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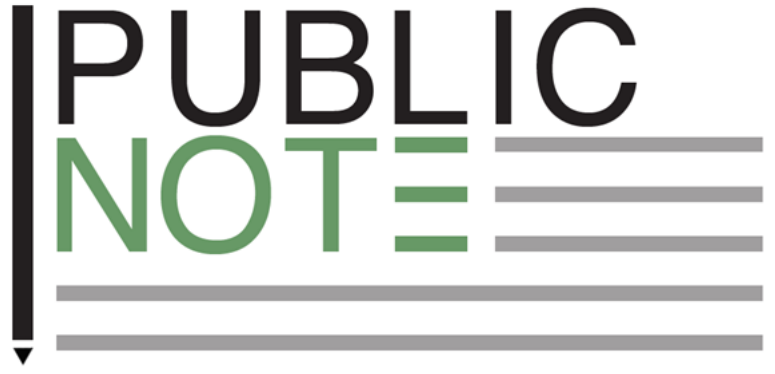
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Rethinking Suriname-Dutch ties in uncertain times

Oemar van der Woerd & Vikas Soekhai



The current debate around Suriname-Dutch ties predominantly focuses on the harmonious and horizontal verbalized intentions to intensify cooperation in- and outside the bilateral sphere. In this reflective note, we plea for a more critical perspective that questions the underlying reasons for and differences in the level of urgency with which both governments try to cooperate more intensively. It argues that a critical approach is necessary to ensure that both Surinamese and Dutch society do not overlook (un)intended consequences of their unbalanced relation, and neglect existing social (negative) sentiments amongst (Dutch) Surinamese communities about unresolved issues between both countries. Our hope is that the raised questions will deepen debates amongst Dutch and Surinamese citizens, politicians and policymakers, how to further build on the special connection between an old colonizer and its former colony since.

Lessons for practice:

- Dutch politicians and policymakers should be aware of the existing sentiments amongst (Dutch) Surinamese communities about unresolved issues between both countries in exploring cooperation.
- Providing and allowing young and older (Dutch) Surinamese generations with a voice is important to acknowledge existing social (negative) sentiments, and to make use of their ideas in exploring cooperation.

Key words: transnational cooperation, diaspora policy, Suriname, the Netherlands

A failed state?

The poor political relations between Suriname and the Netherlands hit rock bottom in the summer of 2018. During a private event for Dutch people working for international organizations, outgoing Minister of Foreign Affairs, Stef Blok, described Suriname – a former colony of the Netherlands decolonized in 1948 that became independent in 1975 – as a “failed state” (Kuipers & Deutsch, 2018). In his view, Surinamese society is “divided along ethnic lines,” and therefore should not be considered as a good example of a society that has succeeded in integrating multiple ethnicities. The statements of Minister Blok caused a lot of backlash in both countries, and weakened the already poor political relations between the two countries.

It was quite shocking that Minister Blok neglected the role of the Netherlands in how Surinamese society is shaped. After all, as a former colonial ruler for almost three centuries, the Netherlands brutally killed and drove out indigenous populations, and imported enslaved Africans to work on plantations. After the abolition of slavery in 1863, their work was partly taken over by contracted migrants from British India and Indonesian Java, resulting in today’s “superdiverse” Surinamese society (Vertovec, 2007).

Renewed bilateral connections

In mid-2020, a new Surinamese government took office, led by President “Chan” Santokhi, representing a new political movement that tries to align different ethnicities. This citizenship-approach can be formally described as “colorblind” (Scholten, 2011), approaching all Surinamese people as citizens rather than as ethnic or cultural groups. President Santokhi presented publicly that revitalizing ties with its former ruler as

well as reconnecting the Surinamese diaspora (i.e., people with a Surinamese background who live in other countries, predominantly the Netherlands) would be priorities in rebuilding Suriname. The calls to strengthen bilateral ties were positively answered by the Dutch government, illustrated in the following tweet of Minister Blok mid-March this year:

‘Glad to see my Surinamese counterpart Albert Ramdin today. Our contact is part of new intentions to revitalize relations with Suriname. We spoke about the special connection between our countries and the continuation of our cooperation.’
(March 16, 2021, translated from Dutch)

The current debate around Suriname-Dutch ties predominantly focuses on the harmonious and horizontal verbalized intentions

In addition, outgoing Minister of Defense, Ank Bijleveld, recently visited Suriname for military purpose; outgoing Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, Sigrid Kaag, led a virtual trade mission; and ambassadors Rajendre Khargi (Suriname) and Henk van der Zwan (The Netherlands) were installed in situ. These examples, amongst others, illustrate renewed connections in the bilateral sphere, and are often described as a logic consequence of the special connection between both countries.

Questioning the status quo

The current debate around Suriname-Dutch ties predominantly focuses on the harmonious and horizontal verbalized intentions. However, it lacks a more critical perspective that questions the underlying reasons for and differences in the level of urgency with which both governments try to cooperate more intensively.¹

What does “the special connection” between the two countries really mean for the Dutch government? Is it for strategic-political purposes to maintain influence, that it responds to sentiments within society about its doubtful role as former colonial ruler, or is it to sincerely support Suriname in the long term to become economically stable? The level of urgency with which Suriname seeks to cooperate seems higher compared to the Netherlands, as it has a high dependence on other countries and institutions (e.g., International Monetary Fund (IMF), Pan American Health Organization (PAHO)) for financial resources, medical equipment and workforce. This became evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when socio-political and dramatic economic developments occurred at the same time, referred to as a “double crisis” (Van der Woerd & Soekhai, 2020).

The Dutch government supported Surinamese hospitals with ventilators, and several Dutch hospitals formed medical teams to help professionals and management on-site.

Although these initiatives can be praised for their impact, what does it say about the role of the Netherlands as the short-term “fixer” in times of crises? Their unbalanced relation could overlook and even devalue the available expertise and work of Surinamese actors, and paradoxically hampers the potential economic opportunities of Suriname in the Caribbean and Latin America. So, how does the Dutch ties fit in with other ties of Suriname with, for instance, Brazil, Canada or the United States? The development of a long-term economic agenda by the Surinamese government that centralizes their unique position on the northeastern coast of South America could help other countries, including the Netherlands, to give support when asked for that serves Surinamese interests on the long-term.

Existing sentiments within Surinamese and Dutch society about unresolved issues between both countries should be discussed more publicly

Moreover, existing sentiments within Surinamese and Dutch society about unresolved issues between both countries should be discussed more publicly. For instance, recent conducted research shows that Dutch Surinamese communities think that the Dutch government should offer apologies for the crimes committed during slavery to start the process of healing (Van Engeland et al., 2020). In addition, to date, little attention is paid by the Dutch government to people who have gaps in pension payments who migrated from Suriname to the Netherlands late last century. For them, the harmonious verbalized intentions could enhance feelings of irritation and cynicism. Ought part of rethinking Suriname-Dutch ties also involves taking better care of Dutch Surinamese inhabitants? The role of

“second generation immigrants” and questions of identity for such individuals (Portes & MacLeod, 1996) against the background of a shared history and heritage receives little

public attention as well. The descendants of migrants could experience emotional conflicts in assessing racial belonging (Stoler, 2009). What should be the role of a former colonial ruler, which by today has an even looser connection with young Surinamese people, to provide perspective on the long-term? Providing and allowing young and older (Dutch) Surinamese generations with a voice is important to acknowledge existing sentiments, and to make use of their ideas in exploring cooperation between the two countries.

A call for critical reflection

The momentum to rethink on Suriname-Dutch ties is now. Opposite to current harmonious and horizontal verbalized intentions to intensify cooperation in- and outside the bilateral sphere, a more critical approach is necessary to ensure that we –

both Surinamese and Dutch society – do not overlook (un)intended consequences of their unbalanced relation, and neglect existing social sentiments amongst (Dutch) Surinamese communities. In this reflective note, we have raised several questions to substantiate this critical perspective.² Our hope is that these questions will deepen debates amongst Dutch and Surinamese citizens, politicians and policymakers, how to further build on the special connection between an old colonizer and its former colony since.

¹ Inspiration for writing this note is taken from on-site and online observations during debates in the Surinamese and Dutch Parliament, as well as interviews and conversations with Surinamese healthcare professionals, students and (Dutch) Surinamese relatives in the last two years.

² We thank Nathan Levy and Angelique van Dam (Erasmus School of Social and Behavioral Sciences) for inviting us to present at the Erasmus Migration & Diversity Institute (EMDI) network meeting on March 15, 2021. The comments of attendees served as valuable input for this reflective note.

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