

Honored guests, ladies and gentlemen, bondia and bon bini!

Please indulge me, as I think it is more than fitting that, first and foremost, we start this morning with a **BIG** round of applause for the whole team of the Social-Economic Council of Curaçao and for the Social-Economic Councils of Aruba and Sint-Maarten. I am extremely grateful for your hard work and excellent collaboration to make this long-awaited symposium happen. I am already proud of the result, seeing the incredible line-up of speakers and participants and this room full of people.

This all started with a phone call from me to the Secretary General of SER Curaçao in which I openly stated; “I need your support. As one of the country’s main independent advisory and consultation bodies, I want to talk about what support you can provide the Government in thinking about and approaching the subject of migration & a migration policy for Curaçao but within the broader vision and scope of sustainable development and a population model for our country. Fast forward to today; I am extremely happy that my phone call was well-received and that the ball got to rolling to today...

The back-story of my request to SER, stemmed from concern. It is not a secret that the current social-economic and political crisis in our neighboring country Venezuela is also having a large effect on the countries of Curaçao and Aruba and to a lesser extent Sint-Maarten. Our nations have been faced the last few years with expanding migration from our large neighbor, and it has been an increasing flow of *irregular migration*. What is also not a secret, is that this has placed enormous pressure on the capacity of our governmental institutions to

manage migration and its various impacts; from the question of protection, providing adequate care, assessing and managing health and security threats, to the impact on our labor market, which is already under stress given economic outlooks.

But as is said; “**no crisis should go to waste.**” The onset of irregular migration coming from Venezuela was a direct catalyst to also think about the broader framework of migration in our country. It added fuel to my conviction that if there is ever a time to do things differently, than that time is **NOW**.

Now is the time to evaluate the fundamental questions that we have been asking ourselves for so long regarding the issue of migration. Migration presents an enormous challenge for small island states, but also a range of opportunities.

It’s time to seek the appropriate answers to these questions from a nuanced but also evidence-based approach. For example; the argument put forth by many political but also civic and private sector leaders that in order to achieve a sustainable level of growth and maintain high living standard, that we need to expand our population.

It is time we put the puzzles together to see how migration fits into our vision for our Country for the next 20-50 years and our prospects for the future.

The clear demographic trend is that our population is aging. Our social welfare system is under pressure. Our best brains do not *yet* return to the island. On the other hand, we’re in the age of technological advancement. What will be “the future of work” for Curaçao and what will that mean for the labour market? [*That’s another topic SER Curaçao is actively facilitating.*] Looking at this broader picture, what role can and will migration play in the development of our human capital?

We also know that as a small island developing country with a higher income relative to surrounding countries, that we cannot just open up our borders and let everyone in. That we need to be able to manage the influx of newcomers.

Now is the time to engage in a discussion on what migration policies and mechanisms would be adequate given our country-specific needs and circumstances. **Now** is the time to take a closer look at our society's attitudes towards migration and migrants, how this fares against the values that we espouse and what are the potential impact of these attitudes on migration policymaking?

As you can see, I do not pretend neither do I want to pretend that I have all the answers. But what I do **firmly** believe is that now is the time for all of us, the community here in Curaçao and on the other islands, to engage in this extremely important and complex discussion together, #huntu and to pave the way forward.

I am convinced that the next 2 days will be an important and extremely valuable start. That this symposium will help us to gain a better understanding of the common challenges and also the best practices in the Kingdom, the region and elsewhere. The wide range of topics that will be covered and the diversity of perspectives, voices and stories you will hear, certainly will help to identify findings and themes that can inform the way towards developing a coherent and coordinated approach to managing migration.

Lastly, once again I want to thank the Social-Economic Councils, but also the governments and specifically my fellow

Prime Ministers of Aruba and Sint-Maarten for supporting the realization of this symposium. A beautiful example of the countries in the Kingdom working together on common issues and challenges for the betterment of our nations.

Let us grow in thinking and knowledge; let us pave the way to sustainable growth of our societies; and let us remind ourselves that this conversation is not about trends and numbers it is about people and how they impact our lives.

Have an enlightening symposium and I look forward to exchanging ideas and reflections tomorrow with you all!