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Volk van veerkracht

*40 Jaar
Land Aruba*

Waarin opgenomen herinneringen aan Aruba's eerste minister-president Henny Eman (1948-2025)

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Na er jaren voor te hebben gestreden verwierf Aruba op 1 januari 1986 de status aparte en is het sindsdien autonoom land binnen het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden. Veertig jaar later is het tijd de vraag te beantwoorden wat ‘meer baas in eigen huis’ het land en vooral de bevolking heeft gebracht. 35 professionals uit de Arubaanse samenleving en wetenschappers laten er in deze uitgave hun constructief-kritische licht over schijnen. Elk vanuit de eigen vakdiscipline, variërend van onderwijs, ondernemersklimaat, gezondheidszorg, cultuur, toerisme, natuur, media, buitenlandse betrekkingen tot ouderenzorg. Daarnaast gaan kenners van de koninkrijksrelaties in op de betekenis van de status aparte voor de staatkundige positie en rol van Aruba als partner in het Koninkrijk en de samenwerkingsrelatie met Den Haag.

Wat deze uitgave een bijzonder accent geeft, zijn persoonlijke herinneringen aan Aruba's eerste minister-president, de op 6 januari 2025 overleden Jan Hendrik Albert ‘Henny’ Eman.

Samenstelling: René Zwart en Luc Alofs

Uitgave

ADC Caribbean





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Met herinneringen aan Aruba's eerste minister-president Henny Eman (1948-2025).



A Forty-Year Review of Children's Rights in Aruba

By Clementia Eugene

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Children are the foundation of any society, representing both present realities and its future potential. Every individual, whether marked by public achievement or simply an ordinary adult life, begins as a child shaped by the institution of the family and opportunities available within the state. Consequently, the extent to which society protects and promotes rights of children and families serves as a critical indicator of its human development and commitment to human dignity. As Aruba marks 40 years of status aparte since its constitutional separation from the Netherlands Antilles in 1986, this milestone invites reflection on the broader social consequences of this autonomous status. In particular, it raises an important question: has status aparte functioned as an enabler or a constraint in advancing children's rights and improving their quality of life?

This essay applies the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) as its conceptual framework for assessing the state of children's rights in Aruba. Adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1989, the CRC establishes a comprehensive set of civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights for persons under 18 years. It is the most widely ratified human rights treaty globally, and provides a normative framework for evaluating state obligations toward children. The Kingdom of the Netherlands signed the CRC in 1990, entered into force in the Netherlands in 1995, and Aruba in 2001. Aruba is autonomous in implementing the CRC, while the Netherlands remains responsible for reporting to the UN Committee, with Aruba writing its own chapter of the report. Since ratification, six periodic reports have been submitted, providing a longitudinal basis for assessing progress and persistent gaps.

Socio-Economic and Demographic Context

In the two decades following status aparte, Aruba experienced demographic shifts affecting children. Although the absolute number of children aged 0–17 increased slightly between 2000 and 2010, their proportion within the total population declined, reflecting broader demographic aging and declining fertility rates (CBS, 2010 & 2020). By 2020, children constituted 22.8% of the population. Changes in household composition further shape children's lived realities. While the majority of children reside in nuclear households (58.2%), nearly one-third (29.7%) live with single mothers, and smaller percentages with single fathers or without either parent (CBS, 2023). Rising divorce rates, which placed Aruba among

countries with the highest divorce prevalence by 2013, have contributed to increasingly complex family structures. Research consistently demonstrates that divorce and family instability negatively affect children's emotional and social development, particularly in blended family contexts (Haimi & Lerner, 2016; Garriga & Pennoni, 2020, Dilla & Wado, 2024). Since its launch in 2019 and legislative enactment in 2024, 'Plan di Mayor' has addressed these risks through a programmatic framework focused on shared parenting, child participation, and support.

Progress in Children's Rights Since Status Aparte

Aruba's engagement with child protection predates a status aparte and reflects longstanding institutional influences rooted in Dutch governance traditions. Early child-focussed institutions include the Child Guardianship Council ('Voogdijraad', est. 1905) and 'Sint Martinus Stichting' in 1954, which later changed to 'Fundacion Guia Mi' in 1995, serving as the family supervision agency when the court grants a child protection order. 'Imeldahof' (est.1954), and 'Casa Cuna Progreso' (est. 1957) have long provided protection and care for children unable to live safely with their families, while the Youth Health Care Section of the Department of Public Health (est. 1916) in collaboration with the White and Yellow Cross (est. 1959) has supported early health and development through vaccinations and other types of preventive care. Education also predates status aparte, beginning in the 1880s with Roman Catholic schools. Collectively, these

institutions laid the groundwork for a rights-based approach emphasizing protection, health, and education. A review of children's rights post-status aparte is evaluated using the four core categories of the CRC: survival, development, protection, and participation. This structure enables a systematic evaluation of how political autonomy has translated into improved quality of life for our children and where gaps between policy and practice remain.

Survival Rights

Survival rights encompass children's rights to life, health, and access to basic services. Aruba has made measurable progress in child health outcomes, including a substantial decline in infant mortality since 2000 (CBS, 2023) and near-universal access to sanitation (99%), safe drinking water (97%), and health insurance. All documented children are covered under the General Health Insurance AZV established in 2001, while the Youth Health Care provides free preventive care, including undocumented children and children with disabilities. Mental health presents a growing challenge. The Child and Youth Mental Health Outpatient Clinic, established in 2009 and integrated into RESPALDO in 2018, offers diagnostic and therapeutic services, but faces persistent waiting lists, indicating a mismatch between demand and system capacity. While most children report generally feeling happy, a significant proportion experience sadness, anxiety, low self-esteem, and worry about the future (CBS, 2023; Eugene, Graafsma & Sanches, 2022 & 2024; Kibbelaar, Slotboom, Goegedrag, & Hendriks,

2024). Girls consistently report poorer mental health outcomes than boys. Longitudinal data indicate a deterioration in students' mental health between 2019 and 2023, accompanied by increased risk-taking behaviours (Kibbelaar, et al., 2024). These trends suggest systemic gaps in early prevention, timely intervention, and coordinated school-based support. Parents increasingly require guidance in addressing their children's socio-emotional challenges, while schools, often the first point of contact, face financial and structural constraints that limit their ability to respond effectively (Eugene et al., 2022 & 2024; Kibbelaar et al., 2024).

Aruba also faces a childhood obesity crisis, with 42.7% of school-age children classified as overweight (Youth Health Care, 2019). Poor dietary habits, high consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages (Franken, 2025), and limited physical activity contribute to heightened risks of chronic diseases and mental health problems. Although prevention initiatives promoting healthy lifestyles exist, such as 'Kies Awa' (Choose Water) JUMP 18 program, and Cool2Bfit, their reach and sustainability remain limited.

Development Rights

Development rights encompass children's physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development. Education has long been a cornerstone of Aruba's social policy. While historically modeled on the Dutch system, one challenge has been Dutch as the language of instruction. Primary education has become increasingly bilingual, with Dutch and Papiamentu as the main languages of instruction, improving educational outcomes for children. This development was shaped by the 1990s Prisma Project and the 2003

declaration of Papiamentu as an official language alongside Dutch. School participation rates among children aged 12–17 remain high, at 97.9% for boys and 98.3% for girls, reflecting the impact of the 2011 compulsory education legislation (CBS, 2020), enforcing the right to education under CRC Article 28. High enrollment, however, masks qualitative disparities. Parents and students express concerns about curriculum relevance, instructional depth, and adequacy of support services (Kibbelaar et al., 2024). Although many students seek assistance from teachers (Eugene et al., 2022), a substantial proportion report feeling unsafe, insufficiently supported, or disengaged at school (Kibbelaar, et al, 2024). Emotional regulation difficulties and strained teacher–student relationships further undermine learning environments, underscoring the need for trauma-informed and inclusive pedagogical approaches.

Early childhood development has been strengthened through the Child Care Act of 2023, which establishes standards for safety, staffing, and quality in childcare centers. The Act advances CRC Articles 3 and 18 by safeguarding children's best interests, promoting early childhood development, and supporting parents in balancing caregiving responsibilities with participation in the productive sector.

Long before status aparte, Aruba supported children with disabilities primarily through NGO-led initiatives. 'Stichting voor Verstandelijk Gehandicapten Aruba' (est. 1964) and the 'Fundacion Arubano di esnan Visual impairment' (est. 1974) provide specialized services for children with intellectual and visual impairments. Children with disabilities have formal access to mainstream and special education, including itinerant teacher support, while Child and Youth Health Services and White-Yellow Cross facilitate early identification.

More recent initiatives, including the Aruba Autism Foundation (est. 2005), the Multidisciplinary Center (est. 2011 as a project and institutionalized in 2016), and Brighter Future (est. 2022), have expanded diagnostic, educational, and psychosocial support. Collectively, these efforts, among others, advance the realization of CRC Article 23, affirming the rights of children with disabilities to dignity, inclusion, and development.

High digital access among children and youth in Aruba (CBS, ICT Report, 2017) presents both learning opportunities and cyber risks. Since November 2025, the National Committee on the Rights of the Child has addressed digital child rights, alongside secondary school policies regulating device use to support positive school environments. Although sporting and club activities are widely available, after-school care for adolescents and recreational opportunities supporting play and social development remain limited (Kock, 2019; Kibbelaar et al., 2024).

Protection Rights

Over the past four decades, Aruba has significantly expanded its child protection infrastructure. Prevention, foster care, family supervision, and alternative care services have been progressively institutionalized. ‘Fundacion Respeta Mi’, founded in 1991 is dedicated to the prevention of child abuse through public education. In 1998, ‘Respeta Mi’ introduced Conscious Discipline in collaboration with the Departments of Education and Social Affairs, ‘Trai Merdia’, and Develop to Grow, now ‘Fundacion Educador Consciente Aruba’. In 2004, the foster care agency ‘Centro Famia di Criansa Arubano’ was established to

provide an alternative family home for children in difficult circumstances. ‘Bureau Sostenemi was established in 2005 as the advice and reporting center for child abuse. The ‘Orthopedagogisch Centrum’ was established in 2006 as an alternative care for children with behavioural difficulties and those in conflict with the law.

Early data documented 946 reported cases of child maltreatment over two years (Abuso di Mucha Commission, 2001). Subsequent research estimated a prevalence rate of 6.6%, with physical neglect and abuse most frequently reported (Guda, 2008). More recent self-report studies reveal a higher prevalence of 78.4%, approximately eight in ten children, with physical abuse again identified as the most common form, while intra-familial sexual abuse remains the least prevalent (Eugene, et al., 2022). Maltreatment disproportionately affects girls, highlighting persistent systemic vulnerabilities (Guda, 2008; Eugene, et al., 2022).

A self-report study examining child maltreatment through Nussbaum’s capability framework (2008, 2011) found that maltreatment is associated with impairments across all ten core capabilities, including life, bodily health and integrity, senses, imagination and thought, emotions, practical reason, affiliation, play, and control over one’s environment (Eugene, et al., 2022 & 2024). These findings indicate that children who experience maltreatment are denied the minimum capability thresholds necessary to flourish, undermining their rights to justice, human dignity, and full human development.

The death of two brothers because of abuse in 2017 marked a critical turning point, prompting comprehensive reforms through the Social Crisis Plan

(SCP) of 2018. UNICEF Netherlands provided technical support in a spirit of partnership, empowering Aruba to develop its own child-protection legislation, policies, and programs without imposing Dutch models, respecting locally informed decision-making grounded in the island's social and cultural context. Moreover, progress was guided by sustained political will.

The SCP introduced integrated child protection measures, including the Child Safety Code (Código di Protección, CdP) to guide cross-sectoral practice. While the CdP strengthened procedural safeguards, evaluations identified challenges in implementation, inter-agency coordination, and professionals' confidence in engaging with affected parents and children (Eugene, et al., 2023). Subsequent reforms designated by law 'Bureau Sostenemi' as the centralized advice and reporting centre in 2019 still need to be fully implemented. Signs of Safety was introduced as a participatory casework approach in 2019. An emerging initiative since 2019 is the Family Justice Centre, which aims to deliver child-friendly, therapeutic justice through integrated legal and psychosocial services.

Prior to 1986, the Department of Social Affairs (DAS) was administered from Curaçao within the Netherlands Antilles. DAS provides financial assistance, counselling, and parenting support to families. 'Fundacion Pa Nos Muchanan' was the first NGO to offer support to parents (est. 1991) followed by 'Tienda di Educacion' in 2012. Parenting education has evolved from periodic information sessions to structured parenting programs and a 161 hotline for parents. Established in 2016, the Pedagogical Vision Committee developed six guiding principles for raising

responsible children and, in 2024, led a participatory process with 30 organizations to create a national vision on parenting support.

Participation Rights

Children's participation in Aruba has evolved steadily since the 1940s, beginning with the Boy Scouts and Girl Guides and expanding significantly after status aparte. Youth organizations such as YMCA (est. 1956) and 'Asociacion Trabao di Hubentud na Aruba' (est. 1986) have provided sustained platforms for youth development and advocacy. Prior to CRC ratification in 2001, 'Fundacion Telefon pa Hubentud' introduced early mechanisms for participation and freedom of expression, through creative platforms and film festivals. Subsequent efforts, notably 'Parlamento Hubenil' (est. 2003) and Heart-Centred Leadership Foundation (est. 2008), have further strengthened youth leadership, social-emotional learning, and engagement in decision-making, reflecting meaningful progress in advancing CRC Articles 12, 13, and 14.

Despite extensive efforts of youth organizations, children continue to identify the right to be heard as both highly important and frequently violated (Kock, 2019). Similar findings emerge from professional perspectives, particularly regarding children's participation in environmental decision-making (Eugene, et al., 2024). Overall, participation opportunities remain uneven and are confined mainly to program-based initiatives rather than embedded in everyday decision-making within schools, communities, and governance structures.

Building on Progress: Addressing Remaining Gaps

Limited financial resources constrain modernization of Aruba's education system (UNICEF, 2024; Kibbelaar, et al., 2024), raising concerns under CRC Article 4 regarding use of maximum available resources. Curriculum reform is needed to integrate social-emotional learning, comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education across all levels. Given high prevalence of child maltreatment, trauma-informed teaching approaches should be adopted. In line with CRC Articles 3 and 19, school boards should strengthen care structures by expanding school social work, including in early childhood education, to enable early identification and timely, family-centred interventions. Proven initiatives such as the SHOCO Wellness program at the University of Aruba should be systematically scaled up as a national, school-based mental health strategy, consistent with CRC Article 24.

Children's early exposure to technology and adolescents' increasing social isolation through excessive device use are linked to rising anxiety and depression. In line with CRC Articles 13 and 17, schools should strengthen creative arts education to foster emotional intelligence, creative agency, and critical thinking, while counterbalancing growing reliance on artificial intelligence. Although initial steps toward a youth policy have been taken, sustained action remains urgent. The planned appointment of a Children's Ombudsman would address a longstanding



Het eerste kabinet Henny Eman.

gap by strengthening independent oversight, expanding child-friendly complaints mechanisms, and operationalizing CRC Article 12. Children from migrant and undocumented families continue to face persistent challenges, including discrimination (Alvarez, 2023; Kibbelaar et al., 2024).

Gaps in children's participation persist, underscoring the need to expand Parlamento Hubenil Aruba across schools and strengthen children's involvement in environmental decision-making (Eugene, et al., 2024). Services for adolescents aged 12–18 with behavioural problems and in conflict with the law remain inadequate (Helen van der Wal, 2007), while juvenile crime has become increasingly complex, requiring targeted and sustained interventions to prevent progression into entrenched criminal trajectories.

International cooperation has supported progress toward CRC implementation, with Centre for Development Aruba (est. 1980) serving as an autonomous intermediary channeling Dutch development assistance and private-sector funds to NGOs focused on children's human development. Despite annual government subventions, NGO financing remains unstable, raising concerns about long-term sustainability of child and family-focused services to ensure consistent rights realization. There is a need to shift NGO financing strategies toward diversified, entrepreneurial income-generation models to enhance financial resilience and ensure continuity of child and family-centered services.

Status aparte: Enabler or Constraint

Status aparte has served both as an enabler and a constraint in advancing children's rights in Aruba. Autonomy has facilitated development of child and family-focused legislation, institutions, programs, and participatory mechanisms, reflecting increased national ownership and recognition of children as rights holders. Conversely, status aparte has revealed continued dependence on Kingdom financial and technical support. Although the Intercountry Task Force for Children's Rights has facilitated cooperation, monitoring, and knowledge exchange, Aruba's child rights implementation remains shaped by reliance on Dutch and European policy models, limiting engagement with regional Caribbean small-island-state approaches. The resulting proliferation of NGOs,

although it has its advantages, has contributed to fragmented service delivery, requiring families to navigate multiple agencies and hindering effective inter-agency collaboration. An evaluation of the Código di Protección confirmed that collaboration is simultaneously perceived as a strength, weakness, opportunity, and threat (Eugene, et al., 2024). Moreover, lack of systematic impact evaluation across NGO-led initiatives constrains accountability and evidence-based decision-making, raising concerns under CRC Article 4 regarding the effective use of available resources.

Progress has been greatest where political will, institutional coordination, and sustained investment have converged. The progress achieved is also a result of sustained commitment, expertise, and dedication of professionals across sectors, as well as the resilience, compassion, and advocacy of parents and communities throughout Aruba. Moving forward, the realization of children's rights in Aruba depends less on constitutional status than on the state's capacity to operationalize CRC principles through policy and practice, adequate resource allocation, and collective participation. Status aparte should therefore be understood not as an endpoint, but an ongoing opportunity to deepen rights-based governance and ensure that all children can flourish and lead lives they have reason to value.