



VIDS  
Vereniging van Inheemse  
Dorpschouften in Suriname



Forest Peoples  
Programme

## BRIEFING FOR MEDIA – Suriname

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### ***Securing Indigenous Peoples' Rights in Conservation in Suriname: A Review***

*Securing Indigenous Peoples' Rights in Conservation in Suriname: A Review*<sup>1</sup> was carried out by the Association of Indigenous Village Leaders in Suriname (VIDS). VIDS concluded that despite some recent positive developments, Suriname is still out-of-step with many of the best practices set out by the World Parks Congress in 2003. VIDS staff: “we can't speak of a new paradigm on conservation in Suriname yet”.

#### **Key findings**

One major obstacle is that the collective land and resource rights of indigenous peoples are still not recognised in the laws of Suriname, despite the various recent decisions of the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) and judgements of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ordering Suriname to adopt legislative and other measures to recognise and protect indigenous and tribal peoples' rights. Formally, the State can decide to establish a protected area anywhere on indigenous lands - which are legally classified as state-owned lands. The conservation laws and policies contain the same flaws and are severely outdated.

Most protected areas in Suriname were established before 2003. The indigenous communities who consider (parts of) these protected areas as their customary lands, say that at the time of the planning and establishment, they were hardly involved or consulted; they did not have full information or did not understand the implications well, or only a few of them were consulted. Saying 'no' was not an option, the plans were already made. Some communities were not even aware of the establishment at all. Yet, the government nowadays still holds the position that the protected areas are valid because 'at the time, the community agreed'. So far, no situations from the past have been reviewed and redressed by government.

In more recent cases, such as the proposed Kaboeri Kreek Nature Reserve, the indigenous communities who traditionally occupy and use the Kaboeri Kreek area, have said 'no' to the establishment, at least until their land rights are legally recognised. However, the government and conservation agencies still view the area as a priority and it is unclear to the communities if the plans have been cancelled or rather postponed.

The current conservation laws in Suriname do not offer the possibility for community management or co-management. Instead, several protected areas have a 'consultation commission', which the government calls a 'success model'. Indigenous representatives however indicate that power within these committees is not genuinely shared and their influence is very limited. In the more recent (1998) Central Suriname Nature Reserve (CSNR), indigenous and tribal people who were involved in consultations to draft a management plan, developed a co-management model that was in the end rejected by the government.

Current management plans hardly allocate a role for traditional knowledge and customary use of biodiversity in the management of the nature reserves and follow a very top-down approach. Indigenous youth reports to be excluded from management trainings and jobs because they lack a formal education diploma. They can only get jobs such as gathering construction materials, cleaning or cooking. At the same time, national biodiversity actions plans and management plans announce steps to increase the awareness of the communities about nature and environmental management.

The indigenous peoples of Suriname say that these plans to educate them about conservation lack any acknowledgement of their traditional ecological principles and knowledge about sustainability and conservation, and of the value and contribution of their customary practices. “We feel that we, as indigenous peoples, know how to protect an area. They don't have to teach us. We should teach them how

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<sup>1</sup> Available at <http://www.forestpeoples.org/sites/fpp/files/publication/2010/04/wccsurinamepareviewoct09eng.pdf>

*to interact with nature!*” The VIDS is trying to raise more awareness among conservation actors and the general public by publishing reports based on community-based research on customary sustainable use of natural resources by indigenous peoples.

## **Recommendations from VIDS**

### ***Adapt legislation***

National legislation must be amended in order to recognise indigenous peoples’ collective ownership and other rights, in accordance with international obligations. At the same time, a critical review and replacement of the Nature Protection Law (1954) is necessary, especially where it impacts on indigenous and tribal peoples and their lands and territories. Current outdated and discriminatory provisions should be removed and stronger obligations to respect indigenous peoples’ rights must be included in national legislation. During the review, VIDS received encouraging news that the new government has asked the help of the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous peoples to draft a law on indigenous land and resources, and the help of IUCN in developing a new Nature Protection Law. VIDS stressed that indigenous and tribal peoples should fully and effectively participate in these processes and offered its help, expertise and input. In 2010 a new government took over and it is not yet sure how the new government will take this work forward.

### ***Strengthen awareness and capacity***

VIDS observed during the review that there is still an all-round lack of understanding and awareness in Suriname of the new paradigm and all its implications, also among government staff and local staff from international conservation organisations. VIDS suggested developing and carrying out capacity-building and training work for the conservation community in Suriname on indigenous peoples’ rights in conservation, to help overcome this obstacle. During the review process, VIDS received various requests to increase other actors’ capacity on ‘acceptable consultation and participation processes’, based on the traditions and culture of indigenous peoples and Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC). VIDS is working on regional consultation protocols, which can be presented and shared, possibly combined with information-sharing or training sessions on the meaning and implications of FPIC, and traditional decision-making processes and customary rules. However, VIDS also emphasises that it is even more important that an FPIC procedure be included in the law, in conjunction with a monitoring body to assess whether FPIC has been applied, and, if not, impose sanctions.

### ***Improve collaboration and dialogue with conservation organisations***

International conservation organisations have their own international principles on indigenous peoples, but local staff, in Suriname, often have limited knowledge or lack the capacity to put these principles into practice, and headquarter monitoring of the actual implementation and adherence to the corporate policies is also lacking. Although they are taking a few steps forward to include indigenous peoples in their work, their approach is perceived by the indigenous peoples as quite top-down, and primarily focussed on conservation goals. VIDS feels that they do not get support from these organisations when it comes to addressing the (land) rights issues and in some areas, in particular in the south of Suriname, conservation organisations play a very dominant, conservation-oriented and not rights-based role. To improve trust and collaboration, VIDS has suggested to increase dialogues and to share more information.

### ***Review and redress past injustices***

Lastly, VIDS recommended that all situations and actions from the past need to be reviewed in relation to contemporary standards on indigenous peoples’ rights and that any mistakes and injustices should be rectified accordingly, through discussing compensation and/or restitution options and preferences with affected communities.

### **Further information:**

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