied to define our scope. Has the draft law or policy a connection with one of the pillars? Are both area's influenced? To what level are they affected?

### 7

If a draft law or policy belongs to one of the pillars AND has a significant impact on economic growth and / or quality of life a topic is eligible for advice. This definition is just as much used to include as to exclude topics for advice. To further tailor the advice towards the analytical framework of the Council the advice will also be limited to the impact it has on both sides of the social economic coin:

economic growth and 'quality of life'. The advice will always mention both areas and will try to reconcile both as much as possible.

## 8

Sint Maarten has had substantial economic growth in the tourism industry since the mid 1980-ties. Since about the year 2000 this was accompanied by a boost in the construction branch: new hotels, luxury housing, and simply more housing to accommodate a growing population. Our island was truly transformed. This economic activity was not anchored strongly in the (changing) local community. As a result, although from Caribbean standards still acceptable, the income distribution is fairly skewed. The vocational training on the island did only partly meet the market demands and the youth's own wishes for personal development. The economic growth was welcomed but was not adequately sustainable. The natural environment took some blows. For a country which relies heavily on tourism based on an attractive natural environment this must be improved. Consequently sustainability will be an important factor in the advice of the Council.

A large percentage of the inhabitants of Sint Maarten are migrants. To keep and improve social cohesion for all residents will be a challenge in a new country where the sense of a nation needs to be nourished and further developed.

For 2012 we have set the following goals to further develop our country.

## 9

Mostly we want to move towards the guiding principles I mentioned earlier and see a beautiful island be more balanced, more sustainable, wealthier, fairer and socially robust. Our job is to advice the government towards that direction and to maximize support from civil society for our advice through social dialogue and balanced and accurate reasoning.

'Know where you go'; a comprehensive vision of the future adds enormously which developments to favor and which not to favor through policies. A small scale society is just as, or perhaps even more, dependent on global changes but a small democracy can also set a course more easily than larger democracies due to the limited number of persons needed for a change in directions. A long term vision is therefore very important to channel the limited resources of government.

The Council is still in the early stages of it's development and therefore learning and sharing are also in our goals for 2012. Exchanging information with other Social Economic Councils will help our development as an institution and perhaps also yours. This opportunity to present the Social Economic Council of Sint Maarten fits well within this goal. I hope you have enjoyed these last 15 minutes just as much I have appreciated this opportunity to tell you about our motivation to go to work each day for the future of Sint Maarten.

Thank you.