

Annie Romano  
TST BOCES  
Ithaca, NY  
Netherlands Antilles, Factor 13: Demographics  
**Sint Maarten: Reversing Colonialism through Fair Travel**

Although tourism is responsible for the majority of income in the Netherlands Antilles, it has eroded the areas of agriculture and traditions in return for low paying service jobs. There is however, an opportunity to tap the expendable income being brought to the area to help solve some of the problems of this island nation. Money from the travel industry could be used to bring back native culture and local agriculture, instead of making it worse.

I've been going to the island of Sint Maarten my whole life. Luckily for me, our family made a point to avoid visiting too many tourist areas. We wanted to see the true island and meet the people. We have met quite a few different people and visit them whenever we return. But there are many poor neighborhoods like Middle Region and Cay Hill that we pass through but seldom stop in, never meeting a large portion of the population. I recently learned that a large number of people on the island are speaking the patois language Papiamentu. The only sign to me of this was a language option on an ATM. My family has spent years exploring the small island and if whole groups of people are practically invisible to us, then I know the majority of tourists on the island are not acknowledging them.

In stark contrast, I watched for 4 years as millions of dollars were dumped into a very upscale but still mostly empty pavilion called the "Blue Mall" while people went hungry across the island. I listened to our friends on the island complain about the infrastructure and about the accessibility of good food. One friendship my family formed was with Ras Bushman, the owner of "Freedom Fighters Ital Shack" and his family. "Freedom Fighters Ital Shack" is one of the very few places on the island where you can get real local food. Ras Bushman owns his own farm in which he produces food for his local restaurant. A restaurant like this is by far the exception to the rule. Ras Bushman's son Ku-J has even written a song about how tourism and urbanization has upset his country.

The song is called "My Town." "My Town" talks about the urbanization, the pollution, and the abuse of the island. It also addresses the tourists by saying "If you really love us so much, then do something, something, something for us." (Ku-J. Web) That really got me thinking about how much tourists, including myself, take from the island without ever giving back. It made me want to do something. It also made me want to find a way use the power of tourism to make a difference. I decided to focus on a solution like this for the Netherlands Antilles, with a focus on Sint Maarten, because that's what I know. Sint Maarten's situation is similar to the other islands of the Netherlands Antilles, and the Caribbean overall.

The island has changed rule many times since 1493. French and Dutch conflict was prevalent throughout the changes. In 1816 the island split into two colonies, the French and the Dutch. In 1919 Saba, Sint Eustatius and Saint Martin united and named themselves the "Netherlands Windward Islands." Then in 1954 Saba, Sint Eustatius and Saint Martin became united with Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao. They became known as the Netherlands Antilles. This was a separate country within the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The Dutch side of the island is known as Sint Maarten while the French side is known as Saint Martin.

Life in the Netherlands Antilles/ Sint Maarten:

Sint Maarten is populated by several different types of people including, Creole (mulatto), black, Guadeloupe Mestizo (French-East Asia), white, and East Indian (Central. Web) and has a population of 51830 (Population. Web). Although Sint Maarten has the highest income in the

Caribbean (New. Web) many people on the island live in poverty and are not getting the right food. “We have had economic growth in St. Maarten, but at the same time we had growth in poverty too. ‘Poverty will always grow despite how much economic growth has been achieved, if economic growth does not include the people themselves.’” (News Network. Web) 22% of islanders have no income. (UNDP. Web)

This really takes a toll on your average Sint Maarten family. These families likely consisting of a single Mother working two jobs to support her two kids. The mother might not always be able to get home to take care of her children. You can see this reflected in the statistics. According to the UNDP 38% of all households are run by single women. Mothers in Sint Maarten have an average of 1.9 children (Van Leusden. Web) These families usually live in small wooden or stone houses.

When you go to mainstream markets you don’t see these poorer people. They shop in bodega-like shops in their neighborhoods. They cannot afford higher priced, healthier food. When they are not eating the highly processed food in these markets they are often eating an assortment of fried foods low in nutrition. One popular food on the island is the “Johnny Cake.” These are essentially small rounds of fried, processed, white, bread dough.

As well as poor nutrition the children of these families on the island have access to extremely poor education. Schools lack stationary and lesson materials. “We took notice of the exam results from the PKL/ PBL students of the Sundial School and the PBL/PKL/TKL students of Milton Peters College. Less than 50% of the students from Sundial School passed their exams and less than 50% of the students who sat their exams in Milton Peters College’s PBL department passed.” (Soualiga. Web) A lack of good education keeps people down. The poorer locals are in a system designed to keep them down. It is a system that crushes the people’s spirits and pride while repressing their culture.

Poor nutrition and low spirits can lead to reduced health and unfortunately, health care on Sint Maarten is very poor. Medical professionals in Sint Maarten often find themselves sending patients abroad due to lack of specialists. There are also no mental health institutions on the island. (On, Port. Web) “It is very important that we increase the number of specialities that we offer in St. Maarten because we are sending a lot of patients abroad for things that we can handle if we had those specialities here.” says social and Health Care Insurances SZV Deputy Director Reginald Willemsberg he named “urology, neurology, orthopaedic surgery and eye specialists as areas he was looking to improve. (New Hospital. Web)

Even if there were good access to health care, many islanders would not be able to afford it. Poverty in Sint Maarten is a huge issue for those native to the island. 22% of residents have no income at all. (2001.) (Altunişik. Web). Not only is much of the country poor but only 1% of the island’s income comes from agriculture (Index. Web). The island is incredibly dependent on tourism. 83.7% of it’s income comes from services (Field. Web). This means that the residents of the island are all mostly working for the rich people who come to visit it. This is a class structure that amounts to modern colonialism. If you do a web-search for “Sint Maarten” you are unlikely to find any information about the culture or inhabitants local to the island. Instead you will find information based around tourism and resorts. The island has become a playground for the rich while its inhabitants work as maids in their hotels, drivers for their cars, and cashiers in the markets in which locals can’t afford to shop. 85% of the work force on the island is directly or indirectly employed in the tourist industry. (Field. Web) Because the poverty line is determined by whether or not you have a job, 22% of the Netherlands Antilles population lives under the poverty line (James. Web). That might not sound too bad but it’s an average and, according to the World Bank, Sint Maarten has some of the biggest income inequality in the world (Public. Web). 80% of those who do have a job in Sint Maarten make the minimum wage of around 32 dollars a day (Today’s Opinion. Web). That is not enough to live on.

Aside from their poverty, people in Sint Maarten have very little access to local food. This is mainly

because they don't have much in the way of local agriculture. As stated earlier, only 1% of their income comes from agriculture. 90% of the food on the island comes from Florida (Benton. Web). The people on the island have pretty good access to food if they can afford it, but a large number of residents cannot afford to shop in the main markets. Typical of inner city poor, they essentially live in food deserts, where healthy foods like fresh fruits and vegetables are not in good supply. The food being consumed by locals on the island reflects poverty. To further complicate the issue, it is hard to distinguish between rural and urban areas on Sint Maarten. The island has been so urbanized that it is like one big city. There is very little food production going on anywhere on the island.

Luckily there are some people and movements making an effort to take back the island's pride, health, and culture. Our friend Ras Bushman, for example, owns his own farm. He uses the food he produces to sell fresh local foods at his vegetarian restaurant "Freedom Fighters Ital Shack." Bushman is not very happy about the amount of commercialism and tourism on the island. He has complained to us, saying that he wants to go back to a time when there was enough for everyone and the country was able to support itself with healthy local food.

Another of the few examples of urban food production that is happening is the "Lowlands Community Garden." This is a project for local agriculture. They want to produce local food and reduce dependency on imported food. They have 5,000 plants in their greenhouse and they are providing for the island. The "Lowlands Community Garden" runs off of donations from the community. They also focus on educating islanders on healthier eating habits. While this project is great, it's one of the only projects of its kind on the island (Lowlands. Web). There is also the St. Maarten Agriculture Private Investors Club, which is working to bring back local agriculture (Introducing. Web).

There are some obstacles to progress on Sint Maarten; resistance from the government is one of them. The USDA has said Sint Maarten's soil is too poor for farming and that nothing grows there. However, according to the Nature Foundation, "Agriculture remained the most important economic activity in Sint Maarten until around 1960." (D.R., MacRae. Web). Ku-J said himself in his song, "Things have changed a lot in my town, things are not the same in my town." (Ku-J. Web) The first major hotel was built on the island in 1955, "Little Bay". There is a clear correlation. Everyone became employed in tourism and commercial food started being imported onto the island. Fewer people saw the need for farming. The many resorts, casinos, and strip clubs that were built for tourists cover land that could have been used for farming. Infrastructure has been built over some of the island's salt pond. It has also been used to dump waste. "We used to be known as the land of salt /Now we're known as the land that has to beg for stuff." "Before...1961 Sint Maarten had a beautiful great salt pond /But now it's a dump and breeding ground" (Ku-J. Web). Ku-J speaks of the swarms of midgies that infest the island in recent years.

There are now so many building projects that farming in most areas is not possible. Finding a market is also a problem. Who is going to buy the food farmed on the island when so much food is being imported? Those large distributors will fight for their customers. Besides these barriers, most people on the island do not have enough money or resources to start a farm. Water is also a limited resource on the island.

There are also barriers to employment at a living wage. They are dependent upon how much employers are willing to pay their workers. Business owners want to make as much money as possible and they can make more if they pay workers a low minimum wage. Most of the jobs on the island are low paying service jobs, serving the mostly white, mostly American tourists. The minimum wage is changed yearly and based on the cost of living (Richardson. Web). It's usually around 32 dollars a day (Unable. Web).

I think the real issue lies in the job market. There is very little availability for jobs that pay higher

wages and there is almost no availability for jobs that might impart both dignity and a sense of self-determination for residents outside of service jobs. Nor is there any incentive to create them.

Limited access to antequated nutrition is also a barrier to an economy that works for all residents. The nicer markets are too expensive for many locals to afford. There is no local food available in markets. This leaves many locals with bad choices: imported, processed, and sometimes even spoiled food. The food they can afford is poor quality and low in nutrition.

Urbanization affects everyone on the island. It affects the available jobs as well as available food. Urbanization is clearly the cause of all the issues discussed above. It has had drastic effects around the island and on crime. The island has become pretty much one big city. It relies so heavily on tourism, especially American tourism, that its entire economy would collapse if that market were to be lost. "Tourism has fueled the building of hotels, malls, and other infrastructure all over the island. The post-1960 restructuring of tropical islands worldwide, from colonial export staples to tourism, has been facilitated by a confluence of forces: metropolitan affluence, multinational investment by invitation, aid-financed transport infrastructure, and the advent of low-cost jet travel." says (Penetration. Web) who also expresses concern about the damaging effects, "Such negative impacts have included deforestation, erosion and wild life extinction (Lean 1994), near-shore pollution and reef destruction (Robbins 1994; Acharya 1995), land alienation, subsistence disruption, and socio-cultural intrusions that threaten to irreversibly alter insular traditions and identity (Wheat 1995; Mansperger 1995; Lanfant, et. al 1995). The response has been increasing calls for improved monitoring, more effective comprehensive planning, and more sustainable tourism styles."

Because of these many issues, people on the island are not happy. They are turning to crime. "now we have no culture, all we do is rob our brothers and sisters" (Ku-J. Web) There are 32.4 killings per 100,000 people (Friendly. Web). You can see a correlation between the increase of these demographic issues and crime. "Islands like St. Kitts, St. Maarten/St. Martin, Antigua, and St. Lucia which had comparatively little crime in the 1960s and 1970s (de Albuquerque 1984) have seen an escalation in their serious crime rates, much of it due to drug trafficking and local drug use (deAlbuquerque, 1996a; 1996b). Drug related crime (robbery, burglary, larceny) has also spilled over into the visitor industry." (CRIME. Web).

Tourism has been growing drastically since the 60's. Agriculture was the most important activity in terms of economics until around 1960. Also the amount of tourist based infrastructure on the island is always increasing. Expedia released statistics from the first quarter of 2013 proving that Sint Maarten was the fastest-growing Caribbean destination. It had a 55.48 percent overall growth in the number of room nights over the period of a year.

Corruption has a huge effect on urbanization. Politicians respond to money and according to Silvio Matser "(the brother of Prime Minister Sarah Wescot-Williams's son in law Gary Matser) told Cees Lutgendorff, founder of a road construction company that worked in St. Maarten in 2002, that 10 percent of every project went to politicians or to their political parties." (Downside. Web) That is a huge incentive for politicians to endorse urbanization and infrastructure. All of the people I've talked to have stressed the incompetence of their local government.

Another issue is that Sint Maarten's economy is completely tied up in America's economy. The island has almost no source of income other than tourism, most of which comes from America. Sint Maarten has even considered changing its currency to dollars. This means that any economic problems in America affect the island too. America's fiscal downturn would explain why the number of stay-over visitors to the island has remained about the same since 2005 "while the number of cruise passengers declined in 2006 and remained almost unchanged in 2007" (Tromp. Web) despite the overall trend of increasing tourism.

## Recommendations:

When I heard my friend Ku J's lyrics "If you really love us so much, then do something, something, something for us" (Ku-J. Web) it got me thinking. Every year my family has visited the island of Sint Maarten. We have enjoyed its beauty and swam in its oceans. This island is not ours. This island does not belong to any of the hordes of tourists visiting the island. The truth is, the island does not even "belong" to many of its poorer natives anymore, and as a result, is among those nations with the highest levels of income inequality in the world, according to the World Bank (Public Policy.Web). Tourists and business travelers are doing nothing to help the island, in fact, they are making things worse. Travel is a huge industry. What if we could use that power to help fund agriculture and food security projects on the island? It wouldn't even take that much money. What if there were travel agents that encouraged people to contribute a percent of their travel expenses to projects that would support food security in the Netherlands Antilles? If every person who came to the island were willing to pay even a few dollars more it would make a huge difference, if it were properly utilized.

There are however some obstacles; any money given to the government will probably not go directly to those in need. Also, any money raised should not seem like charity. It should be more like a fair exchange. That approach was key to the success of fair trade coffee and other foods. It's been hugely successful because it has been able to address the consumer's role in unfair trade while actually helping to solve the problems caused by injustice. It's a small, easy, public way of making a difference. If instead of fair trade we had fair travel, people would be willing to do it in a heartbeat.

The collective effect would be anything but small if there were an option like that for travelers. What if there were travel agents that encouraged people to contribute a percent of their travel expenses to projects that would support food security in the Netherlands Antilles. Similar "fair travel fairs" could be applied to other islands and developing countries.

First, the idea would need to be promoted to consumers in the US; much of the initial funding would be spent on awareness, while simultaneously appealing to travel agents to become certified "Fair Travel Agents." They would be motivated to capture the green travel market in which people already pay to fly carbon neutral. Like the success of the fair trade movement, people just have to be made aware of the issues and that they can help. Travel agencies would have to get certified just to stay competitive.

To keep the money out of corrupt or government hands, it would have to go directly to projects such as the "Lowlands Community Garden." for local agriculture. They are already up and running on donations from the community. And this could help to scale up the project in a major way. The gardens use aquaponics, an incredibly efficient farming and fish raising method that conserves water. A process like this could really benefit Sint Maarten. It provides for local agriculture without wasting too much water, a limited resource on the island. At the same time they are able to raise and sell local fish. Aquaponics combines raising fish in tanks with water cultivation of plants "The by-products from the aquaculture are broken down by nitrogen fixing bacteria, then filtered out by the plants as nutrients, after which the cleaned water is re-circulated back to the fish." (Aquaponics. Web). Aquaponics has been successful on the island because it uses just 10% of the water needed for typical growing, making it perfect for use in the tropics. They are funded through a kickstarter as well as donations. Fair Travel money could also go to fund other small movements on the island like Ras Bushman's farm (Freedom. Web) or "Loterie Farm." (Loterie. Web) and the St Maarten Agriculture Private Investors Club (Introducing. Web). The whole thing would be overseen by an outsider certifier like Quality Certification Services in Gainesville, Florida.

To conclude, here's how the whole thing will work. The idea is that a percent of the cost of your trip

would go to projects on the island that help to keep its culture, agriculture, and food traditions alive. You would have to contribute at least 1%. The standard amount would be 2%. If people wanted to contribute more they could give as much as they wanted. The agent could also provide customers a packet of “fair travel recommended hotels.” Hotels could get in these pamphlets and certified as a “fair travel hotel” if they bought locally sourced food from the island. This would be popular with travelers once they were made aware of the issues and how their leisure fun contributes to social ills in their host country. Hotels and restaurants would be encouraged to participate in order to compete for the Fair Traveller dollars. Businesses could get higher recommendations from “fair travel agents” if they hire locals to management positions, or as chefs, or other non-service positions. This would give the people of the island more control over their destiny and help to lift their spirits and bring back their culture. Perhaps then my friend Ku-J could sing “Something’s going on in my town” for all the right reasons.

### Works Cited

- "About Sint Maarten." *UNDP in Trinidad and Tobago*. UNDP. Web. 8 Aug. 2014.
- "Age For Minimum Wage Will Drop From 21 To 18 - Caribseek News." *Caribseek News*. Caribseek News, 18 July 2014. Web. 3 Aug. 2014.
- Altunişik, A. C. "Dynamic Response of Masonry Minarets Strengthened with Fiber Reinforced Polymer (FRP) Composites." *Natural Hazards and Earth System Science* 11.7 (2011): 2011-019. *UNDP*. UNDP. Web. 4 Aug. 2014.
- Benton, Rachel. "Tremblay Report." (1973). *Fas.usda.gov*. USDA. Web. 3 Aug. 2014.
- "Crime at /St. Maarten "The Friendly Island": St. Maarten a World Leader in Murder Rate per Capita." *Crime at St. Martin/St. Maarten "The Friendly Island": St. Maarten a World Leader in Murder Rate per Capita*. 2 Oct. 2011. Web. 4 Aug. 2014.
- D.R., MacRae, and Nisbeth B.M. 2009. London: Haymarket Professional, 2008. *Nature Foundation*. The Dutch Caribbean Nature Alliance. Web. 2 Aug. 2014.
- "Dutch Empire." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation, 19 Sept. 2014. Web. 19 Sept. 2014.
- "Field Listing :: Labor Force - by Occupation." *Central Intelligence Agency*. Central Intelligence Agency. Web. 17 Aug. 2014.
- "Freedom Fighters Foundation." » *Agriculture*. Freedom Fighters Foundation. Web. 10 Aug. 2014.
- "Introducing The St Maarten Agriculture Private Investors Club." *St Maarten Argriculture*. St Maarten Agriculture Private Investors Club. Web. 2 Aug. 2014.
- James, Ralph, and Per Eklund. "SINGLE PROGRAMMING DOCUMENT FOR THE 9TH EDF OF THE NETHERLANDS ANTILLES." *EDF* (2007): 1-23. *Europa.eu*. The European Commission. Web. 4 Aug. 2014.

- Ku-J. "Ku-J - In My Town Official Video." *YouTube*. YouTube, 12 July 2010. Web. 18 Aug. 2014.
- "Loterie Farm." *Loterie Farm RSS*. Loterie Farm, 2013. Web. 17 Aug. 2014.
- "Lowlands Community Garden." *Lowlands Community Garden*. Lowlands Community Garden. Web. 29 July 2014.
- McElroy, Jerome L. "Tourism Penetration Index in Small Caribbean Island." *Saintmarys.edu*. Saint Mary's College. Web. 17 Aug. 2014.
- McElroy, Jerome. "TOURISM AND CRIME IN THE CARIBBEAN." *Saintmarys.edu*. Saint Mary's College. Web. 9 Aug. 2014.
- "New Hospital Needs Specialists." *BearingPoint*. BearingPoint, 25 July 2014. Web. 2 Aug. 2014.
- On, Port. "WHO-AIMS Report on Mental Health System in St. Maarten." *WHO-AIMS (2013). Who.int*. World Health Organization. Web. 2 Aug. 2014.
- "Public Policy and the Income Distribution." (2006). *World Bank*. World Bank. Web. 10 Aug. 2014.
- "Public Policy and the Income Distribution." (2006). *Worldbank.org*. World Bank. Web. 9 Aug. 2014.
- Richardson, R.A., and Gerard Richardson. "To the Honorable Prime Minister of Sint Maarten." (2012). *Sersxm.org*. Social Economic Council. Web.
- "Saint Martin." - *New World Encyclopedia*. New World Encyclopedia, 20 Jan. 2012. Web. 3 Aug. 2014.
- "Saint Martin vs. Sint Maarten." *Index Mundi*. Index Mundi. Web. 2 Aug. 2014.
- "Sint Maartin." *Central Intelligence Agency*. Central Intelligence Agency. Web. 4 Aug. 2014.
- "Soualiga Social Movement - Awatreness. Inclusion. Participation." *Soualiga Social Movement - Awatreness. Inclusion. Participation*. Cerulean. Web. 7 Aug. 2014.
- "St Maarten Population." *St Maarten Population*. The St. Maarten National Heritage Foundation. Web. 1 Aug. 2014.
- "St. Martin News Network." - *Most of St. Maarten's Problems Stem from Poverty --- USp*. SMNN, 22 July 2014. Web. 17 Aug. 2014.

- "Today's Opinion the Downside of Corruption." *Today*. Today, 29 Mar. 11. Web. 4 Aug. 2014.
- "Today's Opinion Unable to Make Ends Meet." *Today*. Today, 13 Mar. 11. Web. 4 Aug. 2014.
- Tromp, Emsley D. "Emsley D Tromp: Developmental Challenges in a Small Economy – the Case of St Maarten." (2008). *Bis.org*. Bank of the Netherlands Antilles. Web. 6 Aug. 2014.
- Van Leusden, Moors H. "Fertility in the Netherlands Antilles: Its History and Future Expectations. | POPLINE.org." *POPLINE.org*. K4Health, 1985. Web. 17 Aug. 2014.
- "Why Aquaponics?" *Lowlands Community Garden*. Lowlands Community Garden. Web. 3 Aug. 2014.