

Salus populi suprema lex esto

The welfare of the people should be the highest law -- Cicero

Dear chairman and members of the House of Representatives' Committee on Kingdom Relations,

It was with great pleasure and interest that I read the third progress report on St. Eustatius. In a very first reaction, I noted that this progress report (for the time being?) is only available in the Dutch language. It is addressed to you - the House of Representatives - and that means that the Dutch language is obvious, but it goes without saying that there will also be interest in this report on the part of the local, English-speaking population.

Note: In anticipation of an official English-language report, I will provide a translation myself and publish it on <http://www.stationews.info>.

On the first page, the State Secretary is convinced that mutual understanding and a good relationship with the local authorities are essential. In principle, of course, I fully agree. But which boards (plural) are we talking about here? The organisations Stuco and Eutel are public limited liability companies (NV's) and - as far as I know - no discussions take place with private organisations. Actually, this refers only to the (plv) government commissioner. After all, all visits to locations and companies are directed by him/her.

Under the heading "General view" on the first two pages, there is talk of the continued efforts of the (plv) government commissioner to provide the population with comprehensive information. The word "undiminished" makes the sentence correct: this commitment *was* very small and *is still* very small; in this sense the commitment is indeed "undiminished". I cannot judge the consultation hours, but for the rest I do not recognize anything in this paragraph. The townhall meetings are warmly applauded by me but they hardly take place. Only a few meetings, and then only on a specific subject, have taken place in the year and a half that lies behind us: on the zoning plan for hotel construction near the Botanical Garden, the construction of detention capacity, the tendering of part of the road renovation project and one on the progress of several infrastructural projects. There is absolutely no question of two-way communication.

Note: In the context of hotel construction near the Botanical Garden, I was particularly interested in the facilities for the production of drinking water included in this project. The difference in height of the Quill volcano is used intelligently. My question to the potential supplier of this facility has taught me that not only on the scale of a 'hotel' but also 'island wide' drinking water can be produced in an efficient manner (read: cheaper than it is now). Of course, this requires investments. I brought this to the attention of the (plv) government commissioner (in September 2018), but after that I didn't hear anything more about it.

Note: In this context, I also note that not only is there no investment, but Stuco also does not carry out enough maintenance, which is why, as has been reported in the media, the water on St. Eustatius is rationed in this dry period.

After the meeting on the detention capacity on 29 November 2018 (it was also the intention that the police station in Oranjestad would be expanded) provoked a lot of resistance, I

understood from the answers to parliamentary questions (in The Hague, that is!) on 8 February that this plan would not go ahead and that another location would be sought. In the minutes of the Executive Council (on St. Eustatius) of 12 February 2019 under the heading "5. Decisions" the item "*Expansion of detention capacity at the location of the current police station*"; the decision in this respect reads "*Agreement in accordance with the advice of the E&I Directorate*". Well, and what that advice says is nowhere to be found. On the basis of the choice of words I get the impression that the current police station is being built or rebuilt here and that no other location is being sought at all. Who knows, you may say...

Of course you don't have to take my word for it, but I would like to invite you to take a look for yourself at <http://statiagovernment.com/>. You will be able to see with your own eyes that the outdated website has a menu structure of which only the link at the top right 'Dutch' and four links on the left lead to a content that is more recent than 7 February 2018 (namely: 'Welcome', 'Notices, tenders & services', 'Island & executive council' and 'Directory'). The third link leads to a portfolio distribution (current as of 13 February 2018) which, according to reports, is already outdated. The only link that is sometimes worth looking at is that of 'Notices, tenders & services'. Like an unsorted container, new pieces of information are regularly thrown in here. If such a piece of information is then clicked on - for example, the minutes of a meeting of the Executive Council - you quickly lose the desire to obtain information here because underlying documents are lacking (see the example of the above-mentioned detention capacity, for example). And where the State Secretary mentions that minutes of the Social Council are also published (*why not also those of the consultations with the Cooperative Platform?*) as well as decisions of the Dutch government, I can't find them with the best will in the world.

The increase in employment is definitely a good thing. Of course, the fight against poverty is also important. Only to measure this against, among others, the new companies that have registered with the Chamber of Commerce is arbitrary. Of course, this also includes the company that needed a new or amended registration because the direct link with a government official who ran a company that negotiated a public contract had to be made invisible. If I look at the last four years of *Trends in the Caribbean Netherlands* (2015-2018) of the CBS, I see a fairly stable percentage of employment (approx. 66%) and unemployment (approx. 7%). Apparently, the intervention has had little influence on this. Moreover, it is not really about the upswing in the short term, but about the upswing in the longer term, of course. When it is noted that for a realistic picture of the ambition and speed of the positive effects of the administrative intervention, an optimal communication by the government commissioner is essential, then of course I wholeheartedly agree, but as a citizen on this island I do wonder what communication is meant here. Hardly any townhall meetings and a poor supply of news on the government website: that is what we have to do with. On the facebook page of the government there are only reports and no discussions. A truly open and two-way communication with the population simply does not take place.

Take, for example, a tourism vision for St. Eustatius that seems to have been drawn up. I quote the progress report: "*This vision outlines a perspective within which St. Eustatius can continue to work in the coming period to further develop its unique qualities and to be able to put them on the market in order to make St. Eustatius better known as a tourist*"

destination". The sentence that follows this speaks of an implementation plan in order to put the vision into practice. Is there still room for broader consultation with organisations involved in the tourism sector (e.g. Stenapa, hotels and diving schools)? This may have happened, but - as noted earlier - no plan or vision is widely communicated to the outside world. This is the first time that I have read about this in the progress report.

The CBS-document "Beroepsbevolking op de Nederlands-Caribische eilanden" (28 February 2019) states that the majority of 15- to 75-year-olds on St. Eustatius (namely 62 percent) are low-skilled. During the period of the Netherlands Antilles, St. Eustatius has "suffered" under the administration on Curaçao, for which it applied that the shirt is closer than the skirt. With the current centre of gravity of the BES Island administration on Bonaire, this sentiment has not changed significantly. A critical view, based on a self-made analysis, is not a strongly developed aspect among the Statian population. It therefore makes this population sensitive to "positive reporting" by a "strong leader". The propagandistic part of the presentation of the third progress report - the video - was certainly well taken care of. The success is strongly highlighted.

For the record: I don't want to deny or deny anyone that success, but I fear that it will be temporary in nature and above all material in nature. The vast majority of the Statian population will not recognize it as "their" or "her" success. Let the measures be taken. *Hearts and minds* are not really won. If local elections are ever organised again, I am convinced that the past will return, with non-cooperating politicians mainly favouring their own constituencies without pursuing a common interest. Perhaps an open discussion on whether the current administrative system with an island council on a small island like St. Eustatius is adequate should be addressed! In the (recent) past a lot of time and progress has been lost because a "majority" of the island council wanted something or not. The governor or government commissioner should - as a thought experiment - have a much freer hand of action but should be accountable to the population, for example to a Social Council consisting of elected members. This is a food for thought.

I understand that it will be difficult to believe me when I say that the above is written in the sincere wish that the Statian population will make a step forward in the coming years in the experience of living on this beautiful island. The content of the measures taken or to be taken is - as far as I am concerned - less in question than the way in which the process is or will be organised: to date without any substantial involvement of the Statian population. The transition that is being pursued seems to be coloured mainly by an island government that seems to think that consultation with the local population is a "waste of time". At the end of the journey it will be clear to me that "cheap" will eventually be "expensive" again. My previous message is therefore undiminished *"invest in townhall meetings: often, regularly and with a really open agenda"*. It will undoubtedly take time and not everything will be efficient but in the long run everything will be better.

With kind regards and wishing you much wisdom,

J.H.T. (Jan) Meijer MBA.

Note: It may not be a point that needs to be addressed in a progress report, but you have already read in this e-mail that the developments in the long term are considered more important than the successes in the short term. The Committee of Wise Men also spoke about a missing vision on how to deal with the Caribbean part of the Kingdom in general and with St. Eustatius in particular. A good step seems to have been taken with the study that was carried out on your behalf by the University of Groningen. On the website <http://www.statianews.info> I give my idea of a vision (in development).