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# SURINAMESE MIGRATION AND DEVELOPMENT

Vernon Domingo



Jan Ernst Matzeliger

When the Hall of Black Achievement at Bridgewater State College honored Jan Matzeliger at its January 1995 celebration, it was paying tribute to an extremely talented inventor who had arrived in the United States in 1870 and who, through his remarkable technical skills and despite enormous anti-Black racism, had succeeded in revolutionizing the entire shoe industry. His invention, in Lynn, Massachusetts, of the shoe lasting machine forever changed the shoe production process in Massachusetts and throughout the world. Matzeliger had been born in the South American country of Suriname, then a Dutch colony called Dutch Guiana. (Its original status as a British colony was changed in 1667 when the British and the Dutch, caught up in the arrogance of colonialism, exchanged territories; the British gave up Suriname in exchange for New Amsterdam, also called the island of Manhattan! Imagine the different historical trajectory if this exchange had not occurred — Dutch is not that difficult a language to learn.)

## THE UNDERDEVELOPMENT OF SURINAME

My interest in Third World development has led me to consider the situation of Suriname as a case study of the population concerns faced by many underdeveloped countries. Suriname, situated on the north coast of South America, is today a country with a heterogeneous population of about 400,000 people. There can be little doubt that the leitmotif for this country has to be migration and its impact. Suriname's history in the last 350 years has indeed been the history of the movement and the settlement of various peoples, some voluntarily and others in slavery. While the early inhabitants were Arawak and Carib AmerIndian groups who had migrated from North America, in the seventeenth century, European colonizers realized the benefits that could be gained from exploiting the resources of the area. Af-

ter the British had established a sugar plantation society about 350,000 people were brought from west Africa and forced to work as slaves on the plantations. Slavery here was particularly harsh, a fact not lost on Voltaire, the French author. In his story of *Candide*, Voltaire wrote of an encounter that Candide had with a slave in the colony of Suriname. The slave was lying on the ground, half-clothed and lacking a left leg and a right hand. Candide exclaimed: "Good heavens! What are you doing in that horrible state?" The slave replied: "When we work in the sugarmills and the grindstone catches our fingers, they cut off the hand; when we try to run away, they cut off a leg. Both of these things happened to me. This is the price paid for the sugar eaten in Europe."

So many slaves died that it was said that survival itself was seen as a form of resistance.

With the ending of slavery in 1863, the Dutch colonial authorities filled their need for cheap labor through the importation of workers from India and Indonesia, then respectively parts of the British and Dutch colonial empires. While these indentured workers were taken to Suriname on limited time contracts, many of them did not return to Asia at their end of their contractual periods and so became established as additional elements in the changing population structure. Today the key segments of the Surinamese population consists of:

- Hindustanis — the descendants of Indian indentured workers (about 37% of the population)
- Creoles — the descendants of African slaves (about 34% of the population)
- Javanese — descendants of Indonesian indentured workers (about 11% of the population)

Similar to the United States, the post-slavery period saw a great rural-to-urban migration; today the capital city of Paramaribo contains about 50% of the total population.

In the twentieth century, the focus of Suriname's economy shifted from agriculture to the mining of bauxite, the unprocessed ore used in the manufacture of aluminum. Suriname's dependence on this primary resource reached its zenith during the second world war. (In 1942 the U.S. built the Surinamese national airfield so as to assure a reliable source of bauxite needed for manufacturing warplanes). Because most of the highly profitable bauxite industry was firmly in the hands of Dutch and American companies, social conditions in Suriname were given low priority. In the colonially-deformed economy where bauxite accounted for 90% of export earnings, but only 7% of the labor force, living conditions were precarious for most. At the end of the 1960's as Suriname became more peripheral in the international economy, pauperization increased dramatically and in 1969, 53% of all housing in the capital was declared uninhabitable. While a small percentage of the population worked for multinational corporations and did well financially, the majority of workers were disgruntled and struggling to make ends meet. The resulting labor strikes were effective enough to threaten and topple successive governments and the mood was now set for change.

**INDEPENDENCE**

By the early 1970's, the movement for Surinamese independence was gaining momentum in Paramaribo and, most importantly in The Netherlands. The Dutch government, eager to prove its "internationalist" credentials was becoming increasingly embarrassed by the idea of Dutch colonies and they therefore strongly encouraged the Surinamese independence movement, despite some counter-arguments that more time was needed to prepare for this major stage of political development. In early 1975, Surinamese politicians split largely on ethnic lines in the vote for

political independence. The final parliamentary motion for independence won by only one vote with the Creole politicians favoring independence and most of the Hindustani politicians supporting retention of the status quo. When the decision was finally made to declare independence, a psychological panic set in and, amidst rumors of an expected ethnocide, thousands of Surinamers boarded KLM flights to The Netherlands. The knowledge that they would have to relinquish Dutch citizenship on Independence Day (November 25, 1975), led to a massive emigration of mostly Hindustanis, many of them with badly needed professional skills.

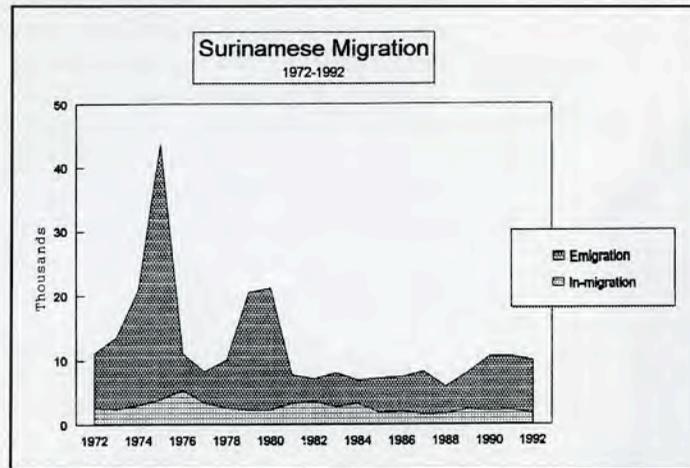


Figure 1 : Surinamese migration 1972-1992

SOURCE: SURINAME BUREAU OF STATISTICS, PARAMARIBO, 1994.

The expected ethnocide did not occur but Suriname was now faced with a great loss of human capital exactly at a time when it was badly needed for their development. As Figure 1 indicates, even after the peak of 1975, emigration has continued to be a constant factor in Surinamese economic and political life. In the decades since independence, emigration has seen spurts due to particular events of political turmoil. After simmering for many years, political tension climaxed in February 1980 when a group of Surinamese army officers staged a coup against what they perceived to be a corrupt, ethnically-based political sys-

tem. But after receiving initially favorable popular support, the military junta fell into disfavor and the slide towards authoritarianism was incessant, leading to the traumatic events of 1982 that would forever change Suriname's politics. In December 1982 the military arrested sixteen of their political opponents — these were leading academics, writers, and lawyers. They were summarily tortured and executed. Suriname has never (and maybe never will) recover from this trauma — for purposes of comparison, consider the effect if 10,000 Americans were tortured and executed by the U.S. military. The despair in Suriname, where to date (1995) no

one has even been indicted on any charge related to the killings, is even more deeply felt, where "everyone knows everyone else".

The killings and the ensuing political apprehension greatly stimulated emigration as many Surinamers fled the country in fear. A civil war in the interior of the coun-

try also led many families to flee into neighboring countries or to The Netherlands, still perceived to be the "colonial mother country". Today about one-third of all Surinamers live in The Netherlands.

Since the open elections of 1987, Suriname has seen a modicum of democracy and stability. While the country continues to be wracked by a shattered economy — resulting largely from a severely falling bauxite prices, withdrawal of Dutch aid, and internal economic mismanagement — there does finally appear to be a sense of "normalcy" and a greater willingness to rethink approaches to national development.

**THE BRAIN DRAIN**

While most national development strategies are often focused on economic variables such as Gross Domestic Product or balance of trade, an often overlooked factor has been that of human resource development. This approach involves the use of national policies to retain and train people for inclusion in the process of moving the country to higher levels of socio-economic and political development.

The so-called “brain drain” has long been a reality for many Third World countries and must be addressed if they are to achieve greater levels of economic growth. One study recently published by ECLAC (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean Region) calculated that between 1961 and 1983 about 700,000 skilled workers, professionals and other highly qualified people, had emigrated from Latin America and the Caribbean region to the highly industrialized countries of Western Europe and North America. This movement is sometimes seen as “development aid” provided by Third World countries for the more economically developed countries. Suriname has not been immune from this phenomenon with many highly skilled Surinamers having emigrated in search of a safer and more stable political climate as well as for better professional and financial rewards. Apart from the loss of skills, Suriname is also faced with a loss in gross numbers of people. While the rate of natural increase in 1992 was a respectable 1.76%, the outflow of people resulted in an actual population growth rate of only 0.12%. The resulting demographic outcome is a greater dependency ratio with now a far greater proportion of the population being under age 15 — for any developing country, this is cause for concern as is it requires even more robust growth to maintain a consistent pace of development.

The remnants of colonial core and periphery ties are still manifest in Suriname where most emigrants choose to go to The Netherlands. The social and economic orientation which Surinamers continue to have with The Netherlands is evident in a 1992 study showing that 74.8% of all Surinamers had family members living in The Netherlands. In the upper and middle classes — that is those who can afford the travel fare to Europe — this figure is at least 84%. Part of the explanation for such a unidirectional pull is the nature of Suriname-Dutch ties both during and after formal colonization. The historic links which are linguistic, cultural, economic, and familial have resulted in regular movements of people between the two countries. Since the 1960’s most of the migration towards The Netherlands has taken on the form of permanent settlement in the metropolitan country and by 1994, there were about 220,000 Surinamers living in The Netherlands; this accounts for about 35% of the total number of people of Surinamese heritage.

**THE RESEARCH PROJECT**

This research project, conducted in 1994, was concerned with analyzing Surinamese international migration and with formalizing policy proposals that would consider migration as an integral part of a development strategy. The primary assumption of the project was the belief that emigration should not be seen as a zero-sum process, but that it can and should contribute to national development. After reviewing published documents, I spent five months in Suriname, interviewing Surinamese government officials and remigrants — people who had previously settled in The Netherlands, but who had then decided to re-settle in Suriname.

As reflected in Table 1, while Surinamese migration has been strongly characterized by outmigration, there has also a movement of Surinamers back to their country of birth.

**Table 1. Subsidized remigration from The Netherlands to Suriname 1978–1990**

	<u>Family units</u>	<u>Total</u>
1978	196	513
1979	149	362
1980	225	490
1981	573	1,210
1982	904	1,790
1983	455	929
1984	242	529
1985	246	510
1986	155	320
1987	71	142
1988	64	152
1989	145	291
1990	110	218

SOURCE: MIGRATION INSTITUTE, PARAMARIBO, SURINAME, 1994

Much of this return migration has been fueled by a sense of nostalgia for the country of birth. The return movement has also been stimulated by the Dutch and the Surinamese governments anxious to receive the differently perceived political and financial benefits from such a remigration. The two governments have for many years actively encouraged remigration through a subsidy program which paid for transit and resettling. While subsidized remigration has always been a small part of the total remigration, the changing rates do reflect the political climate in both Suriname and The Netherlands.

**SURVEY RESULTS**

One vital element of this pre-study has been the interviewing of Surinamers who have remigrated, that is those who had earlier emigrated to The Netherlands but have now returned to take up permanent residence in Suriname. The goal in interviewing these remigrants has been to determine both their motivations for emigrating and returning and to ascertain their perceptions on the resettling process. Thirty respondents were interviewed at length, using a questionnaire that had both answer-specific ques-

tions as well as open-ended inquiries. The results of this sample, while limited in number, do indicate the fundamental nature of the issues of human development that Third World countries like Suriname have to face. While 40% of the respondents had originally emigrated because of the deteriorating socio-political situation in Suriname and most had stayed in The Netherlands for more than 10 years, the decision to return to Suriname was never fully abandoned. In fact, within five years of residence in The Netherlands, 52% of the sample had already made the decision to return to Suriname. Bureaucratic hurdles delayed the return of many who otherwise would have been happier back in familiar cultural and climatic surroundings of their tropical birthplace. The persistence of the remigration motive was strongly expressed by this particular interview sample which recorded an exceptionally high remigration goal — 92% had left with the eventual goal of returning to Suriname. Verbalizing of these sentiments, often for the first time, indicates that it is in close analysis and understanding of such motives that governments can best ameliorate the negative effects of the brain drain.

#### **MIGRATION AND SURINAMESE DEVELOPMENT**

In Suriname, migration policy has rarely been placed within the context of national development. One governmental discussion note of 1990 went so far as to pose it almost in opposition to development, emphasizing that remigration should not be allowed to “frustrate the national development of Suriname”. To see migration and remigration as separate from development is to miss a great deal of the benefits that can be accrued from this process. Clearly in a “passive” way, emigration may already have assisted development if we consider that

emigration can and does serve as a safety valve for societies trying to cope with unemployment, and political and social discontent. This has occurred in Suriname where governments have deliberately stimulated emigration so as to give them more time to put various programs in place.

The results of this preliminary study indicate that Suriname’s development can benefit from a significant restructuring of migration policy. The following initial conclusions can be drawn:

- 1) Policies that welcome and actively integrate remigrants are needed to maintain and retain the in-flow of skills, societal history, and capital.
- 2) A dual nationality provision is essential to develop a diaspora that is actively involved in Surinamese development.
- 3) Special attention needs to be paid to the remigration and resettlement of elderly Surinamers who wish to retire in Suriname’s tropical environment.
- 4) Investment opportunities for Non-Resident Surinamers (NRS’s) will help ensure that the international flow of capital be part of this country’s national development.
- 5) A comparative analysis indicates that Suriname has much to gain by close examination of the non-resident programs of countries such as Cape Verde, India, and Turkey.

This initial report represents the pre-study phase of the project. Within the limitations of existing time and financial constraints, the research team was able to raise particular relevant questions and to point out some directions for future study. The next phase of the project would entail drawing a wider sample of respondents for the next interview stage and also a deeper analysis of comparative programs in other countries. Notwithstanding the work yet to be done, the initial research does clearly indicate that there is an urgent need for programs and policies that relate migration closely to development.

#### **CONCLUSION**

The emigration of Jan Matzeliger has been a loss to Suriname but at the same time a great gain to industrial growth in the United States. While Matzeliger never returned to Suriname where his talents and insights had gone unrecognized by colonial overseers, his experience presents Suriname and other Third World countries with many lessons as we approach the twenty-first century. The emigration of Matzeliger need not have been the end of his contribution to Suriname. With particular policies in place, Matzeliger’s skills and industrial connections could well have been used for Suriname’s own development. This study recognizes that there may be many “Matzeligers” in the Surinamese diaspora who could contribute in various ways to the greater development of their country of birth. Rather than staying at the theoretical level, appreciation of the value of this diaspora can and should be one of the cornerstones of Surinamese development strategies. While migration often reflects the changes taking place within particular countries as well as globally, those Third World societies that were built by migration need to harness this force and tie it much closer into a larger strategy of development. Migration, emigration and remigration can and should be part of reconceptualized Third World development strategy.

*Professor Domingo wishes to recognize Professor Leo Lutchman, at the University of Suriname, and Ms. Sylvia Lutchman, a leading Surinamese poet, for their assistance with his research project.*



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