

## **Imagineries of community-based initiatives: Charting paths towards sustainable tourism in rural Bonaire**

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the potential for community-based tourism (CBT) on Bonaire, a special municipality of the Netherlands in the Dutch Caribbean. It examines how Bonaire's unique constitutional status and historical context, among others, enable or constrain CBT development. Changes in Bonaire's status as a sub-national island jurisdiction (SNIJ) in 2010 led to increased governance and legal alignment with the Netherlands, resulting in mixed impacts on CBT initiatives. Fieldwork, including 18 semi-structured interviews with local stakeholders, suggests that while infrastructural investments and access to Dutch resources provide opportunities, economic disparities, brain drain, and social tensions hinder progress. The current tourism model places pressure on picturesque but delicate coastlines and coral reefs, bypassing rural inland areas like Rincon from a share of economic benefits. The findings highlight the value of preserving cultural heritage, addressing infrastructural challenges, and promoting equitable market access for local business. Inclusive policies and community-driven approaches are needed to foster a sustainable CBT sector that aligns with Bonaire's cultural and ecological heritage and meets residents' aspirations. By addressing such challenges, Bonaire can leverage its unique status to cultivate a thriving, equitable tourism model that benefits the entire community and achieves environmental and cultural sustainability.

**Keywords:** Bonaire, community-based tourism, Dutch Caribbean, grassroots empowerment, postcolonialism, subnational island jurisdiction

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## Introduction

Situated in the southern Caribbean/Leeward Islands, Bonaire is a subnational island jurisdiction (SNIJ) of the Netherlands. Throughout its history, both the political and economic landscape of Bonaire have shifted dramatically, from a small colony centred on salt extraction, to, post-2010, a *special municipality* dominated by a growing tourism industry (Parker, 1999; Schmutz, Potter & Modlin Jr, 2017). However, these developments deserve scrutiny: a rapid economic expansion, environmental degradation, shifting demographics, and social polarization linked to the tourism industry have all raised concerns about the current political and economic models of the island, as well as perceived Dutch domination and recolonization (Veenendaal, 2018; Soma et al., 2022). Thus, there may be some interest in reshaping the economic models of tourism on Bonaire via the introduction of sustainable and community-led initiatives, grouped under the label of Community-Based Tourism (CBT) (Hamzah, 2014).

This article explores how Bonaire's current constitutional situation constrains or enables efforts to reform Bonaire's tourism model. It examines how the island's present status as *special municipality* of the Netherlands shapes the development of localized, bottom-up community-based tourism. As a research question, this line of inquiry is summarized as: *How does Bonaire's constitutional status influence the island's capacity for community-based tourism?*

## Background of Bonaire

Located in the southern Caribbean Sea ([Figure 1](#)), Bonaire forms part of the ABC islands, alongside Aruba and Curaçao. The island holds historic ties to the Kingdom of the Netherlands dating back to the 17th century, when the Dutch took possession of the region from the Spanish. From 1636 to 1954, Bonaire was a colony of the Dutch Empire, with brief periods under other colonial powers. The island's economy was primarily based on salt extraction, which was crucial to the Dutch fishing industry. Like many Caribbean islands, Bonaire's economy relied heavily on a mainly Sub-Saharan African slave workforce until the abolition of slavery in 1862.

**Figure 1: Location of Bonaire.**



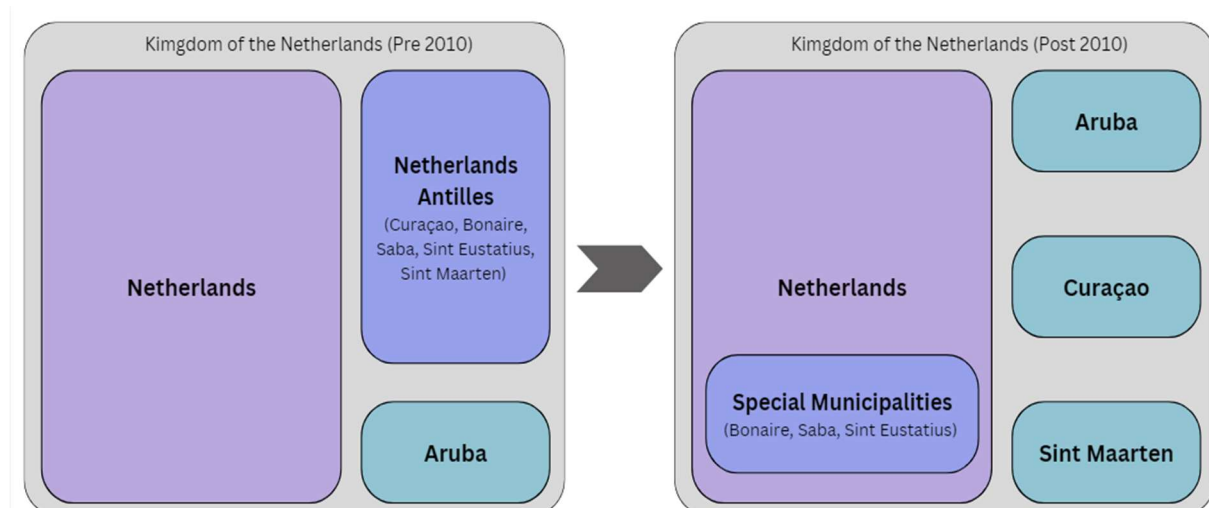
Source: Authors' own.

The first major change to the political status of Bonaire as a Dutch possession occurred post-World War II. During this period, the Netherlands began an unavoidable process of decolonization, with several key territories such as Indonesia achieving independence (De Jong & Van der Veer, 2012; Veenendaal, 2015). Caribbean holdings, however, rather than independence and full self-governance, were instead reorganized in 1954 into an autonomous region within the Kingdom of the Netherlands, named the Netherlands Antilles. Along with Bonaire, this new amalgamation included the jurisdictions of Aruba (until 1986), Curaçao, Sint Maarten, Saba, and Sint Eustatius (or Statia). This settlement, however, was unstable and proved to be unwieldy, with the Netherlands Antilles suffering from sluggish economic development, persistent corruption issues, and allegations of over-centralization towards Curaçao (de Jong 2009; Sharpe 2020). Thus, in the early 2000s, a series of referendums and negotiations were held among each of the island jurisdictions of the Netherlands Antilles and the Dutch metropole in Europe to agree and determine their future political status. This process led to the dissolution of the Netherlands Antilles, allowing each island to pursue a distinctive constitutional status within the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

On October 10, 2010, commonly referred to as 10-10-10, the Netherlands Antilles officially ceased to exist (Sharpe, 2020). For Bonaire, along with Saba and Sint Eustatius, the resulting constitutional status was to become ‘special municipalities’ of The Netherlands, a kind of ‘public body’ (openbare lichamen), meaning that they would become integral parts of the European Netherlands, subject to Dutch law and governance structures. This means that Bonaire is unlike neighbouring Aruba and Curaçao, which are constituent countries within the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

A visual guide of the ‘before and after’ effects of this constitutional change can be seen in [Figure 2](#). For islands like Bonaire, this result marks the end of the Dutch traditional colonial practice to keep its Caribbean territories at a distance, changing its approach to a more integrative one, sharing laws and administrative practices and causing a large impact on the communities of those islands (Veenendaal, 2015).

**Figure 2: Constitutional change to the Kingdom of the Netherlands in 2010.**



Source: Authors' own.

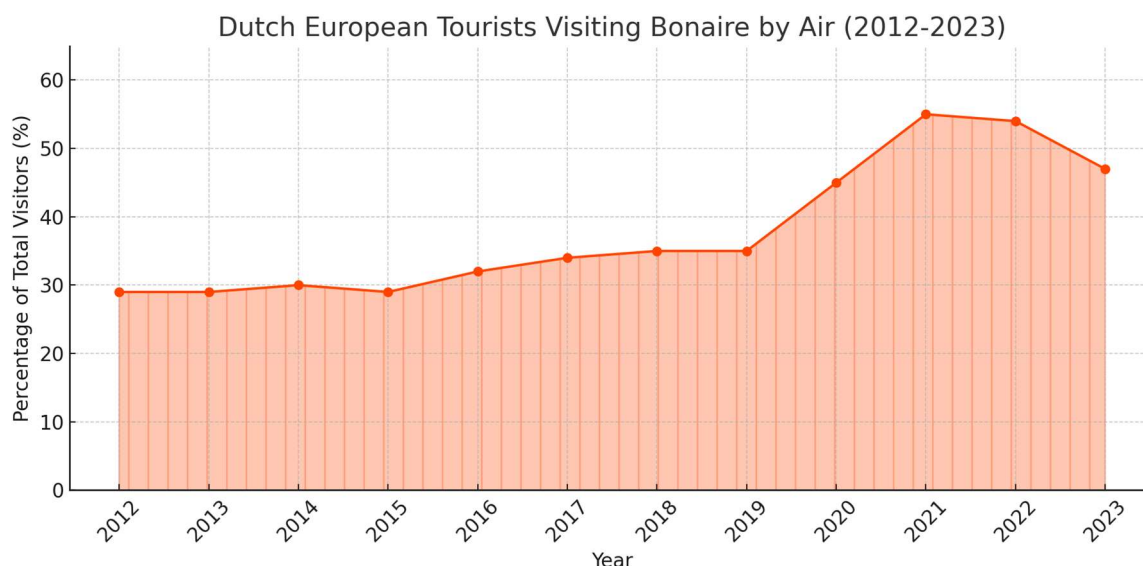
Given Bonaire's new status, certain adaptations were implemented to accommodate local circumstances. Constitutionally speaking, Bonaire is now governed directly by the Netherlands, albeit through a local Island Council and an Executive to handle local matters. A National Office for the Caribbean Netherlands (*Rijksdienst Caribisch Nederland*: RCN) was established to manage various administrative functions. The Dutch legal system was implemented, although some local laws and regulations were maintained. Economically, Bonaire switched to using the US dollar instead of the Antillean guilder, which was seen as a measure to stabilize the economy (though the Euro was not implemented as the island's currency). The transition brought about significant changes in public services, infrastructure, and investment, arguably providing Bonaire with greater financial resources than its more autonomous counterparts in Aruba and Curaçao, something that may have greatly benefited the island during crises such as the Coronavirus pandemic (Maria et al., 2020). There were improvements in healthcare, education, and social security systems, with the aim of aligning more closely with Dutch standards. However, the transition also posed challenges, such as adjusting to new regulatory frameworks and addressing the local population's concerns about cultural preservation and economic inequalities (Sharpe, 2020). This jurisdictional change, which sought to provide Bonaire with greater stability and support while integrating it more closely with the Netherlands, also requires ongoing efforts to manage the complexities of this political and administrative arrangement.

In its conceptualization, opting for a non-sovereign status for SNIJs is seen as providing 'the best of both worlds': this new status offers many benefits of political sovereignty while delegating responsibilities, ensuring security, and reaping the material benefits of association with a larger, stronger, and often reluctant patron (Baldacchino, 2006). However, in reality, and specifically in the context of Bonaire's contemporary constitutional arrangement, SNIJs often exhibit asymmetrical power relations with their governing state (Baldacchino & Milne, 2006). For contemporary Bonaire, perhaps this is most evident through examining the island's economic status as a centre of mass tourism. Within a generation, the economic model present on Bonaire has radically changed, and the dominant activity shifted from material (salt) extraction to tourism, with the tourism industry on the island being dated to the opening of the first hotel in 1952 on the site on a prior internment camp for German nationals (Parker, 1999; Schmutz, Potter & Modlin Jr, 2017). In terms of pull factors for mass tourism, Bonaire possesses attractive coastlines and coral reefs, leading to the island being renowned for scuba diving and water sports (Schmutz, Potter & Modlin Jr, 2017). Thus, contemporary Bonaire, like many other small island states or territories, has tourism as a dominant economic component, driving the main market for service industries and heavily contributing to income generation and inward foreign investment (Craigwell, 2007). Additionally, the political dependence of SNIJs provides advantages to Small Island Tourism Economies (SITE) given the intense relationship with its metropolitan counterpart (McElroy & Parry, 2010). This is evident from the shifting statistics of airborne tourist arrivals to the island: European Dutch have grown to become the largest group, particularly in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic (Figure 3).

It can be argued therefore that the island's particularities in relation to the European Netherlands makes it a region of high interest for tourism and associated investment. Indeed, about 40% of the island's economic activity is directly related to tourism (Bonaire Chamber of Commerce, 2020). In summary, as Baldacchino (2013) observes, the economic development of SNIJs may be faster than that of their sovereign independent island counterparts, suggesting that these territories' decisions to remain as subnational entities has substantive economic benefits. However, this current economic model of mass tourism, against a backdrop of Bonaire's colonial history and enduring legacy of slavery, arguably fosters territorial dualities,

as well as social and environmental challenges (Schmutz Potter & Modlin Jr 2017; Soma et al., 2022). Furthermore, it is debatable if the returns from tourism are being equitably shared across the population, with around 1 in 5 residents on Bonaire stating that they struggle to cover necessary expenses with their current income level (CBS, 2023).

**Figure 3: Number of Dutch Europeans as share of overall airborne arrivals, Bonaire.**



Source: Authors' own, data from CBS (2024).

### **Considerations for community based-tourism on Bonaire**

Given these concerns around the current model of mass tourism on the island, efforts may be directed to reforming the industry on Bonaire to lessen any negative impacts. One potential solution is to fund and develop initiatives aimed at promoting more community-centric tourist businesses and economic activities, which also take into consideration environmental and cultural sustainability. Grouped under the moniker Community-Based Tourism (CBT), this concept, although there are a wide range of definitions (Hamzah, 2014), typically entails community ownership and responsibility for the activities of the tourism industry, with an emphasis on local control and local involvement in CBT initiatives. However, whilst community-based tourism has been the subject of extensive theoretical analysis (Hamzah, 2014; Goodwin & Santilli, 2009), there are challenges and difficulties in translating this theory into practice. The enabling and constraining factors relating to a successful policy translation of CBT into genuine reform of the Bonaire tourism industry is a central focus of this paper.

When examining how the specific features of Bonaire's constitutional status as a SNIJ influence the island's capacity for community-based tourism, several inferences can be drawn. Notably, the political history of Bonaire highlights that it is an "island in flux": a state of significant transition which may influence the island's stability and future (Baldacchino, 2013). This is due to the constitutional position of the island changing extensively in the last 70 years in its relationship with the European Netherlands. This has potential implications, both enabling and limiting, for building CBT initiatives on the island. Notably, Bonaire may have greater access to grant based funding and direct support from Dutch government institutions for the initial stimulus necessary for a viable CBT (Hamzah, 2014). Moreover, Dutch government funding may also be crucial in ensuring that public infrastructure on the island is adept enough to allow access to more remote communities and thus extend CBT to the island's rural regions.

And yet, there may be some constraints caused by the recent changes to Bonaire's constitutional status. This is because political stability may be important in ensuring that residents on Bonaire are able and willing to pursue a more community-centric tourism model (Wu & Pearce, 2013). One potential reason is that access to grants, startup funding, and navigating regulatory frameworks can be a convoluted bureaucratic process for communities, and having an element of stability allows members of a community to start building expertise in working with government authorities. This expertise can be critical for CBT initiatives to transition from a 'gestation period' towards competitive integration within a market dominated by multinationals who possess comparatively greater legal and administrative resources (Hamzah, 2014). This is a potentially critical hurdle as community-based tourism has been criticized for being overly idealistic and reliant on government, overseas aid, or NGO funding (Hamzah, 2014; Goodwin & Santilli, 2009) and thus is unable to provide viable competition to mass market models of tourism.

In addition, since the dissolution of the Netherlands Antilles and the integration of Bonaire as a special municipality, language problems could also cause difficulty in accessing and translating government regulatory frameworks for community-based development. Much of the spoken language in communities on Bonaire is not Dutch or English, but Papiamentu, which is more closely related to Romance languages such as Spanish or Portuguese. Consequently, this could create additional difficulties to the bureaucratic process needed to access funding, fill out necessary forms, and make contacts with the Dutch government, particularly for older members of the community who may have lacked full educational opportunities in their youth. Nonetheless, perhaps a more significant impact of the imposition of Dutch language and culture through greater integration of Bonaire into Europe is the risk it poses to the long term preservation of Antillian culture on Bonaire. Greater imposition of Dutch could threaten Papiamentu-related oral skills of rural communities in Bonaire. This could be consequential for the viability of CBT on Bonaire, as culture-based tourism is often a common trait from examples of viable CBT schemes around the world, such as indigenous tour networks in areas like Lake Titicaca, Peru (Gascón & Mamani, 2022). According to the Community Capitals framework (Emery & Flora, 2021), cultural resilience is an important keystone for successful community centric development. For Bonaire, this resilience is arguably being tested in the face of changing cultural and political circumstances. such as the greater imposition of Dutch and the potential designation of Bonaire as an 'island in flux' (Baldacchino, 2018).

Furthermore, looking at potential demographic consequences of the Bonaire's positioning as a SNIJ, the relationship to the Netherlands could incur a level of brain drain wherein talented individuals from the community, in pursuit of better employment opportunities or education, leave the island for the European Netherlands. This dynamic mirrors other examples from SNIJs in the wider Caribbean region, notably Puerto Rico (Abel, 2014). It should be noted that the hourly minimum wage on Bonaire is around 37% lower than in the continental Netherlands (Bonaire Chamber of Commerce, 2024; Government of the Netherlands, 2024a), and there are no universities on the island. This loss of potential entrepreneurs and a skilled community workforce could constrain CBT initiatives.

Finally, closer ties to the Netherlands through the integration of Bonaire as a special municipality post 2010 has contributed to increased migration of European Dutch to the island. Under current arrangements, Dutch citizens not born on the island can stay on Bonaire for 180 days a year or work for 90 days a year for an internship. Staying longer does not necessitate a work visa in the typical sense, but rather a requirement to apply online for a Declaration of Admittance by Law. The ease of availability for a 90-day internship visa could have significant implications for the workforce of the tourism industry, as it enables short stay seasonal work

options for some Dutch citizens, such as young adults, seeking to experience island life on Bonaire for a period longer than a typical holiday. However, such short stay working holiday migration can undercut wages for locals and make community-based initiatives less competitive. Furthermore, the ease of application for longer term migration and residence for European Dutch moving to Bonaire could also incur a level of gentrification and community stratification, threatening social cohesion. Given that, over the years, there has been a demonstrable rise in the dominance of European Dutch in securing jobs, positions, and opportunities. Briassoluis (2002) and Murphy & Price (2012) argue that such a trend threatens to undermine the planned transformation aimed at positioning the local community as the central focus in the development and planning of community-based tourism.

Combining these considerations together, some possible advantages and disadvantages of Bonaire's new constitutional position for the success of community-centric tourism initiatives can be identified. Whilst Bonaire's close alignment with the European Netherlands through its status as a SNIJ/special municipality could lead to greater access to financial resources, investment, and a tourist consumers, there are some potential drawbacks that could limit the capacity of community-based tourism initiatives to meaningfully reform the island's tourism industry. Notably, greater integration in the metropole could risk the long-term resilience and distinctiveness of Bonaire's Antillean culture through gentrification and the promotion of Dutch over Papiamentu. Moreover, opening up Bonaire to greater investment could lead to multinational tourism developers crowding out community based initiatives.

## **Methodology**

To gain more in-depth direct insights into Bonaire's society, fieldwork on the island was conducted in November 2022. Prior to data collection, a systematic literature review was performed to provide general knowledge on the topics of interest as outlined by the research question. Additionally, an interview guide was developed and tested. The fieldwork involved several visits, interviews, and observations. In the following months, the collected data was thoroughly analyzed, with the qualitative methodological approaches for data collection and treatment being predominantly guided by Hennink, Hutter & Bailey (2020).

In total, 18 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted. The participants represented a diverse array of stakeholders, including teachers, farmers, artists, local government representatives, environmental, cultural, and artistic NGOs, business owners, politicians, academic experts, individuals working in the tourism sector, participants of community-based initiatives in both rural and urban contexts of Bonaire, as well as citizens from its two largest settlements, Kralendijk and Rincon, and other adjacent rural communities. The Netherlands Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (Algra et al., 2018) was observed throughout each phase of the research process, alongside social research principles of respect for participants. Interviewees provided their free and informed consent to participate, and the anonymity and confidentiality of the collected data were ensured.

To gather data from key stakeholders in the development and execution of community-based tourism initiatives, purposive sampling was employed for participant recruitment (Etikan, 2016; Hennink et al., 2020). Of the 18 interviews conducted, 14 were recorded, totalling some 20 hours of material. Some participants were referred by the Netherlands Enterprise Agency (*Rijksdienst voor Ondernemend*), while others were either suggested by Bonairians during a preliminary research design meeting in The Hague and recruited through the snowball technique, or were directly chosen by the researchers due to their relevant role concerning the topics of interest. All recorded material was transcribed verbatim. From these transcripts, deductive (as well as inductive when necessary) codes were developed via the software Atlas.ti



input in decision-making, inadequate support for local businesses, and the marginalisation of cultural and environmental preservation efforts.

Unsurprisingly, a recurring concern among interviewees was the enduring impact of colonisation on Bonaire. This legacy affects various aspects of society on the island, potentially damaging social cohesion between different groups. The historical power dynamics and attitudes from colonial times, along with the legacy of slavery, were cited as contributing to divisions, especially between European Dutch and Caribbean Dutch communities. One participant succinctly summarised these lingering effects:

This division, if you read back on it, goes back to colonialism because when they arrived, they... they separated and disintegrated the society as part of the colonial technique. So, all of those colonialist practices that happened there... they are still here.

The imposition of the Dutch language on Bonaire has significant implications for the island's social fabric and the viability of CBT. Given the centrality of Papiamentu to community identity, the dominance of the Dutch language in schools and government, as enforced by the new jurisdictional status of the island, creates tension and highlights ongoing colonial influences. This shift towards Dutch has marginalized the use of Papiamentu in formal settings, exacerbating social tensions and affecting community cohesion. As a participant expressed,

Dutch is actually a strange language for many of us and for our people, and they imposed it because of colonialism. They imposed it on the people, and it is still a fight for the Papiamentu language.

This institutional preference for Dutch over Papiamentu was found to both exacerbate social tensions and hinder the development of CBT, as it presents a barrier to the political empowerment of Papiamentu-speaking rural areas, as well as to the overall implementation of policy and assistance to these same rural areas. In this context, urban centres such as Kralendijk often receive more attention and resources compared to rural, hinterland areas, exacerbating regional disparities. Additionally, the influence of Dutch colonial legacy and the language imposition under the current jurisdictional framework, kindle and fan social tensions and hinder the empowerment of local communities, particularly in Papiamentu-speaking rural regions. In 2024, Papiamentu was finally officially recognised under the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages, obliging the Netherlands to commit to protect and promote such a language in educational and cultural affairs, administration and justice, media, socio-economic life and other affairs (Government of the Netherlands, 2024b), what may directly affect the tensions exposed here and contribute to the integration and empowerment of Bonairians.

Moreover, the special municipality status has made it easier for Dutch nationals to move to Bonaire and establish businesses, significantly impacting the island's social fabric and character. The influx of European Dutch migrants has led to increased gentrification, driving up property prices and making housing less affordable to local residents. This phenomenon has also resulted in a greater concentration of wealth and business ownership among newcomers, often at the expense of local entrepreneurs who find it difficult to compete. Some participants noted that these new residents tend to live in "Dutch bubbles", distancing themselves from the broader community and contributing to social divisions. The prevalence of European Dutch-owned businesses in key tourism markets exacerbates feelings of exclusion and alienation among local business owners, further complicating efforts to create an inclusive and equitable economic environment on the island.

Addressing these challenges requires targeted policies that promote fair competition, support local enterprises, and foster social cohesion, ensuring that the economic benefits of tourism are shared widely and sustainably (Briassoulis, 2002; Murphy & Price, 2012;). Despite Bonaire's colonial legacy, there are notable examples of grassroots activism and community work aimed at fostering self-determination, empowerment, and social cohesion. Organizations like Mangazina di Rei, a volunteer-led entity near Rincon, play a crucial role in preserving local heritage and culture. They manage a museum dedicated to local history and offer various classes and courses to promote rural development and preserve cultural practices. The presence of such organizations is a significant enabling factor for CBT on Bonaire, providing a basis to community organisation and resilience.

The township of Rincon, often referred to as 'the heart of Bonaire', is pivotal to the potential cultivation of CBT in rural areas. Unlike the more developed and commercialised Kralendijk, Rincon has maintained a unique identity that is showcased through the annual Dia de Rincon cultural festival, exemplifying the rich heritage and traditions of Bonaire. This distinctiveness is further highlighted by the warmth and hospitality of its people, its vibrant culinary sector, local museums, Tambú/Barí music and dance groups, and small crafts businesses. Additionally, efforts to promote sustainable management of the natural environment, such as those by the Echo Foundation, highlight the strong basis for culture, environment, and heritage-oriented CBT on the island.

However, more effort and resources are needed to preserve traditional skills and local knowledge. Regarding the limitations of higher education programs on the island, there is a widespread perception that young people must leave Bonaire to pursue university education in places like the Netherlands, the USA, or neighbouring Curaçao. This migration contributes to a brain drain, depriving the island of educated and ambitious individuals who are crucial for developing CBT and other sectors. The combination of brain drain and the loss of elders has also impacted the successful transfer of traditional knowledge between generations. As one participant lamented,

... music isn't as big, but once upon a time it used to be! We used to have musicians, we used to have people that would just play music on their guitar the whole day. What happened to them? They died and there was nobody to give them their respects. There was nobody to educate their kids and tell their kids that ... We're losing ourselves; you know?

For those who remain on the island, options are limited, often confined to the tourism sector. One participant humorously remarked,

The ones that stay have a few options to do: it's either you enter tourism, or you enter tourism! [laugh] It's either you enter tourism or you start your own business, which you hardly achieve because you still do need an education to start that.

As noted above, current educational programs and training for the tourism sector on Bonaire are seen as limited and in need of new study courses and innovative methodologies to engage the youth. As noted by a participant,

What they provide, for tourism, is the basics ... I think what's needed is a special study course other than the ones that they provide to create waitresses and chefs and low budget

people. That is a special study course that needs to provide people with the mentality and the idea and the education on how to stand on their own.

Entrepreneurship and the ability to start businesses are also hindered by a perceived lack of a business mindset among locals and difficulties in securing loans or funding. As one participant aptly observed:

...it's not that there is no money ... You just don't know how to ask for it.

Furthermore, issues with funding support from the Netherlands, which is sometimes redirected or suspected of corruption, have been problematic. Participants expressed that empowerment efforts have often been top-down, with pre-set programs that do not adequately consider community inputs. This may reflect the notion of Bonaire as being perceived as an "island in flux" (Baldacchino, 2018), lacking the long term political stability needed to build trust in institutions. Thus, there is a need for ongoing efforts rather than one-time projects to equip locals with sustainable, long-term projections for their initiatives, as locals desire projects they can be proud of and take ownership of. A participant emphasized,

we need things that we are proud of and can take ownership of.

Despite these challenges, local institutions, such as Mangazina di Rei and Echo Foundation, have been active in empowering the community through their own programs and training, fostering economic opportunities, particularly in rural areas. These organisations are invaluable, although they are often understaffed and in need of further support, funding, and training. They are particularly engaged in rural development and are trusted by the community, playing a critical role in supporting the growth and sustainability of CBT on Bonaire. In this context, the need for more inclusive policies and community-driven approaches to ensure that the benefits of being a special municipality are equitably distributed and aligned with the island's cultural and ecological heritage is highlighted.

### **Enhancing equity in Bonaire's Community-Based Tourism: Infrastructure and economic challenges**

Reflecting on the current state of infrastructure on Bonaire, the inadequacy of road networks is a critical concern, as this not only hinders connectivity but also exacerbates regional disparities, particularly affecting more remote areas on the island. The existing infrastructure directly impacts the feasibility of CBT initiatives by limiting tourists' access to rural regions such as Rincon and Bara di Karta. As a participant stated,

We have good healthcare, good security, airport, and education. The only thing we don't have are infrastructure or roads.

Similarly, the golf carts rented to day tourists from cruise ships were deemed inadequate and insufficient for safely reaching rural areas like the Rincon valley and other regions beyond Kralendijk. Consequently, access to these areas is overly restricted unless tourists opt to rent trucks or four-wheel-drive vehicles, or rely on buses provided by cruise agencies. This limitation further reduces the potential for equitable tourism distribution across the island.

The jurisdictional status of Bonaire within the Kingdom of the Netherlands provides a framework for infrastructural investments aimed at improving connectivity. However, the

allocation of funds and the prioritisation of projects often reflect broader national and private interests, rather than specific local needs. This dynamic can result in an urban bias and imbalanced development, where urban centres like Kralendijk, as noted above, receive more attention and resources compared to rural and suburban areas. In this light, improving road conditions and transport options is essential for promoting equitable tourism development. The setting up of a market and organized infrastructure for tour buses to visit rural townships could enhance revenue distribution and create the means to preserve the unique characteristics of these areas.

Interestingly, while the lack of infrastructure limits CBT development in rural Bonaire, these areas possess significant potential due to their relative isolation. Beyond Kralendijk, Bonaire boasts extensive cultural and ecological wealth. The township of Rincon, for example, is the oldest continuous settlement in the Dutch Antilles. Participants have expressed a long-term vision for Rincon to become a UNESCO World Heritage site, highlighting its historical significance. The relative seclusion of such areas enhances their appeal, providing a serene alternative to the more crowded tourist spots. Taking this into consideration, protecting rural regions from large commercial developments remains a priority to maintain their cultural and ecological integrity. In fact, the post-2010 change in the jurisdictional status of Bonaire might facilitate the inclusion of the island's sites on the UNESCO World Heritage (both tangible and intangible) lists, as this is, often, a costly and laborious process (Meskell et al., 2015).

As the natural and geological beauty found in Bonaire's rural regions is less frequented by mass tourists, it adds to their tranquillity and charm. These secluded areas can serve as the foundation for a successful CBT initiative, where the historical difficulty in reaching them might now, rather contrapuntally, become a valuable asset. By maintaining their current, pristine conditions and unique cultural heritage, these areas can attract tourists seeking authentic and peaceful experience. As one respondent remarked,

the quiet and untouched nature of these sites is what makes them special.

Similarly, participants highlighted that establishing a market and well-organised infrastructure for tour buses to visit Rincon, in the hinterland, could generate more revenue for local businesses while simultaneously preserving its unique characteristics. Ensuring that these areas are protected from the encroachment of large commercial complexes and resorts is, nonetheless, crucial. This approach aligns with the jurisdictional support from the Kingdom of the Netherlands, which can provide the necessary resources and regulatory frameworks to enhance infrastructure in a way that supports sustainable tourism and, particularly, CBT. Integrating these efforts with local needs and preserving the cultural and ecological integrity of these regions should be key considerations in developing Bonaire's infrastructure network.

Rural areas outside Kralendijk and popular diving spots currently derive minimal benefit from the revenues generated by the cruise market. Only a few companies are authorised to contract with cruise ships and receive tourists at the pier for day-trips, a practice described by one participant as a "protected thing" that "automatically excludes" smaller businesses. This situation is perceived to exacerbate sub-regional inequality, as smaller businesses and local projects find it difficult to participate in the market.

The most evident way for small businesses to benefit from the existing cruise tourism is to offer products alongside their peers in Kralendijk at the cruise market in Playa. However, access to such a market is challenging. Participants highlighted that they felt excluded by high

entry costs and stringent (and often biased) selection procedures, making it infeasible for many locals, small projects, and young entrepreneurs to engage in the market. Furthermore, there is a perceived over-representation of European Dutch small enterprises in these markets, adding to the sense of exclusion among local business owners and to a rupture of the social fabric. In addition to this, as mentioned above, migration from the European Netherlands and the USA to Bonaire is contributing to gentrification, with house prices rising to unaffordable levels for locals. In the tourism sector, investments by wealthy post-2010 European Dutch migrants may have similar effects, with large resorts alienating longer-term residents and those born on the island from increasingly commercialised public spaces. Linking this to Bonaire's position as a special municipality, the Dutch Government could play a pivotal role in addressing these challenges by implementing policies that promote fair competition and equitable access to economic benefits, ensuring that local businesses have the opportunity to thrive in the tourism market without being overshadowed by larger, well-funded enterprises. However, they may also inadvertently cause greater 'pricing out' of more community-led tourism efforts through greater integration of Bonaire into the Dutch and European multinational tourism industry.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this study highlight several key factors influencing the development of community-based tourism (CBT) on Bonaire. Notably, the colonial legacy and the island's unique status as a special municipality of the Netherlands play significant roles. While such political status has facilitated infrastructural investments and access to resources, it has also led to economic disparities, brain drain, and social tensions. Additionally, the inadequacy of infrastructure, such as road networks, and barriers to market access for local businesses pose significant challenges. However, the strong cultural heritage, community initiatives, and potential for collaboration with intermediary organisations provide a solid foundation for developing a sustainable CBT sector.

Based on these findings, Bonaire, and especially its often neglected countryside, is faced with both obstacles and opportunities for cultivating a viable community-based tourism sector. To realize this potential, several foundational elements must be established. Reflecting on the concept of Community Capitals (Emery & Flora, 2021), efforts to preserve and document existing cultural practices and local knowledge can serve as a cornerstone. This ensures the transmission of traditions and skills to future generations, forming the basis for sustainable, culture-oriented CBT. For instance, traditional methods of food preparation, heritage music, and *kunuku* (traditional farmstead) management skills unique to Bonaire can be incorporated into educational programs, which include mentorship and advanced studies beyond compulsory education. These educational initiatives can provide longevity and stability to CBT by equipping future generations with the skills necessary for successful tourism enterprises on Bonaire.

Research indicates that placing heritage and culture at the centre of community-based initiatives enhances their ability to build social cohesion, trust, and a shared sense of identity (Rowlands, 1997; Kline et al., 2019). Mentor-based educational schemes can also mitigate brain drain by offering further education and occupational training opportunities within Bonaire. Emphasising the preservation of traditional culture as a normative goal can increase community participation in CBT, motivating students to explore careers in tourism.

Addressing the brain drain may also involve encouraging expatriate graduates to return to Bonaire. Recruiting such graduates to fill technical skill gaps or freelance tasks, such as website development, and offering incentives for relocation can help repatriate local talent. Häusler & Strasdas' (2003) understanding of partnerships underscores the potential benefits of engaging the graduate diaspora in CBT development. Moreover, improving access to grants is crucial for initiating CBT efforts in rural Bonaire, particularly in areas like Rincon. Despite significant cultural and natural community capitals, sustained and accessible investment is necessary (Dodds et al., 2018). Better guidance in the funding application process or creating a new funding source specifically for community tourism development in rural Bonaire could address this. Simplifying the application process, allowing for administrative tasks to be completed in Papiamentu, and minimizing required digital literacy levels can enhance access to funding.

Collaborating with intermediary community-oriented organisations like Mangazina di Rei, Echo Foundation, and other local entities can also be instrumental. These organizations, with established community ties, can provide the administrative backbone of a potential CBT network in rural Bonaire. A public-facing website could allow small tourism enterprises to advertise and coordinate tour packages, while a private network could offer training, advice, and quality assurance. Such a network could also advocate for community interests, like seeking UNESCO recognition for Rincon as a world heritage site or establishing a cruise market there.

Successful CBT development on Bonaire must also address infrastructural and economic challenges. The inadequacy of road networks limits connectivity and exacerbates regional disparities, particularly affecting access to rural areas like Rincon and Bara di Karta. Improving road conditions and transport options is essential for equitable tourism development. Establishing a market and organized infrastructure for tour buses to visit rural townships can enhance revenue distribution and preserve the unique characteristics of these areas. In partially addressing the current social tensions between Bonairians and the Dutch or Americans, targeting markets beyond traditional Western tourists, such as visitors from surrounding islands and neighbouring Latin American countries (such as Ecuador, Mexico and Venezuela), can attract tourist who partake of similar cultural identities and thus better understand, appreciate and share Bonaire's local culture. This can also enhance the island's resilience against tourism industry's adversities, such as erratic market swings and moods.

Finally, managing a CBT network on Bonaire requires coordination with existing stakeholder organisations and ensuring simplicity and straightforward participation for small enterprise owners. Community-oriented organisations like Mangazina di Rei can play a foundational role in this network, with appropriate support and training. Engaging these organisations in collaboration with more 'top-down' entities can create a balanced approach that promotes fair competition and equitable access to economic benefits for local businesses.

Back to the research question: how does Bonaire's constitutional status influence the success of CBT models? It is clear that both enabling and constraining factors exist. The special municipality status provides opportunities for infrastructural investment and access to resources; however growing challenges related to governance, economic disparities, and social cohesion must be addressed. By fostering inclusive policies and community-driven approaches, Bonaire can develop a thriving CBT sector that aligns with its cultural heritage, socio-economic needs and community aspirations. The very understanding of environmental sustainability on Bonaire must start with an acknowledgement of and efforts towards cultural sustainability.

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