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photo: Private collection

Emigration of the Dutch and their search of the 'Good Life'

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For the first time since the 1950s the Netherlands is experiencing an emigration wave. A large-scale survey on the determinants of emigration has shown that most Dutch emigrants are in search of the good life: space, nature, peace and quiet and friendly people. Two years after having stated their intention to emigrate, 24 percent had actually left the Netherlands.

In 2007 emigration from the Netherlands exceeded immigration for the fifth year in a row, reaching a level of 123,000, or 7.5 emigrants per 1,000 inhabitants. The Dutch media have reported repeatedly about this unique phenomenon because it caught demographic forecasters by surprise. The last emigration wave occurred fifty years ago and the Netherlands is now the only western country in Europe with net emigration. The fact that people are leaving the Netherlands on such a large scale has worried the media and politicians. What puzzled them is that the Dutch case contradicts common knowledge and economic logic. Most migration flows are triggered by the prospect of improving one's economic status, but the Netherlands is one of the most prosperous countries in the world, so why leave a country that has been the destination of immigrants for decades?

To see who had left, we used national data provided by Statistics Netherlands (CBS). In order to find out *why* people had left and who had emigration plans we carried out a survey among a representative sample of the Dutch in 2005. And to gain more insight into the characteristics of the Dutch emigrant we carried out a survey among a group of potential emigrants who had visited an emigrants' fair. This type of oversampling provided a picture of the determinants of emigration intentions. Two years later, we tracked the whereabouts of the entire sample of 2005 with the help of Statistics Netherlands.

Where do Dutch emigrants go? Top ten countries of destination of Dutch-born emigrants (excluding children) and some characteristics

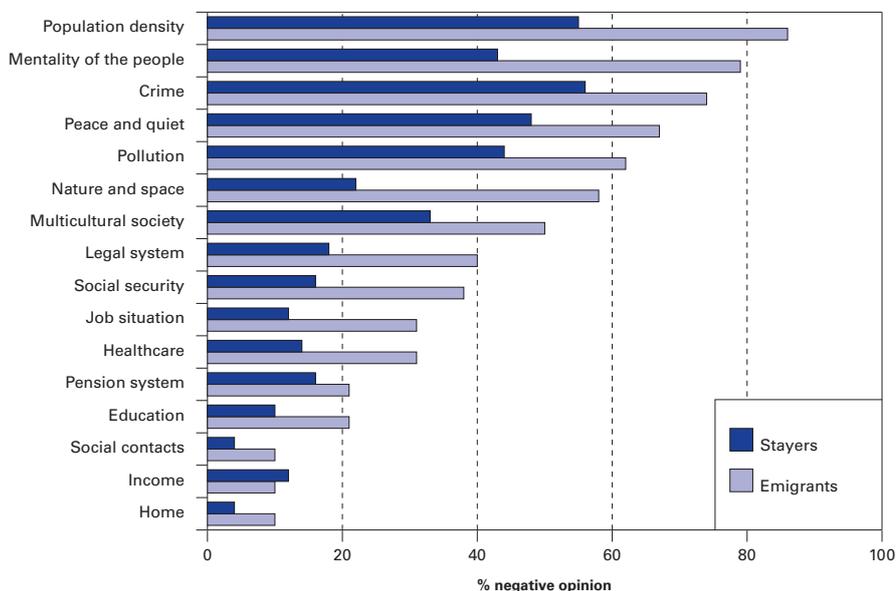
Destination	Frequency distribution	Age at time of departure	% self employed	% singles
1 Belgium	21.1	40.3	9.0	24.8
2 Germany	17.1	40.6	7.2	24.3
3 France	6.5	45.5	10.3	20.9
4 USA	6.4	35.6	3.3	29.5
5 UK	6.1	32.8	2.2	42.6
6 Spain	5.9	43.7	9.6	25.9
7 Netherlands Antilles and Aruba	5.5	35.5	4.3	26.2
8 Australia	3.3	33.9	4.8	34.3
9 Canada	2.7	38.2	17.8	20.0
10 Switzerland	2.0	36.2	3.1	33.2

Source: CBS.

Who has left?

An analysis of the national emigration figures of Dutch-born in the period 1999-2006 reveals that men are twice as likely to emigrate as women and that the step to emigrate is mostly taken by the young (younger than 30). In terms of income, the Dutch with an income in the top decile are most likely to emigrate. Most Dutch emigrants remain in Europe: 69 percent choose a European destination. It hardly comes as a surprise that most emigrants move to one of the neighbouring countries, Germany or Belgium. In these cases, however, people tend to live just across the border and continue working in the Netherlands. The main reason for opting for this form of migration may be the high housing and land prices in the Netherlands and the fact that Belgium and Germany have spacious houses that are virtually unaffordable for middle-income classes in the Netherlands. Excluding Belgium and Germany, Europe is still the destination of choice for 31 percent of Dutch emigrants. Traditional emigration countries such as the US and Canada attract 15 percent of emigrants. The table presents the top ten countries of destination for native Dutch emigrants.

Assessing the quality of the public and private domains in the Netherlands – emigrants versus stayers (percentage (highly) negative opinions)



Why leave?

The NIDI emigration survey carried out in 2005 showed that three percent of the Dutch population had more or less firm emigration plans. By following their subsequent actions we were able to see whether they achieved their intentions. The predictive value of intentions proved to be quite good: 24 percent of the people had left after two years. Considering the fact that emigration is a complex process involving bureaucratic red tape and problems such as selling one's home or business, one could even state that this percentage is quite high.

The most pertinent question with regard to the Dutch wave of emigration is, of course, why people are leaving. Examining what determines emigration intentions and subsequent action provides a clear picture. The determinants can be classified into two groups: (a) individual characteristics one would expect to be relevant if emigration were purely a matter of private gain (e.g. age, human capital, health, networks, personality traits); and (b) the provision and perceived quality of the public domain in the Netherlands. In case of public goods, such as roads, education or the environment, the welfare of each individual depends on the actions and solidarity of others and perhaps even more so in a crowded country like the Netherlands. Based on a statistical analysis, the following elements were selected to represent the public domain: (1) the Dutch welfare state and institutions that provide public goods and services (law and order, social security, education, healthcare); (2) the quality of the public space (noise pollution, space, nature, overcrowding); and (3) an evaluation of the social problems government has to deal with, such as crime, pollution and ethnic tension.

The results of our study reveal that both the private and the public domain are important for an understanding of emigration from a high-income country like the Netherlands. Without knowing how people feel about the quality of the public domain, large-scale emigration would remain a mystery. The more negative people are about the public domain, the more likely it is that they will emigrate (see Figure). Of course, Dutch people who stay in the Netherlands are also negative about aspects of the public domain, but emigrants are far more negative than those who stay behind. The biggest difference between emigrants and those who stay behind is their assessment of the quality of the public space.

One may, of course, wonder whether emigrants are much better off in their country of destination in terms of their reasons for emigrating. At the time of the survey, they were only asked about their expectations and in this respect all emigrants believed the quality of the public space would be far better in their 'promised land' and that social problems would be less serious. Note that only 17 percent believed they would earn a higher income abroad and as many as 29 percent expected their income to drop following emigration. In other words, the Dutch are even prepared to pay to leave their country.

This study suggests that the quality of the public domain is an important aspect of quality of life and those who have moved are implicitly casting a vote of no confidence in their country. By choosing the exit option and foregoing the option of voicing one's opinion, governments feel the pressure to maintain a high quality public domain. Competition is therefore no longer restricted to local governments but is increasingly becoming an affair between national governments. And this very observation may perhaps be the true sign that we are currently living in an age of globalisation.

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