



# Caribbean children pay the price

An investigation into poverty-related problems faced by single parents and their children in the Caribbean Netherlands

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### Shanice's story (age 11)

Hurrah, it's Monday and Shanice is pleased to be able to return to school after a pretty dull weekend. At weekends, her mother works in the nail salon, so Shanice has to look after her younger sister and twin brothers. She is slightly jealous of Gianni, her friend, who spends every weekend at the crafting club. She does lots of great things there and has fun with the other children. Gianni has also asked her to come along with her, but she's not even tried asking her mother, there's just not enough money to pay for it. Even if she had the money, how would she even get there? Gianni is always dropped off and collected by her father, but Shanice's mother is at work and she hasn't even seen her father for what feels like a century. There's no bus service and no one to collect her or take her there.

Shanice wakes her sister who shares a room with her and goes straight to the room where her mother sleeps with her brothers. Mum has already left, off to the hotel where she works as a chambermaid on weekdays and helps in the kitchen. Get a move on boys, she urges the twins. It takes at least twenty minutes to walk to school and Shanice is already reluctant to put her shoes on. She's only just outgrown them, but mum really can't afford new shoes. She'd actually prefer to go to school in bare feet, but as soon she suggested that, mum started screaming that she should forget the idea: otherwise people would see that they were short of money. Because mum works so much, she's always tired. But she herself is also tired, because she has so much to do: washing up, cleaning, doing the washing, shopping, cooking... if she ever forgets anything, mum gets angry. Mum is often angry because she's so tired and Shanice understands that. When the twins were still small, everything was different. That was fun! They lived with Danilo then, the twin's father, in a bigger house, closer to school. It was a great atmosphere: relatives would visit and mum used to laugh a lot. But the rows gradually increased and the more shouting there was, the less mum laughed. If there was any fighting, Shanice quickly ensured she escaped with her sister and the twins, so that they didn't have to see it. The first time that Danilo hit mum, she tried to help her, but because she also got hit herself, she didn't dare do it anymore. Shanice was glad when Danilo eventually left. Well, not quite left: he'd done something bad, mum said, that meant he had to go to prison. Mum, Shanice and the little ones had visited him there once. It was a lovely day, the people there were so nice. Someone patted her head, which she loved, and a guard even started kicking a ball around with them in the corridor.

In the rickety cupboard next to the empty fridge, there's still a little bread left from yesterday. Shanice divides it fairly between the three youngsters, taking the last crust for herself. Before they leave the house, she inspects the others' hair and clothes. Her brother's laces are undone again. She's shown him how to lace them up a thousand times, but he can never quite manage it. Fortunately, they are good at counting, something that she also taught them. She's looking forward to this evening, because mum finally has an evening off. If mum isn't too tired, they might even be able to make a Tik-Tok video together, that would be fun. She also wants to do some school work for her test, which is always difficult when she has to look after the little ones.

When they arrive at school at exactly 7:10, Shanice feels relaxed. She feels a sense of freedom when other people are looking after her sister and the twins. But she's also slightly tired. At school, they don't really know about the situation at home, because that's not their business, says mum. Shanice is hungry! She sits at the table and fills her plate. She knows that she can concentrate much better in the classroom with a full stomach. Fortunately, she's a good learner, but when everything gets too much, when she worries about mum and the little ones, things don't go so well. Then she gets stressed, because she's determined to get her diploma and continue to learn. She doesn't want to have to do all kinds of jobs like her mother, she wants a real job. That way, she won't have to depend on anyone. She intends to do everything she can to achieve that!

## Caribbean children pay the price

This report starts with Shanice's story, about a young girl from Bonaire growing up with her mother, her younger sister and twin brothers. A girl like so many others in the Caribbean Netherlands. In that sense, Shanice's story is not an isolated case. During this investigation, which looks at the parenting and development problems faced by single parents and their children when they have to survive on limited funds, we heard several examples of this type of story, from the single parents themselves and from their children. We remember the mother of several children we visited in her small, neglected house with just one bedroom. She has two jobs and works like mad just to keep her head above water. She just cannot afford a bigger flat. The house is in an unsafe neighbourhood and she worries about her children's well-being. When she has to work in the evenings, there is no babysitter and her children are left to roam the streets. We also recall the mother we visited at work who told us in tears how she cannot afford to buy things for school for her child because she is not eligible for special support allowance. Or the father who is unable to feed his children a hot meal in the evenings. What we found particularly striking was that almost all the parents had one or even several jobs, but they were still not earning enough even to meet basic living needs. Children like Shanice told us that, because their mothers were always at work, they not only have to care for themselves but also their younger siblings and have many household chores to do. That they had to share their bedroom with other family members because the house is so small and is occupied by the wider family and that there was so little for them to do on the islands outside school.

These stories show that single parents and their children face obstacles in numerous areas and also reveal what impact this has on society. The parents earn too little to live on and do not have any savings to fall back on. The stress caused by living in poverty means that they are less able to care for their children. Faced with financial problems, the parents are too stressed to provide sufficient attention to their children or simply do not have the time because they need to work so much, including outside school and office hours. Because their parents are not around to help them (combined with the stress, fatigue and lack of healthy food), the children are less able to cope at school. This is compounded by the fact that the parents often have no social network to fall back on or have no access to assistance from formal organisations, such as help with parenting or in organising financial issues. Generally, the other parent takes no responsibility for finance or parenting. This means that the single parent is literally on their own. The same applies to their children.

In the light of our reports about the elderly and young people, we would be repeating ourselves if we said that incomes on the islands are too low, the cost of living too high and the public facilities and services too limited in scope. Every time we visit the Caribbean islands, we are struck by the conditions in which the island residents are forced to live. This investigation was no different. We saw how people take on several jobs in an effort to juggle all their responsibilities. One cannot feel anything but respect for them. This made it all the more painful to hear that, in late 2021, 'The Hague' was refusing to increase the minimum wages in the Caribbean Netherlands 'since that would remove the incentive to work'.

We will continue to hammer home the message that the ongoing poverty in the Caribbean Netherlands must be brought to an end as soon as possible. We will push forward this message in our reports<sup>1</sup> and in our conversations with government officials or Members of Parliament. We take heart from the fact that action has now been taken on several of the

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<sup>1</sup> Ombudsman for Children (16 June 2021). Als je het ons vraagt. Kinderen op de BES-eilanden. Report number KOM003/2021; National Ombudsman, report Oog voor ouderen in Caribisch Nederland, September 2019. [Report 2019/045](#); National Ombudsman and Ombudsman for Children, report Het maakt uit waar je wieg gestaan heeft, September 2020. [Report 2020/030](#)

recommendations in our reports<sup>2</sup> and that the effort to tackle poverty in the Caribbean Netherlands has been placed more prominently on the agenda. There is no doubt that progress has been made. The minimum wage and other benefits have been increased by 10%, child allowance has risen and measures have been taken to reduce the cost of living, including childcare. But, in spite of every effort, this progress has been too slow and had too little effect. For large numbers of island residents, poverty remains an everyday reality. Around 40% of people live below the minimum subsistence level. Faster action will be needed in order to prevent this having an impact on the next generation. A social minimum income needs to be set that reflects the actual cost of living. Only when that happens, will it be possible to seriously start tackling poverty, and all the problems that result from it.

In addition to socio-economic security, efforts are also need to be made to boost employment and training opportunities for parents, introduce preventive measures in the social domain and effectively tackle debt. Support also needs to be provided to children currently in this situation whose further development will be hampered as a result. However, all of this calls for an integrated vision and policy on poverty, which is exactly what is lacking on the islands. This is partly because of a lack of overall coordination, combined with insufficient investment by the Dutch government to enable permanent improvements to the situation on the islands and the fact that little is being done to acknowledge the children affected and provide them with help.

In our work, we have seen repeatedly that the islands are lacking in policy on a range of social themes, such as poverty, the elderly, employment and refugees. Policy that is directly linked to the living situation of people in the Caribbean Netherlands. Far too often, 'The Hague' views the issue of poverty in the Caribbean Netherlands through a Dutch European lens, drafting policy without taking account of local conditions. It is unrealistic to expect the special municipalities to deal with this on their own. The number of civil servants in the public bodies is insufficient for that, the number of challenges too excessive and the problems too onerous. What we would like to see is a dialogue about developing policy that supports both the European and Caribbean parts of the Netherlands. Sharing knowledge and expertise can help to develop inclusive policy that provides space to accommodate the special characteristics and distinct nature of each region. Put simply, it is essential for 'The Hague' and the islands to collaborate more and take concerted action. As before, none of this is new, but it is still happening far too rarely.

Once more, we are calling on the government authorities on both sides of the ocean to take rapid and effective action in tackling poverty in the Caribbean Netherlands. The government authorities have a duty of care for their inhabitants, whatever their age, and with it a responsibility to ensure that no groups of people are excluded or cast aside. Together, let's ensure that the children of the Caribbean Netherlands are no longer the people forced to pay the price!

The National Ombudsman,

The Ombudsman for Children

Reinier van Zutphen

Margrite Kalverboer

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<sup>2</sup> Daycare for the elderly has been permanently extended and a supervised housing project for young people has been launched on Bonaire.

# 1 Why this investigation?

## 1.1 Rationale

The National Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children have had serious concerns about poverty in the Caribbean Netherlands for a long time. They are not alone in this. Several other organisations, including the Netherlands Institute for Human Rights and UNICEF, together with parliamentarians from different political parties, have regularly raised the alarm, emphasising that the ability to support oneself and one's family is a social and constitutional right that must be upheld, including in the Caribbean Netherlands.<sup>3</sup> Although successive Dutch governments have implemented various measures intended to improve the financial position of the islands' residents and reduce the cost of living<sup>4</sup>, the National Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children regard progress thus far to be inadequate. They have therefore instigated a wide-ranging, three-part thematic study of poverty in the Caribbean Netherlands. This chapter provides further details of the background to the thematic study and the focus of this specific investigation.

## 1.2 Background

In order to place the issue of poverty in the Caribbean Netherlands high on the political agenda – and ensure that it stays there – the National Ombudsman announced a study of poverty-related issues in the Caribbean Netherlands. This has developed into a study made up of three similar investigations highlighting the obstacles faced by three 'groups' of vulnerable inhabitants of the Caribbean Netherlands. This concerns (1) [people entitled to unemployment benefits \(AOV\)](#) living on or around the poverty line; (2) [young adults](#) who are forced to cope for themselves when they reach 18; and (3) single parents living with their children in poverty and who therefore experience issues with parenting. The second investigation was conducted jointly by the National Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children. This also applies to the third and final investigation in the series.

Despite recent increases in the statutory minimum wage, benefits and child allowance on the islands and the launch of the BES(t)4Kids programme, single parents who have several mouths to feed still have a hard time in the Caribbean Netherlands. This is why the Ombudsman for Children and the National Ombudsman both take the view that the group of single parents living on or below the poverty line deserve extra attention. The same applies to their children. The people involved are often young single mothers confronted with multiple problems. In far too many cases, they receive no maintenance payments from the absent parent. Finding and holding down a job, especially during the coronavirus pandemic, is difficult. Generally, people are unable to find suitable and affordable housing and some single parents (and their children) also face domestic violence, or have done in the past. In addition to the general impact of poverty that affects multiple groups in the Caribbean Netherlands, as a group, single parents face several specific problems. At times, they are literally on their own. Because they cannot rely on a partner to share responsibility for the children, they are dependent on effective and reliable childcare or a network in order to work. Parenting issues cannot be shared with a partner. They themselves have little time or space to rest or relax. The effects of policy are placing the children's quality of life under pressure.<sup>5</sup> Issues faced by the children include inadequate care, an unsafe home, and a lack of structure, rules and support. This can hinder

<sup>3</sup> See: <https://www.unicef.nl/nieuws/2019-10-03-teveel-onduidelijkheid-over-welzijn-kinderen-caribisch-nederland>; and <https://mensenrechten.nl/nl/nieuws/gelijke-rechten-moeten-ook-opgaan-voor-caribisch-nederland>.

<sup>4</sup> [Letter to Parliament](#) on progress report re. establishment of a social security benchmark for the Caribbean Netherlands, 27 July 2019; [Letter to Parliament](#) on progress report re. establishment of a social security benchmark for the Caribbean Netherlands, 2020, 8 July 2020. [Letter to Parliament](#) on progress report re. establishment of a social security benchmark for the Caribbean Netherlands, 2021, 14 June 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Quality of life is determined by 14 environmental conditions. Several parts of the report look at the effects of poverty on these 14 environmental conditions. A full list of these conditions has been included in Appendix 2.

their progress at school and limit their opportunities to participate in wider society. All of this means that any investigation into poverty among single parents actually covers two target groups: parents and their children.

### **Child Rights Convention and the Sustainable Development Goals**

Although parents bear primary responsibility for their children, the Dutch government has a duty to provide support, where necessary, to children to enable them to grow and develop to the full.<sup>6</sup> This duty applies to all children growing up in the Netherlands. That means it also applies to children growing up in poverty and also those children who live in the Caribbean Netherlands. These obligations are the consequence of ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).<sup>7</sup> In addition, the Dutch government also endorses the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) drawn up by the United Nations (UN). The UNCRC refers to a number of children's rights that are directly or indirectly linked to growing up in poverty. These include, for example, the right to an adequate standard of living (Article 27), the right to social benefits (Article 26) and the right to protection from neglect and violence (Article 19). A more comprehensive list of poverty-related children's rights can be found in Appendix 2 of the report *A poor beginning*.<sup>8</sup>

In view of the wide-ranging impact of poverty on people's lives and development opportunities, and particularly those of children, preventing and combating poverty and its effects on children's and adults' lives is an important objective within the SDGs. According to SDG 1, there should be no one still living in extreme poverty by 2030. The SDG goes further than merely ensuring that poverty is eradicated from the world. It also states that the number of women, men and children living below the poverty line must be reduced by at least half. Everyone should have equal rights to economic resources, access to basic services and 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.<sup>9</sup>

The National Ombudsman and Ombudsman for Children are actively working to achieve SDG 1 by assuming joint responsibility for promoting efforts to eradicate poverty and combating the negative impact of poverty on children's development opportunities. The research programme of which this report is a part is intended to encourage government agencies to devise creative solutions to reduce poverty in the Caribbean Netherlands. A basic precondition is that the wishes and requirements of the adults and children concerned should be taken fully into account.

### **1.3 Terms of reference**

This investigation has been undertaken to help the National Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children identify the obstacles faced on a daily basis by young single parents and their children living on or around the poverty line in the Caribbean Netherlands. What do poor single parents need in order to be able to effectively raise their children? What issues do the children of poor single mothers experience? What social facilities and services do they need in order to ensure healthy, well-rounded development? The aim of this investigation is to identify potential solutions that can contribute to preventing or reducing poverty. This is a long-term process, whereas the associated problems are extremely urgent. The ombudsmen also aim to

<sup>6</sup> See UNCRC, Article 6.

<sup>7</sup> Appendix 2 of the report includes further details of the provisions of the UNCRC.

<sup>8</sup> National Ombudsman and Ombudsman for Children, *A poor beginning*, Sept. 2020.

<sup>9</sup> See <https://www.nen.nl/Normontwikkeling/SDG/1-Geen-armoede.htm>.



use this investigation as a means of reaching a series of specific recommendations that can be implemented in the relatively short-term. This should include options for taking immediate action to tackle the problems of single parents and the effects that poverty has on the way they parent their children.

This investigation centres on the specific experiences of single parents and their children. At the same time, the investigation will also take account of the views of government and other organisations involved on the issues experienced and potential solutions in order to reach effective recommendations. The results of previous (poverty) studies conducted by the National Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children will also be taken into account in this investigation.

#### 1.4 Scope

This investigation focuses specifically on single parents and their children living on or around the poverty line. This means that there will inevitably be some overlap with the previous investigation<sup>10</sup> since relatively large numbers of single parents can also be categorised as young adults. Despite this, the Ombudsman for Children and the National Ombudsman consider a separate investigation to be necessary because the previous one focused mainly on the transition towards adulthood and the effect of poverty on young people's opportunities for a healthy and promising adult existence. This investigation focuses on the problems that poverty causes in terms of parenting (and the quality of it), parenthood and children's further development.

The authors are mindful that there are also differences between the three islands of the Caribbean Netherlands. Saba and St. Eustatius, for example, are significantly smaller in terms of population numbers than Bonaire. This can have positive advantages in that there is a greater sense of community on these islands, but it also has the downside that everyone knows everyone else's business. Moreover, unlike Saba and St. Eustatius, Bonaire has faced an influx of new inhabitants from Venezuela and Curaçao, in view of the worsening living conditions in those countries. On Bonaire, and especially among the target group, the everyday language is Papiamentu while on Saba and St Eustatius it is English. Dutch is used chiefly in government. There are also differences between the islands in terms of their administrative cultures. In this report we therefore specify the island concerned where relevant.

#### 1.5 Research methodology

During their visits to the Caribbean Netherlands, staff of the National Ombudsman and Ombudsman for Children have spoken to single parents who are experiencing a range of (financially-related) issues that remain unresolved despite their dealings with the government. This investigation aims to identify and catalogue these complaints. 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.

The researchers had discussions (sometimes remotely) with a range of government and other organisations on the island, including the central government representative, the *Rijksdienst Caribisch Nederland* (RCN, the organisation which represents central government on the islands), the public bodies, the Youth and Family Centre (*Centrum Jeugd en Gezin*, CJG), the Guardianship Council (*Voogdijraad*), Care and Youth Caribbean Netherlands (*Zorg en Jeugd Caribisch Nederland*, ZJCN), the Caribbean Netherlands Police Force (KPCN), a member of the municipal executive on Bonaire, the Onkobon consumer association, Stichting Project, Rosa di Sharon, *Expertisecentrum Onderwijs en Zorg* (EOZ), Expertise Centre Education Care (EC2&ECE), Mental Health Caribbean (MHC), Krusada Bonaire (Tabita women's refuge division), BES(t)4Kids, doctors, childcare facilities and several schools.

<sup>10</sup> National Ombudsman and Ombudsman for Children, *A poor beginning* 8 September 2020.

As part of this investigation, discussions were held with more than 40 professionals and care providers on the islands. In the European Netherlands, there were discussions with staff from the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations (BZK), the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment (SWZ), the Minister of Health, Welfare & Sport (VWS) and the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW).

### **Working visits**

In early October 2021, the Ombudsman for Children, a member of her staff and two members of National Ombudsman staff visited Bonaire. On 7 October 2021, an expert meeting attended by 14 professionals was held there. A working visit to Saba and St. Eustatius took place in early February 2022. In addition to talks with professionals, there were also conversations with 23 single parents and 21 children during the working visits. The report also includes three accounts by professionals, in which they describe the issues they face on a daily basis. Their names have been changed.

## **1.6 Structure of this report**

The document is structured as follows: Chapter 2 primarily looks at the financial issues faced by single parents and their children. Chapter 3 focuses on the social and emotional problems experienced by this group. The lack of certain services and facilities and the issues this causes are covered in Chapter 4. Finally, Chapter 5 includes the report's conclusion and recommendations. Appendix 1 provides a brief overview of relevant developments relating to the provision of a social minimum income in the Caribbean Netherlands. A list of the environmental conditions has been included in Appendix 2. The final Appendix includes a list of literature consulted and other relevant sources.

The ombudsmen believe that people's personal stories provide the most powerful picture. This is why this report starts with Shanice and her story. Although fictitious, the experiences recounted are based on the accounts related by children to the researchers. Each chapter contains quotes from single parents, children and professionals taken from conversations and/or correspondence. These quotes and fragments of text have been included in order to illustrate the different views and variety of perspectives. This is their story and their experiences. In order to ensure anonymity, any information that can be traced to the actual person has been removed.

### Juan, a professional working on Bonaire

“Life on the islands is expensive. Food and everyday items are twice the price they are in the Netherlands. As a direct result, many people’s lives are a struggle, but it’s worse for single mothers or fathers. You need to work to keep your head above water. Because these parents have a low level of education, they often need to take on several jobs in order to make ends meet. Obviously, that leaves little time left over for the children, who literally have to pay the price. I know a woman with learning difficulties who has children from various fathers, all of whom have disappeared. She is reliant on other people and the \$386 in support allowance she receives every month. That amount has to cover everything – which is obviously impossible. As a result, she has no choice but to live with her relatives. These places are often already over-occupied, since it is not unusual to have ten or even twelve people living in a one- or two-bedroom flat. This leads to tension, domestic violence, drug and alcohol use and even child mistreatment. Any young person exposed to traumatic experiences at an early age, including physical or emotional mistreatment or neglect, can go on to develop issues as a result. These may take the form of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) with negative changes in mood and cognition, as well as anxiety and attachment issues.

This mother depends on benefits, whereas other single mothers may have several jobs. It’s not unusual for them to work seven days a week. They need to put bread on the table. And it literally is bread: there are numerous families where bread is the only thing on the menu. With all the work and the never-ending stress, there’s simply no time for the children. But I’d like to make it clear that this is not deliberate neglect, it’s a case of having no other choice. If these women’s children end up needing help, they often fail to turn up for their appointments. This is because the appointments are during working hours or because they need to take time off that is unpaid. And that’s not to mention the mothers who can’t even afford to pay for the transport to get to their appointments. It’s almost impossible to motivate this group to get help for the child. Obviously, with no help, the child can face all kinds of problems. We also see behavioural issues in the children, often caused by trauma or domestic violence. I remember speaking to one mother whose child really needed help. She said: ‘I really want to come, but if I do, I’ll lose my job’ Because we understand how difficult it is for these women, our organisation tries to find alternative solutions, such as keeping the office open after working hours.

If I drive across the island at weekends, I often see children in certain neighbourhoods, no older than seven or eight, roaming the streets because there’s no supervision and nowhere to play where children can be supervised. Because the mothers don’t have enough time for their children, they receive insufficient individual attention, leading to attachment issues. As a result, these children often struggle with their emotions and have never learnt to express them. If I compare these children to children raised in better-off families, I can see a real difference, especially in terms of their self-confidence. Children who don’t face poverty are more able to set boundaries, more outspoken and stronger. Children from poor families are already disadvantaged from the outset. And a child that is neglected also goes on to neglect themselves. It’s a vicious circle. It starts and ends with poverty. Ultimately, if your only thought is: how do I survive this, there’s no room left for anything else. This is a common theme in the lives of the poorest on the islands.

Because of Covid, many single mothers lost their jobs in hospitality and the hotel industry. The good news is that tourism is gradually picking up again, but this group is now even more disadvantaged than ever before. And I certainly can’t see them catching up. Even worse: since Covid, the cost of living on the islands has risen by 28%. People are at the end of their tether because they no longer have any idea how to overcome their problems.”

## 2 The financial vulnerability of single-parent families

### 2.1 Introduction

Single-parent families are especially vulnerable financially for a range of different reasons. Generally, the worst problem on the islands is that incomes are too low and the cost of living too high. This has been highlighted on numerous occasions, including in the ombudsmen's two previous reports. This difficult financial situation is a significant source of frustration, tension and stress for many island residents and has a real impact on how they raise their children. The ombudsmen note that single parents who have several children are particularly prone to poverty. Their income is simply not enough to live on, and large numbers of these parents take on two jobs in order to be able to survive. The expense of everyday essential items and other basic necessities, such as the cost of schooling, etc. is the main cause of these financial problems. This chapter explores several of these issues in more detail.

### 2.2 The challenge of earning an income

Quite apart from the fact that there is very little work on the islands in any case, the wages from just one job are usually too low to cover all necessary outgoings. This is particularly the case for island residents who have jobs in the gig economy, based on zero-hours contracts.<sup>11</sup> This issue is covered in more detail in the report *A poor beginning*. Remarkably, it emerged during this investigation that even well-qualified workers on permanent contracts earn too little to meet their basic needs. A single mother with two children working in childcare told us:

“I’ve been doing two jobs for a long time, mainly so that I can afford a car. You really need a car to get around the island, because there’s no public transport. I have to be able to drive my children around, and refuse to be dependent on others. But I can’t even afford a hot meal.”

Even people on middle incomes take on additional work because of the low wages. But finding a job on the islands is far from easy.<sup>12</sup> For the low-skilled, there are limited employment opportunities, since jobs that require no qualifications are generally done by immigrants. Until recently, taking a part-time job in hospitality offered some kind of solution. Unfortunately, tourism on the islands has been badly hit by the pandemic and almost 10% of people have lost their jobs.<sup>13</sup> A mother of two small children:

“I used to work in hospitality and the transport service. When the pandemic happened, I just couldn’t find work. I tried everything: hospitality, daycare and the supermarket, but there was nothing. I’m now living on a monthly benefit payment of \$350.”

Some of them were forced to claim support allowance. Unemployment benefit, such as that payable in the European Netherlands, does not exist in the Caribbean Netherlands.

<sup>11</sup> In a crisis, such as the coronavirus pandemic, this group of workers is particularly vulnerable to job losses.

<sup>12</sup> Via Plenchi di Trabou, people seeking work on Bonaire can qualify for a job-skills programme offered by Forma. The public body and central government collaborate closely on this.

<sup>13</sup> Figures from CBS (Statistics Netherlands) show that there were 1,650 people working in hospitality in 2019, while, in 2020, that figure was 1,480.

### Differences compared to the European Netherlands

In the event of involuntary redundancy, island residents may qualify for what is known as *Cessantia*, a one-off severance payment. There is no occupational disability insurance on the islands. As a result, islanders who are chronically sick or unable to work because of an occupational disability are also forced to claim support allowance. As part of this, those affected are entitled to apply for an occupational disability allowance if declared permanently unfit for work by a doctor. In addition, women with young children in the Caribbean Netherlands are still obliged to look for work, whereas in the European Netherlands, single parents fully responsible for the care of one or several children aged up to 5 have full exemption from this obligation. However, exceptions can be made in specific cases.<sup>14</sup> Finally, pregnant women claiming support allowance must continue to apply for work until their maternity leave.<sup>15</sup>

### Issues around applying for support allowance

Residents of the Caribbean Netherlands aged 18 and over who are unemployed and 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 *Rijksdienst Caribisch Nederland* (RCN). In order to qualify, they must have been more legally resident in the Caribbean Netherlands for at least five years. Despite a 10% increase in the support allowance introduced on 1 January 2022, it is still insufficient to live on even if the parent also receives child allowance and can claim *special* support allowance. This creates a serious risk of payment arrears. A single mother of two children:

“I get around \$300 per month in support allowance and about \$85 child allowance for each child. That has to cover everything and it just doesn't. That's why I'm now three months behind on my rent. I have no idea how I'm going to pay it.”

These issues are compounded by the fact that applying for and receiving benefits is time-consuming and involves unnecessary obstacles for some people. Several professionals we spoke to felt that the government needs to step in and simplify the various schemes. There is too much form-filling involved in applying for benefits and it is often unclear where to apply for financial support, the public body or the RCN SZW unit.<sup>16</sup> A professional:

“People with a low level of education find that impossible. It's all far too bureaucratic and that deters people.”

Although it is possible according to the law, an advance on the payment is not always paid.<sup>17</sup> This means that single parents often go for weeks with no income. Some professionals have been calling for years for a new kind of benefit that is adapted to suit local conditions and actually enables island residents to meet their daily needs. A professional:

<sup>14</sup> Examples might include a parent with a child who is ill or disabled.

<sup>15</sup> Unless they have previously been declared unfit for work.

<sup>16</sup> For example, this can be a factor in applying for school uniform allowance, see heading 2.3.

<sup>17</sup> Article 29 of the *Besluit Onderstand BES* (BES Support Allowance Regulation) stipulates that an advance payment can be granted pending the awarding of support allowance. Details of the further implementation of this can be found in the policy rules for the implementation of the Support Allowance Regulation 2019.

“Adopt a tailored approach and acknowledge that some families simply do not fit within the current rules and regulations even though they should be eligible for financial support from the government.”

Respondents report that it takes several weeks just to make an appointment to apply for benefits. After that, people have to wait not five, but six to eight weeks for a decision on their application for support allowance, including those who are single parents with small children.

#### **Lack of trust**

Residents on the island do not always feel trusted by RCN. They highlight the fact that their Facebook pages are checked, a course of action that is rejected in the European Netherlands. Parents and professionals alike report that ‘the RCN SWZ unit works on the basis of distrust rather than trust’. A professional:

“They ask about literally everything and it can all turn out to be for nothing. People feel that they’ve exposed everything, only to find out weeks later that their application has been rejected. Sometimes for ‘personal reasons’. In my view, the RCN SWZ unit does not apply a professional approach based on the idea of helping people. Quite the opposite. This will lead people to distrust the government.”

#### **Reclaimed**

Even when it has been granted, support allowance can be reclaimed if too much has been paid or it has been paid in error. According to the professionals we interviewed, this is strictly enforced. Simply failing to attend a reassessment interview can lead to a demand for repayment. The same applies if applicants are suspected of cohabiting. Although the repayment instalments can be adjusted in line with people’s ability to pay, they amount to at least 10% of the fortnightly support allowance payment. For someone already struggling to cope, that is too much. A professional:

“If you have someone stay for a week, they deduct it from the support allowance. It’s even cut if you organise a party.”

#### **Unfair treatment**

People forced to apply for support allowance report that their treatment by the RCN SWZ unit and its helpdesk has not always been appropriate. It emerged during discussions that some applications are simply not processed because it is assumed in advance that they will not meet the requirements. A professional explains:

“The way that SZW treats people makes it even more difficult. Rather than engaging in an open discussion, SZW questions people as if they were being interrogated for fraud by the police.”

The RCN SWZ unit itself has indicated that it hardly ever receives complaints, including about people’s treatment. This may be a result of the islands’ size (‘everyone knows everyone’) or fear of potential consequences (‘it could be used against me’). For this reason, the decision was made in mid-2021 to set up a survey to gauge people’s perceptions. This will make it possible to investigate how the services provided by the RCN SWZ are perceived by people living in the Caribbean Netherlands and what can potentially be improved. As far as it was possible to ascertain, the results of this survey had not been announced when this report was published.

### Not everyone is aware of special support allowance

A special allowance is available to cover major incidental expenses, such as a bed, washing machine, oven or to pay for school supplies.<sup>18</sup> The special allowance is a one-off payment intended to provide island residents<sup>19</sup> with financial support if they need to buy expensive items. It is not paid in cash, but in the form of goods or services.

The [income threshold](#) for receiving special support allowance has been set at 120% of the statutory minimum wage. Exceptions can be made in extremely urgent cases only. Just like support allowance, special support allowance can be applied for from the SZW RCN unit. To qualify, people need to provide sufficient proof that the expenses involved are essential and are the result of exceptional circumstances; there must be no alternative provision for having the costs reimbursed and no evidence of an 'inadequate sense of responsibility'. A tailored approach is required in assessing the necessity of the expenditure and the circumstances of the case, according to the stipulations included in the SZW RCN unit's guide to assessing special support allowance. However, this flies in the face of the stories from single parents who say that they were fobbed off by RCN desk staff or told by phone that they were not eligible for special support allowance. A single mother:

"I have no washing machine and need to buy a pair of glasses for my child. When I asked for special support allowance, I was rejected by the telephonist. Fortunately, the Lions' Club is now paying for the glasses."

Consumer durables are assumed to have a lifespan of five years. If they become unusable within that period, it is impossible to make another claim for special support allowance for that purpose.<sup>20</sup> One single mother explained that she had had 'lots of hassle' dealing with the SZW RCN unit because the goods she received under the special support allowance are faulty. Since they are second-hand, she has no guarantee. What she now has is broken and she can no longer make a new application. The mother:

"The bottom of the washing machine is broken and the oven on the gas stove doesn't work. I'm only permitted to apply for special support allowance once every six years. That means I'll just have to wait."

Although the SZW RCN unit website provides information about obtaining special support allowance, our conversations with single parents showed that there is very little awareness about it among the target group. Either they are unaware of it or they find applying for it too complicated or too much hassle. Some people refuse to apply because of shame or fear. A single mother explained:

"Everyone knows each other and there's a lot of gossip. It's an annoying part of the culture."

<sup>18</sup> Article 11 et seq. of the policy rules on the implementation of the Support Allowance Regulation 2019 (Beleidsregels toepassing Besluit onderstand BES 2019).

<sup>19</sup> Beleidsregels toepassing Besluit onderstand BES 2019: Those entitled include children returning to the island and people admitted for medical or psychiatric care outside the public body.

<sup>20</sup> Article 19d, of the policy rules on the implementation of the Support Allowance Regulation 2019.

Other people simply assume in advance that they will not be eligible for special support assistance and do not even apply for anything. Finally, people are also deterred by the fear that the money will be reclaimed later. Underuse of the provisions that are available is, unfortunately, common.<sup>21</sup> Professionals we spoke to feel that the government should invest more in providing proactive information via Facebook campaigns, on radio and/or television. This information should be provided in simple language or using pictures. The campaign aimed at combating domestic violence is a good example and proved particularly successful because of the active involvement of the islanders themselves:

“The campaign and videos aimed at raising awareness of physical abuse proved really successful. They really break through. People from the island also worked on them. We’re attempting something similar now with the HALT videos on young offenders. Maximum efforts are being made to work in concert with the population.”

#### **Child allowance only introduced in 2016**

Families in the Caribbean Netherlands have been entitled to child allowance since 1 January 2016. Initially set at \$38 per child per month, it has gradually been increased to \$89 per child per month.<sup>22</sup> Island residents are far from happy that it took until 2016 for child allowance payments to start. A single parent:

“How is it possible that Bonaire became a special municipality of the Netherlands on 10-10-10 and yet we didn’t receive child allowance until 2016? I thought we were part of the Netherlands? I think we’re entitled to child allowance with effect from 10-10-10. Can’t the ombudsman sort that out?”

Although it has long been discussed, the Caribbean Netherlands does not have an equivalent to the higher (double) child allowance.<sup>23</sup> This is despite the fact that, in the European Netherlands, the parents of children requiring special care are entitled to claim double [child allowance](#).

#### **Maintenance not always applied for and/or paid**

Although both parents are obliged to contribute to the cost of supporting their children, these maintenance payments are not always paid. This issue was raised in almost every discussion we had with single mothers. Most fathers either refuse or are unable to contribute towards their costs. In order to avoid a fuss, the mothers tend to accept this. This is despite the fact that they really need the money:

“I have four children and have no contact with their fathers. They live on Curaçao and claim not to be able to afford to pay maintenance, so that means they don’t have to pay it. But I can’t make ends meet on the money I earn.”

<sup>21</sup> In November 2021, the National Ombudsman initiated [an investigation](#) into the underuse of financial support provisions by vulnerable elderly people. It is expected to be completed in the spring of 2022.

<sup>22</sup> *Wet Kinderbijslagvoorziening BES* (BES Child Allowance Provision Act). See also Appendix 2 of this report.

<sup>23</sup> This option is being investigated. [Letter to Parliament](#) on progress report re. establishment of a social security benchmark for the Caribbean Netherlands 2021.



If one of the parents fails to meet the obligation, the other parent can have the courts enforce maintenance payments, possibly following intervention by the Guardianship Council.<sup>24</sup> Even parents who have refused to acknowledge their child can still be obliged to pay maintenance.<sup>25</sup> According to professionals, very few people take up this option. Not everyone is able to navigate the legal complexities or people are unable to afford legal assistance. At times, things can go wrong for other reasons. A single mother:

“Around four years ago, I submitted a request to the Guardianship Council for child maintenance for my two youngest children. Unfortunately, the request wasn’t processed. It was only recently that I received an apologetic response. It had been overlooked and they are now working on it. The authorities should realise that when people ask for help it’s urgent. You only ask for help if you really have no other choice.”

### 2.3 Cost of living and other essentials still too high

During several of their home visits, the ombudsmen noticed that many parents in the target group are living in small, poorly-maintained houses; one house even had no electricity because the sockets were hanging off the wall. A mother explained:

“I owe around \$2,000 in rent arrears. On Monday, I went to the housing association to hand in the keys. I want to arrange a payment plan. But I have to wait first, because it needs to be calculated. I don’t want to live there anymore because it’s not safe.”

The lack of housing leaves people on low incomes forced to rent expensive accommodation in the private rental sector.<sup>26</sup> At the moment, housing benefit is not paid for homes in the private sector. In addition to expensive accommodation costs, people spend much of their income on utility bills. The ombudsman examined this issue in detail in his report *Focus on the elderly in the Caribbean Netherlands*. During the pandemic, the cost of water, electricity and internet connections was subsidised. Unfortunately, the full prices will have to be paid from January 2022 since this subsidy was temporary.<sup>27</sup> A professional:

“The cost of living rises every year, but wages never change. Any corrections for inflation don’t cover the actual cost of living. Some interventions were made during the pandemic for energy, water and internet costs, but they end at the end of 2021. I think they should be extended. There also needs to be investment in sustainable and affordable housing.”

<sup>24</sup> Article 1:406 of the BES Civil Code: Parents who are unable to reach agreement on child maintenance themselves can enlist the assistance of the Guardianship Council. After an assessment, it can then issue advice to the court, which will be followed by a ruling.

<sup>25</sup> Article 1:394 of the BES Civil Code.

<sup>26</sup> The Rental Housing Market Measures (Caribbean Netherlands) Act (*Wet Maatregelen huurwoningmarkt Caribisch Nederland*) was enacted on Bonaire on 1 April 2021. This legislation aims to regulate a good-quality, reliable, affordable, sustainable rental housing market on the islands. It is hoped it will help reduce the cost of housing for people living in the Caribbean Netherlands. Improvements include transparency with regard to rents, the setting up of a rent controls board and the introduction of a subsidy for landlords. In due course, the Act will also apply on Saba and St. Eustatius, as soon as local arrangements for a rent controls board and a housing valuation system have been approved. See the BZK Ministry’s annual housing market report (*Staat van woningmarkt, jaarrapportage ministerie van BZK*, p. 80).

<sup>27</sup> However, the current government has announced plans to offer compensation to citizens in the Caribbean Netherlands for the substantial loss of purchasing power they are experiencing after the removal of subsidies on water and electricity and general price increases, see [Letter to Parliament](#), 9 February 2022. On 11 March 2022, the government announced plans to provide €5 million for the Caribbean Netherlands in order to offset the increasing cost of energy.

### **Clothing and groceries are unaffordable**

Because children do not receive the care they need, this has an effect on their development. Parents say that they find it particularly difficult to provide their children with good shoes and clothes. Everything has to be imported and the range is limited. This forces up prices. Because of the size of the islands, there are no cheap chainstores. However, a range of local initiatives exist that aim to support single parents in this area. For example, the church offers second-hand clothing and clothes are passed down by family members. A single mother:

“I don’t have any money for clothes, although I sometimes get things from a cousin who has a daughter of the same age. But my girls are growing so fast that we’re always short of something. My sister lives abroad and she used to bring clothes over when she visited the island. But that’s not been possible since lockdown. She can’t afford to send them by post.”

The previous reports *Focus on the elderly in the Caribbean Netherlands* and *A poor start* examined the high cost of groceries in more detail, highlighting how difficult it is to ensure a decent meal is on the table. In this investigation, the high price of groceries was also seen to be a significant problem. On multiple occasions, we were told that people cannot always afford hot meals. A single parent:

“Virtually the only thing my children and I eat is bread. I spend around \$90 a month on bread alone.”

The lack of variety in the food – combined with limited exercise – can result in health problems according to warnings from doctors interviewed in this and other investigations. This applies equally to children. The Caribbean Netherlands has relatively high numbers of people suffering diabetes and obesity is common. A doctor explained:

“In my practice, children with poor and unbalanced diets are particularly prone to obesity. They are also often ill.”

One single mother told us that her daughter is severely overweight. Although she does receive help, there is no money for suitable clothing. Children told us about their tiny homes and how they often found food from other sources than their parent, such as at school, or at the childcare centre. One child said that he goes to bed hungry at least once a week. Insufficient or unbalanced nutrition has an impact on a child’s health, how they feel, behave and how much they exercise, undermining their opportunities for learning.

### **Food parcels appreciated, but not sufficient**

There are two food banks on Bonaire, ADRA and *Stichting Voedselbank*. Some single parents are also eligible for a food parcel via the public body (*Sentro Akseso*). This only applies to residents with earnings below the income threshold. The public body has a care contract with ADRA. Although food parcels are generally provided on a temporary basis, exceptions are possible, depending on the island residents’ individual situations.

On Saba, the public body and the Lions Club provide households with monthly food parcels. The public body of St. Eustatius provides food vouchers to households that need them. However, we were told by one single mother that the public body had stopped issuing vouchers because of fraud, leaving people with nothing, since there is no alternative. Our discussions with single parents showed that this group is generally dependent on the food parcels. Although they welcome them, they criticise the generosity of the contents. One parent:

“I get a parcel of groceries from the food bank once a month. It contains a carton of milk, a packet of rice, sugar, tea, a tin of corned beef, a bag of corn and two packs of toilet paper. I know they mean well, but this is not enough to live on.”

On Bonaire it was remarkable how many people complained that they were only permitted to make use of a food parcel for a limited period. One mother who had used the food bank for six months was told by the public body that she ‘had been removed from the list because it was so long and it was now other people’s turn’. She then resorted to a private organisation where, after queueing for hours, she was told that she was not eligible for a parcel:

“It turned out my name was not on the list and I was sent away. I never want to ask for help again. I’ll try to cope on my own.”

### **Not everyone is eligible for reimbursement of the cost of school supplies**

Finally, (single) mothers and therefore their children can also face problems because of the costs they need to pay for their children’s schooling. This includes such items as school uniforms and school supplies, such as stationery and books, which children obviously need for school.<sup>28</sup>

For primary schoolchildren, parents who are resident and below the set income threshold can apply to the public body for an allowance to cover the cost of school supplies. If they need help with school-related expenses for children at secondary school, parents can apply to the SZW RCN unit for special support allowance. However, conditions apply: for example, the parent applying must have been on the public body’s population register for five years and the (joint) monthly income of the parents must not exceed \$1,250.<sup>29</sup> One single mother explained that she had applied to the SZW RCN unit for school supplies for her son but had not received them:

“When I contacted SZW about it, a lady said, in quite a nasty tone, that a letter was in the post, but I received nothing. I’ve no idea why I received no special support allowance. Maybe it’s because of my name?  
Now that school has started, I’ve asked my boss for an advance in order to buy school supplies. When I received my wage at the end of the month, there was virtually nothing left. Just \$10 to buy food.”

In some cases, the absent parent has authority for the child (or children) and the parent looking after the child can find it difficult to apply for support, such as special allowance for school supplies or child allowance.

<sup>28</sup> If a child does not have the right books or has a uniform that is worn or outgrown, this can have a negative impact on the quality of the environmental condition School and leisure time, and with it the child’s well-being and prospects for development.

<sup>29</sup> See Article 10 of the Support Allowance Regulation implementation policy rules (*Beleidsregels toepassing Besluit onderstand BES 2019*), which state that the Minister can grant the support allowance for the cost of a school uniform and school supplies if it concerns a student in secondary education. The Minister will not reimburse any of these school-related costs via the support allowance for children in primary education, because that is the responsibility of the public bodies.

**A case study**

A single father has only intermittent contacts with his child's mother. The child lives with him. He applies for support for the cost of school supplies for his child at secondary school. The SZW RCN unit tells him that the mother who has responsibility for the child should have made the application. As a result, he received no support for the cost of school supplies for his child. The father considers this unfair because his child lives with him and he was the one who registered his child at school.

The SZW RCN unit stated that in cases where a parent taking care of a child but without authority for it makes an application for support with school supplies, this is always followed by an interview with him or her. Additional information is obtained in this personal interview, enabling the application to be assessed.

**2.4 Forced to make choices**

Many single parents reported that they have difficult choices to make about which bills to pay (or not pay) on a monthly basis. One mother said that she withdraws her whole wage every month before any regular outgoings have been deducted. This enables her to determine for herself what she spends. She pays the internet bill first, because her children depend on it for school. Being forced to make choices of this kind can quickly lead to payment arrears for other regular outgoings, such as the rent or energy costs. Some people have accounts at the supermarket or "the Chinese". Another single parent:

"The fridge is empty at the moment. I still haven't paid the rent, electric or water."

According to the professionals we spoke to, parents do not always make the most sensible choices. This is a source of concern for the professionals who feel that these parents primarily need help with budgeting. This particularly applies to those parents living on or below subsistence level who owe money. The parents seem to struggle to keep an overview of what they owe and do not always find it easy to understand information received from official (government) bodies. Professionals we spoke to feel that the authorities need to understand that not everyone is equally self-reliant. Some people actually do need help, even if they may not ask for it. A professional:

"There needs to be a better understanding of the fact that many people find it difficult to ask the help. Or that they do not necessarily always respond when there are debts to pay. The information provided needs to be better and make it clear what people are entitled to. People need guidance when eliciting help and it makes sense to think carefully about how best to organise this. There definitely needs to be better guidance for single parents. With incomes so low, financial problems are inevitable. What I'm basically saying is: do something about the problems themselves rather than dealing only with the symptoms."

As well as the fact that people underestimate their financial problems, they often have little or no awareness of the financial risks, and are ill equipped to resolve the problems; this investigation has also revealed that one of the main reasons for failing to take action involves issues of shame and pride. Many people do everything they can to hide their poverty. Because poverty is often invisible, it is difficult to assess what help is really needed. A professional:

“One of the key problems single parents face is their unwillingness to admit their problems. In general, poverty is a real taboo issue. That’s why, as a professional, it’s important to be observant and probing in interviews. People are ashamed and do not want to share their problems. People are afraid of stigma and gossip.”

Stigmatisation is a significant problem on the islands and something suffered particularly by children. One single mother told us that her children are bullied because they are poor. According to professionals, children seen as poor are excluded, often being prevented from participating in certain activities because they have to be paid for. Since the islands are so small, everyone knows everything about each other and there is a lot of gossip. Stigmatisation, bullying and exclusion can have a negative impact on the environmental conditions respect, school and leisure and contact with contemporaries and friends, and therefore on the child’s well-being and prospects for development.

## 2.5 Concerns for the future

Finally, parents told us that they have concerns about their children’s school careers and future because of their inability to support them financially. Help with homework is often too expensive and parents can be unsure about how to pay for their children’s education. Parents find this stressful and frustrating. One single mother told us that her daughter will soon be moving to secondary school and needs textbooks. She has no idea how to pay for them. Other activities that are beneficial for a child’s development can also often be expensive or even unavailable on the islands. Although extracurricular activities are organised, not every single parent is able to afford the parental contribution.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, these activities tend to focus on caring for and entertaining the children rather than anything that they may need for the future, such as financial skills or skills associated with relationships and sexuality.

## 2.6 What children consider important

The main thing that children would like to see is improvement in several practical basic conditions for effective development. A 12-year-old girl told us:

“I want a better life for everyone who is poor. I think it’s important for people to be treated equally. My life is okay, this is all I know. We’ve been poor our whole lives.”

If the parent has a good (or better) job, they can afford to run the house, pay for food, water and power and this has a positive impact on the children’s care. It also means the parent no longer needs to have several jobs or work long days, making them more available for the children.<sup>31</sup> Children are very aware of the extent to which their parents struggle to afford everything and the stress this causes them. This means that home life is not always as enjoyable as it could be, regardless of the efforts the parent makes. It is also interesting to note that in some of their answers, children not only relate issues such as a better house to the poverty of their upbringing, but also link it to the way in which the islands are governed. A 12-year-old boy told us:

<sup>30</sup> For Jong Bonaire, an annual parental contribution of \$50 is charged. However, in response to our questions, the Ministry of VWS confirmed that children whose parents are unable to pay this amount are not refused.

<sup>31</sup> If the parent is more physically and emotionally present for the child, the quality of the environmental conditions relating to home will be higher. This in turn has a positive impact on the child’s well-being and prospects for development.

“I would make a few changes to the rules, to enable Bonaire to develop faster. We’re not making progress here, we’re lagging behind. Some of the people working for the Bonaire public body make very poor decisions. For example, they just let buildings rot away. There also need to be more initiatives to help or children, such as a food bank.”

For this group of children, the future is more about the future of the whole island rather than their own individual situation. But, ultimately, the two are inextricably linked: the higher children rate their own situation in terms of such things as the home situation, school and friends or leisure time, the more confidence they seem to have in the future. Children can struggle to talk about such things as security, continuity and stability. They prefer to talk of specific things, such as a better home or food.<sup>32</sup> However, this does not entail that these children are not concerned about the future, as can be inferred from the above quote.

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<sup>32</sup> Zijlstra et al. (2012) The Quality of the Childrearing Environment of Refugee or Asylum-Seeking Children and the Best Interests of the Child: Reliability and Validity of the BIC-Q, *Behavioral Science and the Law*, 30, 841-855.

**Kim, a professional working on St. Eustatius**

“Single mothers on this island have a hard time. One of the reasons why they often struggle financially is because the fathers – absent or otherwise – don’t pay maintenance, because they have the feeling that the mothers won’t spend the money on the children. It’s terrible when parents don’t focus on the child, but insist on fighting. If the father is still around, but the parents don’t agree, the parents are played off against each other and the child loses out. Every time, it’s always the child that pays.

But there’s another side to the problem: the lack of work on the island. I know a mother with several children by two fathers who are around, but don’t contribute. The mother doesn’t come from the island and hasn’t lived here long enough to qualify for support allowance. She’s really eager to work, but there are just no jobs. With no work and no support, how is she supposed to survive? It’s almost impossible. Fortunately, the children are given breakfast at school and also get a hot meal at after-school care, which is one less worry for her. She more or less makes ends meet by doing all kinds of small jobs for people who know her situation and have sympathy for her. By doing occasional cleaning, she gets paid \$50 on the spot and can afford to buy something to eat again. Sometimes she receives food vouchers. That’s welcome and helps take away some of the worry, but the children are growing and need clothes and shoes – it’s just not possible. For that, she relies on family on Bonaire. How she copes with housing? I suspect that she has a landlord who turns a blind eye.

I regularly see this mother and notice how she does her best to keep a smile on her face, but it’s obvious that she’s in survival mode. She has a very difficult life. I can see her determination: she refuses to be made to feel small, but she may spend every night crying in bed. You don’t always know what’s going on behind closed doors. This mother is certainly not the only one with a hard life. I’ve heard several women say: if I’d known my life would be like this, I’d never have had children. That’s very sad. All of these single mothers, it’s almost the norm on the islands. And it’s nothing new, it’s been going on forever. Women have children and the men disappear. How do you bring an end to a culture like that? How do you encourage young women to make different choices and look after themselves better? How do we get the fathers to engage? What preventive measures can be taken? It would make a difference if parents helped to boost their children’s resilience. By talking to them and saying: you can overcome this, how will you tackle it?

Talk to the sons and encourage them to take responsibility for their children later on. In my view, parents are too quick to let go of their children. Once they’ve finished at primary school, it’s a case of: okay, you’re an adult now – do your thing. As a result, children have too much freedom too quickly and don’t know how to deal with it. If they haven’t had a good basic upbringing – because the mother simply didn’t have enough time because she was always at work – the children cannot easily set boundaries and can end up on the wrong side of the track: taking drugs, sexting and engaging in outrageously promiscuous behaviour. If things go wrong, it ends up with yet another early pregnancy and another father who walks away. It’s a vicious circle.

What I do notice is that although the mothers may have it hard, they really do try to do their best. Women can often be really creative. They look at what talents they have, such as braiding, cooking, and try to use that to make money.

But we’re living in 2022. A lot has changed since the last century, especially in terms of technology. But when it comes to raising children, it seems really difficult to bring about change.”

## 3 Single parenthood and poverty-related issues with parenting

### 3.1 Introduction

Many single parents in the Caribbean Netherlands not only struggle to survive financially but also have problems in parenting their children. This is caused by the poverty they face and the fact that they are on their own: these parents have no partners with whom to share the responsibility for caring for their children and are often mentally overwhelmed. Because they are at work so much, their physical presence is also lacking. Many are reliant on other people's help. But this help is not something that can be taken for granted and there is not always a network on which to fall back on. If there is, the network may itself be in difficult financial straits. There are various reasons why people are deterred from seeking help. Being short of money has a negative impact on children's opportunities for development and their well-being. This impact is not only direct and caused by poverty, but also indirect because poverty affects parents' ability to parent their children, causes stress within the family and shame that is also felt by the children themselves.<sup>33</sup> This chapter takes a closer look at the key issues faced by many single parents in poverty in raising their children and the effect that this has on the children's well-being and prospects for development.

### 3.2 Lack of affordable housing creates domestic tension

Alongside a shortage of funds and the high cost of living, the lack of affordable rental housing is one of the main problems that confronts many residents on the islands. The ombudsmen have examined this issue in some detail in two previous reports. Because of the lack of affordable housing and in order to share the costs, there are multiple generations living in the same households (often because they have no other choice<sup>34</sup>). A single mother:

"I'd love to have my own little home. But I can't afford private rent, so my child and I still live with my mother. I'm on a waiting list for social housing, but that could take years."

Members of the wider family often also have financial issues, which means that there are too many people living in homes that are too small, potentially creating unhealthy conditions. These conditions are unhealthy not only in terms of the physical environment, but also the contacts between family members in the home. This can undermine children's sense of safety at home. The issue of housing was also frequently raised in the Ombudsman for Children's conversations with children. One child said:

"I have five brothers and sisters. There are three rooms in the house we live in. Two of my siblings sleep with my mother and one has his own room. I share a room with two other siblings."

<sup>33</sup> The Ombudsman for Children (2017) [Alle Kinderen Kansrijk](#); The Ombudsman for Children (2019) [Ik ben meer dan mijn problemen](#).

<sup>34</sup> Several generations from one family living together is not always born of necessity. It is also part of the culture.



Living in such cramped conditions can in itself be unsettling for children, because they do not have anywhere of their own. This can then have an effect on their performance at school. A 17-year-old boy was glad he was no longer living at home, however temporarily, because it gave him some 'peace and quiet from his brothers and sisters'.

Relationships between different family members can also be a source of tension. For example, sometimes other adults, such as grandparents, uncles and aunts, interfere in the parenting, resulting in conflicts caused by differences in parenting styles.<sup>35</sup>

In various discussions with professionals, it again emerged during this investigation that there has been a further increase in domestic violence on the islands in recent years, despite the measures taken to combat it. Many single parents saw their situation deteriorate as a result of the pandemic. Some became unemployed, compounding their financial issues. This situation, combined with the children's long enforced absences from school and cramped housing conditions, has resulted in a further increase in domestic tensions. A professional:

"Abuse and domestic violence are common on the island. Stress – caused by money worries, cramped housing – causes violence."

The lack of affordable housing can often also mean that a parent (generally the mother) is forced to continue to cohabit with a partner even if the relationship is violent. They simply have nowhere else to go. This is also why some women go straight from the women's refuge back to their violent partners. In any case, single mothers are financially dependent, which forces them to stay in violent relationships. A professional:

"When women want to leave the refuge, the problem is that they often have no choice but to return to their violent partners, partly because benefits are too low and the cost of living too high for them to afford to support themselves, let alone the children. In that case, many women opt to return to a hopeless and violent situation. Ultimately, having a roof over your head and food on your table is better than nothing at all."

For the children, this means growing up in a domestic situation that is unsafe. Obviously, this has a negative effect on their well-being and prospects for development.<sup>36</sup>

### 3.3 Mental stress

Many parents worry about their children's lack of supervision and the limited amount of time and attention they are able to devote to them. Because they work so much, often outside office hours, the parents spend little time at home. They have no network to fall back on and cannot afford a childminder or childcare. They also worry that they are unable to give their children what they need because of their limited financial resources. All of this combined creates a stressful situation. They are unable to give the children the care and attention they need. Parents feel overwhelmed, which makes them less available emotionally when it comes to parenting. A single mother:

<sup>35</sup> Relationship problems between different people responsible for parenting and differences in parenting styles can have a negative effect on safety at home, structure, rules and support, the example set by parents and others involved in parenting as well as stability and continuity in parenting and care, thereby potentially undermining the child's well-being and prospects for development, see Appendix 2.

<sup>36</sup> Ombudsman for Children 2021; *Als je het ons vraagt. Kinderen op de BES-eilanden*. Report number: KOM03/2021. Ombudsman for Children 2017; *Als je het ons vraagt. De Kinderombudsman op Kinderrechtentour in Caribisch Nederland*. Report number: KOM006/2017.

“I have a hard life. It’s really difficult. I even have to do the cleaning at my work. I get home late and exhausted. I have a shower and go straight to bed. I sleep through until morning. I sometimes don’t even see the children.”

The professionals we spoke to are also aware that single parents are tired and overwhelmed. Their main concern revolves around the fact that, because they are so often absent, the parents are unable to provide the children with adequate care, structure, rules and support. These parents are not always able to meet their children’s basic needs. The children can therefore sometimes look unkempt, forced to go to school with no breakfast. They are often left to their own devices, deciding for themselves when to go to bed, roaming the streets until late in the evening, causing mischief. A professional:

“Small children are still walking the streets at 10 at night and are missing out on basics, like structure and routine, that you normally pick up at home. Because the parents have to juggle so many different things, the boundaries just become blurred.”

The island of Bonaire in particular lacks a good social network of other adults and what does exist is limited, both for single parents and for their children. Single parents do not have the option of relying on the help of grandparents since many of them live elsewhere or there is no contact. In addition, many grandparents are forced to work long hours themselves in order to make ends meet and are therefore unable to care for one or several grandchildren. There are even some cases where single parents have to look after their own elderly parent or parents as well as the children. A mother:

“I get no support from family. All I have is my father and he is reliant on me.”

In order to develop properly, children need to build a good bond with their parent or parents. This relationship involves love and attention and interest in the child and requires the person responsible for parenting to be present, both physically and emotionally. A range of different circumstances prevent this. One mother explained that her relationship with her daughter has been undermined by the fact that she paid her too little attention in the past. The daughter is now resentful towards her mother who was never there for her and she has broken off all contact. This is extremely upsetting for the mother.

Professionals find it difficult to share their concerns with these parents, mainly because they are ultimately trying their best. The parent may well want to change things, but their situation just makes it impossible. This makes it even more difficult to talk about. A professional:

“Food is prepared in the mornings, and the children have to heat it up themselves. They also have to take personal responsibility for going to bed on time. Many single parents find it impossible to meet basic needs. With so many jobs to do, there’s often little time left for love, affection or to help with homework. They do what they can and I admire that. With the pandemic and lockdown, we can now really see how hard it is for them.”

### Psychological issues

According to professionals, there has been an increase in psychological issues among single parents living on or around the poverty line. This mainly involves depression, anxiety, stress and mood disorders and makes the situation at home even less safe. There is particular concern that, faced with a future with no prospect of improvements, these parents become almost apathetic in their behaviour. Since the start of the pandemic, professionals have also noticed an increase in the use of alcohol and drugs. This is another reason why parents may not be there for their children, at least emotionally. Because of this, the children are lacking the attention, interest and care they need from their parents in order to be able to develop healthy relationships and mature.<sup>37</sup> A professional:

“People increasingly need help. People are finding themselves in a vicious circle of problems. There is no housing, no jobs and the support available is insufficient. People get depressed and start taking alcohol and drugs to numb it.”

### 3.4 Forced to parent alone

In their parenting, the parents in the target group are left to their own devices and unable to share the responsibility with another parent. Generally, there is little or no contact with the other parent(s) and he or she is not involved in raising the child. There may be arguments between the parents (and wider family members). Failure to pay maintenance is often used as justification for excluding the other parent from the children’s lives. There are also occasions when the other parent simply refuses any further contact. Whatever the situation, arguments between parents leave the children unsafe and lacking structure in their lives. Children miss the contact with the other parent or end up in a conflict of loyalty because of the disputes between the parents. A professional:

“In many cases, children have no father figure from whom to learn. That means you can’t identify with the other parent. As a result, they lack the learning experience of having two parents.”

In other cases, the children may remain in contact with the absent parent (generally the father), but the role played in parenting is non-existent.

### Social support network not always available

The children in the target group actually have to cope without parenting. Their parents have other priorities. Single parents in poverty depend on their own network or government authorities for their basic needs. Unfortunately, these parents, and especially on Bonaire, are often lacking any kind of safety net.<sup>38</sup> This in turn affects the children’s welfare.<sup>39</sup>

One single parent explains that she often has to work at weekends and in the evenings. She tries to swap shifts as often as she can because she would prefer not to leave her children unsupervised at home. She has no family to rely on and cannot afford a childminder. Another mother said that her whole family lives on Curaçao and she has no friends or acquaintances

<sup>37</sup> The Ombudsman for Children (2019) *Ik ben meer dan mijn problemen*; Newland, L.A. (2015). Family well-being, parenting, and child well-being: Pathways to healthy adjustment, *Clinical Psychologist*, 19, 3-14.

<sup>38</sup> In conversations with single parents on Saba and St. Eustatius, we noted that a remarkable number of children – and significantly more than on Bonaire – were looked after by wider family.

<sup>39</sup> The lack of an effective social network can have a negative impact on the environmental conditions (in this case the social network of other adults and the example set by other adults), potentially undermining the child’s well-being and prospects for development, see Appendix 2.

on the island. With two jobs, she is hardly ever there for her child, who is fortunate enough to go to childcare. However, for parents who work in the evenings and at weekends, this is not an option. According to the professionals we spoke to, it is important to focus more attention on the issue of how single parents with no social network can be given help. A professional:

“It is important for people in this group to have someone in their day-to-day life to provide support and help them in resolving the problems they face. A professional who may also be able to involve someone from the parent’s own network.”

For many parents, caring for a disabled child is even more difficult. In addition to the extra costs involved and the fact that they are not eligible for double child allowance, they can also struggle to arrange childcare. There is no respite care for these children.

#### **Childcare not (yet) accessible to all**

Good-quality childcare helps children growing up in poverty in their development, improving their quality of life. But it needs to be accessible to all children. As far as possible, parents make use of the (subsidised) childcare available. The BES(t)4Kids programme<sup>40</sup> was launched three years ago. Part of its aim is to improve access to childcare and this has largely proved successful. Most children attend childcare five days every week and also receive meals there. This costs no more than \$125 per month and is not means-tested. BES(t)4Kids is generally considered to be very successful. This is despite some concerns about excessive regulation and a shortage of educational staff. A professional:

“I’m pleased about BES(t)4kids. But this programme involves so many rules and requirements that it will soon be running out of people to coordinate it. Report X, inspector Y..... It’s all to do with the different cash streams. But ultimately, this is at the expense of the care provided and places pressure on the people having to implement it. I admit that we can be a bit lax, but the requirements that all those cash streams involve are just unrealistic.”

A (temporary) subsidy scheme is in place to enable organisations providing childcare to qualify for subsidies in order to reduce the cost price. This means that the cost that parents pay for childcare is reduced. Any parents who are unable to pay the parental contribution can apply for a grant from the relevant public body. But not everyone uses the childcare. The government-funded childcare is sometimes oversubscribed and private alternatives are seen as too expensive. There can also be concerns about the quality of the care, with a clear distinction between private and government-funded care. Some single parents told us that their unusual working hours were currently preventing them from making use of the care that they need.

Bonaire recently saw the launch of a [childcare pilot](#) for children with special care needs, providing care and support. Childcare organisations and parents can also turn to a multidisciplinary care team if they have specific questions. Until very recently, this kind of childcare was simply not available.

<sup>40</sup> BES(t) 4 kids is a collaboration between the public bodies of Bonaire, St. Eustatius and Saba and the ministries of SZW, OCW, VWS and BZK and aims to improve childcare and after-school care in the Caribbean Netherlands. Its focus is on creating a safe and caring environment for children that all parents can access. The aim is to provide every child with the opportunity for optimum development.

### 3.5 Concerns about children's social and emotional development

The consequences for children of single parents who are growing up in poverty mainly concern the lack of basic necessities, such as food and housing. But children also face problems in their social and emotional development and particularly in terms of the sense of attachment they feel with their parents and the unsafe conditions to which their home life exposes them. A 17-year-old boy explained that gaining his parents' attention and interest was a key issue for him.

The children, single parents and professionals we spoke to as part of this investigation believe it is important for a solution to be found for the children's financial situation. There were also eager to highlight the limited options available to parents and children for exercise and development. There is a sense that even (young) children feel shame and stigmatised by the violence, poverty and family relationships. A 15-year-old boy explained that he worries about his father, who cares for him and his younger sister:

"I feel as if I need to protect him, for example from the police."

If other people know that they are poor, the children feel that they are treated differently.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, parental absence combined with the presence of violence can end up seeming so 'normal' to the children that they do not even raise it as a problem. After all, they do not realise that anything is different in their family unless they are able to compare it to children growing up in a safe family situation.<sup>42</sup> In view of the seriousness of the issue, and the need for greater attention to be paid to the lives of children on the three Caribbean islands, this section focuses on the things that the children did choose to highlight.

#### Parental absence

The fact that parents are absent because of the long hours they work or they need to combine several jobs places practical and emotional pressure on children. Sometimes, the children are alone for hours, left to their own devices and forced to spend the day with no care, structure, rules or support. One 11-year-old girl told us that she gets up at five every morning, arrives early at school and wait there until the teacher arrives.

Several professionals pointed out that these parents generally have insufficient interest in or focus on what is going on in their children's lives. All they are doing is surviving and this leaves them with no time left to care about support in schooling, such as help with homework or talking to teachers. The children suffer as a result. A boy:

"At home it's 'meh'. I find it really boring. My mum works all day until around seven or eight. At the weekends, she works on Saturday afternoon and Sunday morning, so she works every day. I have to do the cleaning and cooking. I have to do everything myself and take care of myself."

<sup>41</sup> If children feel that they are being treated differently because of poverty, violence or family situations, this can have a negative impact on the environmental condition respect and, with it, the child's well-being and prospects for development, see Appendix 2.

<sup>42</sup> The Ombudsman for Children (2020). *Als je het ons vraagt*. Thuis in 2020, report number KOM009/2020; The Ombudsman for Children (2021). *Als je het ons vraagt. Kinderen op de BES-eilanden*, report number KOM003/2021.

In conversations with girls, we also noted that they are generally burdened with responsibilities beyond their age. This is a phenomenon referred to as parentification.<sup>43</sup> The girls explained that they end up adopting the parental role, both in terms of caring for the other children and worrying about their financial situation. In general, children have a lot of chores to do in the household and sometimes have to spend all day minding their younger brothers and sisters. At the same time, the lack of parental supervision and care can often result in mischief-making or even criminal behaviour, causing them to end up in rebound facilities<sup>44</sup>, especially boys. A 13-year-old boy:

“I needed structure. That’s what they’re working on now. I need to learn to say ‘no’ and not go along with the wrong crowd. They’re teaching me things here and there are rules. I didn’t have any rules at home. I don’t mind having rules now. Well, I do at times, and would prefer to have no rules. But if there weren’t any rules here, the place would explode.”

The children’s stories reveal how growing up in poverty in a single family also ultimately affects education and how children spend their leisure time. There are factors in their lives over which they have no control and which they just have to accept, but these factors also prevent them from learning effectively.

The culture on the islands of St Eustatius and Saba in particular, where it is normal for care to be shared more widely than just among parents, offers a solution to the limited care options faced by single parents. A good social network of other adults is beneficial for the children. For example, the children told us about being cared for or having meals at their grandmother’s or aunt’s. Most children accept this, and enjoy spending time with their cousins and wider family. However, this is seen by some professionals as a cause of problem behaviour. Children can be confused by too many different styles of parenting. This means that there is no clear structure for the child and insufficient stability and continuity in the parenting and care they receive.

### Violence and child abuse

The fact that there is violence and child abuse on the three islands and that families face a greater risk if they live in poverty and cramped housing is well understood.<sup>45</sup> Fortunately, the last few years have seen concrete steps taken to improve the approach towards domestic violence and child abuse in the Caribbean Netherlands. There has also been a focus on prevention and raising awareness of the damaging consequences of domestic violence.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Parentification is when a child takes on the parental role for a long period, including the related tasks and responsibilities. This involves being subject to chronically ‘inappropriate’ care that does not reflect the child’s age or culture and can be damaging for his or her development. Examples include: children who take on responsibilities in the household, children who care for their siblings and children who act as a source of support and conversation for the parent. (Source: Nederlands Jeugdinstituut: <https://www.nji.nl/cap-j/d203-jeugdige-in-de-rol-van-ouder-parentificatie>).

<sup>44</sup> Facilities for children with behavioural problems, where they are kept for a specific period before returning to regular lessons.

<sup>45</sup> Because the ombudsmen’s last report, entitled “A poor beginning”, covered this subject in detail, this issue is mentioned only briefly in this report.

<sup>46</sup> The action taken to tackle domestic violence and child abuse involves wide-ranging cooperation between care providers, the judiciary, the public bodies and central government. In late 2020, the then State Secretary for VWS and representatives of the islands’ public bodies signed a new Administrative Agreement aimed at jointly improving action taken on domestic violence and child abuse. This is a follow-up to the Administrative Agreement 2017-2020.

1 January 2022 saw the enactment of legislation outlawing the use of violence or physical force in raising a child and demeaning and degrading treatment of a child.<sup>47</sup> This was already included in the Civil Code in the European Netherlands, but has now also been added on the islands as well.

Despite these well-intentioned initiatives, domestic violence remains common. This lack of safety at home has a negative impact on the well-being and development of the children it affects. In the interviews held with children, they also provided personal accounts of the domestic violence they have experienced. A 14-year-old boy:

“I used to get hit a lot at home but now I just run away. Although my mother shouts after me, when I come back home, she acts as if nothing happened.”

When children talk about the other parent (generally the father), it is notable that many of their accounts also reveal instances of previous violence between parents. A 11-year-old girl told us:

“Would I prefer to live with one or two parents? It’s better just living with my mother. When there are rows, it’s not good for the children. If the parents are together, there are lots of rows. That’s something I’ve experienced myself.”

In our conversations with the professionals, the issue of mistreatment and domestic violence was also raised. They are all too well aware of the vicious circle of violence, where stress caused by worries about money or cramped housing can result in violence. Some professionals even mentioned violence in the form of sexual exploitation of both girls and boys.

### 3.6 Single migrant parent without residence permit faces extra vulnerable situation

Finally, there are concerns about the situation faced by single parents who are working with no residence permits on Bonaire and living with their children. It is thought that this concerns a group of between 700 and 1,000 (labour) migrants, mostly originating from Venezuela, Peru, Ecuador and the Dominican Republic. It is not known how many of them have children. The parents generally work in construction, hospitality, domestic service or in prostitution (enforced or otherwise) and, according to some professionals, live in terrible conditions. A professional:

“Human trafficking and prostitution are not uncommon. Victims have their passports taken away and earn no income. In situations like that, when things go wrong, it’s really bad. Everyone knows it goes on, but it’s a taboo subject. That’s also typical of the island culture.”

Because this group has no insurance to cover the cost of illness, they avoid essential medical care, even for their children. Children without identity papers are registered at schools because they are entitled to education.

<sup>47</sup> [https://www.eerstekamer.nl/behandeling/20211108/publicatie\\_inwerkingtreding/document3/f=vlnpeid88rzig.pdf](https://www.eerstekamer.nl/behandeling/20211108/publicatie_inwerkingtreding/document3/f=vlnpeid88rzig.pdf)

But the migrants are not eligible to apply for social benefits, such as support allowance, child allowance and social housing. Many have no network whatsoever to fall back on.<sup>48</sup> Because of their vulnerable position, they also run the risk of being exploited by their employers. If that happens, they have no access to free legal aid because they are not registered on the island and do not meet the set conditions.<sup>49</sup> These people live in continual fear of deportation. This in turn raises the risk of developing psychological problems.

These parents' children grow up in a situation in which their basic needs cannot always be met. They also live in chronic uncertainty about their future prospects, which further threatens their development. This in turn can lead to feelings of anxiety and stress, causing problems with concentration and behaviour. The psychological strain suffered by the parent can also affect the children because the parents are not emotionally available, even though they may be there in person. Since there is no wider network, the children receive no support or care from another adult. However, these children face similar issues to those who do not have the security of a stable home, because their fear of being deported means that they have no future prospects and lack the confidence to change that, finding it more difficult to concentrate on their school work as a result.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> The religious aid organisation Caritas provides practical assistance to migrants who have no residence permits. Although Caritas has few financial resources, it is able to offer migrants food and clothing and counselling. In the light of the pandemic, Caritas received a one-off contribution from the Bonaire public body in order to deal with the worst emergencies.

<sup>49</sup> See: Section 2a of the legislation on free legal assistance (*Wet kosteloze rechtskundige bijstand BES*).

<sup>50</sup> Hulse, K. & Saugeres, L. (2008). Housing insecurity and precarious living: an Australian exploration. Swinborne-Monash Research Centre: Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute; Warren, E.J. & Font, S.A. (2015). Housing insecurity, maternal stress and child maltreatment: An application of the Family Stress Model. *Social Services Review*, 89(1), 9-39; Ziol-Guest, K.M. & McKenna, C.C. (2014). Early childhood housing instability and school readiness. *Child Development*, 85(1), 103-113.



### **Maria, a professional working on Saba**

"I agreed to do this interview in order to provide an insight into the daily lives of single mothers and fathers. I would like to emphasise how much respect I have for this group who face difficulties in every single area that blight the lives of both the children and the parents every hour of every day. This results in trauma.

This is because the parents who have to cope on their own have low levels of education and sometimes have three low-paid jobs as a result, which means that they are hardly ever at home. You could call that educational neglect if you want, but it is ultimately the dilemma that they face: you either stay at home with the children or you go out to work and earn something like an income. If your child also has a disability, it gets really difficult.

I know several examples of children with behavioural problems whose attention-seeking behaviour takes on extreme forms. Just imagine: you have no social safety net, you're running from pillar to post, have non-stop money worries and your children are walking around in clothes that are clearly too small and worn out. The meals that you prepare are not sufficiently nutritious and this is visible in skin and hair problems. Then there are the children who are fed mainly carbohydrates, which causes them to become obese. Often these children then go on to suffer concentration problems at school. They are more often ill and suffer colds that last forever. But this is a much wider social problem.

Many of the issues are caused by recurrent, everyday costs. Food, for example, is extremely expensive because tax is levied on it twice, once on St Maarten and then on Saba. Healthy groceries, like fruit and vegetables, are virtually unaffordable: just one tomato costs \$1.25. Milk is more expensive than fizzy drinks filled with sugar and colourants and oil and flour are cheap. Getting a good meal on the table on a daily basis is a real challenge and a source of concern for many single parents. Then there is issue of clothing. It's a basic essential. But there are no clothes shops on the island, so you have to order from a catalogue and pay shipment costs on top. Travelling over to St. Maarten to go shopping is out of the question, because a ticket costs more than \$200. As I said, everything is expensive. Even water: if you have four children and have to do the washing every day, it really mounts up.

Saba is a small island of only 1800 to 2,000 people. People are excluded based on certain characteristics. This is why people don't want it to be obvious that they're struggling financially. People don't want to be labelled as incapable and don't want to be gossiped about. You want to be counted as an equal and not to be boxed off, because if that happens it's difficult to escape it. People value an outstretched hand, but when it becomes charity, it's less well regarded.

In such a small community, you see a lot of each other. In order to protect your own family, people keep a lot of things quiet. When I see single parents, I see isolation, loneliness and a lack of trust. If people have a wider network, they struggle less, but still face continuous pressure.

It's distressing to see a child have to go to school in shoes that are broken or have had the toes cut off. Or in a uniform where the badge is no longer visible because it's been washed so often. With a pale blue shirt that has been washed so often it's almost turned white and trousers that are far too short. That can be difficult for a mother or a father and it places pressure on the parenting. And then this child arrives home needing help with a homework assignment – and you just can't give it because your own education is so poor.

And, of course, you already have millions of things to worry about on a daily basis. In cases like that, you're left totally to your own devices. All of these kinds of things eat away at your self-confidence as a parent. Of course, there are organisations like Child Focus offering free help with homework, but you need to know how to access it. Having to register at certain official offices can be a sensitive issue, because people think: 'I just daren't show my face in that place'. It's just yet another instance when you have to swallow your pride, similar to the Food Bank in the Netherlands.

It is also important not to see all of the children in this group as the same. There are also some wonderfully successful children who are performing well at school and socially. But these children also run the risk of trauma and exclusion. They hear other children say things like: 'No, you're not allowed to play with that child', 'No, you can't invite that child to your party because he never brings a present.'

The most frustrating thing of all is the desperation and lack of hope for the future. I wish I could do something to lift some children out of their situation. It is possible, sometimes. In those cases, education, vocational training, can really make a difference, but it's not always like that. Some situations are so harrowing and all-encompassing that there's so much to change that it's almost impossible.

Having said all that, imagine this: imagine, just like before, we face another pandemic. One where everyone, children aged six and above, have to wear face masks and a single face mask costs the same here as you would pay for 50 in the Netherlands. Something else you have to pay for, yet another thing you need to organise. That kind of thing just breaks you."

## 4 Available, accessible and appropriate facilities and services are important in combating poverty

### 4.1 Introduction

In addition to facing the financial, social and emotional problems covered in detail in the previous chapters, single parents and their children are also lacking certain facilities and services on the islands. This is not just because of the shame they may feel in asking for help, but also because facilities and services are not sufficiently available on the islands. As a group, parents find it difficult to improve their situation, for example by attending (affordable) training courses. They are often unaware of the procedures to follow if they enter into (financial) difficulties, but easily-accessible legal services are simply unavailable. The lack of effective public transport makes it complicated or difficult to get to work or to the children's school. There are no special education facilities for children with behavioural issues or learning difficulties.

All of this makes it even more difficult for single parents to escape their predicament. Compared to two parents in a similar situation, they need additional help to improve their plight or simply maintain their current situation. The lack of facilities and services means that children have less opportunity to escape the vicious circle of poverty. This is compounded by the fact that, as a group, island residents are reluctant to ask for help, for fear of stigma or because of pride. They prefer to solve their own problems for themselves. This can make it difficult for those providing help to act proactively or raise issues and concerns. This chapter looks more closely at the facilities and services that are important for single parents and their children but are either unavailable on the island or only available to a limited extent.<sup>51</sup>

### 4.2 Adult education and opportunities for training

There is a group of single parents who are eager to improve their qualifications in order to move on to better-paid work. But the limited services and facilities on the islands in the field of adult education and retraining mean that most have no chance of this kind of growth or development. The professionals we spoke to believe that support is essential for this group in particular:

“There need to be more opportunities for career development. Second-chance education is available as part of the ‘Social Opportunity Programme’ (SKJ), but there also needs to be something for people who can no longer resort to that, people who dropped out of school long ago. They lead fragile lives and lack basic knowledge in the areas of communication, budgeting and social skills.”

Several mothers we spoke to said they regretted not having completed their schooling. One mother on Bonaire said that she was eager to work in tourism, but lacks sufficient proficiency in Dutch and English. She would like to be eligible for a language course, because she is unable to pay for it herself. Young people who do not complete their school careers<sup>52</sup> have the opportunity of so-called second-chance education as part of the ‘Social Opportunity Programme’ (SKJ). But for ‘older’ drops-outs – for example, parents who left school early –

<sup>51</sup> The reports *Focus on the elderly in the Caribbean Netherlands* and *A poor beginning* both examine the facilities and services that are of specific importance for those target groups.

<sup>52</sup> This especially applies to Bonaire and St. Eustatius. Young people can participate from the age of 18 and, after the age of 25, can prepare for a return to mainstream education or progress to the labour market.

the opportunities available for this kind of second chance are limited on the island.<sup>53</sup> Although there are some private training institutes offering vocational courses and programmes at secondary (MBO) and higher (HBO) level, these are too expensive for most people to afford. Besides this, most parents do not have the right prior qualifications.

According to the professionals we spoke to, it is important to enable people to regain their self-esteem and give them every encouragement to develop.

“It’s important to motivate people. They have almost no sense of self-worth. You need to find what people are good at and focus on boosting that.”

#### 4.3 Legal support and help with debt

Many people are unaware of their rights and do not know what route to take if they face (financial) difficulties. Professionals confirm this, pointing out that only limited legal aid is available on the islands.<sup>54</sup> One professional told us about a single mother who had to care for her sick child. She was unable to find childcare and did not have a network. When she returned to work a week later, her employer told her not to come back. She had been sacked and had no idea who to turn to for help. Professionals would like to see an easily-accessible facility put in place soon that can provide island residents with legal assistance in issues relating to legal claims, divorce and access, conflicts at work, debt relief or residence permits. A professional:

“Island residents affected by COVID who have lost their jobs and income, incurring debt as a result, do not have proper access to the services and facilities that should be available, such as a legal helpdesk, general social work, help with debt, budget coaching or housing mediation. The lack of these kinds of obvious facilities and services exacerbates the symptoms of anxiety, stress and panic.”

In 2012, the Onkobon consumer association was established on Bonaire. Onkobon has been campaigning for years for an easily-accessible facility offering consumers independent advice on their rights.

So far, it has not proved possible to establish a legal helpdesk on Bonaire and St. Eustatius. With the financial support of the Ministry of Justice and Security (J&V), a pilot was launched on Saba in 2018, aimed at enabling easily-accessible legal aid and mediation. Having proved successful, the pilot has been extended twice. The intention is to launch the same pilot on St. Eustatius and Bonaire. The plans have been in place for some time, but implementation is slow.

#### Assistance with debt

In the Caribbean Netherlands, debt rescheduling is a responsibility of the islands’ public bodies in the same way as it is a municipal task in the European Netherlands. Although the public bodies place particular emphasis on providing assistance with debt, this is not always proving equally successful for various reasons<sup>55</sup>, according to the discussions we had.

<sup>53</sup> However, people who have no initial qualifications can complete a level I MBO programme in order to improve their chances of a job.

<sup>54</sup> There are hardly any legal-aid lawyers on the islands and no shops offering legal help. However, there is one lawyer on Bonaire who provides pro-bono legal assistance to citizens if he is able to. Island residents earning less than \$12,570 per year can also apply to the RCN for free legal assistance. The Legal Aid Council (*Raad voor de Rechtsbijstand*) conducts an assessment and determines whether the individual is entitled to free legal assistance. In the case of rejection, appeals are possible, but rarely used.

<sup>55</sup> For example, the islands lack the resources to implement this properly.

Despite the fact that the public bodies have introduced various initiatives to offer debt counselling and budget coaching, there is (still) no statutory provision for this on the islands.<sup>56</sup> But there is genuine need for budgeting courses and proactive assistance with debt on the islands. A professional:

“Create a framework for debt management based in the European Netherlands and ensure that the civil service on the islands is capable of implementing it. At the moment, there’s no capacity for reaching out into the neighbourhoods.”

From 1 January 2022, Sentro Aksesio is offering debt counselling and budget coaching on Bonaire. Members of the public can register for this themselves or it may be arranged for them by a partner organisation<sup>57</sup> or a welfare professional. NIBUD (National Institute for Family Finance Information) recently provided remote training for professionals on the island in dealing with budget issues and debt management. There are plans to develop this further by means of peer-review sessions in the second half of 2022.<sup>58</sup>

#### 4.4 Effective public transport

Island residents who cannot afford a car face further challenges in travelling to work, doing shopping or taking their children to school or other activities. There is still no effective public transport system on the islands. As a result, children are unable to move around the island independently and this has a negative impact on how they spend their free time and on their contacts with friends and others of the same age. They are completely reliant on other people.

The ombudsmen have already raised the issue of public transport on several occasions. It was mentioned in many of our conversations, especially on Bonaire. One single mother told us that she still drives a car even though she cannot afford it:

“I need to work in the evenings for my job. The children also need driving to school, otherwise they’d never get there. But it’s really expensive: petrol, insurance and road tax.”

Parents and children without a car generally spend a long time travelling in order to reach their destination. The roads are poorly maintained, increasing wear and tear on the cars, and there are hardly any cycle paths, making it difficult or even unsafe to travel by bike. One young woman told us that she has a two-and-a-half-hour wait for the bus after school every day. A single parent told us:

“When I’m on late shift, I have to arrange a lift home. I usually have to wait, sometimes until well after midnight.”

Because the single parents work long and irregular hours and depend on other people for transport, they sometimes struggle to attend official appointments. For example, one single mother tried to postpone her appointment with a professional providing help for her child because of her working hours. The request was rejected because it was outside office hours. As a result, the prospect of help and assistance was lost.

<sup>56</sup> <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-35316-3.html>.

<sup>57</sup> Fundashon Cas Boneriano (FCB) registers clients with rental arrears for counselling with Sentro Aksesio.

<sup>58</sup> Letter to Parliament on [progress report](#) re. establishment of a social security benchmark for the Caribbean Netherlands, June 2021.

Several professionals are calling for a more proactive approach, reaching out to communities to find out what is needed. A professional:

“it’s easier actually to go to families rather than having people come to you. You need to get out there and talk to people. But there’s a formal structure for too many things. What on earth are we playing at?”

#### 4.5 Special education

Despite the significant improvements in education in recent years, there are still concerns about special education (or the lack of it) and support for children with special needs. There is still insufficient recognition of learning difficulties and behavioural issues on the islands and a lack of expertise. Despite this, schools do help to identify disabilities and learning difficulties. School students are tested via the education care expertise centres<sup>59</sup>, but this does not go far enough in terms of providing the support and care required. All of this means that the education provided is inappropriate for certain vulnerable groups of children and they cannot make optimum use of their right to an education as a result. A professional:

“In the European Netherlands, if you have a child with Down syndrome, there’s a whole team standing by ready to help. Unlike here. Here, you’re completely on your own.

These concerns about the lack of special education are also shared in The Hague. In 2021, the former education ministers wrote to the Dutch Senate highlighting the fact that despite the improvements in education care, it had not yet been possible to provide suitable education care for every student on the islands.<sup>60</sup> Children on the islands with behavioural issues, autism or (one or more) disabilities are taught in regular mainstream classes.<sup>61</sup> This is particularly problematic for single parents because they not only lack support from a partner, but also receive little or no support from the education system in caring for and supporting their (vulnerable) children. A single mother:

“My 13-year-old son has serious behavioural issues and severe learning difficulties. Fortunately, he is currently receiving help from Stichting Project, but what if that ends? He can’t go to school with ‘ordinary’ children because his behaviour disrupts the class. He needs extra attention and supervision. There’s a large group of children with learning difficulties on the island but no provisions to help them.”

Mainstream schools are often unable to provide the appropriate care, despite the deployment of EOZ, ECE and EC2. As a result, some of these children stay at home, even though they are on the truancy officer’s radar.

<sup>59</sup> Education care support services are available on all three islands: the Expertisecentrum Onderwijs Zorg (EOZ) serves Bonaire, the Expertise Centre Education Care St. (ECE) covers St. Eustatius, and the Expertise Centre Education Care (EC2) serves Saba.

<sup>60</sup> [Letter to Parliament](#) of 8 July 2021 from the then Minister of Education, Culture and Science and the Minister for Primary and Secondary Education and Media.

<sup>61</sup> However, ECE on St. Eustatius and EC2 on Saba do provide inclusive special education to children who encounter problems in mainstream education. They receive cognitive, psychological, emotional and social support and assistance.

The professionals we spoke to welcome the idea of inclusive education in principle, but also feel that the teachers need to be properly equipped to teach these children, in view of their need for special care and attention. But the shortage of qualified teaching staff is an issue faced on all the islands. Some schools have started working on solutions to this problem, and there is already a private school on Bonaire focusing on children needing special education. However, this private education is available only to children whose parents can afford it. Finally, several professionals acknowledged that there have been improvements in the quality of education in the Caribbean Netherlands, but there needs to be more effective coordination with juvenile care. Further research is needed on social issues and on the question of why children cannot learn effectively or access quality education.

#### **Additional support outside school**

When parents face financial difficulties, this also affects children's opportunities outside of school. For example, children in need of remedial teaching or support with homework are only able to access it if their parents can afford to pay.<sup>62</sup> As part of their duty of education care, expertise centres are however able to carry out intelligence and dyslexia tests. One professional told us that she had set up her own centre for extracurricular activities open to all children. However, 'The Hague' now deems it necessary to charge a parental contribution. The professional concerned is now wondering how she can ask single parents to pay for this, because they cannot afford it.

#### **4.6 Preventive care for parenting issues**

Single parents do not always know where to turn to if they have questions about parenting. They may also not have a good understanding of what a child needs in order to grow up properly and safely and develop. It is only when the problems have already escalated that any care is provided. A professional:

"Mental Health Caribbean (MHC) on Bonaire has 170 children on the waiting list even though many of these children and their parents could be given preventive help."

This is why some professionals are calling for increased investment in the existing facilities and services. They would prefer to take action and intervene before the problems actually have a chance to develop. Enlisting parental support, providing information and education to parents and parental participation were recurring issues in many conversations. If parents are involved and supported at an earlier stage, they gain a better understanding of the situation and the prospect of a different course of action. Parental support focuses on the whole family system, helping the parent as well as the child. If (single) parents are able to manage their lives and their parenting more effectively, they also set a better example for the children. This boosts their well-being and promotes healthy development. A professional:

"It all starts with the parents. You can't just help the child all the time if nothing changes at home. Focus on the parents, and the children will follow. Give parents the training, budgeting advice and coaching they need."

One positive initiative is the programme '[Parenting In Action](#)' (PIA), recently launched on Saba. It offers parents support from professionals in raising their children, together with practical tips and skills training. Early intervention requires specific knowledge of who is in need of support and what kind. Not every parent will take the initiative to reach out for help. Some parents deliberately stay under the radar as far as possible because they fear that any external interference could result in their children being taken away. A professional explains:

<sup>62</sup> The [Child Focus](#) foundation on Saba does offer free support with homework.

“People tend to be slow in calling for help from the authorities. The reason why people keep their heads down is because not every professional providing help is equally open-minded. Some of these organisations have staff whose view of society can be stigmatising, taking little account of the culture. The fact that there are a lot of people living together in one house does not automatically mean you’re a bad mother. The housing market is just crazy. Any mother asking for help is doing the right thing and that should not be punished by a referral to the authorities.”

Because they see so many of these parents, churches, schools and family doctors were mentioned as useful places for identifying problems, However, they also find it difficult actually to proceed to an intervention referral, fearful of the potential consequences.

#### 4.7 Integrated approach in providing help

The recent launch of Sentro Akseso on Bonaire is a positive move forward. This community-level initiative brings together several types of assistance and support.<sup>63</sup> Sentro Akseso is responding to the calls from a number of professionals for a more integrated approach to providing help, organised closer to the people themselves. An integrated approach prevents people picking and choosing assistance or support and problems not being seen in their wider context and tackled accordingly.<sup>64</sup> Having a base within the community and working closer to the people themselves also makes it possible to encourage single parents and keep them motivated. Family coaches can assist with minor day-to-day concerns, making it easier to connect with parents and build up trust for follow-up action. It is important to win people’s trust, since parents and professionals alike are reluctant to ask for help because of shame and concern about its negative consequences. A professional:

“It’s important to reach out to people so that you can motivate them. Family coaches should visit on a daily basis to make a connection. This outreach really matters. People often need help with really practical things. For example: when someone says “I’m hungry” you give them some food. You help the children to shower and have breakfast and make sure that the washing is done. This is how you build up a bond and that creates trust.”

A more integrated approach also opens up more opportunities for identifying parents who need help. Parents who are willing will seek out help themselves, but those who really need it often go unseen. It is important to note that single fathers find it even harder to seek out help than single mothers and there are also fewer provisions aimed at them. A community-based strategy makes it easier to approach and help this specific target group. One professional said that integration and coordination would also help at higher levels:

“You should also involve local professionals on Bonaire in the development of a multi-year plan for the island. We currently have to deal with four different ministries and two layers of administration. The Public Body is ultimately responsible, but they must be able to send out a signal about people in practice. They can see and hear what’s happening. So, the public body and The Hague and its four ministries also need to improve their coordination.”

<sup>63</sup> The *Sentro Akseso Boneiru* has been in operation since 1 January 2022. It is an independent foundation, merging the Youth and Family Centre with the local community team, the social support unit, the domestic violence and child abuse reporting point and the Care and Security centre (*Zorg en Veiligheidshuis*). It is intended for all island residents of any age.

<sup>64</sup> This applies even more to children: the problems they experience cannot be seen in isolation from the system in which they grow up.



## 5 Conclusions and recommendations

### 5.1 Introduction

This report describes the issues faced by single parents and their children in the Caribbean Netherlands if they are living on or around the poverty line and outlines the effect poverty has on parenting. This effect is felt by the parents and the children. This chapter starts by exploring poverty-related issues in the Caribbean Netherlands in general terms. It then examines some of the issues raised in the report in more detail. This concerns a series of issues of a financial and social or emotional nature. Finally, we briefly look at the lack of facilities and services that could ensure that issues are more easily resolved.

At its core, this chapter focuses on a series of recommendations to the Ministry of BZK by the ombudsmen. Although the ministries of SZW and VWS and the public bodies also have an important role in this area, we consider BZK to be responsible for coordination. Our recommendations aim to improve the situation of single parents in the Caribbean Netherlands, ensuring that they are better able to parent their children and create opportunities for their further development. This requires an integrated approach, but also one that takes account of the local context, the culture on the islands and the current lack of trust in the government. It also needs to take account of the fact that everyone on the islands knows each other.

### 5.2 Devastating poverty persists in the Caribbean Netherlands

The islands of Bonaire, Saba and St Eustatius have been special municipalities of the Netherlands since 2010.<sup>65</sup> Many residents of the islands saw this as a positive sign that life was set to improve in the Caribbean Netherlands. But it has proved a disappointment for many. Despite some improvements in education and healthcare, poverty on the islands has begun to worsen in numerous ways. It was not until 2019, after the ombudsmen and authorities such as the Netherlands Institute for Human Rights, NIBUD and some Dutch MPs raised the alarm, that the government introduced its so-called social security benchmark for the Caribbean Netherlands. This aimed to bridge the gap between incomes and the cost of living. However, no social minimum income was established<sup>66</sup>. Nevertheless, efforts have been made to combat poverty. The minimum wage and other benefits have been increased by 10%, child allowance has risen and measures have been taken to reduce the cost of living, such as the cost of childcare. Unfortunately, these efforts have made little difference, in view of the huge increases in the prices of products and services. A 10% increase in too little is still too little.

In the current government's coalition agreement, the Caribbean Netherlands feature high on the agenda. There are plans to make serious efforts to combat poverty and bolster the labour market. On a structural basis they will spent on the Caribbean Netherlands. There are also plans to 'substantially' reduce costs and boost childcare. These are fine ambitions, but a large group of island residents – many of them minors – are living below the poverty line and it is not clear what is set to change in the short-term. This is worsened by the fact that the Caribbean Netherlands is still lacking social support in the form of care allowance, childcare allowance or statutory debt relief. These kinds of provisions are taken for granted in the European Netherlands.

<sup>65</sup> The reports *Focus on the elderly in the Caribbean Netherlands* and *A poor beginning* include a description of the administrative structure of the Caribbean Netherlands in the appendices.

<sup>66</sup> In the European Netherlands, this is based on the minimum cost of living of a two-person household.

Residents on the islands also receive no unemployment benefit or occupational disability allowance like those in the European Netherlands. Unlike in the European Netherlands, pregnant women and women with very young children in the Caribbean Netherlands are not, in principle, entitled to exemption from the obligation to look for employment if they wish to be considered for support allowance. Finally, child allowance was not paid in the Caribbean Netherlands until 2016. The amounts paid have only recently been increased to something vaguely resembling what people can expect to receive in the European Netherlands. The double child allowance scheme for children requiring intensive care does not (yet) exist.

#### **Different treatment in the spotlight**

The difference in the way in which residents of the Caribbean Netherlands and those of the European Netherlands are treated can only be described as remarkable. This is related to a provision in the Dutch constitution that draws a distinction because of the ‘particular circumstances of the islands’. This refers, among other things, to the economic and social conditions on the island, their size and the distance from the European Netherlands. But it is not clear which particular circumstances prevent the Equal Treatment Act from applying to the Caribbean Netherlands. Even the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, which published a report on 25 August 2021<sup>67</sup>, identified this difference as remarkable and stated its regret that the Equal Treatment Act is not applicable in the Caribbean Netherlands. The committee recommended that the Dutch government also take measures to reduce discrimination and promote equality between the Dutch citizens living in the Caribbean and the European Netherlands. In early 2022, the Committee on the Rights of the Child also highlighted the need to bring an end to the differences between the European and Caribbean Netherlands in the areas of juvenile care, child protection, education and social provisions.<sup>68</sup>

As things now stand, people living in the Caribbean Netherlands currently feel disadvantaged and even more disappointed about what ‘10-10-10’ has achieved. It has certainly not brought the prosperity they were hoping for.

All of this means that people living in the Caribbean Netherlands, including single parents and their children, do not always have an automatic right to provisions and facilities that apply for European Dutch residents. These are provisions on which many people in the European Netherlands rely in order to survive on a daily basis.

### **5.3 How to turn the tide?**

The magnitude of the problem of poverty in the Caribbean Netherlands cannot be emphasised enough. The ombudsmen have frequently drawn attention to this, and have not been the only ones to do so. The government has been repeatedly called to account for its responsibility towards the residents of the Caribbean Netherlands. The ombudsmen have seen how people are working with the best intentions on both sides of the ocean to bring about improvement on the islands and there has been some progress. Child allowance has been increased and childcare improved. Efforts are also being made to achieve a better balance between the cost of living and incomes in the Caribbean Netherlands.<sup>69</sup> Action has also been taken on some of the recommendations both ombudsmen presented in their reports *Focus on the elderly in the Caribbean Netherlands* and *A poor beginning*. These are positive moves, but not positive enough for the residents of the Caribbean Netherlands. The measures so far taken in response to the debate on setting a social minimum income have not resulted in sufficient improvement.

<sup>67</sup> [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CERD/Shared%20Documents/NLD/CERD\\_C\\_NLD\\_CO\\_22-24\\_46534\\_E.pdf](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CERD/Shared%20Documents/NLD/CERD_C_NLD_CO_22-24_46534_E.pdf)

<sup>68</sup> Committee on the Rights of the Child (16. February 2022). Concluding observations on the combined fifth and sixth periodic reports of the Netherlands (advance unedited version).

<sup>69</sup> [Letter to Parliament](#) on progress report re. establishment of a social security benchmark for the Caribbean Netherlands 2021.

### **Realistic social minimum income**

One potential solution would involve easing the financial situation for island residents in general and – in the context of this investigation – single parents and their children in particular. This could start by setting a realistic social minimum income, based on the actual cost of living. This should go hand-in-hand with equal access to social services and provisions, including unemployment benefit and the possibility to apply for exemption from the obligation to work for pregnant women and parents of very young children. In terms of costs, there also need to be provisions to help people manage their existing incomes and budgets and effectively deal with any debts they may have. In order to give single Caribbean parents the possibility to achieve the self-reliance expected of them, there need to be more opportunities for training and development.

### **Ending the vicious circle of poverty for children**

For the children in this investigation, children of single parents in poverty, the situation in which they are being raised is a source of concern. The ombudsmen have seen for themselves how many of the essential conditions for children's proper and healthy development are being placed under pressure. Because they are alone, the parents in the target group generally have only limited opportunity to provide their children with adequate care, love and attention. The parents are under pressure and stressed by all the (financial) problems they have to endure. These parents generally spend a lot of their time working, rather than at home. As a result, the children have less structure, fewer rules and limited support or attention. There is also a greater risk of an unsafe situation at home. Outside the home, the children bear the brunt of this in the sense that they are treated differently than those who are not growing up in poverty and in the effect this has on their contact with friends and other adults, at school and in terms of leisure activities. As a result, the poverty itself is not necessarily the children's main problem. What matters for them is ensuring that the poverty does not have a negative effect on the quality of their living conditions.<sup>70</sup>

Just like adults, children who grow up in poverty have to deal with poverty and its consequences. If no attempt is made to reduce childhood poverty, it is passed on to the next generation. This is why bringing an end to the vicious circle of poverty is what really matters. To achieve this, it is essential for all of the organisations involved to address poverty-related issues in the Caribbean Netherlands in an integrated way – taking account of both parents and children – and to take concerted and proactive action. In this, it is important to ensure that the views of the parents and children are also taken on board. For this purpose, the Ministry of BZK must be rigorous in its coordination.

### **Integrated approach essential**

In view of the complexity of the problem, an integrated approach is essential. The public bodies, responsible for combating poverty on the islands, need to collaborate on this with the Ministry of BZK and the other ministries, in order to be able to take effective action. Although central government and the public bodies each have their own roles and responsibilities, effective collaboration is essential in order to make important and rapid progress in combating poverty and turning the tide.

## **5.4 What will the consequences be for Shanice and her mother?**

To reiterate, the ombudsmen have seen signs of progress in combating poverty in the Caribbean Netherlands, both at national and local level. However, for Shanice, her siblings and her mother, it is important for this progress – and the improvements made on the basis of it – to be permanent in nature. In the past, many similar initiatives turned out to be temporary, taking the form of projects or pilots. Because these kinds of projects are temporary, any improvements do not become permanent even though they are possible. In other words, permanent, long-term efforts are required to beat poverty. This is why the ombudsmen feel that children like Shanice and her

<sup>70</sup> The Ombudsman for Children (2019) [Ik ben meer dan mijn problemen](#); Report number KOM013/2019.

mother can rightfully expect the government to ensure they receive rapid and effective help in improving their situation. They need to be able to build a stable future for themselves. The government must understand that it has a duty of care for all people living in the Netherlands, including the part of the country in the Caribbean, and it must take on this responsibility. This is precisely why the government needs to take several concrete steps to bring about a series of improvements rapidly. Both ombudsmen are convinced that the potential solutions outlined below will improve the situation of single mothers and their children. These recommendations are:

### **Proactive and integrated help and support**

The issue of poverty rarely stands in isolation and is generally accompanied by other problems, as this investigation has once more demonstrated. It is important that island residents who need support or help have access to a designated point of contact that applies an integrated approach in providing support, including with parenting, assistance for young people, social support, housing and debt relief. Sentro Akseeso, established in January 2022 on Bonaire, is a positive example of this. Serving as a portal to the social domain, the centre offers access to various types of support, at individual and community level. An integrated approach like this helps single parents to deal with the many problems they face on a daily basis, as a consequence of poverty and single parenthood. This needs to include a separate assessment of the specific needs of individual children in the family.

The help provided also needs to be easy to find, which means it is important to make it as accessible as possible. Reaching out into the community, having social workers and debt counsellors join community teams and visit people at home can prove very useful in ensuring single mothers needing help and support actually receive it.

The ombudsmen have noted that the temporary nature of many projects means that there is insufficient integration and existing problems are not being resolved from a shared perspective. Far too often, different helpdesks operate in isolation from each other. For each care domain, separate decisions are made with regard to which care and support is needed and how it should be funded. There may also be occasions when rules on privacy prevent information from being shared with other organisations at an early stage.

Despite this, there is an important need for (government) bodies on both sides of the ocean to collaborate more effectively, including locally, adopt a proactive approach and focus persistently on prevention and early detection. This kind of integrated approach goes hand-in-hand with a coordinated vision of the target group and the role of professional organisations in it. This should preferably also encompass a multi-annual perspective and a guide for professionals on how to deal with child poverty in the social domain. In all of this, any development of policy and legislation in The Hague must take place in consultation with the islands.

Finally, the Ombudsman for Children is eager to highlight the important role that professionals can play in reducing the effects of poverty on children and improving living conditions, both at home and outside of it. In the European Netherlands, a guide has been compiled for professionals on how to deal with child poverty in the social domain.<sup>71</sup> A similar guide for the Caribbean Netherlands could also prove useful in bringing about short-term improvements for the individual child. In this, it is important to engage in discussion with children, young people and parents on what they feel they need.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Divosa 2021; *Omgaan met kinderarmoede in het sociaal domein. Handreiking voor professionals*.

<sup>72</sup> The Ombudsman for Children's *Toolkit Het beste besluit* (Best decision toolkit) can be helpful with this.

### Help with money and debt/legal services

Following on from this, the ombudsmen continue to point to the legal and financial issues relating to child maintenance and debt relief faced by the group of single parents living in the Caribbean Netherlands. Aside from a few pilots, there are very few facilities or services on the islands to support these single parents. If debt is to be tackled properly, this calls for a focus on prevention and early detection. One example of this is family budgeting. Introducing training in this area, not only for professionals, but also for the parents and, via education, the children, could prove very beneficial. The islands would also benefit from collaborating more closely on this, in terms of prevention, early detection and implementation.

### Support with parenting

There is no doubt that poverty has a major impact on the opportunities available to parents, and especially single parents, when it comes to being able to parent their children in an effective and appropriate way. This applies both practically, in terms of meeting basic needs and physical presence, and emotionally in terms of the time and attention they can devote to their children in a calm and peaceful setting. This has significant direct and indirect effects on the children's well-being and development prospects and their opportunities later in life. The situation at home has a negative impact on their performance at school (and their opportunities for employment as a result). The stress and lack of parental attention can even cause behavioural problems and attachment issues.<sup>73</sup>

This is why single parents in poverty must be given adequate support in parenting their children – it is actually essential for the children's opportunities for development. The fact that the availability of parents and the quality of parenting matter for children is acknowledged in the European Netherlands by such programmes as *Een Kansrijke Start* (A Promising Start) and preventive interventions like Voorzorg.<sup>74</sup> This kind of approach is non-existent in the Caribbean Netherlands. Organisations like the Netherlands Youth Institute could join forces with the youth and care institutes on the island to explore how these kinds of programmes can be developed as a way of providing vulnerable single parents with additional support. Finally, in the further development of legislation and policy, the interests of the child must always be explored and taken into account.<sup>75</sup>

### Access to childcare

Ensuring that their children are properly cared for is another major issue for many single parents. They themselves lack the time to care for their children properly and childcare from family members often involves differences in parenting styles that can be confusing for children. Often there is no supervision at all, leaving the children to their own devices. In this context, the ombudsmen see BES(t)4Kids to be a particular positive development. Thanks to this programme, childcare has improved and children are being better supervised and encouraged in their development. However, the ombudsmen note that the parental contribution is too high for certain groups of parents and childcare is not available in the evenings or at weekends. These are precisely the times when large numbers of single parents attempt to top up their incomes. Because of this, there is a risk that one group of children, often those who, in view of the lack of equal opportunities, need it most, have the least access to childcare. The ombudsmen would recommend considering deploying additional childcare outside office hours and reducing the parental contribution paid for childcare to zero for all parents. We say this also in the light of developments and the debate about childcare in the European part of the Netherlands.

<sup>73</sup> Warren, E.J. & Font, S.A. (2015). Housing insecurity, maternal stress and child maltreatment: An application of the Family Stress Model. *Social Services Review*, 89(1), 9-39.

<sup>74</sup> <https://kansrijkestart.nl/eerste-1000-dagen-baby/>; <https://www.nji.nl/interventies/voorzorg>.

<sup>75</sup> In determining the interests of the child, the following elements must be taken into account: the child's identity, his or her opinion, the retention of the family environment and key contacts, concern for protection and safety, vulnerability, the right to health and the right to an education. The step-by-step plan *Het beste besluit voor het kind* (The best decision for the child) can prove useful for this purpose.

**Paid courses**

Retraining and refresher courses are necessary in order to increase one's income. The ombudsmen realise that this requires investment. People need to be trained for the jobs that are actually available and supply coordinated in order to meet demand. It is also important for training courses to be affordable and available (in other words, accessible) to single mothers in poverty. There needs to be a specific focus on early drop-outs: people who are now parents who did not complete their schooling when they were young. These people have very few opportunities for development on the island, leaving them with only limited options for taking personal action to improve their situation.

**Continue to supply meals at school and childcare**

During their investigation, the ombudsmen were told that there is little healthy food to eat at home. The ombudsmen were pleased to note that nutritious meals are being provided at schools and childcare facilities. It is important to understand that this is the only healthy meal that some of these children will eat on that day. When they are hungry, children are less able to concentrate and simply have less energy to join in. The ombudsmen would therefore like to see efforts made to ensure that these meals continue to be provided at school and in childcare and that the financial resources to enable this remain available.

**5.5 Recommendations**

The ombudsmen believe that it is important for the ministries in the European part of the Netherlands to collaborate closely in developing and coordinating the improvements suggested above. They envisage a specific coordination role for the Ministry of BZK. Based on its responsibility, this ministry is able to delegate various tasks to the different ministries and public bodies while also ensuring there is effective collaboration and coordination between the different parties. For this reason, the ombudsmen have the following recommendations for the State Secretary for BZK:

- Develop an integrated approach for (access to) facilities and services and ensure that it includes a focus on and a strategy targeted at the children.
- Focus on providing more financial help and debt counselling and easily-accessible legal services.
- Break the taboo on parenting support and make it available and accessible.
- Ensure that childcare is available free of charge.
- Offer affordable courses to enable (single) parents to continue to learn and develop.

## Appendix 1 Wrangling for a social minimum income

In the Dutch House of Representatives, there have been arguments for years about improving social security in the Caribbean Netherlands. Although every resident of the Netherlands (both European and the Caribbean Netherlands) is entitled to social security,<sup>76</sup> it has still not yet proved possible to set a social minimum income for residents of the three small special Dutch municipalities (the BES islands). The main reason for not making the minimum wage in the Caribbean Netherlands the same as in the European Netherlands is the fear of negative economic consequences.<sup>77</sup>

### Social minimum benchmark

Despite this, the (then) government did determine a so-called [social minimum benchmark](#)<sup>78</sup>; a guideline indicating the minimum required to cover the basic cost of living.<sup>79</sup> Several other measures were also announced to improve the social security of people living in the Caribbean Netherlands.<sup>80</sup> These measures primarily focused on gradually increasing incomes and benefits and reducing the cost of living. The Secretary for Social Affairs and Employment (SZW) promised to monitor developments and provide the House of Representatives with annual updates on progress over a five-year period.<sup>81</sup>

### Progress report 2020

In June 2020, the government published its second annual progress report on the social security benchmark. This states that progress has been made in improving the income position of residents of the Caribbean Netherlands and reducing the high cost of living. The statutory minimum wage, benefit and child allowance were all increased (again). National government and the public bodies also incentivised the construction and availability of social housing. In addition, the government made available €9.8 million on a structural basis for improving the quality of childcare and its financial accessibility and announced its plans to investigate the possibilities for permanent reductions in the cost of energy, telecoms and drinking water.

### Progress report 2021

In the report of June 2021, it was announced that child benefit would be increased by 2.4% and the option for double child benefit to be paid to families with children with additional care needs would be explored. The social minimum income would also increase. In addition to financial resources, it announced efforts to improve (single) parents' social security by means of (better) help and support. This involved the establishment of BES(t)4kids, providing childcare to all children, in an effort to reduce the negative impact of child poverty. At the same time, the general parental contribution for childcare and after-school care was reduced.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>76</sup> See Article 20 of the Dutch constitution.

<sup>77</sup> According to the government, increasing the statutory minimum wage could have a negative impact on demand for labour, regional competitiveness on the islands and the resilience of the economy.

<sup>78</sup> These progress reports were follow-ups to the Regioplan benchmarking study to establish a minimum social income for the Caribbean Netherlands ("*Onderzoek naar een ijkpunt voor het sociaal minimum in Caribisch Nederland*"). Commissioned by the Ministry of SWZ, this study aimed to assess the minimum cost of living in the Caribbean Netherlands as a basis for determining a social minimum income.

<sup>79</sup> The guideline figure for a single person on Bonaire was set at \$945 per month. On St. Eustatius it was \$1,056 and \$1,077 on Saba.

<sup>80</sup> The aim of this social security benchmark is to attempt to bridge the gap between incomes and expenditure by means of small increases in income and reductions in the cost of living.

<sup>81</sup> [Letter to Parliament](#) on progress report re. establishment of a social security benchmark for the Caribbean Netherlands, 27 June 2019.

<sup>82</sup> This included the instigation of so-called child places, intended for children whose parents are unable to afford the contribution.

**Coalition Agreement, December 2021**

In the government's coalition agreement, additional money is earmarked for the Caribbean Netherlands. It had been announced previously that the minimum wage and benefit would be increased by 10% on 1 January 2022. This also applied to child benefit that was set at \$89 per child per month. The increase in the minimum wage and benefits is in line with the agreements made in the Central Dialogue<sup>83</sup> on Bonaire and St. Eustatius and with the social partners on Saba. An additional €30 million per year will be invested in sustainability, the economy and basic amenities. Efforts will also be made to make life on the islands more affordable. Finally, the parties in the coalition agreed to accelerate the social security benchmark, according to which the minimum wage and benefits rise and the cost of living falls.<sup>84</sup>

**Onkobon sues the Dutch state**

In February 2022, the Onkobon consumer association on Bonaire announced that it was suing the Dutch state because of inadequate action to tackle poverty in the Caribbean Netherlands. Onkobon argues that the Dutch state is continuing to fail in its duty to set a social minimum income.

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<sup>83</sup> The *Centraal Dialoog* is a consultative body involving local government, employers, trade unions and the Chamber of Commerce dealing with social and economic issues, such as social security and combating poverty.

<sup>84</sup> <https://www.kabinetsformatie2021.nl/documenten/publicaties/2021/12/15/coalitieakkoord-omzien-naar-elkaar-vooruitkijken-naar-de-toekomst>



## Appendix 2 Quality of life environmental conditions

Quality of life is determined by 14 environmental conditions. Several parts of the report look at the effects of poverty on these 14 environmental conditions.

The conditions for healthy development are:

1. Adequate care
2. Safety and security
3. Parental love and attention
4. Structure, rules and support
5. Good example set by parents
6. Parental interest
7. Stability and continuity in parenting and care
8. Safety in the neighbourhood
9. Respect
10. A social network of other adults
11. School and leisure time
12. Contact with friends and contemporaries
13. Good example set by other adults
14. Security and continuity in living conditions

The quality of these environmental conditions is closely related to children's well-being. In general terms, the higher the quality of these 14 conditions, the better the child's well-being and prospects for development.

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