



The Situation of Children and Adolescents in Aruba:

Key findings and recommendations

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Introduction

A situation analysis of children, adolescents and women in Aruba was undertaken in 2011–2012. Commissioned by the United Nations Children’s Fund-The Americas and Caribbean Regional Office , it was conducted by the Observatorio Social del Ecuador (OSE), a non-governmental organization based in Quito. The study had two main objectives: to evaluate progress and challenges around the implementation of the rights of children and women; and to make recommendations for social action and public policies in the medium and long term in order to improve the conditions and life opportunities of those population groups.

The research methodology used a highly participatory approach, including in-depth interviews with 50 key informants from the state, civil society, academia and international organizations, combined with statistical analysis based on information from the 2001 and 2010 censuses complemented by data from other sources.

Since 1986 Aruba has been an autonomous country within the Kingdom of the Netherlands; however, four centuries of colonialism have continuing effects including a legal framework based on the Dutch Constitution and a Dutch model of education. The Netherlands remains responsible for the island's international relations, including reporting to international human rights bodies such as the CRC, and national security. As part of the Kingdom, Aruba has assumed commitments to a number of international treaties and agreements including the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and therefore has been preparing inputs from Aruba to the reports of the Kingdom to the CRC and the CEDAW committees which periodically review implementation of recommendations and measure progress.

The island's development has also been strongly influenced by a long history of migration and immigration. Most recently immigrants have come to fill the multiple employment opportunities in construction and services offered by tourism, which is now the main driver of economic growth. The 2010 Population and Housing Census indicates that 34 per cent of the population were foreign born, making the island both multicultural and multilingual. Of the 107,557 residents, 25 per cent are children and adolescents and 53 per cent are women.

Aruba has high performance indicators, comparable to developed countries, and the population's standard of living is generally good: 100 per cent of residents, including documented immigrants, have social security and health insurance; primary and secondary education are free; 97 per cent of the population 15 years and older are literate; and there is a pension programme that guarantees a minimum income for older adults. This progress is due in large part to the way the state distributes the national budget, prioritizing social investment. From 1999 to 2009, spending on the health sector, on average, accounted for 8 per cent of total gross domestic product, education 6.7 per cent and social protection 7.4 per cent.

The Ministry of Economic Affairs, Social Affairs and Culture established the following priorities for the period 2009–2013: development of children and adolescents; development of women; welfare of the economically disadvantaged population; special needs; care of the elderly; and production and analysis of data in the social affairs field. One important action has been the introduction a payment to help support single mothers. The Government has also established a committee against child abuse and organized the first national conference on child abuse.



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Key findings

Research findings show that Aruba has fulfilled many of the goals defined in international agreements and, in general terms, the rights of children and women are met in an adequate manner. At the same time, however, several limitations to progress in the lives of children and women have only recently been placed on the public agenda. These limitations have structural causes linked to economic pressures that have led more and more Arubans to take multiple jobs to meet their basic needs and have had a detrimental effect on social relations, especially within households. This in turn has led to the reconfiguration of traditional roles and, in many cases, deterioration in the quality of care or neglect of children.

The right to health

Progress achieved

Overall, the health system is well organized, with adequate attention to the provision of health services for children and adolescents. A Department of Child and Youth Health provides good quality services and ensures the availability of adequate child health data. The health of children attending preschools and schools is monitored, including assessments of levels of obesity. In addition, the Department has started psychosocial health-care services aimed at promoting the sound socio-emotional development of all children in schools.

The infant mortality rate (under 1 year) was reduced by 75 per cent between 2000 and 2006 – from 6.2 to 1.6 per 1,000 live births. There is also a continuing low rate of child mortality (under 5 years). Antenatal care covers 99.2 per cent of women and 95.8 per cent have institutional deliveries. All children, including immigrants, have access to health insurance and 9 out of 10 children between 12 and 23 months are vaccinated before their first birthday. There is universal access to safe water and basic sanitation.

Aruba registers only 435 cases of HIV and AIDS of which very few are children. Mother-to-child transmission is very low (2 per cent), and these children are treated immediately after birth with antiretroviral therapy.

Challenges remaining

Obesity is the main public health problem affecting children and adolescents (35 per cent of this group are overweight), leading to other diseases such as diabetes and hypertension. Some of the reasons for this include the limited local production of fruits and vegetables and the high costs of imports, which encourages the consumption of cheaper, high-calorie foods; the lack of regular involvement in physical activity by over three quarters of children aged between 6 and 11; and the low percentage of infants who are exclusively breastfed.

Teen pregnancy is also a phenomenon that requires continued attention, with adolescent girls accounting for just over 1 in 10 births. This limits their ability to achieve their goals and may put them at risk of ongoing poverty. There is limited dialogue between parents and children about sex and pregnancy prevention and a limited sexual education programmes in schools.

The right to education

Progress achieved

A law making education compulsory was passed by Parliament in 2011, and schooling is free apart from a minimal yearly contribution plus the costs of supplies and uniforms. There was already universal primary education, progress towards the elimination of gender differences and more women than men in high school and college. The Government is also developing a new educational curriculum that aims to introduce Papiamentu into teaching (see challenges below).

Since 2007, the Ministry of Justice and Education has carried out a national education plan that aims to improve educational level on several fronts. There is a clear system for supervising the quality of schools, with both internal mechanisms for quality control and external evaluations by the school inspection unit from the Ministry. Other recent government measures are the PRISMA project (which helps non-Dutch-speaking students familiarize themselves with the Dutch language); the Traimerdia project (offering after-school supervision of children in preschool and primary school); and the provision of some after-school programmes for adolescents.

Challenges remaining

One of the major educational problems is the persistence of a Dutch educational model that is not adapted to local needs: only 6 per cent of the population speak Dutch at home while 68 per cent speak Papiamentu, 14 per cent speak Spanish and 7 per cent speak English. This is one of the causes of the high dropout rate, especially among males. There is also a lot of repetition, with children not studying in grades corresponding to their age. There is no mechanism to reintegrate those who drop out or are expelled, and children may become NEETs (not in education, employment or training), get involved in gangs and engage in illegal forms of subsistence.

Another problem is the absence of communication channels between parents and schools. This is compounded by the fact that parents delegate all responsibility for their children's development to the teachers. Also, there are few quality after-school childcare alternatives for children or adolescents. Day-care centres are often of poor quality, that may lead to neglect and even abuse. Having insufficient numbers of teachers and schools limits the possibility of special needs education, as does the small amount of financial assistance available.

There is little diversity in the options offered at university level, and there are also limited career opportunities. A significant number of students continue their studies abroad, mainly in the Netherlands, and social policies to promote their return when qualified are lacking.

The right to protection

Progress achieved

Bureau Sostenemi is the core of an initial protection system for children and adolescents. Its main task is to redirect cases of neglect, abuse and/or violence against children to other state agencies that can provide adequate follow up. There are also about 50 civil society organizations working on issues that affect children and adolescents, including a Youth Telephone Line that offers assistance and access to protective services to children and adolescents through a toll-free phone and via chat.

The new criminal code adopted in 2012 established a juvenile justice system that provides the court with a wider range of sanctions, including placement in a juvenile detention centre and training orders. However, its implementation will require specialized judge(s) for juvenile cases, separation of children from adult convicts when sentenced, CRC-training for all involved in dealing with young offenders and the intensification of measures to prevent children from getting into conflict with the law in the first place.

Challenges remaining

Although the establishment of the Sostenemi Bureau is a crucial first step, there is still not a comprehensive system of care and protection for children and adolescents. Moreover, the civil society organizations that seek to reduce family violence work independently and do not have a common agenda.

Domestic violence in the home affects children, adolescents and women. According to reports from the Youth Telephone Line, about 1 of every 10 calls made by children in the last three years were related to violence. Parents often lack authority and may resort to violence as a form of discipline. Due to the long hours worked by parents, more and more children and adolescents grow up alone, many times in unfavourable environments. The cases Bureau Sostenemi saw between 2007 and 2010 were physical, mental and emotional neglect, sexual abuse and domestic violence. While sexual abuse is punishable by law, but difficult to prove, punishment is not strict and the maximum penalty of 8 years is not applied.

While there are no reports of child sex tourism, the phenomenon of 'sugar daddies' exists, where girls go out with much older men in the expectation of receiving material goods.

The right to participation

Progress achieved

Among the civil society organizations focused on women and children, nine work with and for adolescents to promote youth participation and the fulfilment of their rights. Among these it is especially important to mention the Youth Parliament, which aims to ensure that the voices of young people are heard, valued and taken into account in policy decisions that affect their lives.

Challenges remaining

In general terms, the participation of adolescents in the public sphere is in an initial phase, with a lack of spaces where young people can be heard. Furthermore, women lack equal rights and opportunities in the public sphere. In the past 10 years, there has been an increase of only 2 seats for women in Parliament (from 19 men and 2 women to 17 men and 4 women), reinforcing the idea of the public space as one for men. Women still cannot access certain occupational niches and they do not always work on equal terms, earning 10 per cent less than men.

Although 1 in 10 children and adolescents is foreign born, the situation of immigrant children has been invisible. Immigrants are often socially excluded.

Recommendations

General

- Implement international agreements to which the island is committed by broadening knowledge of the actions required, taking measures to reverse the legal constraints identified and designing and implementing comprehensive policies to ensure compliance.
- Develop a consistent state policy to respond to the needs of children and adolescents with three key elements: an efficient integrated system of comprehensive care and protection; a specific code that defines one state authority to formulate government policy and another to provide assistance; and the system of juvenile justice.
- Create processes of dialogue and joint efforts among the state, civil society organizations, the private sector and trade unions to reverse the existing institutional isolation and suggest real solutions to social problems.
- Continue to deepen knowledge of the situation of children, adolescents and women through ongoing monitoring by the Ministry of Economic Affairs, Social Affairs and Culture in coordination with the University of Aruba.
- Promote regional integration with other countries in the Caribbean and the Americas to support a different model of economic development and contribute to the process of building an independent state.

Health

- Create a programme for preventing and controlling child obesity with integral indicators and goals (involving all the relevant ministries).
- Create a nationwide campaign to promote breastfeeding.
- Continue implementation of programmes of sex education for the prevention of teenage pregnancy.

Education

- Change the current Dutch-dependent educational model and develop and implement a new curriculum to meet the needs of a cultural diverse society.
- Reinforce education quality control systems.
- Address the issue of children lagging behind and ensure the retention of children and adolescents in the system.
- Train teachers and develop educational strategies to integrate special needs children into regular schools.
- Provide after-school educational spaces and recreational opportunities for adolescents.

- Offer educational rehabilitation programmes for children and adolescents who drop out of or are expelled from school.
- Guarantee that the day-care quality control system is being applied to correct identified deficiencies.

Protection

- Promote and strengthen the role played by the Bureau Sostenemi in the implementation of child protection efforts.
- Further develop and strengthen the juvenile justice system, including through the use of specialized judges and appropriate mechanisms for dealing with juvenile offenders in accordance with the CRC.
- Put in place measures to prevent children from getting involved in activities that are in conflict with the law.
- Make the problem of violence visible (through coordination between civil society, the state and the media) to prevent its normalization.
- Implement a programme of mental health care for children, adolescents and women who have been victims of violence.
- Develop joint social and economic policies regarding the employment of women and provide mothers with childcare support, especially in the early years. This should include involving fathers as caregivers.

Participation

- • Create mechanisms for strengthening youth participation at school – for example, through the formation of student councils – and in public spaces.
- • Develop a gender policy to reverse the disadvantages that still persist between women and men in the areas of labour and political participation.
- • Create mechanisms to make visible the situation of foreign-born residents, including undocumented women and children, including through qualitative and quantitative research.



Conclusion

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Aruba has huge potential and has already demonstrated significant progress in fulfilling the rights found in the CRC and CEDAW. Now it needs to take the political and social decision to resolutely tackle the challenges encountered to ensure a better present and future for its population. Only through collective effort can ongoing and complete compliance with the rights of children, adolescents and women be assured.



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