

**The Viability of Community-Based Tourism Initiatives in Rural Bonaire**

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## Executive Summary

Having tourism to be interlaced into all parts of its society, Bonaire now suffers a sequence of events that threatens its ecological sustainability, carrying capacity, and future prosperity with solutions found only in interlocked complication. However, this can be disentangled by empowerment, capacity-building, and resource-based support for bottom-up tourism initiatives from the grassroots community, especially those located in rural Bonaire. This idea is better elaborated through the framework of community-based tourism, an alternative to mass tourism that is found to be detrimental to many. Thus, the research conducted for this report is an exploration on the enabling and the constraining factors affecting the viability of community-based tourism in rural Bonaire which is based on the established theory and practice of successful grassroots community tourism initiatives as points of reference. Utilizing qualitative approach, the data is collected from a fieldwork on Bonaire as well as a series of in-depth interviews conducted with purposive sampling. Drawing our findings together into a cohesive framework, we analyze how the different factors interact with each other before determining a series of recommendations on how to mitigate constraining factors, capitalize enabling factors, and empower the vision of the community.

*Keywords:* community-based tourism; empowerment; rural Bonaire.

## **Introduction**

With an area of 288 km<sup>2</sup> and population of 20,104 (2020), Bonaire is the largest landmass of the Caribbean Netherlands islands. Surrounded by waters that house exquisite coral reefs and marine wildlife, the island has established tourism as its economic backbone. Per the Nature and Environment Policy Plan 2020-2030 (NEPP), “...on average, the direct and indirect added value of tourism to the local economy of Bonaire represents approximately 30% of its GDP, while roughly 23% of employment within the local community is related to tourism” (NEPP, 2020). Whilst a tourism centered economy is not inherently fragile, in Bonaire overconcentration of the economy on established forms of mass recreational tourism along coastal areas and in the capital of Kralendijk, has raised some concerns.

This form of tourism can be damaging for the natural environment, rendering economic returns potentially unsustainable (Briguglio et al., 1996). In modern times, this problem is exacerbated by climate change degrading coastal conditions/ecosystems globally (Braun et al., 1999; Agnew & Viner, 2001). Over the decades, Bonaire has experienced noticeable degradation of coral reefs and other marine ecosystems (van der Lely et al., 2013). This is distressing, as around 70% of Bonaire’s tourists come for diving, with 55% of those are repeaters. Further, only 10% of diving-related tourists would still visit if coral reefs become significantly degraded (NEPP, 2020).

Along with concentrated tourism establishing a potentially unsustainable dependency within Bonaire’s economy, as Tosun et al. (2004) highlights, the tourism sector has the potential “perpetuates class and regional inequalities”. For Bonaire this means that rural inland areas are often unreachable by the distribution of tourist activities and revenue. This sparks the question of

how Bonaire should reform its tourism industry to be more equitable and sustainable for rural communities, particularly considering that these communities could be part of a solution to balance overdependence. One proposal is to cultivate community-based tourism (CBT). This could offset the negative impacts of mass tourism (Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2017), mitigate economic leakage or loss of local ownership (Giampiccoli & Saayman, 2018), and reduce poverty and foster local development (Runyowa, 2017).

Thus, CBT has potential to play a key role in Bonaire's future prosperity. Therefore, this research project emerged as part of a proposal by the Netherlands Enterprise Agency (RVO) of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate Policy, in the framework of research being developed by the Cooperation Dutch Caribbean (CDC) of the RVO. As a joint project, this research is conducted by a team of multidisciplinary research students of the Research Master in Spatial Sciences (Islands and Sustainability) at the University of Groningen, under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Billie de Haas and Prof. Dr. Louise Meijering.

This research project is aimed at assessing the viability of CBT in rural Bonaire. We identify potential *enabling* and *constraining factors* for the successful implementation of CBT in this region. The project employed a qualitative approach governed by an interpretive paradigm, meaning it sought to provide results and inferences that emerged from the ideas, experiences, and context of the study population. In employing this paradigm, we aimed to highlight the *community* aspect of this study. Thus, central to this research is the pursuit of community-based solutions through participatory methods. The main question this research aims to answer is:

What is the viability for community-based tourism initiatives on rural Bonaire?. In order to do so, three sub-questions are raised:

(SQ1) What are the enabling factors for CBT in Bonaire?

(SQ2) What are the constraining factors for CBT in Bonaire?

(SQ3) What are the community's perceptions of CBT and how does the community potentially envision successful CBT development?

### **Theoretical Background**

For the past few decades, in the management of tourism sectors, there has been a major shift from a rapid and extensive growth-driven mindset towards practices aimed at being more balanced and sustainable. As elaborated by Giampiccoli and Mtapuri (2012), as tourism expanded in the 20th century, its practice could potentially only benefit larger companies/stakeholders with better capital and resources, marginalizing the informal sector and local community. As a result, globally, tourism may have contributed to the exclusion of local people from the economy, intensifying the gap between the rich and the poor (Akama & Kieti, 2007).

Nevertheless, reform to address these issues can be daunting. According to McElroy (2005), successful implementation of more sustainable tourism has two vital requirements: (1) a permanent income stream that fulfills a profit criteria, enhances the quality of life of the community, and provides the resources to safeguard biocultural assets (2) a sustained flow of satisfied tourists with size and timing that would be most convenient for the local community. Expanding on this idea of a sustainable income flow, the Sustainable Livelihood Approach, a

people-centered framework assessing whether a policy or development program “can sustain people’s livelihoods” can be applied. (Ashley, 2000; Murphy & Halstead, 2003; Murphy & Roe, 2004). Referring to Scoones (1998), livelihood here signifies the capacity, assets, and activities required for a means of living and it is only sustainable when it is able to recover from “stress and shock” and sustain or improve its capacity and assets without damaging the natural resource base. Per social–ecological resilience theory, achieving this could help build a sufficiently resilient/harmonious socio-ecosystem (Musavengane & Matikiti, 2015; Ruiz-Ballesteros & Cáceres-Feria, 2016).

Reflecting on the issues surrounding the current tourism sector on Bonaire, a model of sustainable tourism termed Community-Based Tourism (CBT) can potentially form part of wider reform. First coined by Murphy (1985), CBT is a tourism model that is often employed by marginalized communities to assert more agency and ownership over tourism initiatives (Murphy & Murphy, 2004). A successful CBT initiative can be defined as “a project or program, or collective action of a group of people that belong to a community that decided to participate in, or develop together a small to medium-scale local tourism industry” (Spenceley, 2012). Thus, within the planning and operation of CBT initiatives, the position of the community is central to maximize their desired social, economic, and environmental outcomes (Cole, 2006; Tosun, 2006). This empowerment entails active community participation in decision-making and ownership (Lapeyre, 2010; Scheyvens, 2003), meaning the community has to be “consulted first and agree” on any stage in the development of a CBT initiative (Briones et al., 2017). In this way, CBT initiatives may contribute to more psychological, social, and political empowerment

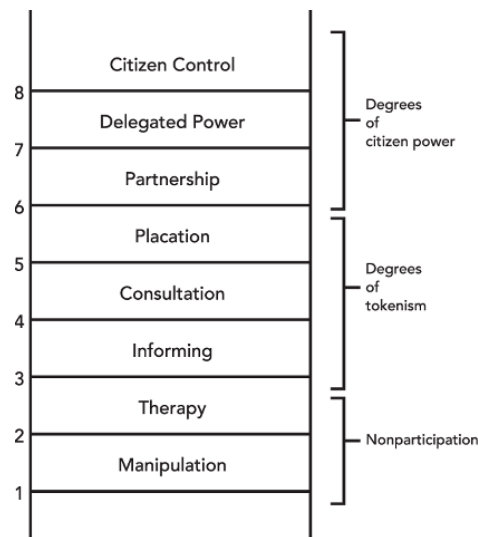
of the involved individuals, which in turn can benefit wider social cohesion and community trust (Kline et al., 2019).

Furthermore, CBT initiatives have been employed as an alternative to Western agendas of constructing new assets like large hotels or resorts for tourism (Lapeyre, 2010), with CBT more often focusing on developing pre-existing and traditional assets (Dolezal & Burns, 2015). Thus, the cultivation of CBT on Bonaire may have positive impacts, with its focus being the conservation of natural and cultural resources in regions (Armstrong, 2012). Nonetheless, CBT does not have a universally applicable model, being highly dependent on the characteristics of each region and community (Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2016) Hence, there remains a critical question: what are the aspects that should be paid attention to in the design of CBT?

In the Community Capitals Framework, which emerged from the aforementioned Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (Gutierrez-Montes et al., 2009) and other participatory strategies developed by Flora et al. (2018), there are several important assets (Capitals) to consider: natural (environmental features, living things), cultural (values, perceptions, reward systems), human (individual potential and talent), social (trust, identity, collaboration, and a sense of a shared future), political (ability to turn norms and values into standards), financial (income, savings, loans, tax), and built (human-constructed infrastructures). A sustainable and self-supporting ecosystem that is able to host CBT properly should not only have to consider these capitals, but also make sure that they foster one another and find balance instead of excessively developed at the expense of another (Callaghan & Colton, 2008).



All in all, features of CBT are aligned with elements of sustainable development “in that it strives to be socially equitable, ecologically sound, and economically viable for the long term” (Dodds et al., 2018 p.1548). To achieve this, it is important to consider community dynamics and social cohesion (West et al., 2006). Poorly implemented and managed CBT initiatives have the potential to provoke jealousy, unhealthy competition, and conflict, rather than its goals of a socially-empowered and collaborative society (Scheyvens, 2002). Employing the Ladder of Citizen Participation (Figure 1, Arnstein, 1969), it is possible to understand clearer what proper community empowerment looks like.



*Figure 1: Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation (1969 p. 217)*

Community participation and engagement may be difficult to start and advance. Arnstein's participation ladder can be a useful tool to not only assess the current level of participation but also map out the necessary actions for further stages in the future. Alongside this process, a community might need external assistance and collaboration, whether in

supporting funds, resources, marketing, or capacity training for a successful CBT actualization (Beeton, 2006; Moscardo, 2008; Okazaki, 2008; Aref & Redzuan, 2009; Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2012; Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2013). Referring to Häusler and Strasdas (2003), partnership within CBT can either (1) involve the whole community, (2) involve parts of the community, or (3) build a joint venture between community and business partners as its operation partnership. But this degree of support and interference should always be cautiously monitored so that there is no overreliance on external bodies, so that communities maintain empowered and become more resilient by their own initiatives.

Nonetheless, cultivating CBT may require some prior analysis, planning, and investment. Aside from the requirement for inclusion of various stakeholders from the community to ensure that all kinds of backgrounds and aspirations are represented (Kibicho, 2008), the design process of CBT should also encompass careful analysis of the aimed objectives, the individual and collective benefits, and also how decisions can and should be carried out throughout the entire process. Adding into this, one potential aim of CBT is to ensure that the scale of tourism should allow for engagement with local culture and society, whilst also not breaching the private boundaries of the local community (Nyaupane et al., 2006), this is in line with McElroy's second criteria (2005). Thus, it would not be as pressuring as mass tourism, but allow for the tourism industry to be economically prosperous and resilient.

Linking back to the NEPP, should Bonaire's tourism sector increasingly embody the features shown in the literature, CBT may be part of achieving the policy aspirations of Bonaire over the course of the decade. These goals are centered in a design to promote "a prosperous

society and cultural identity in balance with a resilient and healthy natural environment” (NEPP, 2020, p. 16). Under the four main strategic goals to achieve the vision, two of them focus on local economic development and to create conditions to ensure sustainable results of nature policy in the region. The diversification of the touristic sector directly addresses three of the sub topics of the strategic goals. *Figure II* below highlights these topics:

<b>Vision</b> A prosperous society and cultural identity in balance with a resilient and healthy natural environment.		
<b>Strategic goal 1</b> Reverse coral reef degradation to enhance wellbeing in the CN	<b>Strategic goal 2</b> Restore and conserve the unique habitats and species in the CN	<b>Strategic goal 3</b> Sustainable use of land and water for the development of the local economy
1.1 Control erosion and runoff	2.1 Conservation and restoration of key habitats	3.1 Sustainable fisheries
1.2 Effective waste and wastewater management	2.2 Conservation of keystone and flagship species	3.2 Tourism industry in balance with nature conservation
1.3 Coral reef restoration	2.3 Prevent new and control established invasive species	3.3 Invest in sustainable local food production
<b>Strategic goal 4</b> Create the local conditions to ensure sustainable results of nature policy in the CN		
4.1 Create awareness through education and training	4.2 Create employment through investments in nature	4.3 Develop a structural research agenda

*Figure II: Sections of the NEPP’s Vision possibly answered by CBT*

*(adapted from NEPP, 2020, p. 16)*

### Conceptual Framework

Taking those previously elaborated concepts, critical to the development of CBT, we unified them and constructed the following conceptual model to guide our research. This was particularly useful in developing initial interview guides and understanding which aspects should be explored. From the literature discussed, we consider the following three concepts central to the success of CBT being utilized in this model: Flora et al. Community Capitals Framework (2018), Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation (1969), and Haüsler and Strasdas' understanding of partnership within CBT (2003).



*Figure III: Conceptual Framework for CBT on Bonaire based on: Flora et al. (2018), Arnstein (1969), and Haüsler and Strasdas (2003).*

## **Methods**

### **Case Study**

Bonaire is the largest landmass of the Caribbean Netherlands islands, surrounded by waters that house exquisite coral reefs and marine wildlife. Having established tourism as its economic backbone, the overconcentration of the economy has raised concerns, as there is currently a centralisation of economic activity to the urbanized Kralendijk area, specially within walking distance of the cruise ship pier. The consequence of which is that tourism activity and revenues that reach rural areas such as Rincon and surroundings and Bara di Karta (east of Kralendijk) is quite limited in comparison. This problem is exacerbated by the poor state of the roads and infrastructure connecting the island communities.

Cruise tourism is a significant part of Bonaire's tourism sector, responding for 457.700 of arrivals, three times the number of plane tourists, which sums up to 157.800 (CBS, 2019). The nature of such activity, characterized by all-inclusive packages and short stays, results in further intensification of the concentration of tourists on the seaside. Cruise tourism has been associated with strong and influential lobby groups, the effects of which can be seen in the different requirements for entry between plane and cruise visitors, with cruise visitors set to pay a \$10 tourism tax starting in 2024, while plane visitors have already been paying \$75 since mid-2022.

On current efforts towards sustainable development, it is noteworthy that The Chamber of Commerce (KvK) has spearheaded the certification for business owners called Blue Destination, to ensure the balance between nature, culture, and economy. However, its definition and application in practice are still considerably fuzzy that many community-based initiatives are

often left out without proper information about it. Worth mentioning, while Bonaire might be one of the first to establish itself as a blue destination, this competitive advantage might become obsolete, as other destinations, including those in the Caribbean, are heading to the same direction.

## **Methodology**

In this qualitative research, fieldwork was conducted over a one-week period in November 2022 on Bonaire. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with participants from a wide range of stakeholder groups living on Bonaire, including farmers, teachers, artists, representatives of local governmental bodies directly and indirectly related to tourism, NGOs focused on environmental causes, culture and art, academic experts in the global and local impacts of tourism, business owners, politicians and other influential stakeholders, individuals working in the tourism industry coordination and participants engaged in existing community-based initiatives related to both tourism and rural development, as well as citizens of Kralendijk, Rincon and adjacent rural communities.

The participant recruitment process was employed using a purposive sampling (Etikan, 2016; Hennink et al., 2010), seeking key stakeholders instrumental in the development and participation of CBT proposals and initiatives. A total of 18 interviews were conducted (17 in person and 2 online). Of these, 14 were recorded, transcribed, and coded, and 4 were informal interviews or had issues with recording equipment. 4 participants were indicated by our client, the *Netherlands Enterprise Agency (RVO)*, 5 were contacted online directly by the researchers, 2 were suggested by Bonaireans in a preliminary meeting to discuss our research project proposal

in The Hague, and 4 were identified using a snowball sampling technique. Interviews lasted for an average of 90 minutes and were handled with granted permission through both oral agreement and informed consent. Furthermore, in January 2023, participants were provided a first draft of this report, to gather their feedback.

Social research principles of respect for participants were observed throughout the entirety of the data collection, analysis and report processes. Participants were informed about the nature and purpose of the research, as well as of the voluntary character of their participation and their right to withdraw at any point without any consequences. Interviewees were thoroughly informed of their anonymity and of the confidentiality of collected data. The guiding principles of the Netherlands Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (Algra et al., 2018) were observed through each individual phase of the research process.

In addition to the semi-structured interviews, a range of other social research techniques were applied and used as complementary data, including participatory observation, diarising and extensive field notes. Qualitative research methods were considered the most suitable for answering our research questions primarily because these are centered on the *perceptions* of participants regarding the current tourism sector and their views on potentialities and constraints for successful CBT initiatives as well as their visions for the future of the sector, and also due to the efficiency of the method in providing nuanced and in-depth insights on the island and its potentialities for CBT.

After a careful collective code development process, the software *Atlas.ti* was used to assist in the data analysis process. Codes were grouped in under thematic categories (social,

spatial, environmental, economic) that better reflected the topics they related to for an enhanced analysis and *in vivo* codes such as “*European Dutch*” and “*kunuku lifestyle*” were used in order to be as reliable as possible to the meaning intended by participants in their expression.

The topics discussed in the interviews are believed to cover the full spectrum of our research questions. They include: perceptions on the current tourism industry on Bonaire; perspectives on CBT as an alternative to current tourism-related challenges; potential geographical areas in which CBT could be developed; enabling and constraining factors for the success of CBT initiatives; the role of authorities and governmental bodies in a multiscale perspective; how CBT initiatives should be administered and what would it take for their fruitful maintenance over longer periods of time; the main cultural and environmental resources present on Bonaire that should constitute and be embodied in CBT initiatives; social cohesion and interaction between different social groups, and participants views on the optimal future development of Bonaire.

Although we acknowledge that a full analysis of the viability of CBT initiatives on Bonaire in all its complexity would only be possible through a longer and deeper immersion in field work and through a more extensive analysis period, we do believe to have reached data saturation in order to offer reasonable guidelines and recommendations for future policy making that are well grounded in the collected data and fieldwork observations. The findings were triangulated as much as possible with extensive literature review, including the island's guidelines for sustainable development, the constitution of the tourism industry, and previous



guiding plans and documents such as “A Nature Inclusive Vision for Bonaire in 2050” done by Verweij et al. (2020) and the NEPP (2020).

## **Findings**

This findings section presents potential enabling and constraining factors for establishing CBT on Bonaire in terms of *Spatial Inequality, Remoteness and Connectedness* and *Postcolonialism, Vulnerability and Resilience*, answering to SQ1 and SQ2. We then present ways in which participants envision CBT development on Bonaire, aiming at capitalizing on enabling factors and overcoming constraining factors, thus reiterating the community-led element to the design of potential CBT initiatives on Bonaire and answering SQ3. Throughout, this section discusses themes such as current attitudes towards the existing tourism industry and the sustainable development of Bonaire.

### **Spatial Inequality, Remoteness and Connectedness**

Reflecting on the existing spatial infrastructure of the island and its immediate consequences on both connectedness and subregional inequality, a significant number of Bonairian residents brought up the condition of the roads as a major issue. As stated by an interviewee: “We have good healthcare, good security, airport, tax, of course, and education. Only thing we don't have are infrastructure or roads.”

The golf-carts rented out to cruise ship day tourists also seemed insufficient in their ability to reach rural areas such as Rincon valley and other regions outside of Kralendijk safely. As a consequence, tourists' access to these areas was overly limited, unless tourists were willing to rent a truck or four-wheel drive vehicle, or used buses provided by the cruise agencies.

Interestingly, although this lack of infrastructure limits CBT development on rural Bonaire, these areas possess rich potential, in part due to their relative isolation. Outside of Kralendijk, Bonaire possesses extensive cultural and ecological wealth. For instance, the aforementioned township of Rincon is the oldest continuous settlement in the Dutch Antilles. One participant had detailed how it was their long term desire for Rincon to be a UNESCO World Heritage site. Furthermore, in rural areas many sites of natural or geological beauty are less frequented by mass tourists, adding to their tranquility. Such areas can form the foundation of a successful CBT initiative, the difficulty in reaching them serving as an asset in its own right. In this context, a participant highlighted that the establishment of a market and a well-organized infrastructure for tour buses to visit the township and spend money in local businesses could bring more revenues to Rincon, whilst also preserving the features that make it unique. Protecting these areas from encroachment of large commercial complexes and resorts may therefore be a key consideration in efforts to better connect these to the island's infrastructure network.

It is noteworthy that rural areas outside of Kralendijk and popular diving spots currently reap reduced benefit from the cruise market revenues. Only a few companies are permitted to contract with the cruise ships, receiving the tourists at the pier for day trips - a service described as a "protected thing" that "automatically excludes" smaller competitors. This is a notable constraining factor that relates to the aforementioned sub regional inequality. One way small businesses can benefit from cruise tourism is to, alongside with their peers in Kralendijk, offer products in the cruise market in Playa. The access to such a market, however, was highlighted as

difficult, with participants expressing they felt excluded from the market by costly entry barriers and selection procedures, making it not viable for many locals, small projects, and youth to engage in the cruise ship market. Meanwhile, at the market, there is perceived over representation of European Dutch small enterprises.

Furthermore, according to interviewees, migration from the European Netherlands and the USA to the island is currently contributing to gentrification through house prices rising to unaffordable levels for locals. In the tourism sector, the investments brought to the island by wealthy migrants may similar gentrifying impacts, with large resorts alienating some residents on the island from supposedly public places. Some participants claimed that the post-2010 European Dutch migrants were able to live in “*Dutch bubbles*”, distancing themselves from issues affecting the wider society on Bonaire.

### **Postcolonialism, Vulnerability and Resilience**

It is therefore not surprising that a consistent concern expressed by many interviewees was the enduring legacy of colonization on Bonaire. Per interviewees, this had implications throughout society on Bonaire, potentially damaging social cohesion between groups on the island. This is because the legacy of colonial power dynamics, attitudes, and slavery were highlighted as causing divisions, especially between the European Dutch and Antillean Dutch communities. One participant summarized the lingering effects of colonialism as follows:

But this, this division, if you read back on it, like 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 also appears to have implications for the viability of CBT. Given the centrality of the Papiamentu language for community identity on Bonaire, the tension resulting from the current predominance of Dutch language over Papiamentu in contexts such as the school system and the government is closely related to the aforementioned theme of postcolonialism. This sentiment was expressed by a participant as follows: “Dutch is actually a strange language for many of us, for our people, and they imposed it because of colonialism. They imposed it on it, on, on the people, and it's still a fight for the Papiamentu language”

In this way, institutional use of Dutch over Papiamentu contributes to the existing social tension between the groups, especially between Antillean Dutch and European Dutch communities, and is a constraining factor for the development of community-based tourism, also being a barrier to the decolonisation of Bonaire’s society and the empowerment of communities in Papiamentu speaking rural areas.

Yet, in the face of this colonial legacy, there are notable examples of grassroots activism and community work towards more self-determination, empowerment, agency and improving social cohesion between groups on the island. For instance, Mangazina di Rei, a volunteer-led organization based near Rincon manages a museum dedicated to preserving local heritage and culture and holds a variety of classes and courses within the community towards rural development and the maintenance of local culture. The presence of organizations like Mangazina

di Rei constitutes a significant enabling factor for CBT on Bonaire, with potential for these bodies to form the foundation of community organization.

Regarding Papiamentu speaking rural communities, the township of Rincon is again significantly important to the potential cultivation of CBT in rural Bonaire. Many referred to Rincon as “*The Heart of Bonaire*”, considering that, unlike more development and commercialized Kralendijk, Rincon had maintained an identity unique to the island. The existence of Rincon is thus a significant enabling factor for CBT on Bonaire, exemplified by the annual Dia de Rincon cultural festival, which celebrates the heritage and traditions of Bonaire. Furthermore, the village and its community is also notable for its culture of hospitality with participants emphasizing the “*warmth of people of Rincon*”, its culinary sector, Tambú/Barí groups, local museums and small crafts businesses in the region. There are likewise efforts to promote sustainable management of the natural environment within a framework of local knowledge of flora and fauna, notably with the Echo Foundation. Thus, there remains a strong basis for culture, environment and heritage-orientated CBT on Bonaire. However, more effort and resources may need to be directed towards preservation and resilience building for traditional skills, education and local knowledge on Bonaire.

Regarding the limitation of the higher educational programs within the island, there is a strong perception that, in order to pursue university education, young people raised on Bonaire have to emigrate from the island to places such as the Netherlands, the USA, or neighboring islands such as Curaçao. These younger, educated, and ambitious portions of the local population are critical in cultivating CBT, as well as in several other areas to be simultaneously developed.

The existing educational programs and training directed to the tourism sector in Bonaire was pointed out as currently very limited in its options and in need of new study courses and methodologies to engage the youth in more innovative learning processes. According to 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. That's what's needed to show people that do not wanna be waitresses and chefs that you can also get into the tourism economy in a different way, because most of them are talented people.

Often, many advanced and talented students do not come back, causing a brain drain. For the students that do stay on Bonaire, usually for a variety of reasons such as not having the necessary educational requirements or having dependents to care for, a participant pointed out:

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.

With brain drain and the loss of elders, there is a perception that successful transfer of traditional knowledge between generations is limited. A participant expressed how this has affected culture and heritage on Bonaire:

(...) 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?

With successful CBT initiatives commonly relying upon heritage tourism and promoting local art, culture, music and identity, the loss of traditional skills could seriously limit the ability of communities to cultivate CBT on Bonaire.

On economic characteristics, entrepreneurship, and the ability to start business, some participants have elaborated that “a business mindset” is inherently “not within” the locals. Nonetheless, it has also been stated several times that, for locals, it is challenging to secure a loan or access funding. A participant remarked: “...it’s not that there’s no money, [...] You just don’t know how to ask for it.”

Furthermore, there have also been problems with funding support from the Netherlands that goes through the local government, as some of these are perceived to have been directed to other areas instead of tourism, and at times, suspected to be corrupted. Participants expressed

that, until today, efforts to empower the community have been more of a top-down approach, coming in ready-to-implement programs with a fixed timeline and budget and without proper attention to communities' inputs. As locals want to have things that they are “proud” and “take ownership of”, there is a need for “on-going effort”, instead of one-time projects that do not equip the locals with long-term projection and with sustainability of the initiative.

All these sequences seem to have particularly worsened the local economy, as even though tourism in Bonaire seems to be growing, the revenue it receives does not seem to reach the local community or is reinvested for their common good. In these terms, local institutions have been active in their own terms to empower the community through their own programs and training in order to foster economic opportunities, particularly in rural Bonaire. Although more than often understaffed and in need of further support, funding and training for themselves, the existence of such local organizations is valuable, as they are specially engaged in rural development and are perceived as trustworthy by the community.

### **Vision of successful CBT development on Bonaire**

In order to overcome the above exposed constraining factors and capitalize upon the existing enabling factors, we now present visions of successful CBT development and operation that community members presented regarding the development of the sector on Bonaire. In this way, we aim to remain faithful as possible to the bottom-up ethos of CBT.

### **Continuous education and training**

Foremost, there are calls for specialized and continuous education programs. This would entail the creation of educational material based on established heritage skills and local



knowledge to form the backbone of any CBT initiative. Such a scheme would help mitigate the effects of both the endangerment of traditional skills and any potential skills-deficit with regards to establishing enterprises. In this way, future generations can continue to support and benefit from CBT initiatives, with the resulting initiatives becoming more sustainable and resilient, embodying longevity in the process. This is important as it helps prevent projects from jump starting only to meet a stall in a few years from lack of support or engagement. As one participant expressed their desire for more education:

We need to document and we need to train. [...] Like in Holland you have like a meester-gezel (master of crafts) [...] It's it's like in the old days you didn't have school, so you go to a master and then you learn the craft. If you have this person and you're documenting, at the same time you need somebody that is learning from him so that if something happens to him, you already have somebody that also knows how to do it. [...] He can teach more people.

Participants need continuous mentorship and training in all areas necessary to make businesses viable in the long run, taking into account entrepreneurial knowledge, communication skills, networking, and advertisement. As expressed by a participant:

You need, um, like mentors, you know? That can continually guide you depending on which stage you are in the business... So you need to train, um, the whole spectrum of the development. You need to train different people to make it sustainable.

Ways to overcome the “brain drain” of the youth were also spoken of, and the role of the government in helping students migrate back was highlighted:

Tell them: ‘Hey, we’re gonna help you pay your ticket when you finish.’ You know? ‘We’ll pay your ticket for you. We’ll help you with your baggage and maybe we’ll help you find an apartment!’ Just simple things. Let alone the job. Just help them get back, you know? And if you can give them a job attitude, then you have your local worker.

When it comes to options for training and education for the students who do opt to stay in Bonaire, other new opportunities that build upon existing training for the tourism sector were also noted. Particularly this could entail expanding on the new “Turismo ta Sexy!” (Tourism is Sexy) campaign to cover aspects in which tourism could help support local heritage and culture.

### **Facilitate access to grants**

The current accessibility of government funding and grants for grassroots projects on Bonaire is limited in the eyes of many of our participants. Taking this issue into account, a considerable number of participants pointed to the need of having personnel dedicated to aiding locals in the process of applying for grants and funding:

We need like a project bureau where there are very good grant writers, so people that can seek funding, everywhere, European Union, and then we can say, like, you know, ‘okay,

this is the strategic plan for the coming five years for our area, for our community, and we want to accomplish this'. And, of course, we are doing that together with the government and all kind of other entities, but the difference is that it's things that come from bottom-up, so things that we are proud of, and, and want to take ownership of, but we, we need, like, you need ongoing effort of, of gathering fronts.

Linking into the above sections, building the skills required to access grants and funding should be accompanied by a series of educational activities, training programs and entrepreneurial mentorship.

### **Online Platform**

A strong online presence was also perceived as pivotal for the overall success of community efforts on the island. This means that establishing a simple to use online platform may be a vital component of the successful development and advertisement of CBT initiatives. Many participants mentioned the need for the strengthening of online networks in contemporary times. For instance, a participant actively engaged in artistic expression, the development of local arts and young artists' entrepreneurship, said:

The step for the future is to create an online catalog of not just our work, but other local artists of their work. And to just have it together in order to, when we do show ourselves, we can promote everybody.

Still on the opportunity of making use of a website for cooperation between islanders, there is also the concept of subsidized, public facing online marketing of CBT touristic packages and tours that connect existing initiatives. In this way, initiatives do not need to compete between themselves and instead work together in a mutually beneficial scheme. This expressed by one participant as follows:

[...] we want to create a model like... You have like a website that you can say: “Hey, you can go to (name of a museum), (name of another museum), (name of a local restaurant), a combined tour.” And it's like, uh, \$90, let's say. And then instead of giving the other museum \$1, it gets \$10. So we are all better off, and then we can, uh, um, save some money to, to like, uh, clean up the trails and other things...

In an ideal scenario, these network collaborations for organization, structuring and advertisement of CBT initiatives would be kept up through circular budget availability and sufficiently dedicated and trained personnel.

### **Target markets**

Although CBT initiatives were perceived as having the potential to attract a variety of tourists, ranging from existing regular visitors to new niches of internationals in search of authentic experiences, participants drew significant attention to the value of attracting visitors from surrounding islands and Latin American countries. It is noteworthy that after Papiamentu, Spanish is the second most-spoken language in the island, followed by Dutch. A considerable

number of migrants from other Latin American countries live in Bonaire and tourists coming from there are perceived as people who share more similar cultural backgrounds as locals, facilitating social edifications and interactions that are not limited to Bonaire's natural attractions. As expressed by a participant, "They understand this culture better. It is... I think the local culture is a lot closer to Latin American culture than the Dutch culture."<sup>1</sup>

Latin American tourists being a majority at the annual Dia de Rincon was also noted by some participants, reflecting to some extent the cultural proximity and ties above expressed. Enhancing the development of touristic activities that embody the local culture through having a special aim at regional tourists was also perceived as a way to improve the island's resilience in terms of possible adversities such as unexpected border closures and their backlash on the tourism industry.

### **Administration and management of a CBT network**

Drawing all of these ideas together is the critical question of how to manage a CBT network to coordinate efforts on the island. Whilst there was enthusiasm for such a forum facilitating cooperation between grassroots initiatives, participants also emphasized the complexity and challenges of successfully implementing one, with participant explaining the following when asked if a CBT network would work on Bonaire:

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<sup>1</sup> For context and positionality, it is important to note that one of the researchers during this particular interview was Latin American in heritage

Yes, definitely. I think definitely it will, it'll work. I mean, you can always try it. I mean, it is also getting them organized, so you need someone to be very organized to do that, which sometimes can be a challenge here!

Furthermore, a successfully managed CBT network on Bonaire would also need to consider the limited amount of free time people working in small enterprise and CBT initiatives may possess. Thus, for such people to be meaningfully involved in a CBT network, participation needs to be kept simple and straightforward, so as not to consume valuable time that could be invested in running the initiatives themselves. One participant expressed this, noting:

I gotta tell you, most people who are doing all of these things are like me. We don't have a lot of help. We're all working towards getting our thing going. There's not a lot of time to get together and let alone agree on things.

Nonetheless, there are organizations in rural Bonaire that fit the ideals of CBT, being based in Rincon, and largely composed of community members/volunteers. One example is the aforementioned Mangazina di Rei. Currently, this organization is managing, alongside other organizations, the establishment of a co-operative in Rincon, to further rural development in a multitude of facets and areas. Such an effort, with the appropriate support from authorities, could provide the standard for CBT on Bonaire. With additional funding and investment, it may be possible to develop this foundational role of Mangazina di Rei together with other community

groups in or near Rincon, such as the Echo Foundation. Such collaboration could form the basis of a *Rincon Community Tourism Initiative*. However, as one participant expressed, such a goal would require more investment and administrative training: "...you also need a different kind of advisors that are trained in the way that I'm explaining that have to be trained so that they will not, uh, mess it up."

Expanding upon the challenge of organizing a CBT network Bonaire, is the task of coordinating with existing stakeholder organizations on the island. These are including but not limited to the Bonaire Hotel and Tourism Association (BONHATA), the Tourism Corporation Bonaire (TCB), the Bonaire Island Authority, the Chamber of Commerce (KvK), and the Ministry of Economic Affairs (RVO). Working together with these more "top-down" oriented organizations, a successful CBT network could act as a "bottom-up" advocate for the interests of smaller CBT enterprises on Bonaire. One participant expressed that they felt that often in the management of the tourism industry, focus was solely directed to larger enterprise and projects, describing how: "Because on the island you have like one, one bigger office and then they focus more on the bigger things. And that's why we suffer because we have to do our own promotion."

In the later development of these initiatives too, if executed right, it can also be grown into an online platform that allows for more collaboration between the community and external actors which can also serve as a joint medium for advertisement. Finally, it is noteworthy that any initiatives towards the development of CBT in Bonaire should not go over these potential intermediary organizations, for these already have closer established ties with the local

communities and are the ones to whom locals look for guidance and assistance and either during or at the end of programs or projects.

### **Tourism tax revenues**

The recent implementation of a unified tourism tax, at the moment applicable only for plane visitors (cruise visitors will start contributing in 2024), in the amount of US\$ 75 per person per visit, is a factor that might contribute to the development of CBT on Bonaire directly, on the financial side, and also indirectly, on improvements in general on the island. According to the interviewees, there is not so far a specific decision about what to use these revenues for, what is expected to be further discussed during the first months of 2023 as the elections approach. Such revenues can be directed to address the constraining and enhance the enabling factors here presented in several ways.

It is relevant to point, however, that depending on the decision, the revenues of the tourism tax can contribute to enhance the constraining configurations instead. To effectively include the local communities in the decision-making process is therefore of higher importance and necessity.

### **Discussion & Conclusion**

Based on these findings rural Bonaire has obstacles yet potential to cultivate a viable CBT sector. To help achieve this, various building blocks can be implemented. Reflecting upon our conceptual framework and the “Community Capitals” (Flora et al., 2018), preservation efforts to document existing cultural practices and local knowledge could be a foundational building block. This is to ensure the transmission of traditions and skills to future generations,



from which to potentially build sustainable culture-orientated CBT. To achieve this documented heritage practices, such as traditional methods of food preparation, heritage music, and *kunuku* (traditional farmstead) management skills unique to Bonaire, could be tied to educational programs embodying mentorship and advanced studies beyond compulsory years. Such further educational programs guarantee a sturdy foundation for CBT in rural Bonaire. This is because they provide longevity through the transmission of skills potentially central to successful CBT on Bonaire.

Research shows placing heritage and culture at the heart of community-based initiatives improves their ability to build community social cohesion, trust, and sense of shared identity (Rowlands, 1997, Kline et al., 2019). Mentor based educational schemes can also help mitigate brain drain in rural Bonaire through widening the options for further education/occupational training. Further, through emphasizing the normative purpose of a mentorship scheme as being the preservation of traditional culture on Bonaire, community participation levels in CBT could be increased (Arnstein, 1969). This could motivate potential students to explore careers in CBT/tourism in general. This could complement the existing “Turismo ta Sexy” program.

Regarding brain drain, it may also be appropriate that any program to cultivate CBT in rural Bonaire be tied to a wider effort to incentivize expatriate graduates to return to Bonaire, through recruiting these graduates to fill any deficits in technical skills or when a freelance task is required (such as building a website) and offering incentives and aid to make settling back easier. Referencing our conceptual framework and particularly Häusler and Strasdas’

understanding of the various types of partnership within CBT (2003), this potential of partnership with and utilizing the skills of the graduate diaspora is compelling.

To kick start any efforts at building CBT in rural Bonaire better facilitated access to grants may be a critical factor. Particularly in and around Rincon, there are significant examples of “Community Capitals” of the cultural and natural variety (Flora et al 2018). However they require sustained and accessible investment. This ties into existing literature on the importance of such support (Dodds et al., 2018). In Bonaire, this could be achieved through better guidance to existing funding application processes, or building a new source of funding specifically aimed at developing community tourism in rural Bonaire. The process of application could be made simpler for these areas, with options for the necessary administrative tasks to be completed in Papiamentu and the required level of digital literacy kept at a minimum. Furthermore, having more explicit target funding may help spread awareness of the availability for such support within the communities of rural Bonaire.

Regarding spreading awareness of efforts to cultivate CBT in rural Bonaire, working with potential intermediary community-oriented organizations, such as Mangazina Di Rei and its cooperation with Echo Foundation and other local organizations, may also be crucial. This is because these organizations already have established ties with the local communities and are the places where local people often look for guidance and assistance. Notably, these organizations can form the administrative backbone of any potential CBT network in rural Bonaire and particularly in and around Rincon, if needed training and support is provided. This network could entail a public facing side with a website on which small tourism enterprises in rural Bonaire can

freely advertise to potential tourists and even coordinate tour packages. There could also be a private side, with a network helping to provide training, advice, and ensure quality of service for small tourism enterprises.

Furthermore, there could also be an advocacy and information gathering role for such a network, with it acting on behalf of the community to advocate for ideas such as Rincon gaining UNESCO recognition or there being a cruise market in Rincon. In these ways community-oriented organizations should be embraced, supported, and equipped with necessary resources and training, especially in combined efforts to build a community centered and sustainable economy in rural Bonaire. As initiatives of CBT in Bonaire grow into a structured network, leadership being from community-oriented organizations and not “top-down” government actors can help ensure community ownership over the network, thus fulfilling a key requisite of CBT (Tasci et al., 2013, Spenceley, 2012).

Addressing our research question “what is the viability for community-based tourism initiatives on rural Bonaire?”, there is a significant potential for successful CBT, which could lead to better interactions between tourists and the local community, lessen the impact tourism has upon the environment, increase community participation in the industry, and provide tourists experiences that are unique and culturally enriching (Mehmetoglu, 2001). Supporting existing individuals and organizations who are working tirelessly to improve tourism in rural Bonaire, these outlined building blocks can form the foundation of a successful initiative. Government actors can play a key supportive role, through assisting with legal frameworks, administrative needs, long term funding, and other required resources for the included initiatives. In this way, a

CBT network can be established and sustained long term in rural Bonaire, particularly in and around the Rincon area.

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## Appendix I – On Papiamentu

The current situation of the Papiamentu language, described along this report, can be object of several considerations. To act towards strengthening it contributes to the self-determination of the people of Bonaire. Initial reflections on opportunities to do so led to the identification of the [European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages](#) (Council of Europe, 1992), where among its goals and principles can be read “the need for resolute action to promote” the language “in order to safeguard” it (c), the “facilitation and/or encouragement” of its use, “in speech and writing, in public and private life” (d), “the promotion of study and research” on the language “at universities or equivalent institutions” (h), among others. To reach higher complexity on the items of the Article 8, *Education*, regarding “measures to promote the use of regional or minority languages in public life”, has potential to address some of the language issues and deserves a dedicated analysis. Similarly, the article 10, *Administrative authorities and public services*, underlies the argument for Papiamentu emancipation in official documents.

The recognition of the Papiamentu language as a minority or regional language can also echo the recent demonstration of the Dutch government in acknowledging and apologizing for the role of the Dutch State in oppression and slavery around the world, as in the [speech delivered by the Prime Minister Mark Rutte](#) on December 19th, 2022, in the Hague. Recognizing that the consequences of slavery affect the present time in several ways, measures to recover from them were announced to be taken. The emancipation of the Papiamentu language can be one of them.

Further studies of the report *Chains of the Past*, produced by the Slavery History Dialogue Group, might contribute to designing relevant strategies.

Last, and also based on the stated above, actions regarding the emancipation of the Papiamentu language can be considered and developed not in isolation on Bonaire, but together with the other Papiamentu-speaking islands in the Caribbean.

## Appendix II – Codebook and Frequencies

Code	Frequency
• (accessing) grants	11
• administration	29
• advertising	16
• agriculture/kunuku	12
• art & culture	49
• background	20
• Blue Destination	13
• brain drain	15
• capacity building	13
• coloniality	32
• communication	16
• constraining factors	82
• cooperation	44
• corruption/politics	52
• COVID	8
• cruises (and cruise market)	20
• education & training	85
• empowerment/agency	30
• enabling factors/existing initiatives	72

• entrepreneurship	48
• environment	29
• European Dutch	35
• export	4
• food	26
• funding & credit	37
• gentrification	17
• heritage	23
• immigrants	22
• inequality/poverty/jobs	87
• infrastructure	15
• institution/organization	37
• interaction between ethnic groups	42
• Kralendijk	9
• land use	5
• language	38
• local leadership	23
• locations (favorite places or specific mentioned locations)	7
• merge (dutch municipality)	29
• mindset	21
• network	19

● online platform	8
● perceptions of place	16
● perceptions on CBT	55
● perceptions on locals (bonairians)	57
● proposed activities	40
● racism	4
● relaxation	1
● return migration	10
● Rincon	15
● rural	9
● self determination	22
● social cohesion	34
● sport tourism	5
● sustainability	42
● tourism industry	100
● tourism tax	28
● tourist demographic	27
● traditional skills	2
● volunteer	9
● youth	29