

Letter to parliament of 14 December 2020 from the State Secretary for the Interior and Kingdom Relations, Raymond Knops concerning the sixth progress report on St Eustatius

Introduction

I am writing to inform the House about progress in all areas related to the state intervention in St Eustatius. You received the previous progress report on 29 May 2020, and on 5 October 2020 I sent an interim report to the House¹ in which I addressed the completion of the criteria to be met before the first phase of the restoration of administrative provisions could begin: the island council election on 21 October 2020.

The second progress report (of 14 November 2018)² set out 12 criteria for good governance. These criteria, which serve as benchmarks for the completion of the phases set out in the St Eustatius Administrative Provisions (Restoration) Act, are being completed step by step. A table outlining the progress made on these criteria is enclosed as Annexe I to this report. Annexe II contains images of the various ongoing and completed projects. In keeping with previous letters, I will describe progress in the administrative, social and physical domains. In addition, this letter will touch on the impact of COVID-19 because it has affected progress on some projects and, more generally, has had a significant impact on the day-to-day administration of the island.

I recently paid a working visit to St Eustatius, in part to meet the newly elected members of the island council. For more information, see my letter of 9 December 2020 containing the report on my visit.³

The general situation

Stata Day: 16 November 2026

The First Salute is celebrated on 16 November every year. On that day in 1776, 244 years ago, St Eustatius fired a salute of 13 shots in the first international acknowledgement of American independence. The 250th anniversary of this historic moment will be celebrated on 16 November 2026. In his speech the government commissioner looked ahead to what St Eustatius will look like in 2026, expressing the hope and expectation that the island would have a more diversified economy, self-supporting agriculture and fisheries sectors, and well-functioning infrastructure and utilities, and that the healthcare and education systems, and government service to the community, would be improved. In the same speech the government commissioner spoke about the many projects that are in progress or have been completed, despite the COVID-19 pandemic, as explained below under the heading 'social and physical domain'.

COVID-19

Since March 2020 St Eustatius, too, has been directly impacted by the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic. The aim of the government commissioner's policy is to prevent the virus from taking hold in St Eustatius. Since the start of the pandemic, there have been 14 cases of COVID-19 on the island but no COVID-related hospitalisations or deaths. The COVID-19 prevention approach includes stringent entry restrictions and a quarantine policy. However, to protect critical processes and, where possible, keep business activity going, workers are permitted to come to the island subject to certain conditions. Successive emergency ordinances were issued in accordance with the risk assessment at a given moment. For example, during an outbreak in September 2020 the most restrictive regime (curfew and ban on all gatherings) was imposed. When no infections had materialised for a significant period of time, the only restriction in effect was a ban on gatherings of more than 100 people. On 1 December the emergency ordinance measure was replaced by a

¹ Parliamentary Papers, House of Representatives, 2020-2021, 35 422, no. 11.

² Parliamentary Papers, House of Representatives, 2018-2019, 35 000-IV, no. 29.

³ Parliamentary Papers, House of Representatives, 2020-2021, 35 570-IV, no. 23.

ministerial order for St Eustatius, based on the COVID-19 (Temporary Measures) Act (*Tijdelijke wet maatregelen COVID-19*).

In addition to direct financial support, St Eustatius has received various other forms of assistance throughout the pandemic. For example, a crisis manager has been appointed, and a 'hospitainer' and additional medical personnel and resources have been made available. Consultations between the government commissioners and the relevant ministries have been very smooth and constructive. Even before the elections, the political parties were actively involved in the considerations and activities of the crisis team installed on the island.

In summary, it can be concluded that although the COVID-19 pandemic has been kept under control in St Eustatius it has had a significant impact on the public body, the economy and the well-being of the population. The municipal health service (GGD) is under considerable strain. The impact on the public healthcare system has been significant because second-line medical care is supposed to take place off-island, and off-island non-urgent care was not possible for part of the year. In addition, the travel-related entry restrictions affect everyone on the island.

Elections

The elections held on 21 October 2020 marked the start of the first phase of the restoration of administrative provisions on St Eustatius. Despite COVID-19, the elections proceeded in an orderly manner and were without incident. Prior to election day, the entire organisation was tested and a second polling station was set up. At nearly 78%, turnout was high. In total 668 voters, or 38%, made use of the option to vote by proxy. Thirty voters did this by granting a written proxy, a written request that another person be allowed to vote on their behalf, and the rest did so by authorising another voter to vote in their place by transferring their poll card to them. The island council was seated on 29 October 2020. In support of the process, and to ensure that the criteria for the next phase of the restoration are met as soon as possible, a roadmap is being developed, in line with the motion submitted by MP Nevin Özütok.⁴ The elections on St Eustatius were monitored by election observers, who will report on their findings in December.

Civic participation and the Central Dialogue

The St Eustatius Central Dialogue was established in February 2020, and since then it has been actively involved in discussions concerning socioeconomic matters, both in regard to St Eustatius specifically and in a broader context. The stakeholders are becoming more familiar with the process, the role and the objectives of the Central Dialogue.

The Civil Society Advisory Council met many times to discuss a range of issues, such as the feral livestock project, COVID-19 and waste processing. With the entry into force of the St Eustatius Administrative Provisions (Restoration) Act, the Civil Society Advisory Council was dissolved after the island council elections. The government commissioner and the island council will discuss the practical scope for establishing a civil participation council.

The administrative domain

Organisational development

With so many projects being carried out on a small island, it is a challenge to fill vacancies and deal with other personnel matters. Although it was possible to fill many key positions in 2020, finding and retaining the right knowledge and expertise is difficult, and this poses an implementation risk. This is particularly problematic for the financial department. On 1 September a new director of operational management took office; the recruitment procedure for a new department head is currently ongoing. The continuing shortage of expertise in combination with the diversity of products to be delivered means that the improvement process is not progressing as quickly as had been hoped. Nevertheless, the annual accounts for 2017 and 2018 were delivered in November, both with a disclaimer of opinion issued by the external auditor, and the draft version of the 2021 budget has been completed.

⁴ Parliamentary Papers, House of Representatives, 2019-2020, 35 422, no. 8.

In general, the facilities and working conditions of large parts of the civil service organisation are hindering its further development. For example, the units of the public body are housed in 13 different locations. This is detrimental to the efficiency of service provision as well as maintenance. St Eustatius and the National Office for the Caribbean Netherlands (RCN) recently decided that a central government building will be built. The Central Government Real Estate Agency will carry out this construction project in close cooperation with the future users. The new building will provide permanent solutions for both the accommodation issue and the level of service provision of the public body and the RCN. Until the new building is completed, a temporary solution for the current situation is needed. Where necessary, existing offices will be renovated and modern ICT facilities will be installed using resources from the second tranche of the regional fund.

The plan for a new government office building is an important step on the path towards improved services for the community and businesses. One such improvement will be the establishment of a single customer contact centre for all government services.

Communication plan

The provision of public information has intensified in recent months. In the months leading up to 21 October, the election was the main focus of communication. In addition, there has been regular communication about issues such as road repairs, the new drinking water supply and the status of other projects. Public information is issued primarily via social media (the public body's website and Facebook page) and the public body's radio programme 'Shedding Light'. User statistics show that the Facebook page is the most viewed of the public body's social media channels, and as such is the most effective.

The social domain

In the social domain active efforts are being made to bring about lasting improvements in many areas, including debt counselling, youth care, childcare and broad social support, by means of training, administrative agreements, legislation, supervision and, where necessary, restructuring. Cooperation between the public body and the various line ministries involved has led to multiple initiatives and knowledge sharing.

With regard to childcare, a temporary grant scheme was recently introduced to provide childcare placement grants to parents in need. The new Childcare Act, which will be introduced in 2022, will provide financing for childcare on the island on a structural basis. In addition, investments will be made in accommodation for childcare. The options for expanding after-school activities are also a focus of attention.

The Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport and the public body have agreed that preventive services in youth care and parenting support on St Eustatius, currently provided by the government agency for Youth Care and Family Supervision in the Caribbean part of the Netherlands, will be taken over by the public body's social support unit. This will enable the public body to provide its residents with a broad range of easily accessible assistance and support services. At the same time, the expertise of the social support unit will be expanded. For 2021 administrative agreements will be made between the public body and the sports foundation concerning ways to improve cohesion and cooperation in sport and exercise.

The public body would like to sign the 2021-2024 administrative agreement on tackling domestic violence and child abuse (between the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport and the public bodies of Bonaire, St Eustatius and Saba) in December, and begin the phased roll out of the advice and reporting centre in the first quarter of 2021.

The public body is working with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment to develop instruments for people with poor job prospects, as well as practical training programmes. The ministry and the public body are in talks concerning efforts to further enhance job placement on the island. They are also discussing poverty reduction and debt counselling.

A sheltered accommodation complex was recently completed. In a new public-private programme, a major investor on the island is offering Statians the opportunity to receive training and obtain employment at a new resort.

In light of the effects of the COVID-19 crisis on employment, the government is also offering support through a temporary grant scheme for the Caribbean Netherlands, to help cover salary costs and loss of income. The scheme was recently extended by nine months to 12 July 2021. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment has made additional funding available for island policy from the emergency package. These funds will be added to the free allowance (*vrije uitkering*) and can be used to alleviate the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable residents. In the recent period the public body has used these funds to assist residents who were unable to pay their energy bills and to provide quarantine options to people who could not quarantine at home.

The physical domain

In the physical domain, visible progress has been made on many fronts, despite the pandemic. After several months' delay, the new air traffic control tower and airport terminal will be completed in the second quarter of 2021. In addition, efforts to improve security measures at the airport are ongoing. Over the past two years, approximately 3.5 kilometres of road have been built on St Eustatius, and roadworks will continue in the coming year. Now that repairs to the road to the port are nearly complete, Rijkswaterstaat and the public body will start reinforcing the weak points along the coast near Lower Town. In addition, plans for repairing and developing the port are being drawn up in consultation with the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management.

Tackling erosion remains one of the biggest infrastructural challenges facing St Eustatius. The stabilisation of the cliff face has been completed and in recent weeks native plant species have been planted in some sections. At the beginning of 2021 a number of completion activities will be carried out, including maintenance on the adjacent cascade, the cliff drainage system.

In addition to uncontrolled rainwater drainage, feral livestock are a major cause of erosion on St Eustatius. The implementation of the action plan for the removal of feral livestock began at the end of October. The first phase involves removing feral goats from Boven National Park. Most of the animals will be captured in the first phase. In the final phase animals will also be shot.

Until recently water supplies were regularly rationed via the drinking water distribution system. The demand for tap water and the number of connections have increased steadily for years, outpacing water production. Shortages were exacerbated by leaks in the drinking water supply pipeline. Three projects aimed at eliminating the need for further water rationing have been completed in recent months. These projects entailed enlarging the water production plant, increasing water storage capacity and replacing two kilometres of supply pipeline. The leakage problem will be solved when the main water line goes into operation. The new storage tank, which has increased storage capacity from 1,000 to 4,000 m³, and the enlarged water production plant started operating in November, increasing water capacity by 66% and making it easier to meet the demand for tap water on the island. Since the summer of 2020 there have been a few temporary disruptions to the water supply due to repairs to the existing water pipes, but the aforementioned measures will ensure that St Eustatius has a reliable drinking water supply system for decades to come.

Conclusion

Many changes have been set in motion in St Eustatius. The continuing challenge is to remain focused on achieving the hundred-plus projects for which the government has made funding available. The public body does not have sufficient capacity to do this alone. With the temporary assistance of external expertise, St Eustatius is working to strengthen its government apparatus step by step. The government cannot produce economic growth on its own. Its role is to provide the necessary services. But economic growth is needed to tackle poverty. Ultimately the private sector must be willing to take risks and make investments. Civil society also has a crucial role to play. The people of St Eustatius are resilient, proud and united. All the elements are in place for St Eustatius to develop into a mature local democracy.