

Sociaal Economische Raad

Social Economic Council

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# RELOCATING "THE DUMP" INHABITANTS: RESETTLEMENT OR DISPLACEMENT?

## POLICY BRIEF

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### Executive Summary

This policy brief summarizes the key findings of research conducted on the Sint Maarten landfill "The dump", following the 2021 Resettlement Action Framework for the dump inhabitants. It argues against informalities and legal ambiguities, for these hinder livelihood restoration and enhancement of the dump inhabitants. In addition, this policy brief briefly describes three recommendations formulated for the Government of Sint Maarten in order to avoid impoverishment amongst the project affected inhabitants

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## INTRODUCTION

The Emergency Debris Management Project (EDMP) is one of the projects of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) for Sint Maarten, after the devastations of hurricanes Irma and Maria. The project is being managed by the National Recovery Plan Bureau (NRPB). In partnership with the Dutch Government, the Sint Maarten Government, and The World Bank, funds have been allocated for this project. The EDMP includes the development of the Sint Maarten landfill. It has been established that the landfill exposes toxic fumes to the population of Sint Maarten and its size is also no longer manageable.

According to the development plan for the landfill (the dump), the estimated 200 inhabitants residing near the landfill have to be resettled elsewhere. The landfill inhabitants do not have any legal claim to the government-owned land on which they reside. They are also not in the possession of any formal land lease agreements.

Nonetheless, the dump has been inhabited informally for over 40 years. The NRPB has hired RINA to prepare a Resettlement Action Plan (RAP) for the involuntary resettlements of the inhabitants. However, to this date, only a Resettlement Action Framework (RAF) has been published.

## RESEARCH OVERVIEW

In order to minimize potential impoverishment risks that the dump inhabitants may face because of resettlement, over the course of five months, ethnographic research was conducted in partnership with the Social Economic Council of Sint-Maarten. The research methods consisted of a number of interactions with various stakeholders involved in the resettlement process. Semi-structured interviews were held with inhabitants and a project advisor of RINA.

In addition, one focus group discussion, and few informal conversations were held with some inhabitants. Field observations and participatory observations were also made in addition, to a content analysis of several media video segments. The usage of different methods allowed different perspectives on the matter and a deeper understanding of the steps already taken in this resettlement process.



## RESEARCH FINDINGS

The findings pointed to various risks of impoverishment for the inhabitants. The inhabitants were especially worried about the long-term consequences of the relocation and were unsure about the reason for the resettlement. The inhabitants feared not being able to afford a home of the same or better value and quality than what they had on the dump. They have spent many years investing in their homes and did not believe that they could ever be compensated enough for everything they will lose. One of these being communal ties. The figure below gives a systematic overview of these risks. The risks were outlined following a modified version of Cernea's (1997) Impoverishment Risk & Reconstruction Model (IRR).



### Homelessness

- Unaffordable housing

### Landlessness

- Unaffordable land

### Community disarticulation

- Breaking of strong communal ties with neighbors

### Marginalization

- Social stigma and stereotyping: illiterate, poor and illegal migrants

### Loss of access

- Central location of the dump and resources from the landfill

### Morbidity

- Health risks from having been exposed to the fumes of the landfill

### Natural disasters

- Weak structures/homes

### Political Instability

- Uncertainty of the relocation and it's motives

After critically assessing the RAF and analyzing the steps taken thus far, the findings show that little attention is paid to the restoration of the livelihoods of these individuals during the resettlement process. The proposed compensation packages mainly focus on the short-term effects (for instance in-cash transfers are only allocated for the duration of 2 years for temporary relocation and for compensation for properties to be demolished.). The compensations amounts do not match the reconstruction costs for resilient housing and the cost of living on Sint Maarten, in general, has risen and fluctuated. The lack of price control over the housing market allows for uncertainty and risks individuals being unable to afford a home with the amounts proposed to them.

Following the above-mentioned findings, some critical points can be made of the initial drivers of the risks found during this research. The risk of this involuntary resettlement turning into an involuntary displacement is a very serious consequence that may negatively affect 200 people's lives. Such adverse consequences will thus defeat the purpose of the "development" project.

Keen attention was paid to the role of the government and politicians in the informality of the dump and its community. The property owners have resided on this piece of government land without any formal land lease agreements for over 20 years, but with permission and official governmental recognition (e.g. official registered address, naming of the street, electrical wiring, and water pipelines and meters). As argued by Roy (2009), this informality may have been created intentionally by the government as a form of control over the population and the land in particular.

The findings seem to confirm this statement: most inhabitants were appointed land and/or housing on the dump by government officials themselves, however, they were never provided with land lease agreements. Not even when requested on various occasions.

Framing the landfill issue as one of development and sustainability gives government officials grounds to argue for necessary resettlement (Otsuki, 2019). The informal occupation of the government-owned land alongside the vagueness of the legal grounds and absence of a minimum housing standard framework in Sint Maarten allows for this process to be executed without any consideration for the actual livelihood restoration and long-term consequences for the inhabitants.

In addition to these legal ambiguities and conscious informalities, stigmas, and stereotyping continue to play a role in the resettlement process. These social stigmas and stereotypes towards the dump inhabitants paint a general image of illegal, poor, and illiterate migrants who are in dire need of assistance.

More importantly, the characterization of the dump, the area in which they reside, as a slum (i.e. inadequate living environment) strengthens the government's argument for the eradication of the dump and a "development" of that area. Nonetheless, the landfill environment poses health threats to the inhabitants living near it. However, alternative arguments towards rebuilding and enhancing their livelihoods by minimizing the threats are lacking.



## CONCLUSION

Overall, the current state of events still raises many concerns, uncertainty and unrest amongst the dump inhabitants. There are many risks that should be taken into account in the resettlement policy to prevent impoverishment. The resettlement process is very politicized and this has added another layer of insecurity for the ones soon to be affected by the development plans.

In addition to these risks of impoverishment, the research findings revealed conflicting motives and interests regarding the development of the area. It also obliges looking critically at the role of the government in this process in ways to improve the wellbeing of the people.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

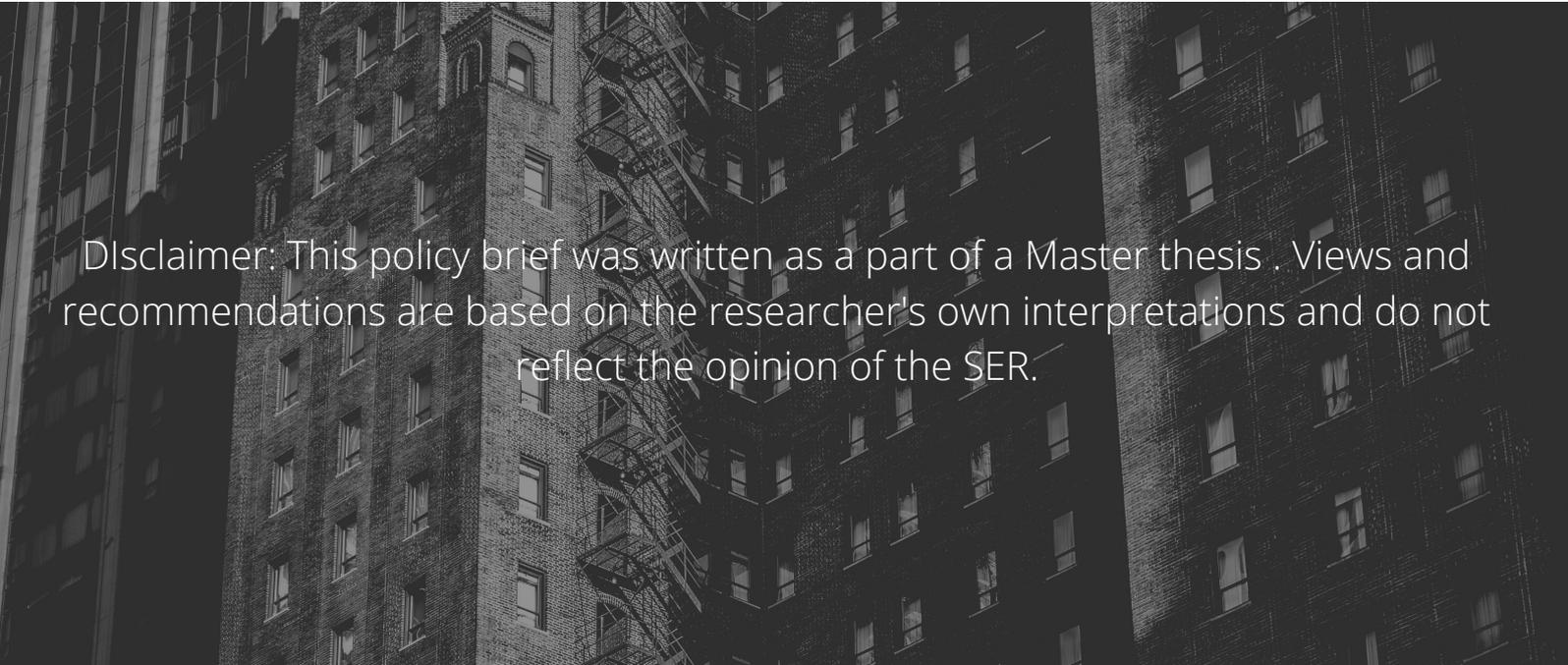


- Following the absence of an official housing standard definition in Sint Maarten, it is recommendable that the government formulates one for the island that will serve as a preventative tool for the formation of other slums and inadequate housing environments.
- Secondly, a successful strategy for dealing with the resettlement of the inhabitants may be to turn Pond Island into an official residential area, rather than maintaining the landfill in the middle of the town. This strategy includes a drastic decrease of the landfill, as suggested by the Social Economic Council waste management advice of 2017, or complete removal. This way, the neighborhood on Pond Island can be renewed. This neighborhood will then allow housing for the 200 dump inhabitants as well as other residents of the island in need of affordable housing. Allowing for livelihood restoration and improvement.
 

However, how to completely remove the landfill from that area still needs to be researched.
- Lastly, the resettlement process requires consideration for the desires of the inhabitants for an inclusive resettlement process. It also requires complete transparency to remove the unrest and mistrust amongst the inhabitants.

Cernea, M. (1997). The risks and reconstruction model for resettling displaced populations. *World development*, 25(10), 1569-1587.

Roy, A. (2009). Why India cannot plan its cities: Informality, insurgence and the idiom of urbanization, *Planning Theory*, 8(1): 76-87.

A black and white photograph of a dense urban building facade. The image shows a multi-story brick building with a prominent fire escape on the side. The windows are numerous and arranged in a grid pattern. The lighting is dramatic, with strong shadows and highlights, giving the scene a gritty, industrial feel.

Disclaimer: This policy brief was written as a part of a Master thesis . Views and recommendations are based on the researcher's own interpretations and do not reflect the opinion of the SER.