

State Secretary Knops

Town Hall meeting Sint Eustatius, 23 September 2019

- Dear Statians, the last time I stood before you all was back in February 2018, now 18 months ago. I can imagine you must have felt a range of different emotions when you heard my message that day: the announcement of an administrative intervention by the Dutch government. Some may have felt hope and anticipation that things would improve; others uncertainty about what the intervention would mean. I understood that then, and I understand it now. This evening I can tell you more about what's happened in the meantime, since we last met.
- At that time, you were not receiving what you had a right to: good governance and visible improvements to the island. In the past 18 months I have got to know you better, and I've been struck by how welcoming, hospitable and hard-working the people of Statia are. You are all firmly committed to this island. Working to ensure a better future for all its people.
- I have met many of you personally. During previous visits, Statia Day or at the Taste of Cultures.
- I really appreciate having had the chance to talk to you in person about your lives on Statia. And to do it here, once again in this town-hall setting. You are the people the island authorities are meant to serve.
- Eighteen months ago, Statia was in a state of gross neglect:
 - There were backlogs affecting social services, the island's infrastructure, the maintenance of buildings and the preservation of nature.
 - The enterprise and investment climate was unfavourable.
 - Public administration was marked by financial mismanagement and a breakdown in administrative relations.
- For these reasons, last year the Netherlands launched an administrative intervention aimed at getting the island authorities and the socioeconomic and physical domains in order. In short, the goal was to improve your living conditions. After all, your wellbeing is what counts the most. It was the primary reason for the intervention and with everything we do, this is our top priority.
- In the past 18 months, a great deal of work has been done, and visible results have been achieved. That is largely due to the dedication of the people of Statia: civil servants, entrepreneurs and volunteers who are working hard to improve things.

- The erosion of the cliff cascade has been repaired and the stabilisation of the cliff itself is in full swing. The Government Commissioner is working to prevent further erosion by ensuring proper rainwater collection, and to provide the agriculture and livestock sector with adequate water supplies.
 - Waste processing has been improved. There is a new waste incinerator and 300 car wrecks have now been removed from the island. And although the completion of the Cherry Tree project has been delayed, it will be finished by March next year. It's a pity that it didn't go according to plan. I am a slightly impatient person and I regret the delay.
 - In addition, this year the Dutch Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations has provided structural funding to reduce rents of social housing on the island. This measure will reduce the cost of social housing and increase your purchasing power.
 - With help from several colleagues in the Dutch government various other measures have been taken to be able to improve your living conditions. For example, the BES(t) 4 Kids programme is helping to improve the organisation of childcare and before- and after-school care such as Buzzy Bees centre that I visited today.
 - A lot of hurricane damage on the island – for example to homes and cemeteries – has been repaired. And people are working hard on many other projects. After hurricanes Irma and Maria, I allocated 9.5 million dollars from my ministry to reconstruction, and a large proportion of that has already been invested in Statia.
- Although a great deal has improved on Statia, I would like to see faster progress. Patience was never my strong suit. At the end of the day, there is still a lot of work to be done.
 - In some areas the backlogs are so severe that more time will be needed to make systematic changes. The local staff and administrators have a very heavy workload, and there simply isn't always enough capacity.
 - That applies to the projects in the physical and socioeconomic domains, but also to efforts to improve the administrative structure, financial management and the civil-service organisation.
 - To get these areas in order and create a solid foundation on which the future newly elected island authorities can build, we need to press on with the good work that's already begun.

- One and a half years ago my reply to questions about the duration of the intervention was always the following: ‘as short as possible, as long as needed’.
- Considering this and the progress on the island, I have great confidence that all this hard work will lead to a lasting improvement in your living conditions and a stable basis for a new administration.
- To assure you of that prospect, I believe it’s essential for you to be able to elect your own island authorities, so that you feel properly represented. And I want to give local politicians the opportunity to put their talents into practice.
- I am therefore pleased to announce that I decided to hold elections for the island council on 21 October 2020. Therefore, I will submit a legislative proposal to the Parliament of the Netherlands, as soon as possible.
- In order to safeguard what has been achieved so far, and to ensure that the necessary work can continue in the longer term, the return to democracy will be a gradual one. Step by step, the governance of the island will return to where it belongs: to you, the people of Statia.
- The island council elections October next year will be the first step. At a later stage, a new executive council will be introduced, and after that a governor will be appointed. In this way, Statia will see the gradual return of normal administrative relations.
- There is still a lot of work to be done, but I have every confidence that, as long as we keep making progress, we can continue down the path we embarked on back in February 2018.
- I’d like to thank you for the confidence you’ve shown in me and all civil servants. The results achieved so far were made possible by the hard work of many people – civil servants and local staff alike. And I have no doubt that plenty more achievements will follow.
- And never forget: the one and only reason for doing this was to be of service to the people of this beautiful island, to all of you.