



REPORT OF THE
STATE COMMISSION
DEMOGRAPHIC
DEVELOPMENTS
CARRIBBEAN
NETHERLANDS 2050

FOCUSED
GROWTH

State Commission
Demographic Developments
Caribbean Netherlands
2050

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Following the Decree establishing the State Commission Demographic Developments 2050, the State Commission Demographic Developments Caribbean Netherlands 2050 was formed as a temporary advisory body on 1 February 2024, in line with Article 6(1) and (3) of the Advisory Bodies Framework Act. The *Focused growth* report was prepared and drafted by the sub-working group Caribbean Netherlands on behalf of the complete State Commission between 1 February and 4 July 2024.

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INTRODUCTION

In November 2022, the House of Representatives requested the government by motion¹ to include the Caribbean part of the Netherlands (hereinafter: the Caribbean Netherlands) in the remit of the State Commission Demographic Developments 2050.² Although the State Commission had already been established by that point and had already started its work on the European part of the Netherlands (hereinafter: the European Netherlands), it wanted to also properly include the Caribbean Netherlands, having heard the request by the House. However, in line with the preliminary study by Statistics Netherlands (CBS) and the Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute (NIDI) on the European Netherlands, additional data on demographic scenarios for the Caribbean Netherlands and their social consequences were still needed in order to properly perform the advisory work. At the request of the State Commission, the government asked the CBS and the NIDI to provide such data. After completion of the State Commission's report on the European Netherlands and after the provision of the additional data by the NIDI and the CBS³, the State Commission started work on its advice on the Caribbean Netherlands in February 2024. According to the Decree establishing it, the State Commission had five months to do so.

The remit of the State Commission for the Caribbean Netherlands is the same as that for the European part of Netherlands:

[...] to advise the government on scenarios, policy options, and policy perspectives of the government in relation to the social consequences of the demographic developments in the public entities of Bonaire, Sint Eustatius, and Saba, in particular of population ageing and migration, until at least 2050 and against the background of general welfare.

Multiple variants of the demographic developments in Bonaire, Sint Eustatius, and Saba have been presented in this report, with due consideration to the societal impact. Given that the countries of Curaçao, Aruba, and Sint Maarten (CAS) are themselves autonomously responsible for this topic, this report deals exclusively with the public entities of Bonaire, Sint Eustatius, and Saba (BES). These three islands are politically and administratively part of the Netherlands in this form since 10 October 2010. From that date onwards, the government of the Netherlands also includes the BES Islands. This also means it bears responsibility for pursuing general welfare⁴ and dealing with the demographic developments within these island communities. The term public entity, as used in this report, derives from Section 132a of the Dutch Constitution, which regulates the establishment and dissolution of territorial public entities other than provinces and municipalities in the Caribbean part of Netherlands. Based on this provision, the local governance of these islands was regulated by the Public Entities (Bonaire, Sint Eustatius and Saba) Act. The term “special municipality” is also often used to refer to these islands. However, the public entities possess functions of both municipalities and provinces, and the Commission for this reason deems it more precise and therefore more desirable to use the term “public entity” instead of “special municipality”.

To be able to properly answer the request for advice, the State Commission wanted to centrally and internally organise and position the knowledge and expertise related to the Caribbean Netherlands. It did so, on the one hand, by having an additional vice-chair in place and, on the other hand, by having this report be drafted by a working group on the Caribbean Netherlands, which, in addition to existing State Commission members, also included three experts, all with specific expertise with regard to the Caribbean Netherlands. In addition, the State Commission visited each of the three BES Islands, where a range of meetings and discussions were held with young people, care workers, administrators, entrepreneurs, trade unions, and others. In this way, the State Commission made efforts to include the local perspective and context in this report, based on its own observations. In drafting the report, the State Commission was aware that this report is about and (also) intended for the residents of Bonaire, Sint Eustatius, and Saba. That is why this advisory report focuses on the concerns and challenges of the citizens of each of the islands, both now and in 2050. The demographic developments, too, have been viewed through this lens. The State Commission is therefore confident that this report is recognisable and in tune with the daily reality faced by inhabitants of each of the islands of the Caribbean part of the Netherlands.

In addition, the State Commission explicitly based its report on the reality that the BES Islands are part of the Netherlands, no less than for instance Hof van Twente is. At the same time, the State Commission has taken account of the fact that, next to this common feature, each of the islands has a very distinct geographic and demographic context. It is also important to realise that, as parts of the Netherlands, the BES Islands are very “young”: the welfare state, socioeconomic conditions, and parliamentary democracy have undergone a development, within the pre-10 October 2010 Caribbean context, which is both derived from the European Netherlands and autonomous. As a result, most societal features in the European Netherlands that have taken shape historically and over a long period of time cannot simply be projected onto the Caribbean part of the Netherlands. In this report the State Commission emphasises the importance of accounting for this.

- 1 House of Representatives (2022)
- 2 For a more detailed explanation of the State Commission’s work on the European Netherlands, see the Moderate Growth report (2024). By way of background: In 2018, the House of Representatives adopted the motion by Dijkhoff et al. asking the government to map the social consequences of (different scenarios of) demographic developments for many policy areas and to present policy options. In 2020, at the government’s request, different population scenarios were worked out and presented by the NIDI and the CBS as a supplement to the existing population forecast of the CBS. These were drawn up in consultation with the various planning agencies, the nine participating departments, and an external sounding board group. As a follow-up to this, in 2021, the NIDI and the CBS also published a report on the consequences of different scenarios for four policy areas, specifically, work, housing, care, and education. Partly in response to the motion by Den Haan et al., the State Commission

Demographic Developments 2050 was established. As laid down in Article 2 of the Establishment Decree, the State Commission on Demographic Developments 2050 (hereinafter: the State Commission) was given the following mandate: The remit of the State Commission is to advise the government on scenarios, policy options and policy perspectives of the government in relation to the social consequences of demographic developments, in particular of population ageing and migration, until at least 2050 and against the background of the general welfare.

- 4 The Dutch term “Brede welvaart” in this text has been translated into “general welfare” used also by the CPB Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis <https://www.cpb.nl/en/general-welfare#> Others like the OECD have also used “well-being” to refer to the same concept. <https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/well-being-and-beyond-gdp.html>

CHAPTER 9

CHOICES TOWARDS 2050

The House of Representatives and the national government have requested the State Commission to review and weigh the effects of demographic changes in the Caribbean Netherlands in the period to 2050, so as to allow the government, parliament, and the public entities to base possible policy perspectives on its recommendations. These policy perspectives focus on maintaining and strengthening general welfare. The ‘Moderate Growth’ report on the European Netherlands published in January 2024 stressed the urgent need to look to the future in time and outlined the necessity of preparing for social changes that may have a major impact on general welfare. This urgency is also reflected in the motions of the House of Representatives that formed the basis for the establishment of the State Commission, as well as the explicit request of the House of Representatives to also consider the Caribbean Netherlands.

It has become apparent that the urgency to deal with the upcoming social changes is at least as high with respect to Bonaire, Sint Eustatius, and Saba. This report has provided insights into the impact population ageing and migration have on multiple domains (space, the economy, and public services). In the previous chapter we also noted that these consequences could further widen the divisions within the different island societies. The State Commission has in this context outlined the contours and the need for ‘focused growth’: demographic growth that may be nuanced differently for each island but features one clear message applicable to all three: the need to

make choices and get to work on them. From a common perspective, focused growth offers each island the particular opportunity for further development of spatial planning, realize focused economic development and maintain public services in the years to come. Of course, this long-term commitment requires further elaboration in several areas. Given its mandate and its existence of several months, the State Commission does not have the ambition to work this out in detail, but does suggest several courses of action. It is up to the political body and the various administrative and civil partners to take this forward, showing the same sense of urgency they did when establishing the State Commission.

9.1 POLICY PERSPECTIVES

Part I of the report explained that population projections come with uncertainty. It also became apparent that data on the Caribbean Netherlands are not available on all (sub)topics or for every year of the past few decades. Nevertheless, the available data and the meetings and interviews held on each island do allow to conclude that demographic changes are highly likely to have a significant impact on the population of the BES Islands. And this calls for action. As it did in the 'Moderate Growth' report, the State Commission will once again use the term 'policy perspectives'. For, ultimately, there are limits to the direction that may be given to and the malleability of population size and composition for the next 25 years.

Even though the differences between the population development variants - assuming decline, low, or, conversely, high growth - result in different policy perspectives, some broader and overarching action perspectives can be pointed out given, for example, the increasing ageing of the population. The unpredictability of demographic developments demands *resilience* from citizens, civil society, and governments. An effective approach requires policy perspectives aimed at *connecting* populations, also in view of existing social divisions. This allows for actively *shaping* a desired future perspective for the Caribbean Netherlands to contribute to robust policies and the timely preparation for the upcoming changes. This is not a challenge to be faced exclusively by the government. Instead, this requires citizens, companies, social partners, and the authorities to work together, showing initiative and the willingness to carry out policies.

By presenting this report, the State Commission first of all aims to increase insight into and understanding of the evolution of the demographic developments in the Caribbean Netherlands and their social significance, both now and in the future. Parts I and II therefore already include an invitation for further research. As we have stated in the above, data was not available to the same extent for all subjects. At the same time, the available materials and the interviews conducted did clearly show that population ageing will continue and that focused growth will be required. In that light, this report can also be seen as a basis for arriving at a (complementary) agenda on many topics. Such an agenda should be based on long-term developments and contribute to a robust strategy, while maintaining flexibility should future demographic developments differ from what was envisioned.

The policy perspectives the State Commission wishes to present can be organised into four groups: population ageing, migration, public services in a small-scale context, and governance.

1. Population ageing

Increasing population ageing will become a major challenge on all three islands. The percentage of the population in paid employment will decrease, especially in the situation of the low-migration variants. The shrinking labour force will be felt particularly strong in sectors like healthcare and education. The continued provision of these public services can be jeopardised simply because there are too few staff members.

Improvement of the overall health status and reducing inequalities in healthy life expectancy form particular challenges. The foundations for realising this are laid in the first few years of life. Investments in a healthy start deserves top priority in the upcoming period. Given the significant demand for healthcare that is likely to develop in the future, heavy investment in prevention and health improvement would be advisable. Much attention should be paid to the relatively large segment of the population suffering from long-term medical conditions as well as obesity. As an older population is, on average, less healthy, population ageing makes this issue even more urgent. Reducing and preventing unhealthy lifestyles that lead to chronic diseases, too, is of great importance. An additional reason for the increasing importance of a healthy population is that the employability of all (potential) workers is badly needed to maintain public services. Knowledge promotion and other social programmes contributing to greater health deserve particular attention. Projects and programmes on healthy food or micro-farming, too, may have great significance, given the otherwise resulting social

costs that may be significant. Reducing socioeconomic inequalities from the very first few years of life onwards, by providing for example good access to childcare and education services, is of great importance. The accessibility of healthcare services, both primary care and care for the elderly, will also become even more crucial in the upcoming period.

As the number of older people - including the group of over-80s - keeps growing, timely investments in suitable and quality housing are also necessary. The availability of high-quality housing for the elderly will have to increase sharply and keep pace with the expected share of older persons on each island. The provision of more places offering a combination of healthcare and residential services will require an investment in the build environment, but also a more in-depth debate with the community about what it means to grow older and about the roles played by various groups. As people become older and require ever more assistance, their ability to continue living in independent housing in the same circumstances decreases. Especially when they also suffer from declining health, they may need different forms of housing. This development also requires adaptations to the living environment, in order to increase mobility and take account of the physical conditions. In Saba, the availability of public space is in part determined by the nature of the island. Particularly on this island, with its steep roads and its many stairs, mobility will become an even bigger issue for the elderly. But adapting public spaces to an older population will also need large efforts in Bonaire and Sint Eustatius.

The tightness of the labour market, which will increase due to population ageing, means that employers and employees in both the public and private sectors will have to more often discuss the options available to have staff work more years and to actively take steps to have people continue working in a healthy and productive way, even when ageing.

Regardless, efficiency in the provision of healthcare will remain a key issue. A major challenge is to remain able to provide the same level of care with less personnel. This also raises the question of demarcating which care can and will have to be provided by the community, and which cases require proper nursing or medical care. The government cannot be expected to provide everything. Civil society and communities, too, will have to contribute by providing specific support. This requires preparation, agreements, and, above all, expectation management - and, therefore, a timely debate on how to organise such support. The use of digital technology to making knowledge about health accessible or to actually provide digital services remotely may also help alleviate the increasing demand for healthcare associated with population ageing. All this also means that the digital infrastructure will have to be improved.

Population ageing is the result of changes in life expectancy and childbearing rates. Increasing the childbearing rates will not reverse the increasing ageing of the population. Quite apart from the fact that the increase in the number of children born will have little or no impact on the old-age dependency ratio in the next 20 to 30 years, childbearing is the result of individual choices. In that context it is important to pay proper attention to those who would like to have children but don't materialize their wishes due to a lack of socioeconomic stability and security.

2. Migration

Focused population growth on each particular island requires a coherent strategy on migration as a determinant of the population size in the upcoming period. This strategy must link different domains, as different policy areas are push or pull factors for migration. The economy and, more specifically, labour demand form the main driver of migration to and from the Caribbean Netherlands. Other motives also play a role in the decision to migrate, such as the limited opportunities for young people to pursue higher education on the BES Islands. This calls for clear choices about the desired future economic structure on each of the islands, with investments in jobs that are pillars for the general welfare of the community as a priority. The State Commission therefore recommends a migration strategy focusing on strengthening essential services (healthcare, education, food supply) and high-quality employment that contributes to the socioeconomic security of people. This strategy should cover all domains and therefore is as much about the settlement opportunities for any family of healthcare professionals or teachers as it is about providing good working conditions and support in the actual migration process. Impacting the push and pull factors of migration, such as the provision of support with finding housing for people working essential jobs, is an important course of action. It may also call for an adjustment of the current migration policy, for example by removing the additional BES exemption doctors and other healthcare professionals (who are already listed in the statutory BIG register for the European Netherlands) must apply for.

It is up to the political body to decide exactly which policy adjustments are required within the migration process, but the objective is clear. At present, it often takes labour migrants to Saba six months or even a year to be able to legally move to the island, even though they often come to fulfil positions that are essential to society, such as in the healthcare or education sectors. Sometimes, this causes them to decide not to migrate at all.

Although such migrants are few in number, Saba, but also Sint Eustatius, are highly dependent on a migration procedure that is currently being perceived as very slow. Bonaire struggles with the question of how to expedite migration of people working in essential jobs while at the same time moderating population growth, given the much more substantial growth in population size. The making of difficult choices on which economic activities should be invested over the upcoming period - in line with the slow growth principle - and which should be curbed, is crucial for general welfare in the longer term. For Bonaire, too, improvements of the migration process, for example with respect to the requirement of having sufficient means, might and should form part of such choices. In short, in the case of Bonaire, focused growth mainly requires getting a grip on current migration movements, both regular and irregular. But it also requires supporting labour migration in socially important position and the making of economic choices, also in view of the pressure tourism places on the island.

Migration and tourism both lead to a greater demand for housing, infrastructure, and utilities, and impose greater demands on nature. All this, while waiting lists for social housing in the BES islands already exist. Moreover, there are significant differences between the population variants when it comes to the number of additional houses to be built. This calls for flexibility and including such considerations in the creation of a vision for migration and tourism. Building new homes, expanding the infrastructure, and making energy generation more sustainable all require space, which is in short supply. In addition, nature conservation is important from an economic, social, and ecological perspective.

The island's need for general welfare should be the guiding factor when attracting migrants. Migration should, therefore, not just be the result of all migratory movements, or be driven mainly by economic sub-interests such as demand from the tourism sector. Similarly, given the small scale and, hence, the vulnerability of the islands, lifestyle migration, too, requires a proactive consideration on what pressure the island can handle and to what extent the community should contribute. The actions taken should not be limited to implementing rules, but also include proactive communication on the topic by the community to and expectation management of potential lifestyle migrants. Next to the implementation of rules and impacting push and pull factors, the process of carefully 'onboarding' migrants within the community, which is to include giving attention to citizenship, also helps ensuring a positive impact of focused migration.

Finally, the remigration of islanders deserves attention, also in light of young people who, due to lack of development opportunities, leave the islands. Given the demographic developments as outlined in this

report, the impact the tightness of the labour market has on the level to which essential positions are staffed within island communities and the fact that costs by nature are higher on small islands, this needs to be considered with a greater sense of urgency. The issue is not that a future elsewhere cannot be nice and prosperous, but, in the interest of the island, keeping an organised view of and keeping in touch with the diaspora is a necessary start. Other avenues to be considered include a system that has the government and/or community contribute (financially) to the cost of studying elsewhere, in return for a commitment by the student that they will return to the Caribbean Netherlands for several years after completing their studies. Other initiatives, such as a system that has former island residents remain employable as professional ‘reservists’ for temporary projects or provide substantive support (digital or otherwise), may also be fruitful. While the above suggestions are just example options, given the small numbers of people involved, such projects can make a big difference. The priority that the State Commission believes should be given to remigration means that the matter should also be looked at differently in a financial sense, such in the light of the possible additional social costs arising in the future due to, in particular, population ageing.

3. Public services and the small-scale nature

Due to their population size and location, the Caribbean Netherlands by definition offer a relatively limited range of public services, which are also more expensive, due to circumstances like the islands’ small scale. To some extent, this is part of island life. But considering demographic developments and to maintaining general welfare, action is required with respect to certain issues. For, as outlined in the above, the provision of basic services like healthcare and education is increasingly being compromised.

The healthcare on offer requires adaptation to the upcoming population ageing and the population growth expected per island. Poverty among a sizable portion of the population also results in increased vulnerability, in particular in the later years in life. As has repeatedly been stressed in this report, preparing for the consequences of increasing population ageing in time is very important, also given the potentially distressing situations that may occur in the BES Islands in this regard. The provision of care to children and young people and public healthcare will also become more important in the coming years.¹ In addition to a vision on dealing with the current health situation of the islands, this also calls for outlining the care capacity needed in the coming years. This requires agreements on how to organise such provision of care, where expectation management is a key aspect.

The important role played by non-governmental organisations in the provision of social care on the islands, often on a voluntary basis and reliant on subsidies, must be considered in this regard. On the one hand, these activities by civil society are of great value, but on the other, the existence of a plethora of foundations with similar objectives should not lead to the provision of care becoming fragmented. The limited range of (healthcare) services on offer also underlines the fact that further cooperation will be needed within, but also outside of, the borders of the Caribbean Netherlands. Especially in the context of curative medicine, care is already being provided on other islands once it becomes too complex for the local facilities to handle. Bonaireans partly rely on facilities in Curaçao (and Colombia), while Sabans and Statians rely on those available in Sint Maarten and on other nearby islands. While such collaborations will, in all likelihood, become even more necessary, they already face serious challenges, for example with respect to operational harmonisation and flights to be scheduled. It is important that the existing and any new collaborations, which will have to include care services being shared between or exploited jointly by the BES Islands, are set up and adapted in time for the upcoming demographic developments. Their timely establishment requires the commitment of a great many parties and professionals. It is partly up to the government and the community to take the initiative for doing so. Technological opportunities in communication and the provision of healthcare can also help improve the healthcare system.

Regarding education, the small scale of the islands means that not everything is possible. However, it is clear that the current offer of higher education is insufficient for allowing the full development of young people. A complementary approach aimed at breaking down the barriers to higher education, both within the region and elsewhere, including in the European Netherlands, is needed.² Examples include the provision of solid language education, but also guidance on what studying in a completely different environment will entail.³ Linking education to jobs that are important for general welfare also deserves greater priority. The provision of teacher training programmes for primary and secondary education by the University of Curaçao in Bonaire and a healthcare training programme offered in Sint Eustatius that is comparable to level 2 senior secondary vocational education, are good examples.

To continue providing public services to citizens of the Caribbean Netherlands, there must be constant attention to renewing the operational capacities of organisations (funds, personnel, infrastructure) and maintaining partnerships between local organisations, both governmental and non-governmental. Cooperation and mutual specialisations

(including in the fields of education and care), be it within the Caribbean Netherlands, within the Kingdom, and within the wider Caribbean region, can contribute to maintaining and bolstering services. This allows for increased scale, reducing costs for both the island providing the services and the islands receiving them. More specialised services also provide more specialised - and usually better-paid - job opportunities. This may render it more attractive for young people to find employment in the Caribbean Netherlands, instead of seeking it elsewhere. As was explained under the policy perspectives for migration, focused (re)migration may also help counter shortages in key positions and boost general welfare.

In addition to encouraging young people who moved out to return to the islands, investments will also need to be made in facilities aimed at young people. Having the reality of island life link up to the wants and needs of young people is not a matter of compassion, but is urgently needed from the demographic perspective. Recreational facilities, opportunities to play sports, as well as development opportunities outside of school and a solid basic digital infrastructure should therefore be part of the long-term vision.

Finally, greater self-sufficiency with regard to food and energy can be beneficial for household purchasing power, the stability of the economy, the health of the population, and local employment. However, this requires space. In turn, this requires choices to be made on the use of space for this and other purposes (housing, nature, infrastructure, utilities, tourism). A more diverse economy reduces sensitivity to cyclical conditions and shocks, increases the opportunities for local young people to find suitable employment, and allows for productivity growth and, thus, for increased income and greater socioeconomic security. This is not easy to achieve on the small scale of the islands. Yet developments with respect to, for example, the local production of food and energy can be realised. Initiatives are already in place on all three islands, albeit on a small scale. These could be developed further. It is important to emphasise in this context that complete self-sufficiency is not realistic for each of the islands. However, there is definitely room for improvement in multiple areas, strengthening resilience.

4. Governance

The demographic challenges for the upcoming period need to be tackled with great urgency, and the need to work on the coming social changes from a cohesive perspective is evident. This is no easy task. It demands a lot in terms of directing policy perspectives. The effective implementation of major changes require timeliness, support, and a certain degree of trust. One key building block for engendering trust is to have

a shared view of where things stand and what needs to be done. In short: there must be a clear outlook that is felt and understood by the community. This calls for governments actively seeking dialogue and providing explanations. Possessing knowledge about and understanding of the main developments and the underlying factors, and having insight into the social consequences of the changes, now and in the future, is a crucial basis for the sound and well-understood deployment of (policy) instruments. The State Commission therefore stresses the importance of actively entering into this social dialogue in the period to come.

A robust knowledge infrastructure is also needed. As was indicated earlier in this report, data on demographic developments in the Caribbean Netherlands or a long-term view of these developments are lacking in part. The State Commission emphatically argues for further research to be carried out and for the State and its institutions to more comprehensively shoulder the responsibility of researching demographic developments in the Caribbean Netherlands. An information position built up structurally over a longer period of time is crucial for the ability to set an agenda in the years to come as well, and to properly respond to demographic developments. This report only serves as an initial step in this process, not its conclusion.

This knowledge infrastructure should also comprise adequate monitoring of these insights and regularly putting them on the agenda to serve as information guided decisions at the administrative level, for example when considering whether sufficient housing for the elderly and other target groups is being constructed and at what rate such houses become available. The initiative of the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations to develop a dashboard on public housing with the CBS deserves support in this connection. However, more is needed than just keeping track of subtopics. The broad monitoring of demographic changes can and should have a place in the regular process of decisions for new policies for the Caribbean Netherlands. A steering committee consisting of knowledge institutions and (independent) advisers might help set this up and provide support.

Demographic developments affect all domains. Dealing with these changes therefore touches on many societal issues at once. Population ageing reinforces shortages in an already fragile labour market where changes that are small in absolute terms can already have major consequences for communities. It simultaneously increases the pressure on healthcare facilities, including in the way the elderly age, and more quickly causes problems with respect to housing. Focusing on general welfare is about making choices about to use limited space and for what economic or social activity. The upcoming period calls for

challenge-oriented and cross-domain actions, not for management of and accounting for each separate subtopic. A common long-term agenda is needed. A collective administrative focus on accelerating general welfare: that is what it is all about. Attention and resources must be bundled to tackle the key social challenges, such as: ‘preparing for continued population ageing’, ‘economic reorientation and focused migration’, and ‘continuity of public services within the small scale of the Caribbean Netherlands’. A challenge-oriented strategy requires bundling responsibilities currently vested in many subdomains in one organisation. This allows for addressing social challenges more comprehensively and for collecting the required talents. This (programmatic) approach also requires civil society and businesses to join in agreements on tackling the various issues and to agree on their contributions to realise general welfare in the years to come. Such cooperation also allows for absorbing shocks if developments are different from what was projected, such as a change in migration movements resulting from a sudden change of migration policy in neighbouring countries or from a regional conflict.

Current governance does not seem to be geared towards tackling cross-domain social challenges. The State is organised on a per-department basis, cooperating with governments that are themselves comprehensively decentralised. While the small-scale public entities on the one hand have equal status to (smaller) municipalities, they are at the same time responsible for an international airport and seaports suitable for international imports, exports, and cruise ship-based tourism. Attention should be given to the degree to which the public entities are able to deal with the magnitude of these duties. In addition, the civil service must be improved to be able to cope with the challenges to come. This does not necessarily mean that more full-time positions must be staffed; instead, the BES Islands (and other territories) could, for example, pool their specialists in specific fields, like financial administrators or spatial specialists. Another possibility would be to establish a temporary workforce consisting of administrative or official ‘reservists’, who can be deployed to work on specific projects, digitally or otherwise. The above suggestions are just some concrete examples, to stress the urgency of strengthening the system.

In short, addressing fragmentation by way of coordination - including with respect to various schemes and arrangements - and making clear agreements on cooperation and final responsibility, is badly needed. Establishing an annual meeting of all government stakeholders might help with assessing and boosting the methods deployed to tackle this challenge. At the same time, it remains important to realise that

there will always be limits to what is possible in Bonaire, Sint Eustatius, and Saba, given their small scale.

9.2 IN CONCLUSION

It is difficult to predict in exact numbers how population developments will unfold on the three islands in the coming decades. However, it has become clear that, irrespective of what the developments will be like, ongoing population ageing forms an important social issue, impacting many domains. In addition, developments within various domains are in turn impacting how such population ageing will take place.

Furthermore, the dynamics with respect to (labour) migration - which have different effects for each island - have a fundamental influence on the future of the Caribbean Netherlands in the context of preserving and boosting general welfare. The islands' vulnerable physical position and spatial conditions, too, affect how each island will be able to cope with the demographic developments outlined in the above. Focused growth will therefore have to be tailored to the situations on each specific island.

This report has some perspective bias in this regard, given the wording of the decree establishing the State Commission. Its mandate covers the Caribbean Netherlands and, because of the political context, the policy perspectives also include some focus on the relationship with the national government. However, as also becomes apparent from the historical developments, the demographic dynamics are clearly linked to Curaçao, Aruba, and Sint Maarten. The same applies to the wider region, including Venezuela and Colombia in the context of Bonaire and a wide range of neighbouring islands in that of Sint Eustatius and Saba. The State Commission stresses the importance of including this broader context in the further elaboration of and follow-up to this report.

The policy perspectives referred to in this chapter underline the importance of policies and social action that, more so than is the case today, are based on long-term developments. At the same time, it is essential to build in flexibility, so as to be able to adjust more easily in case population developments will as yet turn out to be different in the years to come.

By consistently focusing on 2050, social issues can be answered in coherence. The communities concerned are also asked to reflect on what they wish their society to be like. It is important to hold this discussion well in time, as it contributes both to mutual trust between residents and the government and to realistic expectations about the future. A broad dialogue will also reveal how various topics are

interrelated. For example, the staff shortages in essential services also affect the economy and good governance. Also, spatial choices cannot be made in isolation, both because of concrete housing shortages, population ageing, and food security, and because of external developments such as climate change.

Therefore, looking ahead certainly does not imply that stakeholders should sit back and wait. On the contrary: it calls for short-term action, so that the choices made will be effective in time. The capacity of local governments and local civil society should naturally be considered. This holds all the more true considering the significant challenges the three public entities already face, given both their small scale and relatively extensive responsibilities, compared to municipalities of a similar size. Knowledge of demographic developments in Bonaire, Sint Eustatius, and Saba clearly needs improvement, especially because of the systemic significance of demographic insights when making policy considerations. It is up to the national government, the States General, and the public entities to make firm choices. They must do so while being confident and convinced that, taking general welfare as their goal and using focused growth as the means to achieve it, there are a lot of opportunities available to steer the Caribbean Netherlands in the right direction in the years to 2050.

¹ See, for example, Child Ombudsman (2021).

² See, for example, the Strategic Education Alliance and the kingdom scholarship.

³ See, for example, National Ombudsman (2020b).

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