

Introduction

When I think about the future of St. Eustatius, I see different angles. The most general perspective is a passive one, which says "*I can see where it is going, but for the time being I don't see anything at all*". The latter is true: in no way is the population involved in any planning.

Then there are people - I want to count myself among them - who are looking for good plans for the future that have or will have a broad support base, aimed at a shared vision on what St. Eustatius should look like in five or ten years' time. You can think of topics such as tourism, education or agriculture/forestry.

Finally, there is a not so large but fanatical group of people who are of the opinion that Statia should be governed by Statians and that all non-Statians are welcome as tourists at their best (because at least then they will bring in money), but for the rest certainly should not settle here and should not interfere with anything at all (I avoid an active use of the concept of "racism" or "discrimination" here now).

The constitutionalists

To start with the latter group. The line of their thoughts is that the Netherlands is still the colonizer and therefore St. Eustatius (as part of the Caribbean Netherlands, or better: as part of the former Netherlands Antilles) has the status of a colony. After all, the decolonisation process has not been completed. From the position of the colonized, Statia then wants to claim its right to self-determination and self-governance. The right to self-determination is not disputed by the Netherlands, provided that it is unequivocally supported by the entire population. Whether the status should be "country", "public body" or something else (the group itself speaks of an autonomous or free association) is then another point of attention. The group itself puts a lot of energy into the legal arguments for their case, which can often be traced back to documents of the United Nations and case law of the International Court of Justice (*including the document, dated 25 February 2019, on the legal consequences of the separation of the Chagos Archipelago from Mauritius in 1965*).

It is striking how the timeline of these discussions on this subject lies mainly in the past, with an end point in the present or at most in the near future. In fact, this timeline ends with the acquisition of autonomous status. The group makes little or no mention of how to deal with this autonomous status in the more distant future. The most important thing seems to be the motto "*Statia for the Statians and let no one interfere with us*". According to this group, what the future should mean in terms of content is extremely vague or even "terra incognita".

The pragmatists

Then there is the group that is concerned about the future and less about the constitutional status of the island. I myself have high expectations of the so-called 'townhall meetings' in which ideas for the future are jointly developed and elaborated. However, the current island government is doing nothing to help or otherwise facilitate this process. It seems to me that when the proverbial dot on the horizon (five to ten years further away) is marked, a set of activities or projects can be defined that together form the strategy to realize the vision.

For the constitutional status of Statia to achieve all this while retaining its own culture, the public body (i.e. the current status) seems to me to be perfectly suited. After all, with tailored legislation (including WolBES and FinBES) and local General Local Regulations (APVs), this status can be neatly maintained or further developed.

The budget

When I look at the budget of the public body St. Eustatius, I see a global annual total of approximately 18 million (more than half of which consists of the so-called free allowance and therefore comes from the national budget). At the annual accountability day in May of this year it turned out that in 2018

approximately 360 million was spent on the Dutch Caribbean. If I now assume that 10 percent of this has been used for the benefit of St. Eustatius, this is still twice the "own" budget and more than four times the amount of locally levied taxes available. It seems clear to me that for St. Eustatius the input of the central government is therefore indispensable.

The possibilities

As far as my legal knowledge is concerned, there are various hierarchical entities within the Kingdom of the Netherlands, such as country, province and municipality. But also, and here more relevant, country and public body. When I look at the locally organised referendums that are regularly mentioned - for example, the most recent of December 2014, and ignore the fact that the turnout is too low to draw valid conclusions from them - it seems obvious that almost nobody is aiming for full integration into the Netherlands or for an exit from the Kingdom of the Netherlands. For the rest, it is a mix of (more) autonomy and the preservation of the status quo, namely that of the public body. I have already praised the flexible nature of the public body. So it seems to me that in good mutual consultation (i.e. The Hague and Statia) eventually a workable form can be obtained. With a slanted eye I look at Saba where it appears to apply: "*more autonomy through good cooperation*".

My conclusion

In my opinion, the great local challenge is to achieve greater unanimity among the Stadians than has been the case to date. That a lot of consultation, patience and the ability to (want to) listen to each other is necessary for that, seems clear to me. I see around me that people have some difficulty to crawl out of the shell and once placed heels in the sand to rearrange. Especially the (wanting) to listen to each other and the (wanting) to come to collectivity is a particular challenge.

To date, I do not see any initiative on the part of the local government under the leadership of the government commissioner to (want to) make this difficult but necessary step. Instead, only low hanging fruit is picked. For example, the municipal administration will probably soon be in order, but no start has even been made yet on forming the community into a close and proud unity. Concepts such as coalition building and democratic cooperation must be learned; they do not arise automatically from the placing of street name signs and the painting of walls around the cemeteries.

The fact that different opinions exist must be accepted, indeed even encouraged and cherished. In my opinion, mutual respect and mutual equality (including between the interlocutors here and in The Hague) will get you the furthest. An attitude of "*if you are not for me then you are against me*" does not fit in at all.

I will conclude by expressing the wish that this writing may be another small step in the right direction!

With kind regards,

J.H.T. (Jan) Meijer MSc MBA,
Bellevue Road #4,
St. Eustatius, Dutch Caribbean.