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The Common Good from the Ground Up

What Holds Us Together

Keynote address

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Opening

Bon dia tur hende.

First of all, I would like to sincerely thank the Aruban government and the conference organizers for creating this space, and for the invitation to reflect together on the common good, here in Aruba, at a moment when this conversation feels both urgent and deeply relevant.

As a local, I am grateful to be part of a dialogue that brings together policymakers, civil society, knowledge institutions, and community actors, not to speak past one another, but to think together about what it means to flourish as a society.

For me, this is not a distant topic. It connects directly to my work as a researcher, a PhD candidate, a university lecturer, and to my engagement with civil society on this island, and to questions that have guided much of my thinking over the past years.

And it is from that place that I would like to begin.

Framing the Problem: When Prosperity Is Not Enough

What holds a society together when prosperity is not enough?

Across the world, and on Aruba, prosperity has grown. Economies expand, technologies advance, and performance indicators improve.

Yet at the same time, many societies experience rising inequality, declining trust in institutions, social fragmentation, and a growing sense of disconnection.

From a governance perspective, this tells us something important.

The challenge we face today is not only economic or technical.
It is institutional and relational.

It concerns how people feel connected — or disconnected — from society; whether they feel included, represented, and recognized.

This raises a deeper question about how we understand progress and societal development, particularly in young, newly autonomous societies, where nation-building is not only a civic project, but a social one.

In that sense, the common good is not merely a moral aspiration.
It is a governance problem.

And that problem becomes obvious when viewed from a small island perspective.

Small Islands as a Lens

On a small island like Aruba, governance dynamics are intensified.

Proximity is high. Roles overlap. Formal institutions and informal relationships intersect constantly.

Decisions taken in policy arenas do not disappear into abstraction; they are quickly felt in families, neighborhoods, and communities.

From an academic point of view, small islands function as revealing systems. They compress governance processes that, in larger societies, remain dispersed or hidden.

Feedback loops between policy, trust, and institutional credibility are short.
Strengths become visible quickly, but so do weaknesses.

This makes small islands not an exception to governance theory, but a place where its assumptions are tested most clearly.

It is from this small island lens that I approach my own work.

The Guiding Question: Equal Voice and the Common Good

In my PhD research titled “*Creating Value from the Ground Up*”, and in my engagement with civil society and government, one question has become central:

Can there be a common good without equal voice?

Not equal outcomes.

Not a perfect consensus.

But equal capacity to articulate needs, to influence decisions, and to shape what counts as public value.

Because when voice is unevenly distributed, the common good risks becoming something that is defined *about* society, rather than *with* society.

And this raises a second, closely related question: common good, for whom?

When we talk about equal voice, we are also talking about diversity and inclusion.

About whose experiences count as knowledge.

Whose needs are recognized as public concerns.

And whose perspectives shape our collective priorities.

In a diverse society like ours, the common good cannot be separated from inclusion, because exclusion, even when unintended, weakens the whole.

Why Civil Society — and Why These Domains

As a public administration and organizational scientist, people often ask me a very reasonable question:

Why civil society? Why not the government?

And I usually smile a little, because in our field, government is still often treated as the default locus of governance.

But in small island contexts like Aruba, that assumption does not hold in the same way.

Here, civil society organizations are not secondary actors.

They are not an add-on to public policy.

They are woven into the fabric of the community.

They are where care continues when policies end, where culture lives when funding cycles stop, and where trust is maintained when institutions feel distant or overloaded.

And honestly, on an island, everyone in this room knows at least one of them personally.

That is why, in my PhD research, I focus explicitly on civil society organizations in the Dutch Caribbean, not as substitutes for government, but as essential actors in the creation of public value within small island governance systems.

The choice of focus domains was equally deliberate.

The domains of health, social protection, and culture were selected based on prior research conducted over several years, my personal and professional engagement, and a complementary baseline assessment of the civil society landscape.

Together, these sources pointed to domains where vulnerability is high and public value is fragile, but where community resilience and commitment are also particularly strong.

Importantly, the selection of these domains was comparative by design.

Studying civil society across sectors with different institutional settings and relationships with the state allows us to better understand why some sectors are more resilient or effective than others.

Studying these domains was therefore not only an academic choice, but one grounded in the lived realities of our communities.

Reframing Public Value Governance from an Island Perspective

Engaging with civil society in these domains revealed something else.

Much of public value governance theory has been developed in large, Western states — contexts characterized by scale, distance, and relatively stable institutional infrastructures.

These theories offer valuable insights.

But when applied uncritically to small island contexts, their limitations become visible.

On islands, governance is not distant.

It is personal.

Relational.

Sometimes uncomfortably close.

Institutions are not simply “there”; they are still becoming.

Many of our institutions were established within colonial governance structures — or carry institutional logics shaped by them.

These legacies continue to influence how authority is exercised, whose knowledge is considered warranted, and how public value is defined and delivered.

This does not mean our institutions are failing, but it does mean that public value is not neutral.

It is shaped by history, power, and the design choices we inherit unless we consciously revisit them.

Rather than starting from abstract models, my research starts from these island realities and adapts public value governance theory accordingly.

From this adaptation, three mechanisms become visible through which public value is produced in practice, largely through civil society organizations:

- Trust-based collaboration, built through proximity and relationships, but requiring institutional support to be sustained
- Community-based value framing, where lived experiences and diverse voices shape what counts as value
- Value-driven service delivery, services guided by social purpose, requiring both commitment and expertise

Together, these mechanisms show that public value on islands is not accidental.

It is produced through relationships, but sustained through institutions.

From Research to Practice: Strengthening the Aruban NGO Ecosystem

The reason I am sharing this is not to stay in theory.

Because the questions I was grappling with academically were the same questions I kept hearing in practice, in conversations with NGOs, community leaders, and practitioners across Aruba.

That is where theory had to meet practice.

With that in mind, the next question became very concrete:

How can we strengthen the Aruban NGO ecosystem?

This question guided the collaboration through the *Heart + Knowledge* NGO Conference in September 2025, a joint initiative of CEDE Aruba and the Aruba Institute for Good Governance & Leadership at the University of Aruba.

The conference brought together diverse voices, from Aruba, the region, and beyond and was made possible through collaboration between academic, civic, and private partners.

What mattered most, however, was not only the program but the space it created.

NGOs and knowledge institutions came together not to perform alignment, but to reflect critically on collaboration, capacity, and public value creation in a small island context.

Out of these conversations, a shared ambition was announced: the development of an **NGO Academy for Aruba**.

Starting this March, the Academy will move from idea to practice, supported by a broad coalition of partners, all working toward the same goal: strengthening initiatives that emerge from the community itself.

The NGO Academy is not training for training's sake.

It is an institutional response to a structural governance challenge.

Its purpose is to strengthen voice, sustain trust, and enable coordination.

Institutions, Trust, and Fragility

To move beyond theory, we also wanted to understand how these dynamics are experienced in practice.

During the *Heart + Knowledge* Conference, board members and managers from civil society organizations shared their perspectives.

Three patterns stood out.

First, civil society organizations carry a very high level of societal responsibility while operating with limited structural capacity.

This does not signal a lack of commitment. Quite the opposite.

The commitment is there.

But commitment alone is no longer enough to sustain value-driven work in increasingly complex environments.

Second, willingness to collaborate is remarkably high.

There is openness. There is readiness to connect.

But willingness is not the same as trust.

Trust takes time. It takes continuity.

And it requires institutional support if it is to last beyond individual relationships.

Third, much collaboration remains person-dependent rather than institutionally anchored.

In a small island context, this is understandable; proximity makes informal cooperation easier.

But it also makes collaboration fragile.

When people move on, priorities shift, or roles change, cooperation can weaken or disappear altogether.

This is why strong relationships, valuable as they are, must be matched with strong institutions.

Aruba, Institutions, and the Common Good

Aruba is a young country.

With 40 years of Status Aparte, we embarked on a distinct trajectory of governance and institutional development, and we have accomplished a great deal.

But civil society has also carried much of the weight, often quietly, often without consistent or structural support.

The richness of our communities is already here.

The challenge before us is to match that richness with institutions strong enough to sustain it.

Because if we want a stronger community, we need stronger institutions across government, civil society, and the spaces in between.

What This Means for Policy and Practice

Strengthening the common good requires more than frameworks and funding lines.

Collaboration cannot be mandated by policy alone.

Many civil society organizations experience a lack of mutual respect in their interaction with other organizations, government actors, and stakeholders.

They feel their initiatives are undervalued, their expertise overlooked, or their work absorbed without recognition or shared ownership.

From a governance perspective, this matters deeply.

Because collaboration cannot flourish where trust is weak.

And trust cannot grow where voice is not respected, autonomy is threatened, or credit is unevenly distributed.

Policy must therefore do more than regulate.

It must enable respectful practice.

Closing: A Call to Action

So, I ask the question once more:

What holds a society together when prosperity is not enough?

Not moral consensus.

But the capacity to make voice count, to turn trust into collaboration, and to translate shared values into services that last.

That responsibility does not belong to one actor.

It belongs to all of us, policymakers, civil society, the market, governments, knowledge institutions, and communities, each indispensable, none sufficient on its own.

On a small island, this task is unmistakable.

More demanding.

And precisely for that reason, more possible.

If Aruba can show that public value is not created from the top down, but through deliberate choices in how we govern, choices that make voice consequential, trust durable, and responsibility shared, then we do more than strengthen our own society.

We offer the world a different answer to a question many societies are now asking: how to hold on together, without leaving anyone behind.

And that answer does not begin tomorrow.

It does not begin in policy papers.

It begins here.

You, Me, With the institutions we choose to build.

And the way we choose to build them, together.

Masha danki.

PhD Research Highlights

Title: Creating Value from the Ground Up

Focus: Public value governance in small island states

Case studies: Aruba and Bonaire

Domains: Health, social protection, and the cultural sector

This PhD research examines how civil society organizations contribute to public value creation within multi-level governance systems of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. It focuses on institutional capacity, collaboration, leadership, and co-creation in small island contexts.

Author Biography



Thais Franken is a lecturer and researcher in the Department of Public Administration & Organizational Sciences at the University of Aruba and Program Manager of the Master's in Governance & Leadership. She is also a researcher at the Aruba Institute of Good Governance & Leadership (GG&L).

Her PhD research focuses on public value governance in small island states, examining how civil society organizations in Aruba and Bonaire contribute to societal value creation. She combines academic research with policy advisory work and active engagement in the Aruban community.

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