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Improved cooperation needed to tackle poverty among single parents and children in the Caribbean Netherlands

Local and national government must quickly propose long-term measures

This report describes the issues faced by single parents and their children in the Caribbean Netherlands living on or around the poverty line and explores how this affects their parenting, from both the parents' and the children's perspective. Poverty persists as a major problem in the Caribbean Netherlands. The National Ombudsman, the Ombudsman for Children and other organisations have been drawing attention to the issue for a long time. It has been raised yet again in the conversations that the ombudsmen and their researchers have held with single parents and their children. Previous investigations have looked at poverty among the elderly and young adults on Bonaire, St. Eustatius and Saba. Today, the report 'Caribbean children pay the price' has been presented to Alida Francis, government commissioner of St. Eustatius, and sent to the State Secretary responsible Alexandra Van Huffelen (Kingdom Relations and Digitisation).

Problems caused by poverty in the Caribbean Netherlands

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 thematic study of poverty-related issues in the Caribbean Netherlands, made up of a series of investigations into three vulnerable target groups. In 2019, the National Ombudsman published a report about the problems faced by [elderly people](#). In 2020, the National Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children jointly published a report on the problem of [young adults](#) on the islands. This final report, the third in the series, is an investigation into single parents living with their children in poverty and facing issues with their parenting. This investigation was also conducted jointly by the National Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children.

Interviews with parents and children

In recent months, almost 30 interviews had been held with parents and/or their children during working visits to the islands. Often, these parents have more than one job. Despite the hours they work, many are unable to afford a hot meal or to arrange adequate care for their children. Children have to care for their brothers or sisters, often arriving at school tired and without having had a good breakfast.

A single parent: "I need to work in the evenings as well. The children also need driving to school, otherwise they'd never get there. But it's really expensive: petrol, insurance and road tax."

Concerns of professionals

Just like the National Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children, professionals working on the islands also have concerns about the lack of facilities and services available for single parents and their children. The researchers discussed this with more than 40 professionals and government (and other) organisations in both the Caribbean and European Netherlands. An expert meeting attended by professionals was also organised on Bonaire. They explained that there are very few easily accessible facilities or services to assist these parents with issues such as child maintenance, visitation rights and debt counselling. They also highlighted the limited opportunities that young parents have to develop

their careers. If you have a child at a relatively young age, it is almost impossible to complete your schooling in the Caribbean Netherlands. Yet it is exactly this that can offer a way out of poverty.

A professional: "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."

Improved cooperation

There is no integrated vision of poverty in the Caribbean Netherlands. Even professionals on the islands complain of a lack of coordination. At the same time, the Dutch government is not investing enough to enable the islands to improve. Structural and long-term efforts are required to reduce poverty in the Caribbean Netherlands. The ombudsmen feel that single parents and their children can rightfully expect the government to ensure they receive rapid and carefully-considered help in improving their situation. They must be able to build a stable future for themselves and their children.

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. This is why the government needs to take several concrete steps to bring about a series of improvements rapidly. In this, the ombudsmen envisage a specific coordination role for the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations (BZK). Despite the measures taken to tackle poverty in the Caribbean Netherlands, concerns persist about young parents and their children who are growing up in poverty. Because numerous ministries and government and other organisations are involved, tackling these issues is far from easy. This is why there is an urgent need for close collaboration between central government and the public bodies on the islands.

Significant differences between the European and Caribbean Netherlands

European Dutch (single) parents who are poor can rely on such measures as healthcare allowance, childcare allowance or statutory debt relief. None of these are available for parents in the Caribbean Netherlands. Residents on the islands also receive no unemployment benefit or occupational disability allowance like those in the European Netherlands. This is despite the terrible situation that single parents (who are often young) face. This difference in the way in which residents of the Caribbean Netherlands and residents of the European Netherlands are treated is based on a provision in the Dutch constitution that allows a distinction because of the 'special circumstances of islands'. This refers, among other things, to the economic and social conditions on the island, their size and the distance from the European Netherlands.

Realistic social minimum income

The ombudsmen consider it essential for a realistic financial basis to be achieved for all island residents as quickly as possible. This particularly applies to single parents and their children. It could start by setting a realistic social minimum income, based on the actual cost of living on the islands. This can only be achieved through a better understanding of the problems on the ground combined with a concerted approach to tackle them by the actors and organisations involved. This will make it possible to take action before poverty starts. It should also take account of the advice and practical examples provided by parents and children.

Margrite Kalverboer, Ombudsman for Children: "When children grow up in poverty, they often experience a range of problems in different areas of life. This means that there is a significant risk of poverty being passed on to them and for it to continue down the generations. It is really important to break this pattern".

Consequences for the children

Poverty can have serious negative repercussions on how people parent their children, especially if they have to cope on their own. The interviews with parents and children and previous research have revealed that single parents lack the space they need to give their children 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.

A child: "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."

Progress made

Some progress has been made at both national and local level. The minimum wage and other benefits were recently increased by 10%, child allowance has risen and measures have been taken to reduce the cost of living, including childcare. Action has also been taken on some of the recommendations presented by both ombudsmen in their previous 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. In her letter of 7 March 2022, State Secretary Van Huffelen indicated that she also has concerns about poverty on the islands, confirming that the efforts made by previous governments have failed to make sufficient difference to the people on Bonaire, Saba and Sint Eustatius in terms of the impact on their spending power. The current government's coalition agreement includes the investment of €30 million on the Caribbean Netherlands on a structural basis. This is to be used to tackle poverty and strengthen the labour market, among other things.

Reinier van Zutphen, National Ombudsman: " It's so important to ensure that single parents in the Caribbean Netherlands receive more than just money to help them. Along with their children, they have a right to see a rapid improvement in the facilities and services available. This will only be possible by means of improved cooperation between the different government authorities and organisations. Both in the European and Caribbean Netherlands.

Rigorous coordination by Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations

The ombudsmen believe that it is important for the ministries in the European part of the Netherlands to cooperate closely in implementing 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 cooperation and coordination between the various 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.

Recommendations of the National Ombudsman and Ombudsman for Children

- Integrated approach essential

Improved collaboration will be essential because the problems are so complex in nature. 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 cooperation is essential in order to make important and rapid progress in combating poverty and turning the tide.

- Proactive and integrated help and support

Our investigation showed that poverty-related problems often go hand-in-hand with other problems. It is important that island residents who need support or help have access to a designated point of

contact that applies a collaborative approach in providing support, including with parenting, assistance for young people, social support, housing and debt relief.

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."

- Help with money and debt/legal services

There is hardly any support available in the form of child maintenance and/or debt counselling for single parents and their children. In order to nip issues in the bud, the ombudsmen recommend applying a preventive approach and the early identification of problems.

- Support with parenting

Particularly when facing poverty, it is important for single parents to receive sufficient support in parenting their children. This is actually essential for the children's opportunities for development. This kind of support 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. When drafting new laws, it is also important always to take account of the interests of the child.

A professional: "It is important for people in this group to have someone who can provide support in their day-to-day life 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."

- Access to childcare

Ensuring that their children are properly cared for is another major issue for many single parents. They themselves do not have sufficient time and siblings are often left to care for each other. The ombudsmen see BES(t)4Kids as a positive way forward. This alliance between the public bodies of Bonaire, St. Eustatius and Saba and various ministries provides good quality, safe and accessible childcare and after-school care in the Caribbean Netherlands. However, this is not affordable for all parents and childcare is often 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.

The ombudsmen would therefore like to see the current focus to be on additional childcare outside normal office hours, with no parental contribution payable for the childcare.

A single parent: "When I'm on late shift, I have to arrange a lift home. I usually have to wait, sometimes until well after midnight."

- Affordable courses

Learning something new, perhaps for a new career, is essential if you want to have the chance of a better job and a life without poverty. People need to be trained for the jobs that are actually available. Moreover, courses need to be affordable and accessible for single parents. Above all, there also needs to be a focus on parents who left school early, but still wish to continue to learn.

Next steps

In November 2022, a conference is being organised in the Caribbean Netherlands. At it, the ombudsmen and their colleagues from Curaçao and St. Maarten will continue their discussion on the wide-ranging effort to combat poverty.

Background

Bonaire, St. Eustatius and Saba have been special municipalities of the Netherlands since 2010. Together, they make up the Caribbean Netherlands. Since 2010, the National Ombudsman has been handling complaints about government bodies on the islands. Since 2012, he has also handled complaints about the local government authorities, otherwise known as the public bodies. The Ombudsman for Children has been handling complaints in the Caribbean Netherlands since 2011.