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Making ends meet

Poverty-related problems in
the Caribbean Netherlands

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1. Why reflect on poverty in the Caribbean Netherlands?

It is well-known that poverty is a persistent issue in the Caribbean Netherlands that is passed down the generations. But poverty is more than just a financial problem: it also affects the way children are raised and educated, causes stress within families and creates a sense of shame for both children and adults. People develop survival strategies that are passed from generation to generation. In recent years, the National Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children have been investigating specific groups affected by poverty: single mothers and their children, young adults and the elderly. This has given them an insight into the causes and consequences of poverty. Although recommendations have been made, there has still been insufficient progress when it comes to improving the situation of people in poverty in the Caribbean Netherlands. The same applies to their quality of life.

2. What does it mean to live and grow up in poverty?

When there is poverty within a family, this has significant consequences for children's daily lives and development. Poverty creates obstacles that can result in a cycle of poverty, which returns to have an impact later on in life. This pattern is common to most poverty-related issues and is something we also observed in our investigations in the Caribbean part of the Netherlands. This vicious circle of poverty has serious consequences for people of all ages: children, young adults, (single) parents and the elderly. Elderly people who live in poverty often grew up in poverty themselves and the same applies to their parents. Young adults in poverty have limited opportunities to escape it, because they are lacking the basics they need. Parents are forced to work long days and take on multiple jobs. As a result, they do not have the time and peace and quiet to devote to parenting, which can mean that children leave school early and end up in low-paid jobs.

2.1 Unsafe conditions

Parents who live in poverty generally have limited opportunities to provide their children with the care, love and attention they need. They are under pressure and suffer stress caused by financial problems. This results in less structure, support and attention for the children, because parents are out at work for much of the time. In situations like this, the rules in place can often lack clarity, which can mean children end up feeling unsafe. In the Caribbean Netherlands, poverty often goes hand-in-hand with issues with housing. This in turn increases the risk of tension, violence and (sexual) abuse and the damage this can cause in later life.

2.2 Disadvantages

Children who are raised in poverty also face obstacles in their development outside of the home situation. They are often treated differently than children who are not living in poverty, have limited opportunities to engage in stimulating leisure activities and there is too little supervision of their interaction with their contemporaries and with adults. The situation at home makes it more difficult for these children to learn, placing them at an educational disadvantage. This in turn increases the risk of school dropout and leaving school without a qualification. These young people then find it more difficult to find work that provides enough income to survive. As a result, their opportunities for escaping poverty remain limited even in adulthood.

2.3 Slippery slope

The fact that parents are often unavailable and unable to show attention or interest, leaves children more vulnerable to less reliable people who may show attention and interest but may not always have the right intentions. Unplanned pregnancies and parenthood at an early age can mean that young people end up with no qualifications and have to resort to low-paid jobs. Contacts with unreliable contemporaries and adults can lead to criminal activities and prostitution as a means of earning money. This clearly reduces their chances of a more positive future.

3. Which underlying problems perpetuate poverty across the generations?

During our investigations, we encountered underlying issues that are making it difficult to tackle poverty problems. Solutions appear to be difficult to achieve because these underlying questions are being ignored. It is therefore important that these issues are eliminated. They are partly associated with the relationship between the European Netherlands and the Caribbean Netherlands and partly relate to the small scale of the islands.

3.1 Inequality and lack of trust

People in the Caribbean part of the Netherlands have little trust in the government and institutions. In their experience, (social) provisions and services on the islands are not equal to those in the European Netherlands. As a result of this sense of inequality, they feel like 'second-class' citizens of the Netherlands and distrustful towards its seat of government in The Hague. In fact, citizens of the Caribbean Netherlands are indeed disadvantaged when compared to their counterparts in the European Netherlands. One example of this is the fact that the legislative process for equal treatment laws, such as the Equal Treatment Act, was only initiated in January of this year. This affects the availability of services and provisions that are essential for anyone to escape poverty.

3.2 Lack of information, coordination and participation

It is extremely important that children and adults alike are able to participate in decision-making, have their voices heard and exercise an influence. This calls for a proactive attitude on the part of the government in order to inform and engage inhabitants of the Caribbean Netherlands. Information must also be presented in a way that is understandable and accessible, including for children. Personal contact with officials and care providers is crucial in reaching out to people who need help and giving them control over their lives. This can also help to improve trust in the government and authorities.

3.3 Small scale

The small scale of the islands has both positive and negative connotations. It can increase the sense of community but also means that everyone knows everything about everyone else. This helps to perpetuate the culture of shame that persists on the islands. It also makes it difficult for organisations that provide assistance to maintain a professional distance. The fact that there is no policy on social themes such as poverty is another consequence of the small scale of the islands, since the island governments have only limited capacity to develop independent policy to tackle problems. However, this also opens up opportunities for a more integrated approach and a potentially simpler system than currently exists in the European Netherlands.

3.4 Cultural differences

The culture on the islands is significantly different from that in the European Netherlands, which means that laws and regulations are not always a good match for local customs and behaviour. For example, family structures tend to be more extended in the Caribbean Netherlands, which affects parenting duties and support systems. There is a need for a greater understanding of the local culture when laws and policy are being drafted. Close collaboration between the European Netherlands and the Caribbean Netherlands, involving participation by both parties, is important in bridging this cultural gap.

4. Important results and recommendations from investigations

The three investigations conducted by the ombudsmen reveal that the problems people in poverty face go much further than financial issues, such as income. They relate to housing, employment and education, care and social support. The problems span every generation, from young to old. For all generations, this has a negative impact on their quality of life and causes feelings of insecurity, stress and powerlessness. In their three reports, the ombudsmen therefore suggest a series of recommendations to eliminate or at the very least reduce this negative impact.

4.1 Income

Incomes are too low and the cost of living is extremely high. As a result, many parents and elderly people struggle to make ends meet. Elderly people receiving statutory pension alone find it virtually impossible to cope, working people have to accept several insecure jobs in order to earn a living and young people have limited opportunities for generating sufficient income. Many people find budgeting a challenge and do not know where to turn to or whether they are entitled to the help that they need. In addition to setting a realistic social minimum income, increased opportunities for easily accessible debt counselling and more legal services are therefore necessary.

4.2 Housing

Affordable and suitable housing is in short supply, as a result of which accommodation is often unstable and inadequate. Private rents are exorbitantly high and there are no rent controls. Many people are forced to resort to cohabiting in cramped housing. This can cause tension and lead to problems, such as (child) mistreatment, domestic abuse, sexual abuse and the formation of unequal relationships. Because of this, there should be sufficient refuge and shelter facilities, particularly for young people in vulnerable situations. Daycare facilities could also improve the well-being of (lonely) elderly people.

4.3 Employment and education

Education has a crucial role to play in overcoming poverty because it can lead to better-paid jobs. However, there are only limited educational opportunities on the islands, especially for young people who are unable to leave the islands or have behavioural issues. The further education opportunities available for parents are also limited. This is not only because of the poor availability of courses, but also due to practical issues, such as a lack of time and problems with transport. Parents are often forced to work rather than pursuing an education, which makes it even more difficult to find better-paid work. Young people struggle to find work placements and have to compete with contemporaries from the European Netherlands and immigrants from South America. More educational opportunities for both young people and parents are therefore essential. For young people, after-school activities could also help to provide positive stimulation. We have recently seen an increase in the number of these on the islands, but it is important that they continue to be offered.

4.4 Care

Because of the high cost of living and food, people in poverty can find it difficult to access sufficient and healthy food. The result of this is poorer health and an increased need for medical care. However, access to care is limited and the Social Support Act (WMO) does not yet apply on the islands. Child maintenance payments are rarely made and single parents receive very little guidance and support. Children who grow up in poverty often have to look after themselves because their parents are busy working several jobs. A buddy for young people and parenting support for parents could prove helpful in this. Access to childcare facilities, the focus of some recent attention on the three islands, makes an important difference for young children.

For elderly people, daycare facilities could play an important role, for example in providing healthy meals.

4.5 Social support

In view of its relatively large size, Bonaire in particular is lacking a social network on which the elderly, but also parents and children, can rely. This means they are left with little or no safety net. In addition, public transport services are virtually non-existent on all three islands, leaving all groups of people isolated. Children are unable to move around independently and single mothers without transport find it difficult to take their children to school and collect them. This eats up additional time, which tends to be in short supply, especially if they have several jobs. A buddy could also prove useful here in providing children and young people with a positive social contact. For single parents, support in parenting and help with access to childcare could also be beneficial. For parents living in poverty, it is essential that this childcare also remains financially accessible.

5. In conclusion: what is needed?

All of the above is based on information provided to the ombudsmen by citizens and children in the Caribbean Netherlands during their investigations. Every generation needs to have positive future prospects, but the outlook for several generations in the Caribbean Netherlands looks bleak. Clearly, tackling poverty in the Caribbean Netherlands is complicated and there are no rapid solutions. While financial support is essential, it is not sufficient in itself to break the cycle of poverty. Indeed, this is also confirmed by the findings of the Caribbean Netherlands Social Minimum Committee.

It is essential that solutions are developed in close collaboration with the residents of the Caribbean Netherlands. At the same time, the needs of Caribbean elderly people, parents and children must be the central consideration in this. In our three investigations and these general reflections, we have presented a series of essential building blocks for reaching solutions. Although the government is in agreement with the conclusions made by the ombudsmen in their investigations, the ombudsmen have noted in recent years that it takes a long time for work to start on their recommendations. They have also seen that solutions are often offered for short periods only, in the form of pilots, making it impossible for them to become permanently embedded. But if it is to break the vicious circle of poverty, the government must now take rapid steps towards sustainable and integrated solutions for poverty and related issues. This must go hand-in-hand with the elimination of the obstacles we have identified, taking account of the cultural differences and small scale of the islands. This will enable us to strive towards a better future for people living in the Caribbean Netherlands. The National Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children will not rest until this has been achieved.

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