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Las islas útiles: Causes and Opportunities of the Venezuelan migration to the ABC islands and St Maarten.

Summary: The presentation will mention the importance of transnationalism borders in understanding the relationships between the ABC islands and Venezuela. This short presentation will deal with an assessment of causes of the Venezuelan migration due to the Venezuelan humanitarian crisis with the latest data from April 2019 (economic and social indicators, desire to migrate, plans to migrate and conditions in Zulia and Falcon). It will also state the opportunities of the qualified labor among Venezuelans arriving to the islands (based on qualitative data from 2018) and the positive impact it could have on the economy.

Venezuela and the ABC islands are geographical neighbors. For hundreds of years native Caribs and Arawaks would crisscross from the mainland to the islands in small boats. The Spanish whom initially colonized the islands called the ABC islands *las islas inútiles* (the useless islands) due to their lack of water and resources. When the Dutch took over in 1634 the islands quickly converted themselves in a flow of goods and services that have been well documented by Dutch and Venezuelan historians. These initial commercial networks soon gave way to social, cultural and economic networks. The point is that the north of Falcon and to a certain degree Maracaibo and the Zulia State have had strong relationships with Aruba, Curacao and Bonaire since the XVII century.

Mixed marriages, similar customs and religious rites, a strong Jewish community on both sides, musical and cultural syncretism and a strong sense of common territory (today defined as transnational borders) have since characterized the ABC islands and Venezuela. There is no lack of examples of intra-cultural exchanges: from the common diet we all share, to the use of Spanish in Papiamentu. In the XX century the islands were exposed to the consequences of the Venezuelan development from oil investments with far reaching consequences that today still stand. It is not uncommon to hear in the islands and in Falcon that *“when things go bad in Venezuela, things will be bad in the islands and the other way around”*.

Since 2008 things have indeed gone bad in Venezuela. A gradual decline in the Venezuelan economy led to a small but interesting population moving to the islands. Seasonal jobs, whereas Venezuelans came to work in the islands for a few months became more common. Venezuelan professionals and Venezuelans- Dutch also came more often and stayed. Ties that had been present for hundreds of years solidified and the islands became for many Venezuelans a safe haven and place to work and live.

Since 2010 the Venezuelan crisis cannot be understated or explained in a short sentence. 1 million percent of inflation in 2018 – 1.8 million percent expected this year. 90% of the population is considered poor by the UN – six years ago this percentage was 46%. People say they cannot find 9 out of every 10 medicines. The current minimum wage is 8 dollars a month. A family of four needs 725 dollars a month to cover basic needs. 71% of the population declares that their income is not enough to cover their needs. 31% of Venezuelans state that they have made plans to leave the

country this year (Consultores 21 - April 2019 – that's over 7 million persons). In Falcon and Zulia this figure rises to 37% whom state they have made plans to leave the country this year. Our studies indicate that in the region of Falcon and Zulia 64% of the population consider that their situation is worse than one year ago. 60% consider that their situation will get worse in the next six months. 75% state that their main emotion is either rage or anguish. 4 out of every 10 inhabitants in these regions already have at least one family member outside the country. Only 2 out of every 10 persons state that their family member would return if things change.

Having spoken to more than 300 Venezuelan migrants over the years in the islands some interesting conclusions can be stated in this forum:

- Most of them have been to the islands before (either as seasonal workers, permanent residents or irregular ones). At least 6 out of every 10.
- The main reasons to come to the islands in the beginning were push factors (like insecurity), but lately, since 2014, economic reasons – specifically to send money back is the most important reason to migrate. Already 81% of families in Falcon receive money regularly from the family members abroad (April 2019). 50% of the population state that the money sent from relatives abroad covers between 50- 75% of the total budget of the family.
- They rely on careful crafted evolving networks that allow them to arrive to the islands – pull factors - many have family or friends or employers willing to have them.
- Migrants do “island hopping” if they can. They work for a while in Curacao, then in Aruba or Bonaire and suddenly they appear in St. Maarten.
- If deported, especially those from Zulia and Falcon, they try to come back, usually in an irregular manner.
- One of their biggest desires is to become legal and (we could discuss this later) be able to go from the island to the mainland evidence that proves a transborder identity - like in borders between the Colombia and Venezuela.
- The blockade has not stopped them. The networks have evolved in the last months. More boats appearing in the coasts of Curacao and indirect flight routes are now taken to the three islands via Panama, Bogota, etc.

Through-out my research it is very clear that the abilities and capabilities of the Venezuelans migrants are sub-utilized in the ABC islands. More consideration should be given to analyzing how these Venezuelans and other nationalities could fit in the economy of the islands. In my research I have found dozens of Venezuelans that have technical or university degrees doing menial or informal jobs in Oranjestad, Williamstad and Kralendijk. In one small example - the local inhabitants of Bonaire, constantly complained to me the lack of doctors in the islands and how they had to go to Curacao or even to the Netherlands to be treated. To our loss, 26.000 doctors have left Venezuela in the last 14 years. There is one Venezuelan doctor in Bonaire. Any migration policy should look into allowing people that could be beneficial to the economy of the islands.

Describing the causes of coming to the islands underlines a well-known, but little researched fact. The transborder identities of the inhabitants of Venezuelans with Aruba Curacao and Bonaire foster

the need to rethink migration policy in terms of bilateral human and social capital. Just two weeks ago the Venezuelan Tourism association declared (in another scandalous and sad story for my country) that 40% of the workers of the tourism industry have migrated to other countries. Are they in the ABC islands? Without doubt, many are here. Do you need more? Probably the answer is yes. All the directors of networks and organizations of tourism in the ABC islands have always told me how import migration is to them and how skilled workers of any nationality are **key** to improve their hospitality services. My point is that migration is an opportunity for new person power, entrepreneurships and new businesses. The networks that already exist could create a very important border economy with the islands benefiting greatly from human capital in a win-win situation for my country and the islands. My greatest desire is to see a prosperous and free Venezuela, but only alongside *las islas utiles* (The useful islands) that have become Aruba, Curacao and Bonaire for us in these hard times.