

Summary of survey 2019

Caribbean Research Program NWO



In 2019, the Dutch Research Council NWO carried out an online consultation to find out what the main research needs and questions were of the people and institutions on the six islands of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, including people in the diaspora, who have a strong personal link with one of the island but live elsewhere (e.g., in the Netherlands). Many people filled out the online survey, resulting in a rich base of input for developing a Research Agenda for the Caribbean parts of the Kingdom.

The following pieces of text provide a general summary of the input we received in 2019, clustered around six commonly mentioned themes and three complex and broad issues. You can respond to each of the short pieces separately; alternatively, you can provide input for the summary as a whole.

- 1. MAIN THEMES.** The primary topics for research can be clustered around a number of themes (see below). Most of these topics closely correspond to challenges and issues mentioned in the [SIDS-framework](#) and the [SAMOA](#)-pathway. The sequence of topics listed below does not indicate priorities. The six main groups of topics can all be considered important.

1.1. ECONOMY & WORK

Sustainable, inclusive, equitable and diversified economic development | Poverty reduction

Sustainable economies form one of the primary pillars of societal well-being and progress. Many respondents expressed their concerns about future prospects regarding island economies, the availability of jobs and poverty-related issues. Respondents stressed the need for diversifying the economy as to make it less vulnerable to unforeseen crises, which may target specific branches. Suggestions for achieving this goal include stimulating regional, smaller-scale activities and enterprises, boosting innovation by deregulation, opening up economic niches through targeted investments, encouraging local entrepreneurship and overhauling the outdated tax-system. Reducing the divide between rich and poor, fighting corruption and implying measures to reduce the brain-drain among young people are suggested as necessary conditions to improve the economic situation in the longer run.

The first and foremost concern, however, relates to the urgent need of poverty reduction. Poverty is seen as an extraordinarily great burden for societal development, in need of special attention and calling for a comprehensive, yet tailor-made strategy for alleviating it. Respondents suggest introducing locally adaptable measures for poverty alleviation, as well as improving education, fighting systemic inequalities, empowering young people, and increasing transparency to help curb increasing levels of poverty.

1.2. SAFE & HEALTHY SOCIETIES

Promoting peaceful societies & safe communities | Good governance

Good governance is the most often stated wish regarding means to foster positive developments and societal well-being on the islands. Respondents expressed the need for modernizing and professionalizing public services, they encourage authorities and institutions to underpin their policies with facts and data, and they urge those responsible to put much more emphasis on long-term perspectives and strategic planning. Achieving good governance may require tailor-made, regional approaches, rather than applying copy-paste models. As concrete measures, respondents see a clear need for fighting favoritism through transparent structures and processes, for better

understanding and subsequently improving local decision-making and for empowering responsible and accountable public institutions.

Respondents were concerned about the negative spiral of poverty and poor education, unemployment and misconduct, the lack of appropriate jobs (as well as role models) for young professionals and highly educated people, ensued by a near-constant brain drain. Creative ideas and new initiatives, firmly based on the regional context, are needed to turn the tide.

Creating safe and healthy societies also implies fighting crime including domestic, sexual and child abuse. Respondents acknowledge that this is frequently linked to the economic situation and educational possibilities of families; the roots of crime therefore merit a better understanding and close consideration. Some respondents suspect that migration may play a role in this respect; there is a need for mapping and better understanding the positive as well as negative effects of migration to and from the islands, respondents find.

1.3. EDUCATION, CULTURE & IDENTITY

Education & language | History & identity | Culture & heritage

Improving the quality of education on all levels is the most relevant and urgent matter within this topic, respondents find. Good education is of great importance for healthy and stable societies. Improving education should not be done by importing pre-fabricated models and curricula. Instead, tailor-made approaches need to be developed and deployed, taking the regional context, skills and values explicitly into account. Many of the existing curricula need to be overhauled; education should generally put more emphasis on topics and values that are important for the future of the island communities, such as sustainability in the broad sense of this term. Improving the educational system in a lasting way requires local capacity building, empowering young teachers and stimulating the principle of life-long-learning. Moreover, the issue of high school drop-outs and the partial mismatch between regional education and the future job-market should be better understood and addressed. Educational policies aiming at these goals should firmly be based on facts and data.

Good and regionally embedded education adds to a positive feeling of identity and belonging. Several respondents see a need to put more emphasis on the regional history and heritage. New and de-colonial approaches are necessary to advance the self-consciousness of island societies. Tangible and intangible cultural heritage deserve more attention and should actively be integrated with activities such as (quality-)tourism. Blended and regional approaches may have to be favored over traditional models.

1.4. SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

Sustainable tourism | Sustainable energy production

Sustainability received more attention from respondents than any other topic in the survey. Sustainability is not seen as an option, but as a must, and the main challenge is how to make progress in this direction. Out of all sectors mentioned in the survey, respondents find (mass-)tourism the biggest challenging for a sustainable future, as it puts extensive pressures on the environment, on scarce resources and on societies as a whole. Small islands are by definition short of space and resources, and the expanding tourism sector threatens to expand beyond the carrying capacity of local natural and societal systems. Since a big portion of tourism is linked to the promise of natural beauty on land and in water, unrestricted growth would eventually lead to an implosion

of the whole sector. The time is ripe, many respondents find, for developing strategic visions for future tourism in relation to other activities and functions. A gradual switch from high-quantity to high-quality tourism may be unavoidable and should be accompanied by appropriate policies to ease this transition.

All islands depend very heavily on import of goods and resources, making them vulnerable to logistic disruptions of any kind. Investing in local production and closing resource cycles would both help alleviate this vulnerability, thereby also contributing to reduce waste accumulation on the islands. The urgent need for enough clean water is a separate issue mentioned by several respondents. Spatial planning is needed in order to accommodate all necessary functions on the scarce, available space.

Promoting self-sustainability should also be a priority for the necessary and upcoming energy transition. Exploring and deploying sustainable ways to generate energy, taking regional circumstances into close account, and novel ways to reduce energy consumption will play an important role in this respect. A coherent plan for a step-wise energy transition should be developed, including appropriate investments as well as financial and tax measures to incentivize citizens and businesses to engage with the transition. Reforming the energy sector (e.g., monopolies) and investing in smart innovation may be necessary to reach this goal.

1.5. HEALTHY ECOSYSTEMS

Biodiversity incl. invasive species | Healthy ecosystems | Land degradation, waste management, incl. hazardous waste

Many respondents emphasized the importance of healthy environments, under water and on land, for diverse societal and economic functions. Many ecosystems are currently under pressure as a result of land degradation, pollution and uncontrolled run-off along the coast lines, which are all consequences of human activities, most notably an over-use of space and resources for economic activities such as (mass-)tourism. Turning the tide of environmental degradation requires building of awareness among the public, most notably the youth, for the value of healthy ecosystems, and to find ways how to use limited resources (incl. space) in a sustainable way. Spatial planning, longer-term strategies for balancing natural values and societal functions and enforceable rules for safeguarding environmental standards may help achieve these goals.

Climate change, pollution and different human activities threaten native species and ecosystems on land and in the sea, coral reefs being the most well-known example. At the same time, invasive species gain access and spread across vulnerable habitats at an accelerating pace. Species like *Sargassum* wash up beaches of the region in vast amounts, posing serious hindrance to all sorts of beach activities, most notably tourism. On land, free-roaming donkeys and goats contribute to land degradation through erosion. Respondents interpret these facts as signs of an increasing imbalance between natural systems and processes on one hand, and human activities on the other. They call for realistic strategies to safeguard ecosystem functioning and to preserve biodiversity in a socially acceptable manner. These strategies should also include scenario's for future sea level rise.

1.6. FOOD, NUTRITION & HEALTH

Healthy nutrition, affordable food | Sustainable food production & food autonomy | Clean, reliable water availability | Life-style diseases incl. obesity & diabetes | Vector-borne diseases

Food and nutrition are closely linked to health and general well-being. Respondents frequently referred to this link by advocating the promotion of healthy, affordable food and life-styles. This may help reduce common illnesses like diabetes, obesity and other life-style related health issues. Reducing the costs of healthy nutrition, be it through smart taxation or subsidies, is seen as a very urgent matter and a prerequisite for a successful transition to healthier diets. Many respondents call for sustainable measures to reduce the extraordinarily high levels of dependence on food imports. This can partly be achieved by actively stimulating small-scale, local agriculture and horticulture, applying modern cultivation and irrigation methods developed for arid systems. To this end, different stakeholders from the public and private sector should closely collaborate and develop a joint vision for sustainable long-term food production on the islands. Joining forces with islands inside and outside the Kingdom may help progressing in the direction of both healthy diets and future food sovereignty.

Respondents see a general need to improve the health and care system on the islands. They wish for a more holistic approach to well-being and more emphasis on health promotion and disease prevention. Apart from new policies, a shift in the awareness of people is necessary, especially with respect to lifestyle-related diseases and healthy diets. Respondents think that schools may play a prominent, if not crucial role in promoting these ideas among the young inhabitants of the islands.

2. **COMPLEX CHALLENGES.** A further analysis of the input reveals several complex and highly inter-sectoral issues that are considered of high priority by many respondents. Three of these topics are listed and briefly described below, attempting to give a first insight into these challenges. The number, exact description and framing of these issues may be different in the final version of the report.

- 2.1. **Find a sustainable balance between nature, tourism & social well-being.** Many respondents have expressed their concern about current and future developments which may lead to a severe imbalance between natural values, economic development and social well-being. Disproportionate mass tourism is often considered a disrupting factor, seriously challenging the sustainability of human-nature interactions on the small islands. Natural values, be it coral reefs, biodiversity and pristine landscapes below and above water are essential for the image of the region as attractive tourist destination. At the same time, mass tourism is one of the biggest threats to exactly these values. Factors such as land degradation and erosion, inappropriate waste management, Sargassum blooms and overpopulation exacerbate the perceived imbalance between nature and mankind. 'Over'-tourism also threatens the social and cultural integrity of local communities. Many respondents acknowledge the complex nature of these issues and call for research on different aspects of this challenge and their interactions. Policy-shifts to promote 'slow' tourism, spatial planning on land and in the sea to assign areas to different functions, active protection and restoration of coral reefs and other threatened wildlife, as well as social and technical innovation are among the suggested pathways for mitigating the impact of this challenge.

- 2.2. **Value local culture & history, improve & regionalize education.** Many respondents called for finding new ways to strengthen the identity of people by better valuing local cultural and historical aspects. This could partly be done through education programs which actively include and emphasize regional values. The question of appropriate teaching language for

children at school has been raised by numerous respondents, some of them giving contrasting suggestions on possible solutions. Science-based approaches and co-creation, involving citizens and other stakeholders from the start of a project may advance knowledge and implementation in his area. There was relatively strong consensus about the need to 'regionalize' education programs as opposed to 'cut and paste' them from existing systems and practices outside the Caribbean region. Respondents were concerned about high numbers of school drop-outs and also about young talented people leaving the islands for study and work elsewhere and not returning home due to a lack of opportunities. While stimulating higher education among young people was seen as positive, respondents called for ways to create more local opportunities for ambitious and motivated people, thereby counteracting the negative spiral of brain drain.

2.3. Improve healthy living & stimulate food autonomy. Numerous respondents highlighted the need to improve healthy living on the islands. In many cases this referred to a desirable reduction of life style diseases and food-related issues such as obesity and diabetes, which respondents found serious threats to well-being. High costs of healthy food and a lack of awareness among people is mentioned as the most prominent obstacles for improving a healthy diet for broad groups of the local populations. At the same time, many people have voiced their concerns about the strong dependence of the islands on food imports, suggesting that opportunities and concepts for local, small-scale production should be developed and implemented. Technical innovation, for instance with respect to modern irrigation systems for arid regions may prove part of the solution for enabling the local production of healthy food. Other socio-economic aspects, such as innovative taxation measures, awareness-building among school children and their parents and an active involvement of the civil society at large is considered necessary for advancing healthy diets, partially based on sustainable, local food production. Realistic economic scenarios should be developed for this complex transition involving many aspects of the local societies and the natural system. Agro-tourism is mentioned as an example in this respect as it offers economic opportunities while contributing in a positive way to several challenges.