



A poor beginning

A study examining poverty-related problems among young adults in the Caribbean Netherlands



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A poor beginning

Break the vicious circle of poverty and offer young people in the Caribbean Netherlands future perspective.

This report is the second in a series of three examining poverty-related problems in the Caribbean Netherlands.¹ It presents the findings of joint research conducted by the Ombudsman for Children and the National Ombudsman, focusing on children and young adults growing up in poverty. We believe that this group deserves special attention because they still have their entire future before them. Young people not only suffer the immediate effects of poverty; their situation determines their opportunities and future prospects. Many find themselves in a downwards spiral that is virtually impossible to escape. In this report, we describe the ‘vicious circle of poverty’ in which they grow up. More importantly, we demonstrate that there are indeed ways of breaking that circle. This is crucial: if we can improve the lives of today’s younger generation, there will be a knock-on effect for the generations yet to come.

As in our earlier research examining vulnerable groups in the Caribbean Netherlands, we encountered some truly harrowing cases. They include a young man of 17 with a minor cognitive disability, whom we met at his workplace late one afternoon. He had eaten nothing at all that day because he had no money for food. He had no one to care for him at home and had been left to fend for himself. We met a girl whose parents are alcohol dependent. Because there was no food at home, she had begun to steal and was now sliding ever further into delinquency. We met another girl who had started a live-in relationship with an older man, just to have a roof over her head.

Some young people seem lethargic and indolent, as if they have simply given up. Social workers told us that many see absolutely no hope for the future. Even the professionals can feel powerless to help and this inevitably strains morale. While they can sometimes make a difference at the individual level, there are broader societal issues which are just not being addressed.

The problems experienced by the young people of the Caribbean Netherlands are complex. They are to be seen in various domains of particular importance to this age group, such as education, employment and family life. Action to improve the situation of young people is therefore a matter of urgency. Firm steps must be taken sooner rather than later. Success will depend on a fully integrated approach in which appropriate support is given in all areas, thus creating real opportunity. Studies and reports are all very well, but action is the only way to break the vicious circle of poverty.

Breaking that circle is an essential step in improving the lives of young people in poverty. Only then will they enjoy any real future perspective. Parents must be able to devote more time and attention to their children. They must be able to afford better, healthier food. There must be better, more spacious housing so that all family members can enjoy a degree of privacy. If people have to worry less about money, or the lack thereof, they will suffer less stress. This will reduce the risk of domestic violence and other forms of aggression. With more money available, it becomes possible to offer young people more in the way of sport and extracurricular activities which promote their personal development. Truancy will fall, there will be fewer school drop-outs, and all young people will be able to gain the qualifications they need to secure a good job with real career prospects. To solve the problem of poverty without further delay is therefore the first step in creating a better future for the young of the Caribbean Netherlands.

¹ The three studies examining poverty in the Caribbean Netherlands are described in more detail in the [Ombudsagenda 2020](#).

Combating poverty is easier said than done. This is amply illustrated by the vast body of research conducted in the past, none of which has made any practical difference. This study therefore devotes particular attention to obstacles which stand in the way of effective poverty reduction. Some are purely economic in nature. The high cost of living on the islands is a matter of particular concern, for example. We have previously drawn attention to this situation and we have not been alone in doing so. In 2015, the report of the Spies Commission² noted that basic necessities are often prohibitively expensive. The point was raised yet again in a report by the independent consultancy Regioplan, which had been commissioned to establish a 'social minimum income' for the Caribbean Netherlands.³ The minimum wage and welfare allowances have since been increased. Measures intended to offset the high cost of living have been announced. Nevertheless, many islanders still find it very difficult to make ends meet. The corona pandemic has made life on the islands even more uncertain. While the Dutch government has implemented emergency measures and made additional funding available, travel restrictions have paralysed the tourist industry on which a significant number of islanders rely. Many will be asked to work shorter hours, with a concomitant loss of income. Some will lose their jobs altogether. The worst hit are likely to be those on 'zero hours contracts' and casual workers, a group which by definition comprises the poorer members of the community.

Not all obstacles are economic or financial in nature. We also note a conflict of cultures. Policy that is devised by and for the European Netherlands is not always appropriate to the 'way things are done' in the Caribbean Netherlands. Many islanders harbour a degree of distrust in government, fuelled by a succession of disappointments. Hopes of real change have been raised, only to be dashed. Moreover, the islanders are a proud people. They prefer to solve their own problems rather than rely on public authorities. Shame and embarrassment is another factor: people do not like to talk about poverty or other problems, either to each other or, more especially, official agencies. As a result, few approach the authorities for support, even when they are fully entitled to it. Every measure intended to reduce poverty on the islands must therefore be implemented in close consultation with local authorities, social organisations and the community itself. In the case of young people, we must work closely alongside the target group to determine what should be done and the best way of doing it.

This said, the problems of young people living in poverty are only one aspect of a much broader picture. Having conducted extensive interviews on all three islands, we note divergent, often conflicting, opinions with regard to the extent of poverty and about what those who are living in poverty can reasonably expect. The professionals who actually visit the poorest neighbourhoods and see people in their own homes inform us that their situation is indeed desperate, and that poverty is widespread. Others, including a number of government officials, state that poverty is 'really not that bad'. Some cast at least part of the blame on the poor themselves, suggesting that they have 'failed to prioritise'. The harsh truth is that those living in poverty are not being taken seriously by the very people on whom they should be able to rely. This can only increase distrust in government.

Poverty in the Caribbean Netherlands is a complex problem, and a stubborn one. It cannot be solved overnight. Nevertheless, if we are to improve the situation of young people living in poverty it is essential to take certain small but crucial steps as soon as possible. Only then can we create an escape route out of poverty and ensure that children develop well, passing into adulthood in a way that does full justice to their potential. We have been given a number of

2 Spies, J.W.E., Soons, A.H.A., Thode, G.A.E., Verhey, L.F.M. & Weekers, F.H.H. (2015). Vijf jaar verbonden: Bonaire, St. Eustatius, Saba en Europees Nederland. [Report](#) of the Commission on the Evaluation of the New Constitutional Structure of the Caribbean Netherlands. The Hague: Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Kingdom Relations (in Dutch).

3 Straatmeijer, J., De Bruijn, J. & Mack, A. (2018). [Onderzoek](#) naar een ijkpunt voor het sociaal minimum in Caribisch Nederland. Amsterdam: Regioplan.



practical suggestions by young people themselves. “Organise stimulating after-school activities.” “Everyone needs a ‘buddy’ – a listening ear.” “Stop all the jobs and work experience placements being taken by European students – provide ample employment and training opportunities for locals.”

Education and housing are important themes when considering how to improve the lives of young people living in poverty. Several professionals state that there should be more direct, face-to-face guidance, and that more should be done to spot problems at an early stage to prevent their escalation. ‘Second chance’ education projects are of particular importance, as is supervised housing for young adults over the age of 18.

Like the first report in this series, concerned with the problems of seniors in the Caribbean Netherlands, the current study is based on interviews and meetings with the islanders themselves, both young adults and professionals. Their stories expose the problems that young people encounter in their everyday lives, revealing what it is that prevents them from building a more promising future. Talking with the islanders is an essential part of all efforts to mitigate poverty and associated problems. Only the people ‘on the ground’ can tell us exactly what is needed and how it can best be provided. That something must be done – and done well – is crystal clear. It falls to us to ensure that real change happens, and happens soon. We, the Dutch government and society at large, can and must make a difference. We must take heed of what the people of the Caribbean Netherlands are telling us. We must take them seriously. Despite the ocean that separates us, we are all citizens of the same country. As compatriots, we have a duty to look after our own.

The Ombudsman for Children,
Margrite Kalverboer

The National Ombudsman,
Reinier van Zutphen

ACCOUNTABILITY

1 Why this study?

1.1 Introduction

Poverty in the Caribbean Netherlands is a matter of great concern to the National Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children. We are not alone: several other organisations, including the Netherlands Institute for Human Rights and UNICEF, have regularly called attention to the problem, emphasising that the ability to support oneself and one's family is a social and constitutional right that must be upheld.⁴ Although the Dutch government has implemented various measures intended to improve the financial position of the islands' residents and reduce the cost of living,⁵ the National Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children regard progress thus far to be inadequate. They have therefore instigated a broad research programme to examine various aspects of poverty in the Caribbean Netherlands. In this chapter, we first consider the general background to the research before zooming in on the specific focus of this report: poverty and related problems among children and young people in the Caribbean Netherlands.

1.2 Background

To ensure that poverty in the Caribbean Netherlands is given a prominent place on the political agenda, in 2019 the National Ombudsman announced a broad-based, multi-focus research programme.⁶ It comprises three part-studies, each similar in structure, designed to identify the problems faced by three groups of vulnerable citizens in the region: (1) [seniors](#) (of pensionable age), living at or below the poverty line;⁷ (2) vulnerable young adults, including those over the age of 18 with no family support, and (3) single parents. The second and third part-studies are joint projects involving both the National Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children.⁸

The current document presents the findings of the second part-study which examines poverty-related problems among young adults in the Caribbean Netherlands, defined here as those aged between 16 and 23. During visits to the region, the National Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children were able to assess the nature of the problems faced by this group. Interviews were held with both young adults and relevant professionals, from which it became clear that many young people grow up in a setting of extremely limited financial resources. A significant number are, or have been, under the supervision of youth welfare services. Upon reaching the age of 18, they no longer have access to welfare services. Those who have been living in care must suddenly learn to fend for themselves. The islands have no amenities such as Independence Training or Sheltered Housing.

4 See for example <https://www.unicef.nl/nieuws/2019-10-03-teveel-onduidelijkheid-over-welzijn-kinderen-caribisch-nederland>; <https://mensenrechten.nl/nl/nieuws/gelijke-rechten-moeten-ook-opgaan-voor-caribisch-nederland>.

5 [Letter to Parliament](#) on progress report re. establishment of a minimum social income for the Caribbean Netherlands, 27 July 2019; [Letter to Parliament](#) (follow-up) 8 July 2020.

6 National Ombudsman, Oog voor ouderen in Caribisch Nederland, September 2019. [Report 2019/045](#) (in Dutch)

7 The first part-study culminated in the publication of the report Oog voor ouderen in Caribisch Nederland in September 2019.

8 The third and final part-study, focusing on the position of single parents and their children, is expected to commence in September 2020. Publication of the resultant report is scheduled for early 2021.

During visits to the islands, the National Ombudsman noted a severe lack of development opportunities for young people. There are very few facilities or out-of-school activities, and those that do exist are prohibitively expensive for most. Anyone who has failed to complete their basic education will find it extremely difficult to find employment. Opportunities for further education are extremely limited. Anyone wishing to gain a degree or professional qualifications must leave the islands to do so. On their return, they will usually have a large student loan to pay off. Given the low earnings potential, it will be difficult or impossible to do so. This discourages some from pursuing further education at all. Those who do leave the islands to better themselves may never return.

In view of these problems, the young people of the Caribbean Netherlands have limited opportunity to escape poverty or to structure their lives in a way that will permit them to develop into fully-rounded adults. It is often during adolescence – the transition from childhood into adulthood – that poverty-related problems are felt most acutely. It is for this reason that the National Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children decided to conduct this part of the research programme as a joint project.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Sustainable Development Goals

Although primary responsibility for bringing up children rests with parents, the Dutch government has a role where support is required to ensure healthy, well-rounded development.⁹ This applies throughout the Kingdom of the Netherlands, including the Caribbean Netherlands. The government's responsibilities are derived from its ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).¹⁰ The Dutch government has also endorsed the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The CRC establishes a number of rights which are directly or indirectly relevant to children growing up in poverty. They include the right to an adequate standard of living (Art. 27), the right to benefit from social security (Art. 26), and the right to protection from violence or neglect (Art. 19). A more detailed account of the relevant rights is given in Appendix 2.

Given the broad impact of poverty on the life and development potential of all people, and young people in particular, the prevention or mitigation of poverty is a key component of the Sustainable Development Goals.¹¹ SDG 1 is headed 'No Poverty' and states that no one, anywhere in the world, should be living in extreme poverty by the year 2030, while the number living below the poverty line should be at least halved. The text goes on to state that everyone should have an equal right to economic resources and should enjoy access to basic provisions, including a social 'safety net'. Action to increase the resilience of poorer people 'affected by natural disasters or by an economic, social or ecological crisis' is also mentioned.¹² With this in mind, the current report also examines the impact of the coronavirus¹³ crisis on the people of the Caribbean Netherlands.

9 CRC Art. 6.

10 A more detailed account of relevant sections of the CRC is given in Appendix 2.

11 <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

12 <https://www.nen.nl/Normontwikkeling/SDG/1-Geen-armoede.htm> (Dutch version).

13 Novel coronavirus Covid-19.



The National Ombudsman and Ombudsman for Children are actively working to achieve SDG 1 by assuming joint responsibility for promoting efforts to eradicate poverty among children and young adults. The research programme of which this report forms part is intended to encourage central government, government agencies, NGOs and private sector organisations to devise creative solutions which will reduce and eventually eliminate poverty in the Caribbean Netherlands. A basic precondition is that the wishes and requirements of the people concerned should be taken fully into account.

1.3 Terms of reference

This study has been undertaken to help the National Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children identify the poverty-related challenges faced by young adults in the Caribbean Netherlands. What factors undermine development opportunity? What solutions or support do young adults expect from government agencies and social organisations? Are their expectations reasonable? The study aims to arrive at potential solutions which will smooth the path of young people entering adulthood and increase the likelihood of a successful and satisfying future. The suggested solutions are chiefly intended for the use of government authorities and focus on eradicating poverty, or at least mitigating its impact on young adults. The study and resultant report centre around the experiences and stories of young adults and the professionals who work with them.

1.4 Scope

This study is specifically concerned with young adults aged between 16 and 23 who are living in poverty. The National Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children realise that there will be a degree of overlap with the third part-study, which examines the situation of single parents and their children. After all, some members of the 16 to 23 age group are themselves parents. Nevertheless, there is a clear difference in focus between the two part-studies and this justifies their having separate research agendas. The third part-study will be primarily concerned with the way in which poverty adversely impacts the quality of parenting and child-rearing, while the current study focuses on how it affects the opportunities that young people enjoy in terms of securing a healthy, successful and satisfying future.

The authors are mindful that there are also differences between the three islands of the Caribbean Netherlands. On Bonaire, for example, the everyday language is Papiamentu while on Saba and St Eustatius it is English. Dutch is used chiefly in government. There are also differences in terms of the islands' administrative cultures, as previously noted in the report *Oog voor ouderen in Caribisch Nederland*.¹⁴ In this report we therefore specify the island concerned where relevant and necessary.

14 National Ombudsman, *Oog voor ouderen in Caribisch Nederland*, 10 September 2019.



No statistics on poverty

At no point during our research were we able to find any firm data relating to poverty. However, several professionals state that at least 40% to 50% of young adults are affected by poverty to some degree. The Social Affairs and Employment unit of Rijksdienst Caribisch Nederland (the organisation which represents central government on the islands) believes the figure to be significantly lower but is also unable to provide any accurate figures. The 'Youth Monitor' produced by CBS/ Statistics Netherlands puts the number of children and young adults on the islands at approximately 7,000, of whom 2,100 fall into the 16 to 23 age group. The Youth Monitor does not record how many are living in poverty. In 2019, UNICEF published a situation analysis which called for comprehensive, reliable data to be collected.¹⁵ If poverty in the Caribbean Netherlands is to be reduced, it is important that the government is aware how many children are living in households with an inadequate income. Only when the target group has been identified can effective remedial action be taken. In a response to the UNICEF report, the State Secretary of the Interior and Kingdom Relations (BZK) stated that further efforts will be made to tackle poverty in the Caribbean Netherlands and that such efforts will be based on a multidisciplinary approach in line with the UNICEF recommendations.¹⁶

1.5 Research methodology

During past visits to the Caribbean Netherlands, staff of the National Ombudsman and Ombudsman for Children have been contacted by citizens who have experienced various difficulties in their dealings with the authorities. For the purposes of this research, complaints and reports relating to matters of finance and income were identified and collated. Desk research also included relevant parliamentary papers and the existing literature. Because poverty in the Caribbean Netherlands has been subject to considerable past research, it was decided to adopt the resultant reports as a starting point upon which to base further investigations.

Because the research would have implications for various policy domains, staff of the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations (BZK), the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment (SZW), the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport (VWS), the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW) and the Ministry of Justice and Security (J&V) were informed about the form and intentions of the study prior to its commencement, and were apprised of the interim findings. The researchers also maintained close contact with the Ocan Foundation,¹⁷ Dr Jurenne Hoogiven (an independent expert on poverty reduction and social inclusion), and Ms Nina den Heyer (a member of the Public Body of Bonaire). In February 2020, the Ombudsman for Children, a member of her staff and two representatives of the National Ombudsman visited Bonaire. Further visits to Saba and St Eustatius were planned for late March but had to be cancelled due to the coronavirus crisis. Researchers were nevertheless able to use Skype to speak with representatives of various organisations, including the SZW unit of RCN, the public bodies and schools. They conducted interviews with a total of 59 professionals and 19 young adults. This report includes the personal stories of several young adults and professionals who describe their experiences and, in the case of the professionals, the difficulties they encounter in their work. Names have been omitted or changed in the interests of privacy.

15 [Letter to Parliament](#) about the findings of an analysis of children's rights in the Caribbean Netherlands, 2 October 2019.

16 Idem.

17 Stichting Ocan is a national non-profit organisation. Its activities include projects intended to improve the situation of the people of the Caribbean Netherlands.



1.6 Structure of this report

Chapter 2 considers poverty-related problems in the Caribbean Netherlands, with particular reference to the 'vicious circle' in which those living in poverty find themselves. The practical implications of this vicious circle are described in Chapter 3, which focuses on problems that young adults have experienced in the past, and Chapter 4, which considers current difficulties and how their future is likely to be impacted. Chapter 5 examines the broader social context and the factors which obstruct efforts to break the vicious circle. Chapter 6 presents the conclusion and recommendations. Background information is included in the appendices. Appendix 1 describes the administrative structure of the Caribbean Netherlands, while Appendix 2 offers a summary of recent developments likely to affect the situation of young people in the region. A list of the literature and references consulted is given in Appendix 3.

Each chapter includes direct quotes from interviews or correspondence with the respondents. These quotes are part of their personal stories and experiences, used here to illustrate the diversity of perspectives.



Dylano (38), community youth worker, Bonaire:

"I chose to help young people entirely because of my own experiences. I left home at 14 and went on to make a number of bad choices. A lot of children who lack a strong family background do the same – some are less mentally resilient than others. I want to help people to make the right choices, and I want to be a role model to my own children who are now 12 and 15. I want them to have the things I didn't.

Poverty is rife on this island. Parents have to work very hard to make ends meet and they often leave their children to their own devices. There are so many children who lack any form of parental supervision or stimulation. Their parents take no interest in their homework, never attend parents' meetings at school, and rarely show any form of emotional attachment. A child born into certain families is practically written off from the outset, such is the level of prejudice.

Some children are just left to fend for themselves. There is no structure or routine. After school, they hang around on the streets until late in the evening. There is nothing for them to do. True, there has been a string of projects but they rarely come to anything. I run a garage and youngsters pop in after school to see what I'm doing. I try to talk with them and offer them some guidance. I teach them about car maintenance so that one day perhaps they too can work in a garage. But of course there are very many young people who do not visit my garage. These boys and girls just hang around on the streets or they go to 'the Chinese'. It all begins with drink and drugs. Before long it's weapons and things go from bad to worse. There are arguments, there are fights.

In a stable family, everyone eats together around the table. There are so many young people who have to find their own dinner. From the age of 9 or 10, they must look after themselves because Mum and Dad are only interested in drink. They have to forage for food and then they spend all evening in a bar, staying until one or two o' clock in the morning. When the parents eventually catch up with these vulnerable children, physical abuse can ensue. I know of two girls who were taken into care because their mother forced them into prostitution. And sadly, that is not a unique case. The authorities do nothing. Even girls who are not forced to work as prostitutes will often take up with a 'sugar daddy', simply because they are looking for a father figure. They receive attention and a little pocket money in exchange for sex. The girls themselves see no problem in that. They think it's all perfectly normal and don't realise that the power relationship is skewed, that they are being exploited.

Outside school, there is absolutely nothing for young people to do on the island. In my opinion, this is something that must be rectified very quickly. I am convinced that children can escape the tedium and misery if only they have a helping hand. They should be given the chance to opt for something worthwhile. This is why we are now making plans. We intend to open a sports park. Not everything will be about the physical side – we shall also devote attention to mental wellbeing. It will be somewhere to go after school, where you can exercise, where you can eat and interact with mentors. We hope to establish a foundation with volunteers who are eager to help young people. They will talk with the children and adolescents, give them the attention they need and act as role models. They will stress the importance of education.

I was able to escape the misery because I got help from the right people. I now want to 'pay that forward' to today's young generation. These children have a very tough life and see absolutely no prospect of improvement. I want them to come into contact with people who believe in them so that they start believing in themselves. Once they do that, they too can escape the misery."

2 Poverty in the Caribbean Netherlands

2.1 Introduction

That poverty has negative consequences – even for children and young people – is obvious. The Dutch government has implemented various poverty reduction measures intended to ensure that young people who grow up in poverty can nevertheless play a full part in society. Since 2017, it has made additional funding of approximately €100 million per annum available to tackle childhood poverty. Of this amount, at least €1 million per annum is available to help children in the Caribbean Netherlands.¹⁸ This money will not be spent exclusively on financial measures such as family income support, but will also be used to promote social participation. Poverty affects many aspects of a young person's life. In this chapter, we offer a general overview of poverty in the Caribbean Netherlands before examining its impact on children and young adults.

2.2 Poverty reduction: measures and obstacles

Although accurate figures are not available, it is estimated that some 40% of households in the Caribbean Netherlands have an income which is inadequate to meet all needs,¹⁹ while some have difficulty in affording even the basic necessities of life. Although the minimum wage, benefits levels and child allowance have all been increased in recent years,²⁰ many people, including young, single mothers with several mouths to feed, are still finding it difficult to cope. Supplementary social provisions such as rent allowance²¹, health insurance allowance, childcare allowance and debt restructuring programmes – all standard in the European Netherlands – have yet to be introduced in the Caribbean Netherlands. Even the unemployment benefit available to citizens in the European Netherlands is unknown to the islanders, although they may qualify for a one-off severance payment (known as a 'Cessantia') if employment is unilaterally terminated by the employer.²² Persons over 18 who have no other means of support are able to apply for the basic Support Allowance ('Onderstand'), administered by the Social Affairs and Employment unit of Rijkdienst Caribisch Nederland (RCN).²³

18 Letter to parliament, 20 September 2016, ref. 2016-0000201246.

19 Among the findings of the Regioplan benchmarking study to establish a minimum social income for the Caribbean Netherlands is that "at least 43% of households on Bonaire and Saba, and 39% of households on St Eustatius, have an income that is 10% or more lower than their average monthly outgoings." The report also notes that the total cost of basic necessities for a single person living on Bonaire is \$1010 per month, while this figure rises to \$1070 on St Eustatius and \$1150 on Saba. In June 2019, the Dutch government used these figures to set the 'social minimum income' for the Caribbean Netherlands, this being a guideline indicating the minimum required to cover the basic cost of living. The amount varies slightly by island: for Bonaire it is \$ 945 per month (for a single person), rising to \$1,056 on St Eustatius and \$1,077 on Saba.

20 Letter to parliament about findings of an analysis of children's rights in the Caribbean Netherlands, 2 October 2019.

21 In September 2019, the Dutch government announced its intention of extending the rent allowance system to the Caribbean Netherlands in 2020, with the necessary funding allocated as part of that year's national budget. This will reduce housing costs for many islanders, thus increasing their disposable income. The measure is one way in which the government hopes to establish a realistic standard of living for the residents of the Caribbean Netherlands. The policy has yet to be finalised.

22 The Centraal Dialogo Bonaire, a consultation platform involving local government, employers and employee representative, has been examining the possibility of introducing social insurance arrangements similar to those provided by the European Netherlands' Werkloosheidswet (Unemployment Act; WW).

23 In 2020, the basic allowance is \$175 (per two weeks) on Bonaire, \$212 on St Eustatius and \$208 on Saba. Supplementary payments can be made depending on the applicant's personal situation, e.g. whether living alone or as a member of a household, any dependent children, and whether the applicant is unable to work due to long-term incapacity.

Eligibility is conditional on at least five years' residency on the islands. Households receive a joint allowance unless any one member of that household does not qualify. An additional payment, the Special Support allowance, is available to cover incidental expenditure such as the purchase of school supplies. Although the RCN website includes information about the Special Allowance, by no means all islanders are aware of its existence or how to claim. Like their counterparts in Europe, the residents of the Caribbean Netherlands are also entitled to child allowance.²⁴ Once again, however, not all parents are aware of this entitlement and do not apply. One social worker who was interviewed for this study said the following about this:

“Because my children and I moved to the islands later, I didn't know that I was entitled to child allowance.”

Underuse of financial support provisions is, unfortunately, still common. The National Ombudsman drew attention to this point in the report [Oog voor ouderen in Caribisch Nederland](#). Finally, we note that the Caribbean Netherlands does not have an equivalent to the higher (double) child allowance, which in the European Netherlands is paid to the parents of children requiring special care.²⁵

High cost of living

One of the most serious obstacles to reducing poverty is that the cost of living on the islands remains extremely high.²⁶ There is an extremely limited stock of affordable social housing, whereupon the majority of households are forced to rely on more expensive private rentals. In the absence of a rent allowance system, many find this type of housing prohibitively expensive.²⁷ Utilities are also expensive. Gas, electricity, water and telecoms bills can take up a disproportionately large share of the household income. On St Eustatius, this situation is compounded by a shortage of clean drinking water. In his letter of 11 May 2020 to the State Secretary of the Interior and Kingdom Relations and the Government Commissioner, the National Ombudsman stressed the seriousness of the situation and asked a number of critical [questions](#).²⁸

24 In 2020, child allowance is \$83 per month on Bonaire, \$84 on St Eustatius and \$85 on Saba.

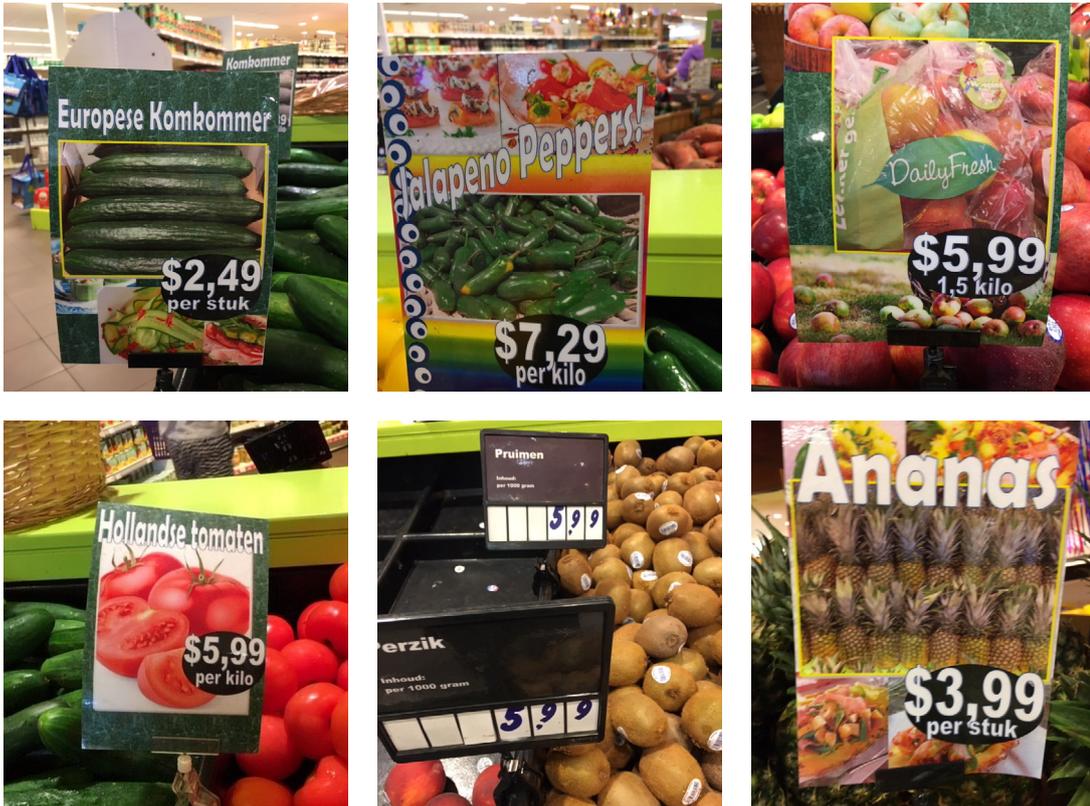
25 In a letter dated 9 October 2019, the State Secretary of the Interior and Kingdom Relations (BZK) stated that the State Secretary of Social Affairs and Employment (SWZ) is to examine whether a similar provision can be introduced in the Caribbean Netherlands. In her progress report of 8 July 2020, the State Secretary of SZW informed parliament that the investigation had been delayed by the corona crisis.

26 Straatmeijer, J., De Bruijn, J. & Mack, A. (2018). *Onderzoek naar een ijkpunt voor het sociaal minimum in Caribisch Nederland*. Amsterdam: Regioplan; Letter to parliament about progress report on establishing a social minimum income for the Caribbean Netherlands, 27 June 2019; and <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2020/04/stijging-consumentenprijzen-op-bonaire-houdt-aan> The progress report of 8 July 2020 states (here in translation): “efforts will focus on reducing the cost of living. The objective is to lower all necessary outgoings to a reasonable level.”

27 <https://rijksbegroting.nl/system/files/12/kabinetsreactie-koninkrijksrelaties.pdf>

28 In a Letter to Parliament dated 30 June 2020 the Minister of Infrastructure and Water and the Minister of BZK notified the house that a ‘Water Taskforce’ had been established on 10 June 2020. Its remit is to address problems affecting fresh water supplies on St Eustatius as a matter of urgency, and to develop solutions which will ensure continuity of supply in the longer term.

There are few public transport facilities on the islands, whereupon many residents depend on local convenience stores which charge higher prices than the larger supermarkets. Standard groceries can cost twice as much as in the European Netherlands. Fresh produce is particularly expensive; many people simply cannot afford fruit and vegetables.



Several (insecure) jobs needed to survive

In order to support themselves and their families, many islanders are forced to hold down two or more jobs. In most cases, these are not 'permanent' jobs with a formal contract, standardised salary and secondary benefits, but 'gig economy' jobs with, at best, a 'zero hours' contract. Some people rely on a succession of casual jobs: a day's labouring as and when the opportunity arises. Clearly, they have little or no income security. In a crisis, such as that caused by the coronavirus pandemic, this group is particularly vulnerable. With virtually all flights grounded, the tourism sector is at a standstill. Many islanders rely on tourism for employment and income. Although income support measures similar to those in the European Netherlands have been introduced, it is by no means certain that those affected are aware of them, or know how to apply for these (temporary) support schemes.²⁹ As we have seen, the take-up of other forms of allowance is low, perhaps due to unfamiliarity, perhaps to pride.

²⁹ Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations: Letter to parliament dated 25 March 2020 on the effects of the coronavirus pandemic on the Caribbean regions of the Kingdom.

Social minimum income

In late June 2019, the Dutch government issued guideline figures for a ‘social minimum income’ for the Caribbean Netherlands. Various parties had been calling on it to do so for some time.³⁰ The State Secretary of SZW announced several measures designed to increase incomes, reduce the cost of living, and improve both the local economy and employment opportunity.³¹ In his report *Oog voor ouderen in Caribisch Nederland*, the National Ombudsman describes these measures as a step in the right direction, but also notes misgivings with regard to the way in which they are to be implemented and the time it will take to do so. He also questions whether the measures will be enough to lift the most vulnerable members of society out of poverty.

In July 2020,³² the State Secretary of SZW informed parliament that a number of significant steps had been taken to “visibly” improve the income position of the residents of the Caribbean Netherlands and to reduce the high cost of living. The statutory minimum wage, pensions, benefits and child allowance had all been increased (for the second year in succession), and central government and the public bodies have agreed action to increase the availability of affordable social housing. In addition, the government has allocated a permanent budget, starting at €9.8 million, to increase the quality and affordability of childcare services. Ways in which to reduce utility costs will be investigated.³³

2.3 The vicious circle of poverty

Young people growing up in poverty have a hard life on the islands. This is partly a direct result of poverty itself: they do not have enough to eat and what little food they have is neither healthy nor nutritious. They live with their parents in extremely cramped accommodation. But poverty often goes hand-in-hand with other problems at home.³⁴ Due to the stress of living in poverty, some parents are unable to provide appropriate care. Their financial problems might prevent them from devoting attention to their children at all, or they may overreact to undesirable behaviour. Parents who have themselves had a difficult past may suffer from psychiatric problems. Some are unable to maintain interpersonal relationships and are therefore single parents. It can be a challenge to structure their own lives, let alone those of their children.³⁵ Poverty also has an adverse impact on children’s development opportunities. It can mean poor housing, or no housing at all. The poorest neighbourhoods have a higher level of criminality, violence and drugs abuse.³⁶

30 Oog voor ouderen in Caribisch Nederland (report 2019/045) The Hague: National Ombudsman.

31 The government confirmed the guideline figures for the social minimum income for the Caribbean Netherlands in the progress report dated 27 June 2019. The State Secretary of SZW undertook to follow developments very closely and to inform parliament of all further progress. The final progress report was submitted to parliament on 8 July 2020 (see note 32)..

32 Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment: Voortgangsrapportage ijkpunt bestaanszekerheid Caribisch Nederland 2020, 8 July 2020. The Hague: Ministry of SWZ.

33 The Dutch government has introduced a number of temporary measures in response to the coronavirus pandemic, including subsidies to reduce these costs. In her progress report, the State Secretary of SWZ stated that the measures are in line with the government’s ambition to reduce the overall cost of living.

34 Ombudsman for Children (2017). *Alle Kinderen Kansrijk. Het verbeteren van de ontwikkelingskansen van kinderen in armoede*. The Hague, and Ombudsman for Children (2019). *Ik ben meer dan mijn problemen. Een integrale aanpak voor kinderen met meerdere problemen in de thuissituatie*. The Hague.

35 Newland, L.A. (2015). Family well-being, parenting, and child well-being: Pathways to healthy adjustment, *Clinical Psychologist*, 19, 3-14; Grant, K.E., Compas, B.E., Thurm, A.E., McMahon, S.D., Gipson, P.Y., Campbell, A.J., Krohock, K. & Westerholm, R.I. (2006). Stressors and child and adolescent psychopathology: Evidence of moderating and mediating effects, *Clinical Psychology Review*, 26, 257-283; Antokolskaia, M.V., Jepessen de Boer, C.G., Ruitenbergh, G.C.A.M., Schrama, W.M., Van der Valk, I.E. & Vrolijk, P. (2019). *Naleving van contact-/omgangsafspraken na scheiding: een rechtsvergelijkend en sociaalwetenschappelijk perspectief (summary)*. The Hague: Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek en Documentatie Centrum; Baumrind, D. (1991). The influence of parenting style on adolescent competence and substance use, *The Journal of Early Adolescence*, 11 (1), 56-95.

36 Anthony, E. K., King, B. & Austin, M.J. (2011). Reducing child-poverty by promoting child well-being: Identifying best practices in a time of need, *Children and Youth Services Review*, 33, 1999-200.



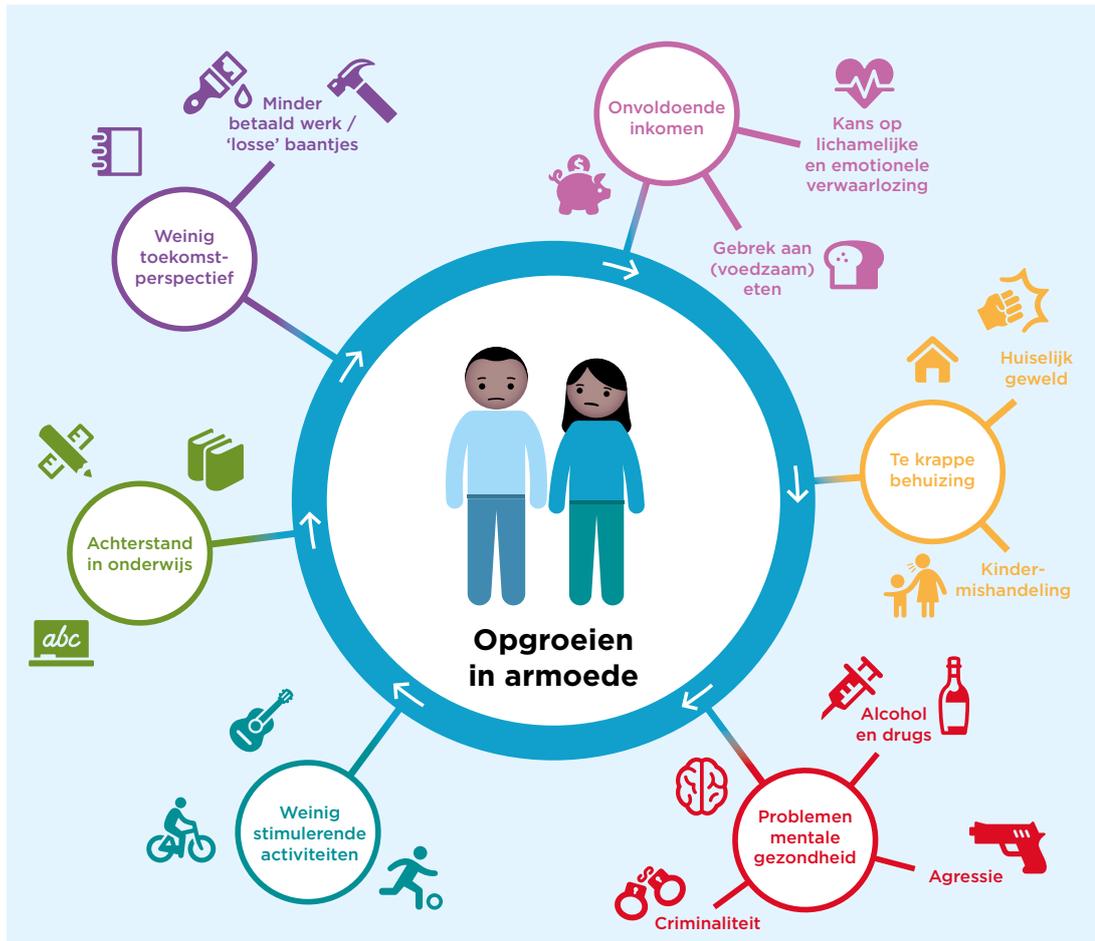
The poverty-related problems of young people are not confined to the home situation. Previous research into poverty among young people in the European Netherlands confirms that many experience social exclusion. They are, for example, less likely to take part in activities such as sport. As a result, they have less contact with others their own age, and with adults who can provide a positive role model and appropriate guidance. Shame and social stigma that surrounds poverty are significant factors.³⁷ Poverty can also mean that children start school with a developmental deficit and are unable to devote adequate attention to their studies. This increases the risk of truancy and of failing to complete their education. They drop out of school without even basic qualifications. Their prospects in adulthood are therefore poor. This group will find it more difficult to secure employment at all, or to find work that pays enough to cover the basic necessities.

In short, poverty has both direct and indirect effects on the lives and development of young people. These effects are not only short-term and immediate. They erode development opportunities to such a degree that the impact persists throughout the person's life. Children growing up in poverty are at greater risk of falling behind their peers in countless areas. As they do so, it becomes ever more difficult to catch up and it becomes almost impossible to escape poverty. When they are older and have children of their own, poverty and disadvantage will be passed down to the next generation. As one social worker said:

“You often see the problems of the mother being passed on to the children. [...] Children remain physically and/or mentally underdeveloped, and this goes from generation to generation. A lot of it has to do with poverty and neglect.”

37 Andresen, S. & Meiland, S. (2019). Being poor from children's point of view. The potential of childhood theory and qualitative methods for child poverty research: Findings from two qualitative studies of poverty in Germany, *Children and Youth Services Review*, 97, 94-99.

The infographic below illustrates the vicious circle of poverty. We see that poverty (inadequate income) has a direct impact on housing and nutrition, as well as an indirect impact on health, education and employment prospects, which in turn will affect the future income of the young people concerned.



The National Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children consider it essential for this vicious circle to be broken. Poverty is unacceptable. This applies to all young people, of course, but especially to the young people of the Caribbean Netherlands. For them, the situation is now urgent. In view of the direct and indirect consequences of poverty, it calls for considerable additional support from government agencies and other relevant organisations. Schools, for example, should devote special attention to the children concerned. Welfare organisations should help families with matters of parenting and upbringing. Healthcare organisations should monitor and encourage proper development. In the Caribbean Netherlands, however, such organisations are less well represented than in the European Netherlands. This is partly due to the limited size of the region and its population, whereupon it is difficult to arrange all necessary support for a relatively small 'client base'.

Because young people and their parents often do not speak about their difficulties and poverty, it is difficult to assess how serious the problems are. Moreover, poverty is to some extent a subjective term. In some interviews, the researchers therefore expressly asked: what is poverty? When are you poor? The problem of poverty is not fully acknowledged. Moreover, earlier research suggests that the people of the Caribbean Netherlands do not regard some problems as problems at all. They are merely 'part of life'. One example is domestic violence.³⁸

2.4 The 18th birthday: a tipping point

A significant tipping point – and perhaps a leverage point when attempting to break the vicious circle of poverty – is the age at which a child legally becomes an adult, with all the rights and responsibilities that entails. The age of majority in the Netherlands is 18. Upon reaching his 18th birthday, a young adult is largely expected to organise his own life. To do so, he must be able to build upon the foundation laid during childhood. In the European Netherlands, we sometimes refer to the '18-/18+' dilemma.³⁹ Research reveals that the foundation laid for and by children growing up in poverty is often fragile, not only with regard to the home situation but also school and the social network. In adulthood, this fragility can have adverse effects in terms of, say, employment prospects and the likelihood of finding adequate housing. It is therefore important that young people entering the first phase of adulthood can rely on support from government and private organisations. These organisations can help to strengthen the foundations and guide the young person on the path to an independent life as an adult. It is, of course, important that young people acknowledge their problems and are willing to talk about them openly.

38 Straatmeijer, J., De Bruijn, J. & Mack, A. (2018). Onderzoek naar een ijkpunt voor het sociaal minimum in Caribisch Nederland. Amsterdam: Regioplan; UNICEF (2019) Situatieanalyse kinderen en jongeren in Caribisch Nederland, The Hague: UNICEF Nederland.

39 See for example www.nji.nl/nl/Download-NJi/Handreiking-van-jeugdnaarvolwassenheid.pdf



Monica (48), social worker, Bonaire:

“Most children born here have little hope of a good life. They have virtually no prospects, simply because they were born here. Only last week I had an appointment to visit a 17-year-old girl. She already has a child of her own but is still living with her mother and several other family members. As I drove into the street, I saw two police cars parked outside the house. The girl’s mother was telling the officers that her daughter had been assaulted by her boyfriend. The girl came outside and my stomach turned. Her face was swollen and I could see the fear in her eyes. The man who had done this to her sauntered casually into view. The police officers gave him a friendly prod and said, “Hey, what you been up to, man?” The girl slumped in disappointment. Nothing was going to be done. When I tackled the police officers about this, they didn’t seem to care. “Oh, there’s always something.” This is typical of attitudes on the island.

Young men know how to intimidate girls, especially girls who are not particularly bright or living in poverty. Older men prey on unprotected, vulnerable girls. They sexually abuse them. Because youngsters really want things like telephones, they prostitute themselves. They have learnt that’s how to get what they want. There are children still at school who have to care for their younger brothers and sisters. For them, life is just one long struggle.”

A lot of problems begin with parenting, or rather the lack of it. That said, parents don’t have an easy life either. Some hold down three or four jobs just to make ends meet. There just isn’t time to provide care and support. They lead their own lives and the children are expected to fend for themselves. Girls visit boys’ homes, and vice versa, and they all go out into the garden to drink and take drugs. One thing they do get plenty of is continual shouting and abuse. And then there’s the violence, both physical and mental. Children are slapped about while being told, ‘you can never be anyone – who do you think you are?’ Before long, children start talking to each other the same way. I find that so painful – that children, young as they are – can be so hardened and so emotionally damaged.

Children in the European Netherlands are reasonably independent and want to leave home as soon as they’re old enough. But here on the islands, young adults continue to live in the parental home. One of the girls I work with lives with her mother, three sisters and a brother in a tiny two-roomed house. Her eldest sister has five children – and they all live there too. As does the brother’s girlfriend and the other sister’s two children. No wonder that things quickly flare up. Drink and drugs are definitely also to blame. There is so much domestic violence on the island. But the women say: he pays the rent, he pays for this, he pays for that. If we split up, how am I going to live? I have nowhere else to go.’

There is so much misery in these families, so much despair. But visitors to the island don’t see it because it’s all below the surface. The children on the streets look fine. They learn at a very young age that appearance matters; the exterior must be beautiful. When you see a pretty five-year-old girl, you don’t imagine that she had nothing to eat that morning... or afternoon. People don’t talk about it and children know better than to say that there is no food. ‘If you tell anyone we don’t have bread, I’ll break all your teeth!’ Children are afraid, they become very secretive. Talking about your problems with a stranger or a social worker is taboo. It can take a very long time to gain their trust.

In my view, the greatest problem is that children have no opportunities. There is so much poverty and there is also a culture of shame. If there are any jobs, they often go to Dutch youngsters. To our young people, everything just seems hopeless. And yet they have so much potential. Children here are strong and inquisitive. They like to learn. But their own government does not invest in them and that is a missed opportunity. Make the children of the Caribbean Netherlands a priority. Help them!”

3 Risks of growing up in poverty

3.1 Introduction

Poverty often begins at birth, perhaps even earlier. Many of the young adults who are now living in poverty grew up in poverty. This has had an impact on their development and is likely to have encumbered them with much social and emotional 'baggage'. The young adults with whom the researchers met state that they sometimes feel 'trapped', with no way out. Their problems seem insurmountable. This is largely because they have never had any guidance or support, whether at home, at school or in the wider community. This chapter examines the effects with which they are now living. What factors have been at play? What opportunities have they been given – or denied – in terms of making a successful transition into adulthood?

3.2 Inadequate income increases the likelihood of physical and emotional neglect

Many residents of the Caribbean Netherlands find it extremely difficult to make ends meet. The wages from just one job are usually too low to cover all necessary outgoings. This can sometimes cause very distressing situations. One girl told the researchers that she and her younger brother were taken into care because her mother could no longer pay her bills and the water supply had been disconnected. The home situation gave such cause for concern that removing the children seemed the only option. In the report *Oog voor ouderen in Caribisch Nederland*, the National Ombudsman noted that some islanders live in what can only be termed abject poverty. They have no sanitary facilities and no interior plumbing. They are regularly forced to skip meals. When they do eat, they can afford nothing more than rice or 'pap' (a basic gruel).

Growing up in poverty can cause developmental delays from a very early age. Inadequate income has consequences in terms of the quantity and quality of the food available, the child-rearing ability of parents, housing and, ultimately, children's mental health. We examine these points in further detail below.

3.2.1 Lack of nutritious food

The lack of healthy, nutritious food is a point that was raised more than once during the research. When asked, the young respondents told us that they generally eat rice, 'pap' and occasionally meat. Meals are regularly skipped to save money. Several respondents told us that few of the children in their class at school eat breakfast at home. One girl said that she knows at least twenty fellow pupils who arrive at school on an empty stomach. Residents of the Caribbean Netherlands may be eligible to receive food parcels or food vouchers. On Bonaire, 166 households receive a monthly food parcel provided by the Seventh-day Adventist Church⁴⁰ which has a care contract with the public body. Bonaire has a non-profit foundation which raises funds to pay for one hundred food parcels each month. The Voeding op School (Nutrition at School) Foundation,⁴¹ which also has a care contract with the public body, visits schools and crèches every day to distribute breakfast to some eight hundred children. School staff decide which children should receive the free breakfasts. There are also several smaller initiatives allied to a church organisation. Children attending the Jong Bonaire after-school childcare facility are served lunch there.

40 Known as the 'Adra Food Pantry' or 'Adra Food Bank'.

41 Set up by the Rotary Club of Bonaire.

On St Eustatius, food vouchers are issued to families and individuals who are unable to support themselves, for whatever reason. To qualify, applicants must be registered as available for work and must provide proof of their income and outgoings. The Community Care Center provides hot meals for people who are unable to cook for themselves due to a medical condition or disability, as well as to children under 18 whose parents qualify on these grounds. The Seventh-day Adventist Church runs a soup kitchen (although not on a regular schedule) while a local caterer sometimes distributes hot meals.

On Saba, people with a very low income can have one hot meal a day delivered to their home by Meals on Wheels.⁴² They must apply to receive this service. The public body also distributes grocery parcels to those living at or below the poverty line. This scheme, which is means tested, has recently been expanded in response to the corona crisis.

Fruit and vegetables: a scarce commodity

In recent years, central government has encouraged the local production of fruit and vegetables in order to make the islands less dependent on expensive imports. The Administrative Agreement signed between central government and Bonaire in November 2018 announces several plans to step up the production of healthy, nutritious food on the islands.⁴³ At present, fresh produce remains extremely expensive. This is a matter of concern to professionals, who note that many young people have a very poor diet. Some expressly draw attention to the risks that this entails. One doctor stated that there is a clear correlation between poor nutrition and poor concentration, and with behavioural problems such as ADHD.

“Children who do not eat well do not perform well at school. They are unable to concentrate. Just providing better food will increase young people’s opportunities.”

Some children are given money with which to buy their own meals, usually a pie from ‘the Chinese’ or some other fast food. Parents do not encourage them to eat fruit and vegetables. The prevalence of chronic conditions such as diabetes and hypertension is relatively high on the islands, which is a further cause of concern for doctors.

42 Meals on Wheels is subsidised by the public body.

43 Recent years have seen the introduction of several small-scale projects on St Eustatius and Saba. They include “Made in Statia”, launched in 2017, in which fruit and vegetables are being grown locally on St Eustatius. Since 2018, growers on Saba have been using hydroculture to produce lettuce, tomatoes, paprika and cucumbers.



3.2.2 Emotional neglect

Many parents work such long hours that they are rarely at home. They have little time for their children, who go largely unsupervised. Care may be 'delegated' to grandparents or older siblings, but there are some children who are simply left to fend for themselves. One young person had the following to say about this:

"I had only my mother to look after me. She works seven days a week and does not have much money. I was always left alone at home, even when I was very little. I would get up and walk to school on my own."

Fortunately, progress has been made in implementing childcare services. January 2019 saw the commencement of BES(t)4Kids programme, a joint initiative of central government and the public bodies. Children under twelve can now attend a crèche or after-school centre. This programme aims to strengthen care facilities throughout the Caribbean Netherlands, with a focus on creating a safe and nurturing environment for the youngest members of the community. The importance of ensuring that childcare is affordable for all parents is fully acknowledged.⁴⁴

BES(t)4Kids appears to be a resounding success. Unfortunately, however, it comes too late for the young adults who took part in this study. Most received very little support and guidance during their formative years. Several professionals told us that many young people in this group had never received any individual attention: they were just expected to 'get on with it'. They had never been read a story, never been asked about their day. Most children simply had to amuse themselves as best as they could. It is not always a question of time, however: some parents lack the necessary parenting skills, being themselves from an underprivileged background. As one professional noted:

"The child is the product of his or her upbringing. I see many problems that start at a very early age."

Most parents bring up their children just as they were brought up, which means that there is a sort of 'unconscious neglect', the professionals state. It is therefore important to invest in programmes that will improve parenting skills and help parents to develop social norms and values, suggested one respondent. Parents must learn that they are their children's 'life coaches', and they must learn to interact with their children in an open, frank manner. Several of the young adults we interviewed told us that their parents had taken little or no interest in their upbringing or education. Some complained that they were never able to talk about what was on their mind. There was no one who took the trouble to ask about their problems. If they were having difficulties at school, parents would not attend a meeting with teachers because they were too concerned with their own problems. This attitude makes it very difficult to engage parents in their children's education and progress, which increases the risk of the child dropping out of school without any qualifications.

44 The financial arrangements are expected to be finalised in 2020. See the report on correspondence relating to the establishment of a social minimum income for the Caribbean Netherlands, 20 December 2019.



Some young respondents expressly stated that they would benefit from having a 'buddy': someone who listens to them and offers guidance. Others simply wanted to develop a better relationship with their parents. As one girl put it:

"I would like children to have a better life with their parents, and I would like adults to set a good example."

'Unconscious neglect' within the family can also lead to a situation in which young people find it difficult to accept help when it is offered. They see it as 'interference'. One girl complained about the 'strange' behaviour of a teacher. Further enquiries revealed that the teacher had done nothing more than ask her whether everything was alright. He had been worried about her.

The public bodies have implemented several projects intended to raise awareness of parental responsibility and bring about behavioural change.⁴⁵ On St Eustatius, the Youth Care and Family department (JGCN) has joined forces with the island's secondary school to introduce a counselling programme for young girls and help to prepare them for the future.⁴⁶ On all three islands, an integrated neighbourhood approach based on the 'behind the front door' methodology is now in place. Life coaches proactively make contact with residents. In the first instance, they talk about poverty and debt, but the conversation can also turn to matters such as housing, parenting issues and domestic violence. Much of the work of the professionals involved appears to be crisis assistance. Social workers stress that it is not easy to bring about long-term change. As previously noted, the stress of living in poverty prevents many parents from fulfilling their parental responsibilities in an adequate manner. This is particularly true of parents who themselves had a troubled past, or where other problems such as alcoholism, drugs addiction or mental illness are at play. Such problems make it very difficult for parents to make any permanent improvement. Change demands commitment and energy, but they are devoting all their energy to basic survival.

A case study:

A girl of 19 was raised by her mother, who has severe learning difficulties. The girl states that she finds it impossible to communicate with her mother, who has never given her daughter any attention. As a result, she fell into delinquent behaviour such as joyriding, and started hanging around with older boys. She no longer lives at home but has moved in with her boyfriend. She is extremely concerned about her younger brother, who does still live with their mother. He has ADHD and therefore needs extra support and guidance. But he is not getting any help, either at home or at school.

Social workers emphasise how important it is for this group to be given additional support and guidance. Direct, face-to-face contact is essential because they do not understand everything and are not able to participate fully. Their limitations must be taken fully into consideration. The social workers further stress the importance of increased investment in the early detection of problems, as well as better cooperation between departments and organisations. Only then can incipient problems be 'nipped in the bud'.

45 See Appendix 2.

46 This involves 'girl talk' sessions for two groups: 10 and 11-year-olds and those aged 12 to 18. Eight girls are currently taking part, some of whom will act as 'ambassadors' to empower fellow pupils.



3.3 Inadequate housing

Demand outstrips supply on the islands' housing market. Rents are high. There remains a severe shortage of affordable social housing,⁴⁷ while properties in the private sector are far too expensive for most. In June 2019,⁴⁸ it was announced that the new Rental Housing Market Measures (Caribbean Netherlands) Act had been drafted and, following the production of the necessary local ordinances, would come into effect on 1 January 2020. In his letter to parliament of 5 December 2019, the State Secretary amended this to 'during the first half of 2020'. At the time of writing, the Act, which will apply to all three islands, has not yet been implemented. The Ministry of BZK and the public bodies are still working to finalise a system of rent subsidies,⁴⁹ quality rating points on which to base rental values, a liberalisation threshold, and the appointment of a Rent Control Board. The public body of Saba is in discussions with the ministry about a trial of a rental increase compensation scheme.⁵⁰ The ministry has asked the Homeownership Guarantee Fund (Waarborgfonds Eigen Woningen; WEW) to look into ways in which a mortgage guarantee scheme similar to that in place in the European Netherlands can be extended to the islands. An initial experiment on Bonaire is seen as a promising way forward.

According to the professionals, landlords prefer to rent their properties to tourists or foreign students as this offers greater security. For islanders with a low income, it is particularly difficult to find affordable accommodation. It is by no means unusual for several generations of the same family to share a house in order to reduce outgoings. Family members help each other where possible. However, there are cases in which too many people are living together in very cramped conditions, which can result in health risks and other undesirable situations.⁵¹ Social workers note that overcrowding, especially when combined with other poverty-related problems, leads to additional stress and tension for many families. Only one respondent suggested that several generations living together in the same house is part and parcel of the local culture, and that islanders have been used to doing so for as long as anyone can remember. In other words, it is sometimes a matter of choice rather than necessity.

In most cases, there is a clear connection between the problems experienced by children growing up in poverty and their home situation. One young girl complained that she and four others are forced to live in one small room, with a shared lavatory and a very small kitchen. If she has homework, she must do it sitting on her bed. Many others are in the same position, with no access to a quiet room in which they can concentrate on their studies. This has a negative effect on their school results, and hence the likelihood of staying at school long enough to gain any qualifications. One social worker noted:

"Many people are living together in very small houses. No one has their own 'space'. Children must wait until evening before they can study."

47 Approximately five hundred social housing units are planned on Bonaire, of which one hundred have now been completed. On St Eustatius, one hundred units are being renovated. A further fifty social housing units and five emergency homes (for the most urgent cases involving households with children) are under construction. On Saba, approximately 18 social housing units are planned.

48 By means of the Covenant Volkshuisvesting Bonaire, an agreement between the Ministry of BKZ and the Public Body of Bonaire, 27 June 2019.

49 See Staat van de Woningmarkt Jaarrapportage 2020 (Ministry of BZK), §1.5.

50 In her progress report of 8 July 2020, the State Secretary of SZW stated the ambition of launching the pilot in 2021.

51 National Ombudsman Oog voor ouderen in Caribisch Nederland, 10 September 2019, p. 18.

Domestic violence and child abuse

Cramped housing and the stress of living in poverty can be a fertile seedbed for domestic violence, child abuse and incest. We know that poverty does nothing to improve parenting ability – quite the reverse. The stress of living in poverty actually increases the likelihood of aggression.⁵² We also know that the victims of domestic violence rarely report it to the authorities, perhaps because they are too embarrassed to do so, perhaps because they are financially or otherwise dependent on the perpetrator, or because they fear that their children will be taken into care. As one social worker put it:

“We have to deal with invisible problems.”

Although not all cases are identified or reported to the authorities, domestic violence is commonplace on the islands, according to the professionals. They are concerned, not least because domestic violence is often regarded as ‘normal’. One social worker said:

“In the prevailing culture, striking a woman or child is not seen as particularly shocking. It has been going on in this community for a long time.”

Domestic violence is a theme that was raised many times during the course of this research. This comes as no surprise: many previous studies have noted the prevalence of domestic violence on the islands.⁵³ It is a stubborn problem which appears to be worsening,⁵⁴ although it is largely hidden from view. In recent years, the government has stepped up efforts to combat domestic violence.

On 18 November 2015, the Netherlands ratified the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, better known as the ‘Istanbul Convention’. Its provisions came into effect in the European Netherlands on 1 March 2016.⁵⁵ During the ratification process, it was decided that the Convention would not yet apply to the Caribbean Netherlands since there was still too much to be done to ensure that its obligations can be met in full.⁵⁶ As an interim measure, the government drafted an Administrative Agreement ‘on measures to tackle domestic violence and child abuse in the Caribbean Netherlands’. The focus of the agreement is on prevention, knowledge development for professionals and better support services. It foresees a ‘chain approach’ (to include the creation of safe refuges for the victims of domestic violence and child abuse), a low-threshold reporting system and an effective legislative framework. The Administrative Agreement and the measures it introduces will eventually lead to the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in the Caribbean Netherlands.

52 Karin Kloosterboer, *Vertrouwen, aan het werk met risicjongeren van de Cariben*, 2018.

53 UNICEF *Situatieanalyse kinderen en jongeren in Caribisch Nederland*, 2019; Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) *Vijf jaar Caribisch Nederland een zorgelijk beeld op sociaaleconomisch gebied*, 2015; Law Enforcement Council, *Preventie van jeugdcriminaliteit in Bonaire, St. Eustatius en Saba*, 2016.

54 See for example the Council for Law Enforcement report *Bijdragen van de justitiële partijen aan de aanpak van huiselijk geweld in Caribisch Nederland*, March 2020.

55 Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, 11 May 2011.

56 Report of the Government of the Netherlands on the implementation of the Istanbul Convention, September 2018.

In 2017, the State Secretary of Health, Welfare and Sport entered into an Administrative Agreement with the public bodies, whereby the islands will adopt various measures intended to prevent domestic violence.⁵⁷ Among the first projects was the public information campaign *Het stopt niet vanzelf* ('It won't stop by itself'), launched in November 2018. This and similar activities are intended to raise awareness of the damaging effects of domestic violence, and to encourage citizens to report suspected cases.⁵⁸ Agreements have been made with various chain partners, with an emphasis on mediation. When victims are to be moved to a place of safety, it is sometimes necessary to decide whether this will be on the same island or elsewhere in the region. Contact has therefore been established with Safe Haven, a women's refuge on St Maarten. Under a reciprocal agreement, victims from other islands in the Caribbean can be referred to the refuge on Bonaire, where a total of ten places are available.⁵⁹

A women's refuge opened on Bonaire in October 2019 and a number of 'safe houses' are available for short-term stays. Not all professionals are equally impressed by the initiatives. As one social worker told us:

"They decided to set up a drop-in centre in the middle of Kralendijk. Everyone knows what it is. If you see a woman go in, you immediately know that she is being abused. Men stand outside waiting for their partners, who they force to come home with them. Government officials don't have a clue. They have never experienced domestic violence so they think this is going to help."

On St Eustatius, two apartments are available as emergency accommodation for the victims of domestic abuse. On Saba, hotel rooms and apartments are rented as needed.⁶⁰ The Ministry of VWS is shortly to appoint a programme manager who will assess costs and numbers before setting up a pilot project to determine precisely what is needed to combat domestic violence on the islands. A fully integrated approach is foreseen and there is to be another public information campaign to raise awareness.⁶¹ Further to the corona measures which limit face-to-face contact, St Eustatius and the Aruba Child Helpline have recently opened an email helpline. The introduction of the helpline, a joint initiative of the public body and UNICEF,⁶² was brought forward due to the corona crisis. Children and young adults (under 25) are able to discuss their problems with someone who does not know the island but is nevertheless familiar with Caribbean culture.

57 Bestuursakkoord Aanpak Huiselijk Geweld en Kindermishandeling Caribisch Nederland 2017-2020.

58 Based on the Kas Sigur Signs of Safety training method.

59 Letter to parliament on progress of measures to prevent domestic violence and child abuse in the Caribbean Netherlands (in Dutch).

60 Letter to parliament regarding the report of correspondence relating to the progress report on the establishment of a social minimum income for the Caribbean Netherlands and related matters, 19 December 2019.

61 "Veiligheidsbeeld BES 2018", report of a study examining practical measures to reduce crime and increase safety on Bonaire, St Eustatius and Saba, January 2019 en <https://www.rijksdienstcn.com/actueel/nieuws/2019/juli/15/aandacht-voor-aanpak-huiselijk-geweld>.

62 Ministerial Regulation issued by the State Secretary of Economic Affairs and Climate, 20 November 2019, no. WJZ/19302615, on the amendment of the BES Islands Telephone Number Allocation Regulation and unit charge schedules for premium and information services.



Despite the attention being devoted to domestic violence, some professionals believe that victims are still inadequately protected against their aggressors. One social worker told us that it is not unusual for a woman, having finally plucked up the courage to report the abuse, to change her mind at the last minute because the police officer on duty is a friend of her partner, perhaps even a relative. Because accommodation is so difficult to find, victim and abuser will often continue to live together. As one respondent told us, women frequently accept domestic violence because they have nowhere else to go. In the words of a professional:

“We must not make people even more dependent on others, especially when domestic violence is involved. These women either stay with the man or return very quickly, solely for financial reasons. What are we trying to encourage? Dependence or self-reliance?”

3.4 Mental health

The difficult home situation in which many poor children grow up also affects their ability to acquire the necessary life and social skills. It can erode their self-confidence and their trust in others. Young people do not always know what they can and should expect from others. They can be insecure or downright suspicious. Some do not learn about boundaries: they have no appropriate boundaries of their own and fail to acknowledge other people's. This increases the likelihood of their 'going off the rails'. They may show aggressive behaviour, seek refuge in drugs or alcohol, or turn to crime. Several young adults told us that they had deliberately 'done something very wrong' in order to be taken out of their difficult home situation and into care. Unfortunately, the islands have few facilities for this group. There is no Independence Training or Sheltered Housing for young adults once they have reached the age of 18. Clearly, such facilities are sorely needed. One social worker remarked:

“Children who are taken away from the parental home are left to fend for themselves once they turn 18. Often, their only option is to go back to the very same problematic environment. They feel like 'cast offs'.”

In 2013, Bonaire launched a supported housing project whereby eighteen young adults aged between 17 to 27 were able to live and learn together in a protected environment.⁶³ According to social workers, the project was a success. Nevertheless, it was discontinued in mid-2018. The researchers were told that this was due to a lack of qualified staff and because central government and the public body had failed to reach clear funding agreements.

63 Sentro S.H.A.R.K, was part of Jong Bonaire.



Aggressive behaviour

Children who grow up in a problematic home environment often lack the motivation to complete their education. An unsafe, stressful situation places them under extreme pressure whereupon they may develop behavioural problems, including aggression and violence. Children often mimic their parents. They test boundaries, whether at school or on the street. In a 2018 report on ways to reduce criminality and increase safety on the islands, the Public Prosecution Service notes that there is increasing evidence that poverty and stress do indeed adversely influence children's neurological development. The report refers to a scientific study which concludes that poverty and stress affect those parts of the brain responsible for the "higher order cognitive functions [needed] for success in school and in life" (Blair & Raver, 2016). Behavioural problems and violence were topics raised with some regularity during our interviews with both professionals and the young people themselves. Several respondents mentioned bullying, aggression, possession of weapons, drugs dealing, and inappropriate or disinhibited sexual behaviour. Social workers told us that violence between contemporaries can begin at a very early age, sometimes in the primary school. The young adults confirmed this, adding that things can escalate very quickly when drugs are involved. One young man told us that he is afraid to go outside because he is systematically molested and terrorised by a gang of local youths. These youths smoke marijuana and are known to be extremely violent, but no one has taken any action. The respondent feels very unsafe. He wishes to leave the island as soon as possible to pursue his education elsewhere.

Alcohol and drugs

The professionals are also concerned about the abuse of alcohol and drugs among young people. They report that problems often begin at a very early age. The consumption of alcohol, particularly beer, is extremely high on the island. One social worker noted:

"Beer is not even regarded as alcohol. People go to the supermarket and buy beer during their morning break."

The effects of alcohol and drugs abuse vary by gender. There are many stories of young women who offer sex in exchange for drugs or money. Males are likely to become aggressive, thus creating a general feeling of menace and threat. Girls are at risk of being misused by these young men. As a result, some retreat into themselves and develop anxiety or depression. There have been instances of self-harm.

Several of the young adults told us that they know contemporaries who drink alcohol or use drugs, either at school or in the neighbourhood. Upon further questioning, we learned that dealing drugs on school premises is not common, but it does take place on the street and in the neighbourhood ("behind the church"). One girl told us that drugs dealing is rife in her neighbourhood ("a ghetto"), but it doesn't bother her. Several professionals suggest that drugs use among young people is not a particularly serious problem; it has been exaggerated and the various stories all relate to the same few cases.

Descent into criminality

Finally, some professionals are extremely concerned about the number of young people from problematic home environments who become involved in crime. Some state that poverty 'forces young people into crime', while others take a more nuanced view, suggesting that these young people have simply made bad choices and must re-examine their priorities. Almost all professionals agree that this group requires extra support in various domains to ensure that they do not slide yet further into delinquency.



A case study:

A social worker told the researchers about a girl who was living in an overcrowded house with her mother and older brothers, all of whom were addicted to drugs. Due to this problematic home environment, the girl dropped out of secondary school before completing her studies. She then got into trouble with the law. The girl is now in 'second chance' education. However, because she has a 'label', it will be very difficult to find a work experience placement. According to the social worker, her best hope is to leave the island and build a new life elsewhere. She receives absolutely no support from her family. Fortunately, the Youth Care and Family department is willing to look into the possibilities.

In 2014, the Public Prosecution Service extended the 'HALT' approach to the Caribbean Netherlands. (HALT is a contraction of het alternatief, and provides an alternative method of dealing with juvenile offenders, under which they are not immediately burdened with a criminal record.) It was introduced to the islands as an emergency measure to deal with the high number of minor offences such as truancy and petty theft. The court generally imposes a juvenile probation order. Under HALT, this is treated as a conditional discharge and the PPS allows the offender to 'wipe the slate clean' by completing unpaid work or attending training sessions. Although various action plans to deal with juvenile offenders have been produced in recent years, the professionals report that organisations lack the resources to implement those plans. Moreover, not all young 'criminals' are known to the authorities. There are many undocumented and unregistered juveniles, particularly on Bonaire, who have largely escaped scrutiny thus far. This creates a new problem which organisations are ill-equipped to address.

The islands' probation service is Stichting Reclassering Caribisch Nederland (SRCN). It does not devote specific attention to young people aged 18 to 23. No figures are available but SRCN estimates that approximately 15% of its caseload involves this group.⁶⁴ The organisation states that the likelihood of re-offending among young people living in poverty is high, since they see little alternative. One social worker commented:

"The young people who have grown up in poverty learned about survival at a very early age. They are used to drinking alcohol and taking drugs. It is difficult for them to find gainful employment because everyone knows their reputation. It will therefore be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to break the vicious circle."

The PPS reports that a chain cooperation approach works well at the individual case level but systemic improvements are needed. Very recently, on 1 August 2020, a new system of juvenile criminal justice was introduced in the Caribbean Netherlands. It draws heavily on educational science with a view to promoting positive development. Most notably, the new system brings back the HALT approach, introduces juvenile detention and ensures better coordination of community service and the supervision of special conditions by the probation service.

⁶⁴ Probation is concerned with preventing re-offending and encouraging behavioural change on the part of offenders, i.e. rehabilitation. SRCN provides advice, produces (pre-trial) reports, monitors offenders, provides training and supervises the completion of community work orders.



Miss Jackson (46), teacher, St Eustatius:

"I first met Michael three years ago. He was a nice, cheerful, athletic and very polite young man who tried hard at school and achieved good results. But then he changed practically overnight. The friendly, cooperative boy became aggressive, rebellious and completely unmanageable. He began to play truant. If he did bother attending school, he just could not concentrate. We later found out that, from the age of 13, Michael had been sexually abused by his uncle. The uncle also threatened him so he was afraid to tell anyone what was happening. Eventually, he confided in his grandmother who did the right thing and contacted the authorities.

The uncle was arrested, tried, and sentenced to two years' imprisonment. Meanwhile, Michael saw a psychologist who strongly advised that he should move to the European Netherlands or one of the other islands. In Europe, he would be able to get the professional help he so sorely needed. The psychologist even made arrangements for Michael to stay with one of his former teachers in the Netherlands. Everything was set. But as so often happens on these islands, the plans were thwarted by bureaucracy.

The uncle has since been released and Michael inevitably runs into him from time to time. This is, after all, a very small island. Everyone knows what happened, and everyone has their own opinions and biases. Michael is now living with his mother and things are not going well. His grandmother, with whom he used to live, did her best but she is old and tired. She has more or less given up on him, while Michael receives absolutely no support from his mother. My heart breaks every time I see him. I remember the boy he used to be before all this happened. It is inexcusable that he is not receiving the help he needs. We can see him sliding ever further into the mire. Michael is 'lost', wanders the streets and is constantly getting into trouble. He is so disappointed that he is still here on the island and must still face his uncle. He is mentally scarred. He needs help but a psychologist visits the island only once a month.

I still don't know why nothing has been done for Michael. In my opinion, one of the biggest problems on the islands is the bureaucracy. This is a prime example of a young man who could have been 'saved' if only he had been given prompt help. Even his grandmother tired of attending so many sessions with youth welfare services without anything being done. She had to turn up time after time. On each occasion she had to explain the situation all over again. The last meeting about Michael's case was in October last year. "Something must be done," they said. "We're going to work on it," they promised. Almost nine months later... nothing. Michael's situation continues to worsen by the day. My heart bleeds for this boy. I am so frustrated by the way things are done here. After all, Michael is certainly not the only one to have experienced abuse and neglect.

If you ask me to name another youngster who has had a difficult life, I immediately think of Kimberley. She is seventeen and both her parents are alcohol dependent. She is currently living with her father. Life with her mother was almost intolerable as she had to share the house with all her brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts and grandparents. She had no room of her own. Everyone around her was either drinking alcohol, smoking weed or both. It was during this period of her life that she began stealing. She had to - she was hungry and there was no money for food. Her father, with whom she is now living, does provide something to eat but that's about all. Her parents are not there for her, they give her no encouragement. The stealing which began because she was hungry continues. It is something she just has to do, Kimberley herself says. She feels so alone. She is on a special education course here at school. Usually, the next step would be a work experience placement but she is at a distinct disadvantage because she is the child of two alcoholics.



It will be very difficult for her to find an employer willing to give her a chance. She is 'labelled' simply because of her family background. Our foundation will do everything possible to help her because she has no chance of a decent life without support and guidance.

Poverty on the islands is a big problem. Of course, not everyone is poor. But even the children of families with a little more spending power can experience serious issues. Abuse, both physical and sexual, is commonplace, not always at the hands of the parents but other relatives living in the house, as in Michael's case. The shame if this became public knowledge is so great that people go to enormous lengths to keep it secret. If you ask me how many children and young adults have a very hard life here on the islands, I would say around sixty per cent. Life is indeed difficult for them, and parents give them no support.

The best jobs and work experience placements go to Europeans. No wonder that so many local young people seem to have lost all hope.

What would I do if I had millions of dollars at my disposal? I would create an organisation staffed by all the various specialists needed to counsel, guide, advise, encourage and support our young people, helping them to become good citizens. I would ensure that everyone has a good education and guaranteed employment. I would help them to regain their self-confidence, so that they know they are good enough to deserve love and affection. I would do away with the 'labels' and make sure that everyone has a place where they feel safe and secure."

4 Little future perspective

4.1 Introduction

Chapter 3 was concerned with the past: the significant factors in the background of young people who grow up in poverty. This chapter examines the future. How do young people view their own future? How can they prepare? What support do they feel they need but are not getting? Social workers report that young people growing up in poverty become bored and start 'hustling' for money, which may involve prostitution, drugs dealing or countless other forms of illicit activity. This is a way of generating income in the short term, but in the longer term it achieves little or nothing. It certainly does not help young adults improve their situation or prospects. The vicious circle of poverty that began at birth is now complete. Boredom is largely due to the lack of stimulating, positive activities on the islands. There are also too few opportunities for education and training, and there is far too little employment opportunity. In short, young adults see little prospect of a good future.

4.2 Few stimulating activities

If young people are to escape poverty, it is essential that they are able to develop in the broadest sense of the word. Development is not confined to the school or the home, but also takes place during leisure activities: sports, cultural pursuits, or simply spending time outdoors doing fun things with friends. Virtually all respondents, professionals and young adults alike, state that the islands offer no opportunity for children and young adults to spend their leisure time in a positive, stimulating way. This certainly applies to those living in poverty. Apart from football, basketball and occasionally volleyball, there are no organised sports activities. In the European Netherlands, the Youth Foundation for Sport and Culture (Jeugdfonds Sport & Cultuur) is a fundraising organisation which ensures that all children, regardless of financial status, have an opportunity to participate in worthwhile leisure activities. It has no direct counterpart in the Caribbean Netherlands. As one social worker remarked:

"A lot of kids play basketball at weekends but there is very little else in the way of sports or other activities."

There are, however, several organisations which provide after-school childcare and organise a range of activities. They include Jong Bonaire, which is able to accept some 125 youngsters, each paying \$50 per annum. Having finished their homework, children can take part in various activities, which include sports, music, photography and lessons in personal care. A healthy and affordable lunch is also available, one girl told us. She greatly enjoys going to Jong Bonaire, not least because she can get help with her homework. However, another girl told us that her mother will not allow her to attend Jong Bonaire because the organisation had something of a bad reputation in the past. There are of course families who simply cannot afford the subscription.⁶⁵

65 The Ministry of VWS states that the subscription charge will be waived for those who cannot afford to pay.



Community centres

The professionals hope that the government will increase investment in ‘social activation’ programmes and in facilities such as community centres, which offer an attractive setting for leisure activities which can be enjoyed by people of all ages. Respondents have noticed that the importance of community centres is now more widely acknowledged and that things seem to be moving, albeit gradually, in the right direction. It is important that the range of activities meets the wishes and requirements of the target group (i.e. is demand-led rather than supply-led). One social worker informed the researchers that several community centres on the islands have recently been renovated, as provided by the Administrative Agreement. However, they remain seriously underutilised and very few appealing activities have been organised so far. He described the situation as follows:

“Most community centres have been renovated but more activities must be organised and staffing must be improved. It is important to determine what the community itself wants.”

Another professional told us that there are several motivated groups and individuals who wish to organise activities for the target group. However, they face “a wall of bureaucracy” which make it very difficult to get initiatives off the ground. She noted:

“If you want to do something good for the island, you come up against a wall of bureaucracy. You have to know the right people.”

The lack of recreational activities means that young people have little opportunity for personal development. They are unable to build appropriate social networks or to learn new skills. Most respondents complain that the absence of activities leads to boredom and encourages disruptive behaviour. As a result, young people are more likely to come into contact with the police. This will further impair their chances of finding gainful employment, not least because the labour market is already extremely competitive. Other areas of life can also suffer. As one social worker put it:

“The lack of public transport encourages youngsters to joyride. They drive around without a licence and without insurance, a danger to the public.”



4.3 Failure to complete education perpetuates poverty

A good education is essential if young people are to escape poverty. They must be able to develop in every aspect of life. However, the islands offer little choice in the way of education and training facilities. This is primarily due to the size of the population. There is one secondary school on each island. These schools also offer limited further or vocational education. MBO (Intermediate Vocational Training) is available to Level 2 on St Eustatius and Saba, and to Level 4 on Bonaire. Any student wishing to study at a higher level must do so elsewhere, perhaps in the European Netherlands.

Educational opportunities for children over 12 (including higher, further and 'second chance' education)

Bonaire

Bonaire has one secondary school organisation with three separate locations. The 'Scholengemeenschap Bonaire' (SGB) is for children aged 12 and over. Courses and streams are structured according to the Dutch system, based on academic ability, and lead to qualifications at MAVO (intermediate school certificate), HAVO (higher school certificate), VMBO (pre-vocational) and VWO (pre-university) level. Practical and special education are also available. The school also has an MBO (Intermediate Vocational Training) department which offers courses at levels 2, 3 and 4. A separate institute, FORMA (Fundashon Centre for Vocational and Adult Education), offers MBO to Level 1. FORMA also provides 'second chance' education under the Sociale Kanstrajecten Jongeren programme (Social Opportunity for Young People; SKJ), which is for those aged between 18-24 who failed to complete their secondary education.

St Eustatius

St Eustatius also has just one secondary school: Gwendoline van Puttenschool (GvP). While it formerly used the Dutch system, a few years ago the school adopted the syllabus of the Caribbean Examinations Council, which in turn is based on the British education system. At the same time, English replaced Dutch as the main language of tuition. Like Bonaire, the school also has an MBO department which provides training at levels 1 and 2. Second chance education under the SKJ programme is provided by the New Challenges Foundation (NCF).

Saba

Saba Comprehensive School (SCS), the only secondary school on the island, has applied the Caribbean system and syllabus for some time. Here too, the language of tuition is English; Dutch is taught as a 'foreign language'. The school has an MBO department which offers training at Levels 1 and 2. Second chance education under the SKJ programme is provided by the Saba Reach Foundation (SRF), which also has a social workshop. At the time of writing, the workshop provides employment to two young adults.

Professionals draw attention to a problem: the language of tuition on Saba and St Eustatius is English, while the language used in higher education in the European Netherlands is Dutch. Students opting to study in the European Netherlands therefore face a language barrier and this can impede progress.⁶⁶

On Bonaire, only the MBO1 programme is conducted in Papiamentu. MBO2 training is in Dutch. There has been a recent trial of MBO2 training in Papiamentu 'by way of an experiment'. One professional told the researchers that it would be possible to improve the quality of education in Papiamentu. On both Saba and St Eustatius, all secondary education is in English. Dutch is a school subject, taught as a 'foreign language'. Many young people in the Caribbean Netherlands are not proficient in Dutch and would therefore begin any further education in the European Netherlands at a disadvantage.

Further education elsewhere

One adverse effect of young people having to leave the islands to continue their education is that it causes something of a 'brain drain'. The ambitious, motivated young citizens who are willing and able to take some financial risk go elsewhere, perhaps never to return. Those who lack the desire to continue in education, or who cannot afford to do so, remain. This hampers the further development of the islands themselves, and has a serious negative impact in terms of social cohesion and the motivation of young people. As one professional put it:

"An islander would never want to come back just for work. People posted here from the European Netherlands earn much more."

It is difficult to find employment on the islands. Jobs are few and far between. Young adults who fail to complete their further education elsewhere and are forced to return to the islands, disillusioned and with a student debt to pay off, are likely to face extra difficulty. Even those who do complete their education and opt to come home will struggle. They too have a student debt to pay off, but salaries are low and the cost of living is high. There are very few vacancies at graduate level. Many young people wishing to go straight from secondary school into employment have unrealistic expectations, the researchers were told. They seem to think that a place will be created especially for them, and that they will immediately start earning 'big bucks'. Once they discover that this is not the case, they too become disillusioned. As one social worker noted:

"Youngsters think that obtaining a degree immediately entitles them to a good job. They don't realise that they will have to work very hard to find one. They are also very naive when it comes to how much they can expect to earn."

⁶⁶ The National Ombudsman is to examine this problem in greater depth in the forthcoming study into obstacles faced by Caribbean students who wish to continue their education in the European Netherlands. The resultant report is expected at the end of 2020.

Apprenticeships

'On-the-job' training is available under the BBL (Beroeps Begeleidende Leerweg) day release apprenticeship scheme. An approved training organisation formally employs a young person, who works for that organisation four days a week and attends MBO college one day a week. The number of places available varies by sector. In 2019, the scheme's coordinating body (ROA CN) examined the relationship between the throughflow of MBO students and the requirements of the labour market.⁶⁷ The study concludes that there are relatively few MBO students active in the construction and hospitality industries, whereupon it is unlikely that supply and demand can be balanced in the foreseeable future. ROA CN also notes that opportunities to manage the availability of training places are limited, particularly on Saba and St Eustatius. It therefore advises examining the possibility of creating places on other nearby islands.

Internships

Internships are work experience placements which can facilitate the transition from education into employment. Many educational programmes include an internship as a qualification requirement. However, it can be difficult for young people in the Caribbean Netherlands to secure an internship. This is partly because students over the age of 18 must make all the necessary arrangements themselves. No help or support is available, even for those with minor cognitive disabilities. It is also due to fierce competition. Some hotels and restaurants prefer to offer internships to students from the European Netherlands because they can be deployed with a minimum of introductory training. There is also competition from South American immigrants, who represent an (even) cheaper source of labour than locals.⁶⁸

Even if a young person manages to secure an internship or apprenticeship, it can be difficult to hold onto it. Several professionals suggested that additional support and guidance would certainly be desirable.

Bonaire has a 'sheltered workshop' which provides employment for eight people with significant learning disabilities. There are no facilities for young people with other types of restriction. Another problem is that students are expected to seek employment in the sector for which they have trained. Given the shortage of jobs and internship placements, this is not always possible. As a result, it can be difficult for students to complete their programme, while young people in general can become demotivated and despondent. Here too, several professionals note a need for targeted support.

Special education

Due to their size, the islands have no separate special education facilities for children with behavioural difficulties or minor cognitive disabilities. Several professionals see this as a serious omission. As one of them put it:

"We are not doing enough to help children with learning difficulties. I understand the rationale of inclusive education, but I am concerned nonetheless. There is not enough specialist knowledge."

67 Raad Onderwijs Arbeidsmarkt Caribisch Nederland (ROA CN), Beroepsonderwijs en arbeidsmarkt Caribisch Nederland, December 2019.

68 Companies are obliged to notify all vacancies to the public body (Department of Social Support and Employment), which will attempt to find local candidates before the employer is allowed to apply for a work permit from the RCN-SWZ unit.

Children with minor cognitive disabilities demand additional help and support. Staff are then able to devote less time and attention to others in the class, who nevertheless demand attention (and ‘negative attention is also attention’). There is a shortage of qualified teachers. The possibility of using classroom assistants (‘shadow-teachers’) has been examined, but once again there are simply too few qualified applicants. The special requirements of children with behavioural problems or learning difficulties have not been adequately acknowledged. Not enough specialist knowledge is available on the islands. Schools are alert to possible cognitive disabilities and will refer a child to an Education Care Expertise Centre for assessment.⁶⁹ However, this is not enough, the professionals contend. Assessment merely confirms that a problem exists; it does nothing to resolve that problem. Several professionals report that they have seen children in this group fall into delinquency. They suggest that many would benefit from having a ‘buddy’: someone to provide advice, encouragement and a listening ear. The final report of an evaluation of education care services in the Caribbean Netherlands was submitted to the government in early July 2020.⁷⁰ In response, the Minister for Primary and Secondary Education and Media announced that improvements will be made.⁷¹ There will be specialist facilities on all islands to address the special needs of children with significant, complex or multidimensional issues, and the statutory ‘duty of care’ that applies in the European Netherlands is to be extended in full to the Caribbean Netherlands.

Drop-outs and second chance education

Many teachers find it difficult to cope with children’s behavioural problems. With so many students needing special attention, it is simply not possible to divide one’s time between them all. As one social worker noted:

“Children who do not go to school are not ‘drop outs’ but ‘push outs’. Teachers sometimes have to make the very painful decision to suspend a pupil because they have been threatened or even physically assaulted. On occasion, it has been necessary to involve the police.”

On Bonaire in particular, some children are suspended from school for lengthy periods. They sit at home with nothing to do. On Saba and St Eustatius, school attendance is relatively high, largely due to the efforts of the truancy officer.⁷²

Some professionals suggest that teachers are choosing ‘the path of least resistance’ and assert that ways must be sought to keep pupils in school. They might include visiting the homes of parents who do not attend meetings to discuss their children’s progress and behaviour. If teachers do not take a more proactive approach, this will be particularly damaging for children with behavioural problems. Parents have an important part to play in instilling appropriate social norms and values. If they fail to do so, and if they do not take an interest in their children’s education, this responsibility falls entirely to the teachers.

69 Education care support services are available on all three islands: the Expertisecentrum Onderwijs Zorg (EOZ) serves Bonaire, the Expertise Centre Education Care (ECE) covers St Eustatius, and the Expertise Centre Education Care (EC2) serves Saba.

70 Middelbaak, Van der Vegt en Sligte, Evaluatie onderwijszorg Caribisch Nederland; final report, July 2020.

71 Letter to parliament of 3 July on education care in the Caribbean Netherlands, ref. 24902566.

72 Saba reports no school drop-outs due to intensive registration and support. Absenteeism is closely monitored and regular meetings are held with students and parents.

Because not all young people finish school,⁷³ all three islands have a system of catch-up education under the Sociale Kanstrajecten Jongeren (SKJ) programme. Anyone aged 18 to 24 who dropped out of secondary school is able to gain their school certificate, prepare for higher education or improve their chances on the employment market. Young adults on the SKJ programme receive a monthly allowance of \$188. For some, it would otherwise be impossible to take part. However, several respondents report that this amount is not sufficient, especially for those with children of their own. They find it impossible to support themselves and family on the allowance alone, but are ineligible for any other form of benefits. As a result, some are forced to leave the SKJ programme and seek employment. Some respondents are highly indignant that the allowance is so meagre. As one professional said:

“The amount is ridiculously low and clearly not enough to support anyone. Young people must therefore work alongside their studies to make ends meet. And if they cannot find a job, they resort to prostitution or crime.”

If a young person on the SKJ programme fails to keep the agreements made, the allowance can be docked or withheld. One girl told the researchers that if she failed to attend classes, or performed below the expected level, she would receive less money.

High cost of education and student debt

For almost all young people on the islands, and certainly those who grow up in poverty, further education is expensive and often unaffordable. Of those who choose to continue their education elsewhere, some go to Curaçao, St Maarten or other countries in the region. Others opt for the European Netherlands or the United States. In all cases, there are inevitably additional costs such as travel and accommodation. It is primarily those from more prosperous families who are therefore able to afford the ‘luxury’ of further education. Young people studying in the European Netherlands can apply to DUO (Dienst Uitvoering Onderwijs) for a student loan. To qualify, they must have been resident on one of the islands of the Caribbean Netherlands for a minimum of ten years or hold Dutch nationality. Anyone wishing to study in the Caribbean region or in North America (including Canada), can apply for a ‘performance-related grant’, administered by the RCN. Young people from the Caribbean Netherlands who opt to study in the European Netherlands may also qualify for a one-off Kickstart Allowance⁷⁴ from RCN Student Financing, which is intended to help young people get on their feet when they move to the European Netherlands. This is a conditional loan, repayment of which is waived if the applicant graduates within ten years. Those who do not graduate within the designated period must repay the original amount plus interest.⁷⁵ Incidentally, it should be noted that young people who enrol in a Level 1 or 2 MBO programme do not qualify for the Kickstart Allowance.

Like their European counterparts, young people from the Caribbean Netherlands who opt to study in the European Netherlands accrue a student debt which they are required to pay off once they enter employment. Several young people, and indeed some professionals who have yet to pay off their student loans, told us that doing so places a great strain on their finances. A number of the professionals with whom we spoke have extremely high student debts, in some cases exceeding €90,000. By their own admission, it is extremely unlikely that they will ever be able to repay such an amount. Not only are salaries somewhat lower than in the European

73 This applies primarily to Bonaire and St Eustatius.

74 A Kickstart Allowance is a one-off performance-related grant of \$2,635.73. In addition to this allowance, students can also take out a one-off loan for \$5,271.46, which must always be repaid, including interest. In 2019, the interest on these loans was 0.0%.

75 Students in further education at MBO Levels 1 and 2 qualify for a maximum of four years’ financial support in the form of a non-repayable grant.

Netherlands, the cost of living is notably higher. The problem is even more acute for those who fail to complete higher education, since the student loan must still be repaid. Moreover, the professionals point out, unless and until the student loan is paid off, they are unable to obtain any other form of loan, including a mortgage to buy a house. Several of the younger interviewees told the researchers that it is the high cost of higher education, and the resultant debts, that discourage them from studying at all.

“You work just to pay for your education.”

Through various channels, the National Ombudsman has received a number of disquieting reports from and about young people from the Caribbean Netherlands⁷⁶ who have experienced problems when planning to study in the European Netherlands, while actually doing so, or at some later date. He has therefore initiated a separate large-scale [investigation](#) which is scheduled for publication in December 2020.

4.4 Young people are barely able to make ends meet and their prospects are bleak

Job opportunities are limited for young people, whether part-time alongside school or full-time once they leave. Several interviewees informed the researchers that many jobs go to ‘friends of friends’.

“The island is small and everyone knows each other. If you scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours. That’s how it works here.”

Some young people are unable to secure employment because they do not have the right papers, even though they do possess the required skills. Those with a ‘blot on their copybook’, such as a criminal record, are also at a serious disadvantage. As one young person remarked:

“I have children and I really want to improve my life for their sake. But because I have a criminal past, I just can’t get a job. No one will give me a chance.”

Young people who cannot find regular employment may become active in the ‘black economy’. They may take casual work with no contract of employment, no secondary benefits and low wages paid ‘cash in hand’. The professionals report that some young people are forced to earn a living through prostitution or crime. Even formal employment rarely pays enough to cover basic living expenses. As a result, the young people who are lucky enough to find a job are still unable to escape poverty.

In principle, anyone over the age of 18 can apply for a Support Allowance (known as ‘Onderstand’). However, the amount concerned is not enough to cover essential outgoings. Respondents report that renting a one-room studio apartment costs at least \$400 per month, while a two-room apartment will cost between \$600 and \$800. In the case of families with children, the fact that they receive child allowance is taken into account when setting the rent.

As previously noted, the allowance of \$188 paid to those in second chance education is far too low to live on. Many therefore discontinue their studies.

76 Including Aruba, Curaçao and St Maarten.

A case study:

A young girl who had recently given birth joined the second chance education programme. She was very keen to learn and gain some qualifications. However, she was responsible for her own upkeep and that of her baby. The allowance of \$188 per month would not come close to covering basic essentials. She did not qualify for any other form of benefits. Entirely due to financial considerations, she was soon forced to leave the programme and look for a job.

One girl, aged 19, told the researchers that she was living with an older man who supported her. Although she had a job, working six days a week in a fast-food outlet, her wages were not enough to live on. Many young people told us that they want to leave the island on which they grew up at the earliest possible opportunity. They hope to go to the European Netherlands or the United States, where they believe they will have more opportunity. As one social worker noted:

“Young people travel to other islands in search of work because they are given no opportunities here.”

Several respondents believe that rules and regulations have become much stricter since 2010 and are being more rigidly enforced. Several professionals report that the RCN SWZ unit has become particularly officious. One social worker cited the case of a young single mother of two (expecting her third child) whose benefits were stopped because she was thought to be cohabiting with the father of her children, thus forming a ‘joint household’. The staff of RCN SZW had based their decision on unsubstantiated rumour: the ‘word on the streets’. Rather than conduct a proper investigation, which would have involved visiting the people concerned and conducting formal interviews, they chose to rely on neighbourhood gossip and whatever they could find on Facebook. Some professionals remarked that government officials show little empathy in carrying out their work. They stated that many of these officials, thanks to their financial background, do not pay enough attention to the hardships people face.

It is certainly true that authorities have been quicker to reduce or withhold claimants’ benefits in the last ten years. Previously, people could earn a little extra by, say, catching a few fish to sell to a restaurant. Several interviewees stated that this is no longer possible because RCN SZW is itself fishing for information on Facebook. The risk of having one’s benefits stopped or receiving a fine has become too great. The legislation covering benefits payments includes a ‘hardship clause’⁷⁷ but, according to the professionals, it is never applied. “There is no flexibility, no room for discretion.” The researchers were also told that islanders in receipt of benefits are not allowed to leave the island without permission, and that anyone thought to be cohabiting faces having their benefits stopped at a stroke. Islanders find this extremely unfair, since there is often no alternative given the severe housing shortage.

77 Article 10 of the Besluit Onderstand BES (Support Allowance Regulation) stipulates that the Minister may, at his or her discretion, award the allowance to a person who is otherwise ineligible if there are ‘extremely urgent reasons’ for doing so. Under Article 2 para. 3, two persons who are domiciled at the same address and are first or second degree relatives (as defined elsewhere in Dutch law), will not automatically be deemed to form a ‘joint household’. Rather, all relevant circumstances are to be assessed on a case by case basis.



Some contend that legislation that was devised in the European Dutch context does not chime with the culture of the Caribbean Netherlands, and that it should not apply in their situation. As one young woman said:

“You can’t just apply the European regulations across the board, but that is what is happening.”

Special assistance

Young people or their parents can apply for ‘Special Assistance’ (Bijzondere Onderstand) to cover exceptional expenses such as textbooks and study-related materials. It is generally paid in the form of vouchers which can be exchanged in a shop. RCN-SZW informed the researchers that Special Assistance is intended to cover items such as school uniforms, pens and pencils. It is expressly not intended to cover the purchase of a computer, which is not regarded as an essential item. RCN SZW states that children do not need their own computer at school; if they need to use one, the school will supply it or they can go to the public library. One professional cited a case which had made a profound impression on her. It concerned a single mother of two, one of whom was in primary education and the other at secondary school. From the public body, she received a contribution towards school supplies for the younger child.⁷⁸ However, she received nothing in respect of the older child. According to RCN SZW, she did not qualify for Special Assistance because she was thought to be cohabiting with a partner. As the professional remarked:

“SZW will not contribute towards school supplies if you have an outstanding debt.”

A room of your own

Alongside the extreme difficulty of generating their own income, young people living in poverty face the problem of finding suitable accommodation. For the majority of young adults in the Caribbean Netherlands, there are no housing opportunities whatsoever. The only available properties are in the private sector and hence far too expensive. Young adults are therefore forced to continue living with their parents or other relatives. Once again, the problems associated with cramped housing described in Chapter 3 help to perpetuate the vicious circle of poverty. The situation is even more harrowing for young people who are not living with their family, having been taken into care. On reaching the age of 18, they must make their own arrangements. Bonaire used to have a sheltered housing project named ‘Shark’ but it has been discontinued. Because there are no facilities for those aged over 18, such as Independence Training or Sheltered Housing, they have nowhere to go. With little or no future perspective, they are described by the professionals as ‘without hope’.

“Some become adults at an early age because they carry a burden.”

78 The Support Allowance Regulation 2019 is accompanied by instructions for implementation, Article 15 of which states that the Minister is able to award Special Assistance to cover or offset the cost of a school uniform or other necessary school supplies, where the student concerned is in secondary education. The Minister does not award Special Assistance for such purposes in respect of a child in primary education, this being the responsibility of the Public Body.



Living with older adults

Young people who cannot live with their families are likely to sleep on the streets, stay with friends, or in some cases, enter into a live-in relationship with an older adult. One professional recalled a case she had recently discussed with the Integrated Neighbourhoods social team:

Case study:

A young man, now 18, had previously been taken into care and placed with a foster family on another island. It was a very satisfactory arrangement for all concerned. On his 18th birthday, however, the care order expired and he had no choice but to return to his home island. He could not live with his mother, nor with his father. Eventually, he moved in with an older woman who already had five children. He saw no other option: he had nowhere to go. The woman concerned was following a training course and received a monthly allowance of \$188. This was the amount with which she was expected to support herself, her five children and her new boyfriend.

It became clear that young people on Saba and St Eustatius are more likely to be taken in by their families. The practice of forming relationships with older adults is more prevalent on Bonaire.

“Young men are fathering children with women who are practically middle-aged. No one talks about it but everyone knows.”

Although the strategy of moving in with an older adult appears to be a voluntary choice, we must ask whether this indeed the case if the young person sees no other option.

“Those girls don’t bother looking for work. They hook up with an older man or become prostitutes.”

Alongside the concerns that such an unequal relationship raises, the strategy seems to stand in the way of more positive development. In many cases, the older adult has children of his or her own. It then becomes less likely that the young adult in the relationship will be able to devote time to study and complete their education. Some girls deliberately fall pregnant in the hope of making the relationship more permanent. With a child to care for, it becomes more difficult to stay in education, or to find and keep a job. And so the vicious circle of poverty continues. Unequal relationships and the resultant domestic arrangements are rarely discussed, even though the entire community is aware of them. The topic is extremely difficult to broach with young adults, and hence it is difficult to involve them in seeking alternative solutions.

“Girls try to get pregnant at an early age. Once they have a child, they want to do nothing.”



At the same time, it is difficult to distinguish between inability to make changes and unwillingness. The extent to which poverty-related problems are at play is not always clear. Professionals report that young people may perform certain activities, including sexual activities, because they want money to buy a new smartphone or fashionable clothing. Some borrow money at extremely high rates of interest, just so that they can 'belong'. It is not easy for organisations to reach and help these young adults because they reject authority and discipline. This also goes some way towards explaining why young people rarely take advantage of the support facilities that do exist.



John (56), professional on Saba:

“Many young people on Saba have a very hard life. I’m now thinking about a single mother I know. She has two children. Her intentions are good: she is keen to be a good mother. She holds down two jobs in order to support her family. This means that she rarely even sees her children, let alone offers them any support or guidance. They more or less have to fend for themselves. They have fallen in with the group of youngsters who hang around on the streets, drinking and taking drugs.

If you drive around the island you will see lots of these ‘dead-end kids’ They look listless, apathetic. But that’s no surprise given how little there is for them to do. Of course growing up like this will have consequences. Some are depressed, some are angry because they feel they are not being treated fairly. This is largely because there is such a huge difference between them and the privileged youngsters who do indeed have prospects for the future. The more affluent young people can leave the island to study in another country. When they return, they fall into a good job. Some manage to land a good job with only a high school certificate. It’s not what you know, it’s who you know. If the parents have a good network, the children are set up for life. No network? Oh dear, how sad, never mind. That said, I know a highly respected man on the island whose children enjoyed a very good education. But because this man became embroiled in a dispute with the authorities, it became almost impossible for the children to find an employer willing to take them on. This island is all about cronyism and mutual back-scratching. Young people can see that, which is why they become angry and frustrated. I think that it is extremely important to tackle this problem before it gets any worse. So many youngsters are depressed. I am very concerned about their future mental health.

One of the most important challenges we face is stamping out poverty. The cost of living has always been high, but since the introduction of the General Expenditure Tax [comparable to VAT], things have become a lot worse. It is poverty that forces children to leave school. Only a small number complete secondary education, and even fewer go to college. A university education is only for the children of rich parents: it costs at least \$35,000. If they return to the island after graduating, it is still very difficult to find suitable employment if you don’t know the right people. I know a young man who studied in America before coming home to Saba. He is now working in a childcare centre.

Young adults must be able to find work so that they can start living independently. At present, they have to continue living with their parents just because they cannot afford a place of their own. Because there are entire extended families living under the same roof, there is friction and abuse, both emotional and physical. Last Tuesday, two youngsters came to see me. They were desperate. They saw absolutely no future for themselves here on the island. I told them that Saba is not the only place in the world. Many talented young people realised that in the past and left to build a future elsewhere. But that too is far from ideal, because the island really needs talented young people.



Saba is a very small island with a population of around two thousand. I contacted the authorities and spoke to a committee because I want them to encourage young people, to provide some sort of incentive. There should be financial support, perhaps in the form of an interest-free loan which would allow them to start a small business. They could buy a fishing boat or set up a farm. With direct personal guidance, young people could achieve so much more. Better educational opportunities will increase the chance of the business being successful. I know a young man on the island who grew up in poverty. He now runs a small fishing company and actively encourages other young people. This gives me cause for optimism. On the other hand, I know a single mother with three children who lost her job due to the corona crisis. How is she supposed to pay the rent? How can she feed her family? We now have another three children growing up in extremely difficult circumstances, for whom the future seems extremely bleak. The despair I see in some young people really hurts me. I can only hope that things improve... and soon."

5 Factors which stand in the way of breaking the vicious circle of poverty

5.1 Introduction

In Chapters 3 and 4, we focused on the lives and experiences of young people who grow up in poverty, the factors which characterise their background, and the future they see for themselves. It is clear that help and support can and must be offered in several areas if these young people are to be given the opportunity of a better future. However, efforts to implement appropriate measures have not always been successful. This study is therefore also concerned with the factors that stand in the way of reducing poverty and breaking its vicious circle. One such factor is the size of the islands and their population. While this does have some advantages in terms of social cohesion – everyone knows everyone else – it also means that everyone knows everyone else's business. The small scale of the islands could well hinder efforts to solve the poverty-related problems of young people in the Caribbean Netherlands.

Based in part on the interviews conducted further to this research, the National Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children conclude that there are several other obstacles which either hamper the implementation of measures, or will detract from their effectiveness, thus making it more difficult to break the vicious circle of poverty. These factors include: (1) a clash of cultures, (2) discrimination and misuse of power, and (3) lack of confidence in government. This chapter examines these points in greater detail.

5.2 Clash of cultures

The culture on the three islands is very different from that of the European Netherlands.

The Caribbean culture versus the European culture

There is an ocean of difference between the two regions of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, both literally and figuratively. During this research, as well as on previous visits, staff of the National Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children have frequently heard that the European Dutch are “totally unfamiliar” with the culture of the islanders. People complain that many new laws, rules and regulations came into effect on 10 October 2010⁷⁹ which they do not understand, or which they believe are not applicable to their situation. Professionals have told us, often with tears in their eyes, of young mothers, some no older than 20, who have several children to support. They are expected to live on an allowance of \$262 per fortnight while their rent is \$800 per month. They are not permitted to move in with each other because “all incomes in the household are added together to determine eligibility.” While there is a ‘hardship clause’ which would permit a higher amount to be paid, the professionals state that it is never applied. In another example, senior citizens who have saved up for their own funeral so as to spare their children this expense have been told that they must use the money to cover household expenses. Only when it is exhausted will their children (who form part of the same household) qualify for the support allowance. In the past, some men occasionally caught a few fish which they could sell to a local restaurant to make a little extra money. Since ‘10-10-10’, all such income must be reported to SWZ RDN and will be deducted from their benefits. Moreover, they are no longer permitted to catch fish at all due to new environmental regulations. Situations like this have caused much resentment among the islanders. They feel that central government has seriously let them down.

79 See Appendix 1.



Another bone of contention is that many good initiatives are very short-lived. They often begin as a pilot project only to be abandoned with no follow-up.⁸⁰ Professionals fly in from the Netherlands and, having fulfilled their remit, fly out again. There is little chance of any sustainable implementation, whereupon even successful projects quickly 'bite the dust'. The temporary, transient nature of such initiatives means that no structural changes are achieved, although the professionals and young people themselves have seen that improvement is indeed possible. This is another reason that the local population can take a cynical view of experts and officials from the European Netherlands. Some professionals state that they have learned not to expect too much from central government and organisations in Europe. As one told us:

"We're getting tired of officials from the European Netherlands coming here to do their research. There have been countless studies examining this and that, and we have always lent our full cooperation. But then we hear nothing more. Reports just gather dust and their recommendations are never followed up."

The transient nature of projects also means that there is little opportunity to establish an integrated approach, with 'joined-up' solutions. Existing problems are not addressed from a common perspective. For example, there have been projects to tackle domestic violence and protect victims. But there is still no broad-based, long-term plan to bring the problem into the open, no adequate funding, not enough alternative housing for victims to ensure that they do not have to return to their former situation, too little attention for the treatment of trauma caused by violence, and so on. Thus far there has been a 'sticking plaster approach': hasty solutions that cover up the symptoms but do little to mitigate the underlying problem. As one professional told the researchers:

"We're spending all our time putting out little fires. Very little is being done to find permanent solutions. Although we can sometimes feel disheartened, we are still extremely committed to our work."

Notably, a number of professionals criticised the European 'obsession with figures'. One remarked:

"The European Dutch always want to know exactly how many islanders are living in poverty. There is no way of telling. Poverty is not visible. But take it from me - if you have three generations of the same family all living in one two-room apartment, that is poverty."

Culture of shame

Another significant obstacle to solving the poverty problem is the 'culture of shame' that prevails on the islands. This point was raised in the National Ombudsman's earlier report, *Oog voor ouderen in Caribisch Nederland*, which notes that islanders keep their problems to themselves and like to 'keep up appearances'. This was again very evident during our research. It is a matter of concern to the professionals, who report that young adults find it very difficult to talk to anyone about their poverty. They fear gossip or even ostracisation. To hide the fact that

⁸⁰ The general intention is that projects financed by Samenwerkende Fondsen Cariben (a coalition of non-profit aid organisations) will, if successful, be taken over by government after three years and made permanent. In practice, this rarely happens.



they cannot afford to buy certain items, some are willing to perform 'favours' in exchange for those items so that they can feel part of the group. Although these children and young adults look fit, well dressed and presentable, many are indeed living in poverty or are the victims of abuse. They sometimes consider appearance more important than food or positive attention. Shame and the fear of social exclusion are also why so much violence and abuse remains hidden. Victims do not come forward due to the stigma they may attract. One girl told us:

"My friend is being beaten by her stepfather but she doesn't dare say anything. She is afraid that no one will believe her."

Several young people spoke of the many taboos on the islands, not only with regard to poverty and domestic violence, but also sexual relationships. It is difficult to overcome the culture of shame. They would like to be able to talk more openly with each other, but this is not possible because adults regard such topics as 'vulgar'. For girls, the culture of shame has another dimension in that it also extends to sexual behaviour and sexual development. Prostitution and teen pregnancy (and the responsibilities of men in this regard) are not topics which can be discussed frankly. Young people receive very little sex education and are embarrassed to ask for contraceptives. Responsibility for an unplanned pregnancy is placed firmly at the feet of the girl, who may well be pressured to have an abortion. Parents do not talk to their children about the use of contraceptives to prevent the pregnancy in the first place. Poverty and teen pregnancy are a reality on the islands. For girls in particular, they form yet another obstacle to escaping that poverty.

5.3 Discrimination and exploitation

The exploitation of the poor is not unique to the Caribbean Netherlands. It is a problem throughout the world. Nevertheless, we are left with the impression that exploitation is more common on the islands than in the European Netherlands, and that it occurs in various domains: housing, education and employment, for example. In our conversations with young people on Bonaire, we heard of various forms of discrimination and exploitation. Landlords and employers exploit the young people who are dependent on them, aware that they have few, if any, other options. Young people have to accept a lot simply to survive. One respondent told us that a landlord can change the rules on a whim. He may decide that the rent no longer includes water or utilities. There is no statutory rent protection.

There is also discrimination at school, where staff are more lenient towards the brighter, more affluent students. It seems that offences such as drinking alcohol or taking drugs are regarded as less serious when committed by a better class of classmate. In terms of employment, young people complain of cronyism, with employers giving jobs to the children of their friends, and bemoan the fact that students and interns from the European Netherlands are coming to the islands to 'steal our jobs'. The Europeans not only earn more, they may also be given an apartment as part of the deal. This creates resentment and frustration. Professionals on Bonaire have noticed that locals have begun to withdraw from public areas, keeping a very low profile. They feel that the island is no longer theirs but is being taken over by the European Dutch. Many believe that there is not enough investment in Bonaire's own people.



The young interviewees report cases of work rosters being changed without notice. One young lady suddenly found that she was scheduled to work completely different hours. When she protested, she was told to accept the changes or find another job. As one young person told us:

“If you stand up for your rights, you’re seen as insolent.”

Reputation is important. It is easier to find a job if you know someone ‘high up’. Anyone lacking inside contacts will have far greater difficulty, while for those with a poor reputation it can be almost impossible to find employment. Jobs are few and far between; competition is fierce. Some young people feel that they are treated with suspicion and distrust, not only by employers but by the organisations which exist to help them. As a result, these often vulnerable young adults avoid contact with those organisations.

5.4 Lack of trust

The National Ombudsman’s earlier report, *Oog voor ouderen in Caribisch Nederland*, notes that many islanders avoid contact with government and social organisations. In the case of seniors, this can be due to shame or pride. Some simply do not know where to go for assistance. Information is not always clear, a point that was made several times during our research. Government decisions are usually communicated in Dutch, a language in which few young people are proficient. Correspondence from the government can be overly formal and authoritarian in tone, demonstrating little empathy. This obscures the message and causes irritation. Professionals report that some young people (and their parents) distrust the government and avoid further contact for fear of negative consequences. This is concerning since there will be fewer opportunities to provide help and support. It is also felt that government and social organisations overestimate young people’s abilities. To qualify for certain welfare services, for example, applicants are expected to describe their exact requirements. By no means all young people show the level of self-sufficiency expected of them. Indeed, the lack of self-sufficiency is often the reason that they need help in the first place. For many, it is extremely difficult to take the action required to ensure success in life. They need support and guidance: someone who can help them prepare and organise.

The situation demands close cooperation between the various organisations which deal with this target group, which must also adapt their style of communication to the Caribbean culture, the professionals stress. It is important that all social agencies and departments take proactive approach, focusing on prevention and the early identification of nascent problems. The professionals are very disappointed that the required level of cooperation has yet to be achieved on all three islands, which they blame on the mutual distrust that can exist between the organisations concerned. Some, for example, refuse to share information about their clients, citing privacy regulations. It then becomes impossible to implement the necessary proactive, integrated approach.

The exception is St Eustatius, where there have been several positive developments. Agencies now cooperate more closely and more frequently. They are willing to share information when doing so increases the effectiveness of efforts to help young people. As one professional told us:

“There is now communication while previously there was suspicion and distrust. In the past, islanders did not understand why nothing appeared to be happening. There is now a much more positive attitude. Decision-making processes are more transparent and the community is more involved. People therefore understand the decisions and accept them more readily.”

Where organisations (such as the police and youth welfare services) do work together, it is of course important to respect the privacy of the individuals concerned. The researchers were informed that a ‘privacy charter’ has been drawn up, and that information is only exchanged with the express prior consent of the young people concerned or their parents. The only exception is in the case of a life-threatening situation. In recent months, the Youth Care and Family department on St Eustatius has adopted new procedures intended to increase openness and transparency. In practice, this means that the young person, his or her parents and other family members are invited to attend all case discussions. Representatives of other social care departments are also present. In the report [Van wie is die privacy eigenlijk?](#) (“Whose privacy is it, anyway?”), the National Ombudsman stresses that it must be the individual concerned who decides what personal information is to be shared, and with whom. That information must not go beyond the minimum required to achieve the objectives. This is particularly important in the Caribbean Netherlands given the size of the islands.

Professional distance

Because the islands are so small and the community so close-knit, it can be difficult to maintain professional distance. Everyone here knows virtually everyone else, directly or indirectly. This too can have negative implications in terms of social support for young people. A truancy officer, for example, might be reluctant to take formal action if the case involves a friend or relative. In cases of domestic violence, standard practice is for the victim to be moved to another island, while the perpetrator is permitted to stay on the home island. This is in stark contrast to the approach in the European Netherlands, where it is generally the perpetrator who is ordered to leave the family home. Although recent initiatives to tackle the problem of domestic violence are a welcome development, the practice of ‘uprooting’ the victim undermines her status as the aggrieved party. The young interviewees often refer to the role of the police:

“The police know everyone. And if you know the right people, you’ll be out in no time.”

One girl mentioned that some perpetrators of domestic violence are personal friends of the police officers sent to investigate, a point confirmed by the professionals. Given the size of the islands, this is a distinct possibility. The researchers were unable to ascertain whether any action is taken against the perpetrator in such cases, but the respondents’ accounts seem to confirm the lack of confidence in the authorities. Central government does not always take account of the fact that everyone on the islands knows each other. This may be a significant factor in explaining why some initiatives intended to help the islanders prove unsuccessful.



Cynthia (38), social worker, Bonaire:

“There is an old house on Bonaire. It was empty for a very long time but for the last year or so it has been occupied by four young men aged between 16 and 23. There is no water or electricity. Two of the boys sleep indoors on mattresses on the floor, the other two sleep outdoors on camp beds. On the walls of the house, they have drawn murals depicting their lives. There are a few personal possessions scattered about. The boys cook outdoors on a charcoal burner. They do not cook healthy meals – that would be far too expensive. It’s only people who work who can eat slightly better. These boys have a diet of rice, potatoes, meat and canned food. One of them goes to school, another washes cars to earn a little money. They all live hand to mouth. When I visit in the morning, they are just waking up. Sometimes they start the day with a spliff. They say they need it to stay calm.

There are many other young people who smoke marijuana for the same reason. It often begins at an early age; many users are under 14. Drugs are bought and sold at school. Children deal on behalf of adults in order to earn money. Many are in a relationship with that adult. In some cases, parents wash their hands of these children. If parents do not know how to deal with a wayward child, that child will simply go his or her own way. Young people like this are soon hardened. They become streetwise. They grow up before their time.

Some children on Bonaire have too much responsibility. Their parents are hardly ever at home because they have to work several jobs to make ends meet. The children must also find a way of earning money, but whatever they do earn they must hand over to the parents or spend on groceries for the family. Some children are given nothing, not even a little pocket money. The bar has been set too high for them. Given their circumstances they cannot develop properly. They cannot learn how to manage money. Twelve-year-olds are expected to care for their younger siblings, cook the meals, do the laundry. Some children become too vocal, too ‘sassy’. Parents no longer understand them and don’t know how to deal with them. Other youngsters, girls and boys alike, enter into relationships with older adults solely to have a roof over their heads and something to eat. Fortunately, there is a non-profit organisation that ensures that all children who go to school can eat breakfast there.

As social workers, we find it very important to teach young people how to prevent problems. That’s something that many people on Bonaire are not used to. A check-up at the dentist every six months? No, you only visit the dentist if you have toothache. An annual service inspection for your car? No – you call the garage when it breaks down, not before. Prevention is very important – that’s the message we are trying to get across to young people. We want to teach them to save money for the future, to accept and act on their own responsibility. We also want to encourage girls to take the pill if they are going to have sex. Fewer teen pregnancies will be a good thing.”

6 Conclusion and recommendations

6.1 Introduction

This study is concerned with the obstacles experienced by young people living in poverty in the Caribbean Netherlands. What is detracting from their development opportunities as they make the transition from childhood to adulthood? In other words, what does the 18-/18+ dilemma mean in the Caribbean Netherlands? Our research confirms that many young people do indeed face serious obstacles which prevent them from escaping poverty and make the transition into adulthood far more difficult.

6.2 The vicious circle of poverty is still intact and will take a long time to break

The testimony of all interviewees illustrates that young people living in poverty have generally had a very difficult past. Some have been forced to raise themselves. Their parents were too busy working several jobs to make ends meet, or were unable to fulfil their parenting responsibilities for a variety of other reasons. Many of the young people we met grew up, and continue to live, in extremely cramped housing which they share with far too many other people. Alongside practical difficulties, such as having no private space in which to study, this also has emotional consequences. There are likely to be tensions and arguments which may escalate into violence. There may be physical and sexual abuse. Since a very early age, these young people have been disadvantaged in various ways. They have a developmental deficit that will be extremely difficult to make up. An educational deficit increases the risk that they will drop out of school before gaining any qualifications, whereupon they will find it far more difficult to find any job, let alone one that pays enough to cover basic essentials. Because they see so few prospects for themselves, some young people make bad choices. Crime or prostitution is seen as a 'quick fix' – an escape route from poverty. Some young people see a relationship with an older adult as a way out, albeit temporary. These survival strategies stand in the way of positive development. The behaviours prompted by poverty seem to be handed down from generation to generation. Quick and easy relationships lead to unplanned pregnancies. Embarrassment prevents girls (and boys) from buying and using contraceptives. Involvement in illegal activity results in a criminal record, making the chance of finding gainful employment even smaller, while unequal relationships between young and old are more likely to degenerate into domestic violence. The vicious circle of poverty is complete. It is essential that this circle is broken.

Poverty is a many-headed monster. Young people who grow up in poverty do not experience one or two obstacles in a single domain, but a multitude of obstacles in virtually every area of life. This makes the problem of poverty even more complex. At the same time, it also creates opportunities and openings whereby improvements can be planned and implemented in all domains simultaneously. The information gained from the researchers' interviews confirms that there are many organisations, agencies and individual professionals who are keen to improve the situation of young people living in poverty. Central government has also acknowledged the urgency of doing so, and has introduced a raft of measures, subsidy arrangements and investments targeting this group. Nevertheless, this study clearly demonstrates that far too many young people in the Caribbean Netherlands are in a very precarious situation. The lack of any future perspective has caused some to give up hope and to lose the motivation to invest time and effort in their own future. Although professionals have sought to rekindle hope by offering help and guidance, their efforts have met with little success thus far. As our research confirms, young people have little trust or confidence in the agencies and individuals who are there to help them.

Obstacles to the implementation of solutions

The interviews conducted by the National Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children reveal that several obstacles still stand in the way of efforts to eliminate poverty in the Caribbean Netherlands. There are, for example, significant differences between the culture of the islands and that of the European Netherlands, whereupon measures devised by central government, even if effective in Europe, are not necessarily appropriate to the Caribbean way of life. We also found evidence of discrimination and exploitation in various domains, including housing and employment. The people of the region show a general lack of trust in government and official agencies, prompted in part by a succession of disappointments experienced since the islands became 'special municipalities' of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in October 2010. The National Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children consider it essential that efforts to improve the situation of young people in the Caribbean Netherlands are accompanied by action to mitigate or eliminate all obstacles standing in the way of successful solutions. This will demand (even more) time and patience, but is necessary if we are to achieve actual improvements rather than remain bogged down in a never-ending cycle of studies and reports.

The National Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children are gratified to note that central government has implemented measures to tackle poverty in the Caribbean Netherlands. Its efforts have been particularly intensive in recent years. In 2019, for example, the government established a 'social minimum income' for the region and initiated a very successful childcare programme: BEST4Kids. UNICEF reports that the Dutch government has taken firm steps to improve the position of children in the Caribbean Netherlands, and that significant progress has been made in various policy domains.⁸¹ Nevertheless, the organisation notes some ongoing concerns such as the number of children and young people growing up in poverty, domestic violence, and child abuse.⁸² These points are also prominent in the current study, which further concludes that it will be far from easy to arrive at an effective plan of action to tackle poverty. This is primarily because the problems, both underlying and resultant, are to be seen in so many different domains. Where there are financial problems there will usually be social problems, and vice versa. This is why it is so important for all agencies which are concerned with vulnerable young people in the Caribbean Netherlands to identify the problems across the board and take joint remedial action: the integrated approach. This demands effective process management, which in turn demands good cooperation and coordination between central government and the public bodies.

6.3 Closer cooperation in various areas: a matter of urgency

The National Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children call for urgent action to establish closer cooperation between the various relevant policy domains, which include social affairs, youth welfare, housing, education and health. Facilities and services must be adapted in line with the actual requirements of the target group. In other words, there must be greater flexibility allowing problems to be addressed on a case by case basis, with individualised, 'custom' solutions. It is no longer appropriate to rely on the current system of rules and provisions. Young people in the Caribbean Netherlands must be able to count on government to work in their interests. They must be confident that government is to establish an acceptable standard of living, and that they will be able to grow up in a favourable, stimulating environment. The National Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children therefore consider it very important that the poverty reduction policy addresses all domains which touch upon the lives of young people growing up in poverty. Only then can the vicious circle we have described be broken. Doing so is essential if we are to create opportunities and prospects, not only for the current generation of young people but for every generation yet to come.

81 UNICEF, Situatieanalyse kinderen en jongeren in Caribisch Nederland, 2019.

82 Letter to parliament about the findings of an analysis of children's rights in the Caribbean Netherlands, 2 October 2019.

To break the vicious circle of poverty demands an integrated, 'joined-up' approach. However, that approach must also take full account of the local context, the culture of the islands, and the current lack of confidence in government. It must allow for the fact that everyone knows everyone else. Every measure should be applied in a way that is likely to restore mutual trust between young people and the various agencies. There must be clear rules governing the exchange of information, and the interests of the young people themselves must always be leading. An integrated approach will include both prevention efforts and targeted assistance in the areas of parenting skills, housing, education, training and employment. The complexity of the problems calls for long-term commitment. Many of the initiatives described in this study, although effective, were temporary in nature. It is clear that combating poverty among young people demands continuity and consistency. This said, the seriousness of the problems is such that action to improve the situation of young people in the Caribbean Netherlands is now required as a matter of urgency. Moreover, it is important that all residents of the islands are given ample opportunity to contribute and to make their viewpoints known. There is absolutely no point in implementing provisions intended to improve the situation of the islanders if no one makes use of them, either because they are unaware that they exist or because they do not wish to be reliant on government. For this reason, government agencies (and other relevant organisations) must work proactively to garner support, provide clear and accessible information, and establish straightforward frameworks and conditions.

6.4 Young people growing up in poverty lack support in various areas

The National Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children asked young people themselves to suggest potential solutions to their problems. What do they expect from government and social agencies? We find it very important to listen to the views and opinions of the target group, who must be given every opportunity to contribute. They should be encouraged to think about the desired outcomes: the future perspective towards which we are working together. In the past, there has been very little interaction between young people and the policy-makers. Listening to their opinions is nevertheless a key success factor. By giving young people a voice, we increase the likelihood that the measures and programmes implemented to improve their lives will have the desired effect. Moreover, inviting their participation will help to increase trust in government agencies and authorities. That trust is currently at a low ebb.

Some of the suggestions made by our respondents relate to basic social provisions: more affordable housing and greater employment opportunity, for example. However, a conspicuously high number of respondents called for more activities to support personal development, as well as one-to-one guidance from a mentor or 'buddy'.

Development activities

Both young adults and professionals state that young people on the three islands must be given greater support in their personal development. In many cases, this support is not available from parents. Several professionals suggested that more personal guidance is needed to encourage young people to complete their education, and that they should be given more help in finding employment. This applies to all young people, but especially to those with minor cognitive disabilities. It was suggested that training opportunities for this group should be increased in order to reduce the likelihood of a descent into indolence and delinquency. In addition, there should be more low-threshold, accessible activities to support development and help young people develop various life skills. Community centres can play an important role in this regard. Some respondents point to successful projects on Bonaire, in which young people were 'enticed' to take part by placing an emphasis on debt resolution. During the projects, a wide range of other topics were raised, including sex, relationships and domestic violence.

A buddy

Young people and professionals alike state that trust is an essential requirement of the guidance process. The word 'buddy' was used several times. A buddy is a confidant(e) who can advise and guide a young person on the road to adulthood. All young people on the islands would benefit from such an arrangement, but it seems particularly important for those with minor cognitive disabilities and young adults who have been under the supervision of youth welfare services. On reaching their 18th birthday, this source of support and guidance is no longer available to them and they find themselves 'between two stools'. Buddies can encourage young people to trust others, or as one professional on Bonaire put it, "teach them how to speak openly by doing so yourself. If things are not going well, they must know where to turn for help and must make the situation known as soon as possible." In fact, the buddy need not be a professional social worker; he or she could be someone of the same age, or an adult within the young person's network. One young adult on Bonaire told the researchers how important it is for adults to set a good example. If the parents are not good role models, some other adult must step into the breach. Specific reference was made to schools and teachers, who should take a more proactive approach in this respect. Some young people also suggested that contemporaries who are relatively well off and 'sorted' could help those who are finding life more difficult.

6.5 Recommendations of the National Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children

Each of the islands of the Caribbean Netherlands has a small, close-knit community. Even the largest island, Bonaire, has a population of approximately 20,000. Given the geographical context and demographics of the islands, it would be impossible to make the essential improvements to young people's lives one by one, as a series of individual projects. It is therefore desirable for central government and its ministries to cooperate closely with each other when planning and implementing the improvements. The National Ombudsman and Ombudsman for Children believe that it would be appropriate for the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations (BZK) to take the lead, acting as process manager and coordinator. Based on its overall responsibility, the ministry can then delegate the various tasks to the other ministries and the public bodies of the islands, while overseeing communication and coordination between them. An integrated approach is essential in view of the complexity of the problems. The public bodies, which are responsible for poverty reduction on their respective islands, must be able to work effectively alongside the Ministry of BZK to ensure that measures are implemented with appropriate urgency.⁸³ In this respect, integration spans the ocean. Central government and the public bodies have their own distinct tasks and responsibilities. Nevertheless, cooperation between all parties is crucial if significant steps are to be taken as quickly as possible. In the view of the National Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children, the underlying principle must always be that all measures address the actual requirements of young people in the Caribbean Netherlands, especially those who are growing up in poverty. Only then can long-term improvements which enjoy broad support be made.

Plans are being made and measures implemented in various areas, including income, education and after-school childcare. All will improve the situation of young people living in poverty in the longer term. However, the seriousness of the problems now faced by this group, and their effects on their future perspective, creates a real urgency. Firm steps to alleviate the problems must therefore be taken in the short term. Given the necessity of an integrated approach, with close cooperation and coordination between the two levels of government across all policy domains, the National Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children wish to see the framework for such cooperation put in place as soon as possible. All departments and agencies should be able to combine their key tasks with the provision of help and support in other domains.

83 This point was previously noted by the National Ombudsman in the report *Oog voor ouderen in Caribisch Nederland*, 10 September 2019.

In the opinion of the two ombudsmen, overall responsibility should fall to the Ministry of BZK. Effective coordination will ensure tangible results within a reasonable period. We therefore advise the Ministry of BZK to devote particular attention to the following points:

- **Housing and supervised accommodation**

Adequate housing and facilities for vulnerable young people should be put in place as soon as practicable. There have been several short-term projects involving sheltered and supervised accommodation, whereby young adults not only have a suitable place to live but are given targeted support in various other areas. It is essential that vulnerable young people have access to this additional support if they are to make a successful transition into adulthood.

The ombudsmen are gratified that measures are being taken to improve the housing situation for the general population of the Caribbean Netherlands. At the same time, however, they note that the interests of certain groups, most notably vulnerable young people, are not being given due attention. Adequate and appropriate housing for these young people must be created as a matter of urgency. It is also important to increase affordable housing opportunities for all young people on the islands. Having somewhere they can call 'home' will give them a solid basis on which to build their lives further. Possibilities include student-type accommodation, perhaps on a campus, after the European model.

- **Education and activities**

The National Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children stress that there must be more educational opportunities on all three islands, for young people in general but for those with behavioural problems or minor cognitive disabilities in particular. An adequate range of stimulating after-school activities is required, which must be accessible and affordable even for young people living in poverty. As mentioned elsewhere, community centres provide a highly suitable venue for sports activities, cooking lessons, money management courses, and so on. Such activities help young people to prepare for the future. Close cooperation with local organisations and the community is very important to ensure that projects address the actual wishes and requirements of the target group.

- **Professional training and work experience**

Efforts should be made to upscale and improve professional training opportunities, while it is also important to ensure that a sufficient number of internships and work experience placements are available to the young people of the islands. One possibility is to reserve a fixed number of places for locals only; students from the European Netherlands or elsewhere will not be eligible to apply.

- **A buddy or mentor**

The ombudsmen also stress the importance of breaking down the 'culture of shame' which precludes open discussion of topics such as poverty, abuse, domestic violence and sexual relations. Here too, it is essential to involve young people themselves in deciding how this can best be achieved. Several young adults have expressed a need for a 'buddy': someone who will listen to their concerns and offer guidance. The ombudsmen see much merit in this idea. A buddy, mentor or life coach can encourage young people to talk more openly about the 'taboo topics', doing so in a safe and secure setting. Where necessary, he or she will also offer appropriate guidance and practical support.

Appendix 1 A special part of the Netherlands

1 Constitutional change

On 10 October 2010, the islands of Bonaire, St Eustatius and Saba became 'special municipalities' of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Since that date, each of the three islands has had two levels of government: central government in The Hague and a local authority known as the 'public body'. Central government is responsible for matters such as law and order (police, prosecutors and courts), public health, education, taxation and social security benefits. The executive agencies acting on behalf of central government are designated 'units' of Rijkdienst Caribisch Nederland (RCN). These units have their main offices on Bonaire and most have a public service desk on each of the other islands.

The public bodies are responsible for local matters such as civil affairs, spatial planning, economy, healthcare services, youth and welfare, sport and culture, education and employment. Each public body is run by a 'municipal executive' (a chairman and a fixed number of members) which is answerable to the elected 'Island Council'. The intention is that the two levels of government should work in close cooperation. The State Secretary of the Interior and Kingdom Relations oversees coordination of national and local policy.

In the interests of good governance, an appointed 'Kingdom Representative' acts as the administrative link between central government and the three public bodies. He promotes and facilitates cooperation between staff of the various ministries, approves appointments to the municipal executives, ratifies by-laws and regulations passed by the public bodies, and reports regularly to the State Secretary of BZK.

The constitutional changes of October 2010 effectively dissolved the former geopolitical region of the Netherlands Antilles, which had comprised the six islands of Curaçao, Aruba, St Maarten, St Eustatius, Saba and Bonaire. Curaçao, St Maarten and Aruba became autonomous countries within the Kingdom, each with its own national government and parliament. The only areas in which the Netherlands has maintained sovereignty are foreign policy, defence and citizenship. All other matters are the direct responsibility of the government of the island concerned.

2 Legislative change

Until 10 October 2010, the islands were subject to the law of the Netherlands Antilles. From that date, Dutch law (as current in the European Netherlands) was applied. This change was necessary as the former legislation was incompatible with the Dutch judicial system and the new constitutional relationships. There was an extensive programme in which many legislative instruments were amended or redrafted, from the Statute to all the various Acts of Parliament, directives, decrees, administrative regulations and judicial procedures. Organisational structures were reformed, beginning with new constitutional law for Curaçao, St Maarten and the Caribbean Netherlands. For each entity, it was necessary to decide which Antillean Dutch legislation would be retained in full, which would apply in amended form, and which would be repealed.⁸⁴ Although the islands are special municipalities of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, not all legislative instruments applicable in the European Netherlands have (yet) been implemented in the Caribbean Netherlands. The lacunae include the Jeugdwet (Youth Act) 2015 and the Wet Maatschappelijke Ondersteuning (Social Support Act) 2015. A new juvenile criminal law system was implemented on 1 August 2020.⁸⁵

84 A. van Rijn, "Handboek Caribisch Staatsrecht" (2019), p.80.

85 On 22 June 2020, the Minister of Justice indicated in correspondence relating to [law enforcement](#) that the new date will be 1 August 2020.

It has been decided that all future legislation or amendments passed in the European Netherlands must be carefully examined to determine whether they can and should apply in the Caribbean Netherlands, or whether alternative arrangements are required.⁸⁶ Substantive differences between legislation in the two parts of the Kingdom can sometimes cause contention. When is it appropriate to apply rules and regulations to some Dutch citizens and not to others?

In 2013, UNICEF and the Netherlands Institute for Human Rights concluded that legislation on the islands falls short of the minimum requirements of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Two years later, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) expressed similar concerns, noting that young people in the Caribbean part of the Kingdom do not enjoy the same rights as their counterparts in the European Netherlands. The Committee recommended that special attention should be given to resolving the disparities. A 2017 study conducted by the Ombudsman for Children also concluded that children and young people in the Caribbean Netherlands are not treated in the same way as their counterparts in the European Netherlands, which constitutes a breach of the principle of non-discrimination. Another marked disparity between the regions relates to the ratification of the Istanbul Convention. This Convention was ratified by the Dutch government on 18 November 2015 and its provisions came into effect in the European Netherlands on 1 March 2016. However, it does not yet apply in the Caribbean Netherlands. The Administrative Agreement and accompanying instruments⁸⁷ provide for the ratification of the convention in the Caribbean region 'in due course' but no firm deadline has been announced.

3 The public bodies in relation to central government

If a public body fails to fulfil its responsibilities, the law provides a mechanism whereby the municipal executive can be relieved of its responsibilities, which will then pass on to a higher authority. Just such an 'administrative intervention' took place on St Eustatius in 2018, since when the island's affairs have been overseen by a Government Commissioner and his deputy. At the time of our research, a [bill](#) was passed to extend this arrangement while working towards the gradual resumption of the statutory provisions.⁸⁸ In November 2018, central government (in the person of the State Secretary of BZK) entered into an Administrative Agreement with the public body of Bonaire, intended to create an 'optimal level of welfare and prosperity' for the citizens of the island. In June 2019, the State Secretary signed an Administrative Agreement with the public body of Saba. Known as the 'Saba Package', it sets out to consolidate and extend the successful cooperation between central government and the public body in the areas of social and economic development, good governance, safety and security, public order and disaster response.

4 The National Ombudsman in the Caribbean Netherlands

In 2010, the National Ombudsman was designated the 'competent authority' for the Caribbean Netherlands, authorised to investigate and advise on complaints relating to central government departments. In 2012, this responsibility was extended to include complaints relating to the public bodies of Bonaire, Saba and St Eustatius. In the first instance, complaints about central government, including the RCN, must be submitted to the agency or department concerned, whereupon an internal complaints procedure is followed. As in the European Netherlands, the National Ombudsman forms the 'second line' complaints assessment body. In the case of the public bodies, the National Ombudsman is the 'first line' assessment body. Citizens may

86 Vijf jaar Caribisch Nederland, de werking van wetgeving, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen (2015).

87 Government of the Netherlands (2018). Report of the Dutch government on the implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the Istanbul Convention), September 2018.

88 Senate of the Netherlands, [Wet herstelvoorzieningen St Eustatius](#), 7 July 2020.

therefore approach the National Ombudsman directly. Staff of the ombudsman's Caribbean Netherlands team visit the islands three times a year. They hold meetings with various public sector authorities and make themselves available to citizens with a complaint or query. The conversation can be conducted in Dutch, English or Papiamentu. From their contacts with the islanders, the team is able to form an impression of the problems people encounter in their dealings with government. The number of complaints handled by the National Ombudsman is gradually rising: from 191 in 2018 to 220 in 2019. Slightly over a third of all complaints relate to the public bodies: in 2019 there were 61 complaints against the Public Body of Bonaire, 12 against the Public Body of St Eustatius and 3 against the Public Body of Saba. Over half of all complaints (140) were presented verbally during the team's visits.⁸⁹ It is gratifying to note that citizens whose only language is Papiamentu have become more aware of the National Ombudsman's existence and how we can help. As in the European Netherlands, over half of all complaints can be resolved by means of a simple intervention.

At first, the National Ombudsman restricted investigations to those prompted by an individual complaint. Increasingly, however, the organisation initiates its own investigations, perhaps because there is a sudden rise in the number of complaints or reports about a particular topic. In many cases, the problems presented to the Caribbean Netherlands team are not incidental in nature but part of a broader pattern. In 2015, the National Ombudsman therefore adopted a revised strategy to include large-scale research projects, with findings and recommendations presented to the relevant government departments. There can also be topics and themes which engage the ombudsman's attention for some time, and which it is felt should also be brought to the attention of the ministers responsible. This certainly applies to problems which affect a large number of citizens, as in the case of poverty.

5 The Ombudsman for Children in the Caribbean Netherlands

The Ombudsman for Children promotes and upholds the rights of all children and young people in the Netherlands, including those living on Bonaire, Saba and St Eustatius. Like the National Ombudsman, the Ombudsman for Children is authorised to deal with complaints relating to the three public bodies and other public sector authorities on the islands. In addition, the Ombudsman for Children is the designated body to deal with complaints against certain organisations which operate under private law, such as schools. Like the National Ombudsman, the Ombudsman for Children is the 'second line complaints assessor' with regard to complaints against central government, including the RCN, and the first line assessor with regard to the public bodies and other local agencies. In principle, a complaint relating to a private law organisation, such as a school, must first be submitted to the organisation itself. However, if this is not possible or desirable, the complainant may approach the Ombudsman for Children directly. The Ombudsman for Children considers it important that children and adults in the Caribbean Netherlands know of the organisation's existence and how to contact us. Staff therefore visit the islands regularly, working in close cooperation with the National Ombudsman. To provide the best possible assistance to the children of Bonaire, Saba and St Eustatius, it is important that the Ombudsman for Children knows the organisations and agencies that exist, how their internal complaints procedures work, and how we can reach the target group.

89 National Ombudsman, [Annual Report 2019](#).



The Ombudsman for Children first visited Bonaire, Saba and St Eustatius in 2016. Since then, there have been several return visits to the three islands, during which children, parents, administrators and professionals were invited to tell us about their priorities and needs. Several complaints have been received and processed. In many cases, they involve particularly complex problems, such as a child with disabilities who was unable to access education. Some cases involve smaller problems which nevertheless have a significant impact on young people's lives. Most can be quickly resolved by means of an intervention. Expert meetings have been held on all islands to discuss the implications of the Convention of the Rights of the Child with regard to decision-making procedures.

Appendix 2 Improving the situation of children and young adults in the Caribbean Netherlands

1 Introduction

The Netherlands became a signatory to the UN International Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1995. All provisions of the convention, which inter alia stipulate that children⁹⁰ must have an adequate standard of living and be protected against violence, abuse and neglect, apply in full throughout the European and Caribbean parts of the Netherlands. The convention also states that conditions must be in place to encourage “the full and harmonious development” of all children.

The CRC establishes four basic rights, from which a further fifty rights follow. One of those basic rights is the principle of non-discrimination (Art. 2). This means that all rights must apply to all children in the Netherlands, including those in the Caribbean Netherlands. Another basic right is that the interests of the child are paramount in all decisions by government or other organisations, where such decisions may influence the life and development of the child (Art. 3). This applies to decisions taken in respect of an individual child as well as those affecting one or more groups of children. The third basic right is that of ‘life and development’ (Art. 6). A government must “ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child”. In combination with Article 2, this means that legislation passed by the Dutch government may differentiate between European Dutch children and those in the Caribbean Netherlands only insofar as this serves to ensure that the most seriously underprivileged children enjoy the same development opportunities as the least underprivileged. In other words, positive discrimination is permitted. The fourth and final basic right is established by Article 12, which states that “[a] child who is capable of forming his or her own views is to be assured the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child.” The remaining fifty provisions of the Convention flow from these basic rights. Some of those provisions are particularly relevant to children living in poverty, as in the Caribbean Netherlands. They are:

- **The right to an adequate standard of living**

Article 27 requires signatories to “recognise the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child’s physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.” Although primary responsibility rests with the child’s parents, this provision obliges governments to ensure that all basic requirements of the child are met. If parents are unable to meet those requirements, the government must provide support. Basic requirements are not confined to housing, food and clothing, but also include stimulating activities such as sport and culture.

- **The right to optimal health**

Article 24 establishes the “right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health and to facilities for the treatment of illness and rehabilitation of health”. Alongside access to healthcare services, the article also establishes an entitlement to “the provision of adequate nutritious foods and clean drinking water.” Here too, primary responsibility rests with parents. If they are unable to provide such basic amenities as a healthy diet and clean water, perhaps due to poverty, the government must step in, offering direct support to parents or otherwise ensuring that this right is upheld.

90 The terms ‘child’ and ‘children’ refer to all persons under the age of 18.

- **The right to social benefits**

Article 26 is concerned with the right of the child “to benefit from social security, including social insurance.” This does not mean that the government is expected to allow children to benefit directly from social security, as claimants in their own right, but they must be able to do so through their parents or guardians. Article 26 is closely allied with Article 27, which concerns the right to an adequate standard of living, and is an instrumental right which underpins various other provisions of the Convention.
- **The right to protection against violence, abuse and neglect**

Article 19 states that children must be protected against all forms of violence, abuse and neglect. Where financial concerns cause parents to overreact to their children’s behaviour, or are not often at home because they have to work several jobs to make ends meet, abuse and neglect may result. Children living in ‘rough’ neighbourhoods where violence and crime are rife are also at risk. The government must provide adequate protection, perhaps through parenting support or by ensuring access to childcare facilities when parents are at work.
- **The right to protection against drugs**

Article 33 is concerned with the government’s obligation to protect children against “the illicit use of drugs and psychotropic substances,” as well as “the use of children in the illicit production and trafficking of such substances.” For parents (or other relatives) living in poverty, drug use can be a way of forgetting about their problems, while dealing or trafficking may be seen as an escape route from poverty. Although drugs use and drugs dealing are certainly not unknown in the European Netherlands, this right comes under additional strain in the Caribbean Netherlands, which has a reputation as an international hub for drugs trafficking. Here too, the right obliges government to provide protection, which may involve targeted information or better law enforcement in high-risk areas. The government can also ensure that parents have adequate financial means whereby drugs dealing ceases to be an attractive way of earning extra income.
- **The right to protection against sexual exploitation and abuse**

Article 34 is concerned with the preventions of sexual exploitation and abuse, whether committed within or beyond the family circle. For those living in poverty, prostitution may seem a way out. Homelessness can make people – including children – more susceptible to sexual abuse, and this is also true for those living in overcrowded accommodation. The government has an obligation to protect children against all forms of sexual exploitation and abuse. It can do so by ensuring safe, secure housing for children and families, as well as adequate childcare facilities for those whose parents are at work.

2 Working on improvement in the context of the rights of the child

Although all children have the right to an adequate standard of living, for some living in the Caribbean Netherlands that is illusory. In 2013, UNICEF concluded that the situation in which they grow up fails to meet the requirements of the CRC. Shortcomings were noted in all life domains: family and upbringing, education, health, safety, recreation, housing and finance.⁹¹ UNICEF had been commissioned by the Dutch government⁹² to research the situation in which children in the Caribbean Netherlands were living. The resultant report was one of the drivers of the government's renewed efforts to improve opportunities for this group.⁹³ An initial budget of three million euros was allocated "for the improvement of the position of children in the Caribbean Netherlands through action to resolve (the causes and effects of) poverty and violence, and promotion of social participation by young people."⁹⁴

During the 2017 'Children's Rights Tour' of the Caribbean Netherlands, the Ombudsman for Children spoke with many children and young adults who are reasonably satisfied with their lives, but who nevertheless do not enjoy the same rights as their counterparts in the European Netherlands. She concluded that the Dutch government is applying double standards.⁹⁵ The Netherlands Institute for Human Rights endorsed this view, in the sense that differences between legislation, policy and practice in the two regions had not been adequately explained or justified.⁹⁶ The reports produced by UNICEF, the Institute and the Ombudsman for Children helped to ensure that children's rights in the Caribbean Netherlands were given a prominent place on the political agenda. Various measures intended to substantially improve the position of young people in the region have since been implemented and the necessary funding made available. UNICEF, working closely alongside the public bodies and local organisations, has recently completed a follow-up study.⁹⁷ Its report concludes that "the parties charged with various tasks in connection with children's rights on the islands have worked extremely hard to bring about improvement" and "significant progress has been made in various policy domains." It cites examples: all schools have now attained the minimum quality rating; there has been a reduction in the number of teen pregnancies; greater attention is being devoted to poverty-related problems, and there has been increased investment in the quality and accessibility of childcare services.⁹⁸ However, the report also notes that it is difficult to ascertain exactly how much the situation has improved since 2013 due to the absence of reliable data. UNICEF continues to have concerns about the vulnerability of children and young adults on the three islands. Their situation is not being monitored closely enough, and there are no welfare services which specifically focus on children living in poverty. The 2019 report includes thirty recommendations "for stronger children's rights in the Caribbean Netherlands", arranged according to three priority areas: (1) the implementation of legislation to tackle child abuse and domestic violence; (2) better coordination between the various ministries involved in the youth welfare chain, and between central government and the public bodies; (3) better progress monitoring for new programmes, to be achieved by means of data-gathering and measurable performance indicators.

91 UNICEF, Kind op Bonaire, St. Eustatius en Saba, Kinderrechten in Caribisch Nederland (summary), May 2013.

92 Since 2010, the Dutch government had been responsible for the implementation of the CRC in the Caribbean Netherlands.

93 UNICEF, Situatieanalyse kinderen en jongeren in Caribisch Nederland, 2019.

94 Parliamentary papers II 2014-2015, 34 000 IV no. 9.

95 Report, [Als je het ons vraagt](#), Ombudsman for Children, July 2017

96 <https://mensenrechten.nl/nl/nieuws/armoede-en-dubbele-standaard-caribisch-nederland-ook-voor-kinderen-problematisch>

97 UNICEF, Situatieanalyse kinderen en jongeren in Caribisch Nederland, 2019.

98 Letter from UNICEF to the State Secretary of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, 20 September 2019.

In his response to the UNICEF report,⁹⁹ the State Secretary of BZK stated that poverty reduction policy is a local task. He also announced that the forthcoming Administrative Agreement with Bonaire provided for further professionalisation of the island's poverty and debt reduction strategy, with policy formally established by a local regulation or published policy rules.¹⁰⁰ A similar undertaking is included in the Saba Package, which also applies to St Eustatius. There is also to be an administrative agreement on prevention policy, which is relevant to young people in that it provides for better sex education in schools and classroom programmes on the risks of alcohol, drugs and smoking, and a sports agreement intended to establish a permanent range of sports and exercise opportunities. The State Secretary notes that adolescence is an extremely important phase in a young person's development. The Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport (VWS), in association with Mental Health Caribbean, is to investigate the mental health of adolescents on the islands, as well as their use of various recreational substances, both legal and illicit. According to the State Secretary, the government intends to pursue its efforts to improve children's rights in the Caribbean Netherlands, closely following the UNICEF recommendations, whereby a "structured and above all pragmatic approach is essential". He stresses that the government is working towards a clear objective, viz. to improve the living standards of all residents of the Caribbean Netherlands, including children and young adults.

A Improvements further to the right to an adequate standard of living

In June 2019, the State Secretary of SZW established a 'benchmark' for a social minimum income, and announced a number of measures intended to increase the socioeconomic security of the residents of the Caribbean Netherlands.¹⁰¹

He further announced extra efforts to reduce the cost of several essential outgoings, including housing and childcare. The statutory minimum wage, benefit amounts and the child allowance were increased on 1 January 2019 and again on 1 January 2020. As a result, islanders who rely on benefits or a minimum-wage job now have a somewhat higher disposable income. Further independent research is to be undertaken to determine an acceptable level for the minimum wage.¹⁰² The government has also taken steps to improve the quality and affordability of childcare services. This enables more women to take up employment knowing that their children are in good hands. Central government has also provided funding to improve the public bodies' employment mediation services (the 'Jobcentres'). According to the government, these measures will give children from poor families a better life.

Unfortunately, the recent coronavirus outbreak is likely to worsen the poverty problem in the Caribbean Netherlands. The loss of tourism is a particular blow to the islands' economy and it will be the most vulnerable groups who are hardest hit by the economic effects of the pandemic. The self-employed and anyone without a permanent employment contract have suddenly found themselves with no source of income. Many were already having great difficulty in making ends meet, relying on casual work washing dishes, fishing, doing odd jobs or driving tourists around

99 Knops, R. (2019) Letter to parliament about findings of the analysis of children's rights in the Caribbean Netherlands, 2 October 2019.

100 The Ministry of SWZ will provide assistance on request.

101 IJkpunt bestaanszekerheid Caribisch Nederland, 27 June 2019.

102 On 17 June 2020, the State Secretary of SWZ indicated (in [correspondence](#) relating to children's rights and the establishment of a social minimum income) that this independent research will be undertaken in the second half of 2020.

the islands. They are not eligible for the government's income support provisions intended to shore up the economy until the crisis has passed.¹⁰³

On 27 June 2019, in its response to the progress report on the establishment of a minimum social income,¹⁰⁴ the government undertook to issue an annual statement to both houses of parliament informing members about the progress of its joint efforts (with the public bodies) to improve the situation of the people of the Caribbean Netherlands. In the first such progress report,¹⁰⁵ the State Secretary of SZW wrote that a number of significant steps have been taken to improve the income position of the residents of the Caribbean Netherlands and to reduce the high cost of living. The statutory minimum wage, benefits and child allowance have again been increased. Central government and the public bodies have stimulated the construction and renovation of social housing, and a pilot scheme has been launched in which rental increase compensation is to be extended to the private sector. In addition, the government has allocated funding of 9.8 million euros to improve the quality and affordability of childcare services. Ways of reducing the costs of essential utilities such as energy, telecoms and water, are being investigated.¹⁰⁶

B Improvements further to the right of protection against violence, neglect and abuse

The Istanbul Convention,¹⁰⁷ which came into effect in the European Netherlands in 2016, requires the government to take firm action to reduce and eliminate domestic violence and violence against women. However, the Convention has yet to be effectuated in the Caribbean Netherlands, even though women and children on the islands face a very real risk of falling victim to violence, neglect or abuse.¹⁰⁸ While the Dutch government has stated the intention of extending the Convention to the Caribbean Netherlands 'in due course', no firm deadline has been set. The current government has nevertheless undertaken to develop a "comprehensive and sustainable approach to ensure that all obligations are met."¹⁰⁹ As part of this process, in 2017 the State Secretary of VWS and the public bodies signed the 'Administrative Agreement on Action to Tackle Domestic Violence and Child Abuse'. The agreement covers the period to 2020 and lists the priority areas for which the public bodies and the Ministry of VWS are responsible. The main focus of the public bodies is prevention, while the ministry is responsible for response measures, including victim support.

103 See Annex 1 to the letter of 7 April 2020 by the Minister of BZK on measures for the Caribbean Netherlands in connection with the coronavirus situation which states that, in exceptional cases, a person may be eligible for the temporary wage costs subsidy or compensation for loss of earnings, even if not registered with the Chamber of Commerce (trade register). This might be the case for, say, taxi drivers or fishermen. However, the applicant must be classed as self-employed. In such situations, SZW will therefore make enquiries with the Tax and Customs Administration. When submitting an application, only current income is relevant. Full income records for previous years will not be required.

104 Parliamentary Papers II, 2018/2019, 35000-IV, no. 61.

105 Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, [Voortgangsrapportage ijkpunt bestaanszekerheid Caribisch Nederland 2020 \(8 July 2020\)](#). The Hague: Ministry of SWZ.

106 In response to the coronavirus situation, the government has introduced a number of temporary subsidies to offset these costs. The State Secretary describes them as 'appropriate to the government's ambition of reducing the costs of essential items and outgoings.'

107 The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence was ratified by the Netherlands in November 2015 and came into effect in the European Netherlands on 1 March 2016.

108 <https://www.unicef.nl/files/Situatieanalyse%20kinderen%20en%20jongeren%20in%20Caribisch%20Nederland%202019.pdf>. <https://www.regioplan.nl/wp-content/uploads/data/file/rapporten-2400-2499/2426-Eindrapport-De-aanpak-van-huiselijk-geweld-op-de-BES-eilanden-Regioplan-april-2014.pdf>. <https://kennisopenbaarbestuur.nl/rapporten-publicaties/vijf-jaar-caribisch-nederland-gevolgen-voor-de-bevolking/>; <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/rapporten/2019/02/12/tk-bijlage-veiligheidsbeeld-bes-2018>.

109 <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2020/05/14/kamerbrief-over-voortgang-aanpak-huiselijk-geweld-en-kindermishandeling-in-caribisch-nederland>.

A report issued by the Law Enforcement Council (Raad voor de Rechtshandhaving) in March 2020 states that the Administrative Agreement has served to increase knowledge and expertise about domestic violence, and that the problem can now be discussed more openly on the islands. The Council stresses the importance of continuing the action initiated by the Administrative Agreement even after it officially expires in 2020.

Because the corona crisis 'lockdown' forces people to stay at home in close proximity, the public bodies, social agencies and police have stepped up their monitoring of vulnerable families and individuals. Assistance is provided as necessary. Islanders are able to contact the public body, either by phone or email, with any questions about the practical and financial assistance available. A day-care centre for children from families affected by domestic violence and child abuse remains open, while the Youth Care and Family department has launched an emergency 'rapid response' prevention programme. Residents of St Eustatius now have direct access to the Child Helpline (Kindertelefoon) on Aruba, which provides advice to children and young adults under 25. The public body is developing a scheme in which church leaders will help to encourage people to discuss domestic violence and child abuse more openly, both during and after the corona 'lockdown'. On Saba, the public body has a social worker who is available to answer questions and provide assistance as necessary. All members of the community are urged to 'look after each other' in these difficult times, and to contact the Youth Care and Family unit (JGCN) immediately should they have any concerns.

Future legislation

In the second half of 2020, a bill is to be presented to parliament whereby, following consultation with the public bodies, all violence and abuse, physical or mental, and all other forms of demeaning or degrading treatment within a familial, parental or comparable relationship, will be proscribed in the Caribbean Netherlands and punishable under criminal law. In addition, the feasibility of extending the Wet Tijdelijk Huisverbod (Domestic Exclusion Orders Act 2008) to the Caribbean Netherlands is to be examined. The Ministry of Justice and Security (J&V) and the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport (VWS) are to determine the extent to which it is possible and desirable to establish a legislative basis for action to combat domestic violence and child abuse. Before the end of 2020, the Ministry of VWS and the public bodies will ascertain what is necessary to ensure that such action fulfils all requirements of the Istanbul Convention.

C Improvements further to the right to development

The Education Agenda for the Caribbean Netherlands¹¹⁰ is intended to ensure that, by 2020, all students in the region will receive an education which is at least comparable in quality to that in the European Netherlands. This entails achieving a demonstrable improvement in the quality of education, with a concomitant improvement in output and results. In 2017, the Minister of Education noted that quality had indeed improved compared to the situation in 2010, as had the physical conditions in which students are taught. Given the small scale of the islands, however, qualified managers and school principals are in short supply. It can be difficult to recruit and retain staff of the required calibre. The Education Care Expertise Centres provide support and guidance with regard to children with learning difficulties or severe behavioural problems. The schools are satisfied with this support. The Education Agenda notes that institutes providing 'second chance' education (for young adults who dropped out of school early) are doing good and important work.¹¹¹

110 Tweede Onderwijsagenda voor Caribisch Nederland "Samen werken aan de volgende stap" voor de periode 2017-2020.

111 Sociale Kanstrajecten (SKJ), run by FORMA on Bonaire, by the New Challenges Foundation on St Eustatius, and the Saba Reach Foundation on Saba.

On Bonaire, several students have taken advantage of second chance education as part of the 'Social Opportunity Programme' (SKJ), enabling them to find employment or progress into further education. On the other islands, particularly Saba, the target group is extremely small.

The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW) is to consider whether young people under 18 can also take part in the Social Opportunity Programme. This point will be included in the formal evaluation of the underlying legislation. The allowance paid to students (\$188 per month) is seen as an incentive for young people to enrol on the programme. However, for most people it is not enough to live on, whereupon they are often forced to discontinue their education (again) and seek employment.

One effect of the Education Agenda is that interdepartmental cooperation in youth policy is being formalised and intensified. In late 2018, for example, a consultation meeting was held on each island at which officials from various ministries met with staff from the local youth welfare agencies. The ministries of OCW, VWS and SZW hold regular meetings with a view to strengthening cooperation in the social and youth welfare domains in the Caribbean Netherlands. Such interdepartmental meetings draw on the findings of UNICEF's research to identify themes and topics to which extra attention should be devoted. In education, there is cooperation between all four countries of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Their respective ministers of education attach great importance to this voluntary collaboration, which is based on the principle of equal partnership. There are plans to establish a joint teacher training college, and for a joint analysis of the difficulties faced by students wishing to progress to higher level of education in another part of the Kingdom. Language, as well as differences in the curriculum and entrance requirements, can prove an obstacle to mobility.

In the progress report on education in the Caribbean Netherlands of July 2019,¹¹² the ministers state that distinct progress has been made. However, they also note that the quality of education is fragile, and that further efforts are required to maintain and safeguard the improvements made thus far. The shortage of qualified staff poses a particular risk. Following the adoption of English as the language of tuition, there are clear indications that students on St Eustatius now have a better grasp of the course material. However, on both St Eustatius and Saba, helping students to become proficient in Dutch remains a point for attention with a view to continued education in the European Netherlands. The Taalunie language institute has therefore been asked to develop teaching and assessment resources in Dutch as a Foreign Language.

112 Letter to parliament by the joint ministers of education, 10 July 2019.

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Report 2020/030 is a publication of the
National Ombudsman and the Ombudsman
for Children, 8 September 2020

