



In dire need to protect the territory and governance of the Saamaka people

Executive Summary

This policy brief¹ addresses the importance of institutional support in strengthening the governance traditional systems in parallel with securing land tenure rights for the Saamaka people. Saamaka livelihoods have been strongly related with their territory and that are decisive in the management of natural resources and the conservation of forest ecosystems associated with the Suriname River watershed. It is crucial for the effectiveness of the land tenure rights of the Saamaka people, that the titling process is accompanied by efforts to enhance local and traditional governance systems to promote visibility, and to strengthen and legitimize decision-making customary processes that assure the future of the Saamaka territory and its inhabitants.



Policy Analysis

Facing the global crisis associated with climate change and the loss of biodiversity, mitigation mechanisms are becoming emphatic in the importance of local communities in nature conservation. For more than three decades, efforts to highlight traditional governance systems as key elements in the sustainable management of natural resources have been increasing, based on the argument that the well-being of local communities will also reflect the well-being of the ecosystems associated with their territories (Borrini-Feyerabend & Hill, 2015). For that reason, Institutional organizations at global level have highlighted the importance of social justice in conservation processes by conceiving local communities as subjects of rights, special attention and key actors in achieving conservation objectives (RRI, 2015). This meant considering the “sustainable use and benefits-sharing of natural resources, with emphasis on the role played by local communities”. This approach was promoted by the Convention on Biological Diversity in 1992. Like these, the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development of 1992, the Strategic Plan for Biological Diversity 2011-2020 as well the Conferences of the Parties like COP15 in which the CBD establishes a historic and ambitious agreement in search of achieving the aim of protecting 30% of the planet and recovering 30% of degraded ecosystems by the year 2030, guaranteeing the well-being and conservation of the cultural values of the local communities that inhabit

¹ Developed in a collaboration between “Observatorio de Territorios Etnicos y Campesinos” de la Pontificia Universidad Javeriana (OTEC), “Vereniging van Saamaka Gezagsdrages” (VSG) and “Tropenbos Suriname” (TBS) within the framework of the Working Landscapes Program of Tropenbos Suriname, coordinated by Tropenbos International and funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

them and depend on them. Among other institutional efforts including the most recent Declaration of Belém resulting from the 2023 Amazon Summit, the Amazon Forest shines as a strategic ecosystem for the preservation of life on the planet and for the mitigation of climate change. Suriname, being an Amazonian country, has a commitment of great importance in the global framework, and the protection of the communities that have ancestrally inhabited this ecosystem should be one of the principles of territorial management (Quintanilla, Guzmán, & Josse, 2022).

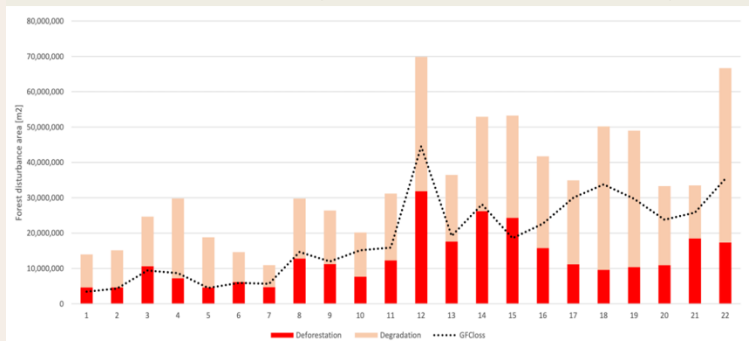
Context and Diagnosis

The Saamaka people have inhabited the Upper Suriname River watershed inside the Amazon Forests for more than three centuries and their livelihoods are closely linked to the ecosystems of this region. The physical territory not only represent objects of use for them, it also represents Gods, families, history, identity and legacy (Ramirez-Gomez, et al., 2017).

Saamaka people have created a special knowledge composed of traditional practices and governance structures protecting the natural resources of the region. For this reason, since their existence as a Maroon tribe they have undertaken a struggle to claim their rights to be free people in their territory and protect it, living between abundance of natural resources and scarcity of secure livelihoods (Vereniging van Saamakaanse Gezagsdragers, 2023).

Currently, the Saamaka territory is suffering the consequences of the aggressive impact of, often illegal economies related to the extraction of natural resources in Suriname. Activities such as logging and gold mining are progressively affecting the vegetation cover of the Amazon Forest and water sources, while the Saamaka people are left without tools to assert their rights and create thriving opportunities for their future. According to the latest Global Forest Watch report from September 2023, the dynamics of deforestation and degradation of the Amazon Forest in areas where the Saamaka territory overlap with logging and mining concessions have increased considerably over the last 10 years (Figure 1). Likewise, it is evident that this increase is related to the construction of road infrastructure such as the Palmera road, which has facilitated the construction of new illegal roads that penetrate forest covers and function as a means of transportation for wood extraction (Global Forest Watch, 2023).

Figure 1. Deforestation and degradation inside concessions that overlap with the Saamaka Territory 2001



Source: LandMark. Global Forest Watch. 2023

The Saamaka community has a social organization structure based on clans called 'Lo's.' In total it is made up of 12 Lo's that are distributed throughout the territory and each one has the right to access a certain area of forest which they can make use of. The management of the natural resources of these areas takes place through collective decisions approved by the traditional authorities (Kapitein, Basja



and Elders) of each village (Ramirez, Linga, & Petrusi, 2021) . These dynamics of use are supported by traditional knowledge and its belief system that has an intimate relationship with the forest. In this way, use relationships are based on respect and care for life. One of the most remarkable beliefs is the full awareness of caring for nature in the present for the survival of future generations of its people. Therefore, the most important family legacy is the land on which they can live; legacy that is transmitted orally through the Elders of each family, since they are the ones who know the territory, its limits and know who has property rights over it.

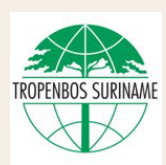
Both the form of land distribution and the traditional governance system of the Saamaka people are currently facing changes brought about by the agency of external pressures. This corresponds to the land use planning that the Suriname government imparts in the region and that does not take into account the traditional government mechanisms through which the Saamaka people have inhabited the Suriname River watershed. This has been reflected in community forestry concessions, which are part of the governmental land use system, and which are granted without considering that there is already a clan-based forest distribution that has worked for years. Consequently, the overlap of these government management figures with areas that belong to certain clans has become recurrent, triggering conflicts inside the community.

When these conflicts emerge, the bonds of trust, cohesion and unity that have always characterized Saamaka communities can be badly impacted by the presence of external actors and the monetization of traditional relations. The delay in the official granting of territorial rights to the communities has exacerbated these problems and has generalized the feeling of uncertainty and hopelessness in the Saamaka people. In addition, economic, social, and political factors add to the difficulty of the process and are having a negative effect on people's quality of life.

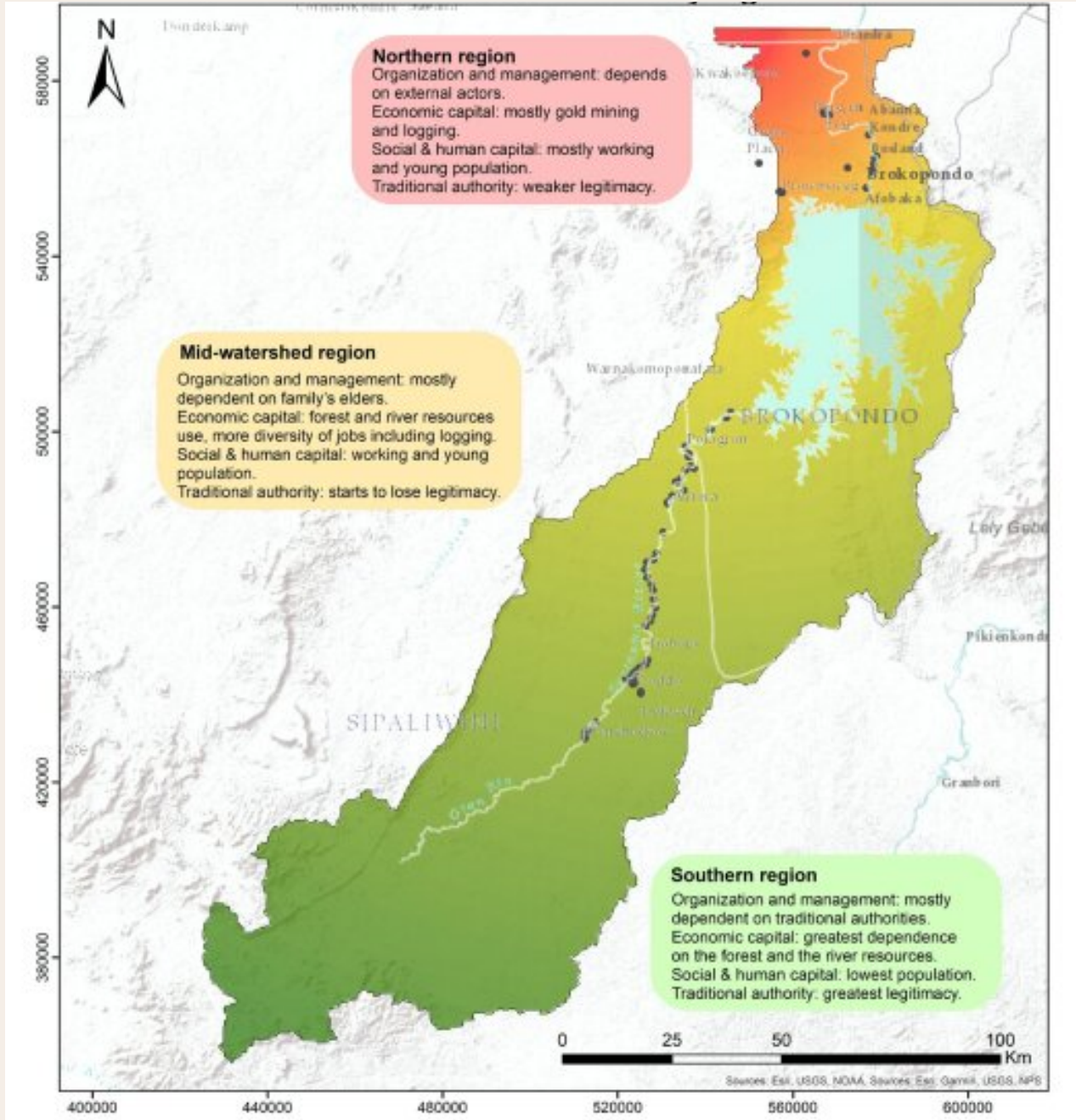
The exercise of territorial rights is one of several tasks that traditional leaders oversee. However, the governance of territories and natural resources has been challenged by migration trends, the increase in the agency of external actors and the aggressive extractive activities developed by companies (The Amazon Conservation Team, 2010). Most of these factors are challenging the governance structures of the territory and the management of its resources may be a consequence of the limitations that continually emerge due to the delay of the State of Suriname in recognizing the traditional property rights of the Saamaka people.



These changes have been reflected in the current organization of the territory and the dynamics that are occurring within the villages, as well as in the increase of conflicts. It is possible to affirm that the pressures mentioned above have a different influence throughout the watershed because of factors such as geographic location, the presence of external actors, infrastructure development and even, the



presence of more western organizational and belief systems. Seeing that the territory is so diverse, it is important that the way of approaching its problems is equally diverse. For this reason, three large subregions were defined that can be differentiated based on social, economic, natural, and cultural characteristics.



Map1. Variations in the Saamaka territory's governance

Northern region

A first region that goes from the northernmost limit of the territory to the area that now corresponds to the Brokopondo water reservoir. This region, for the most part, is the product of the transmigration



process. The village complex Brownsweg and villages/settlements like Marshallkreek and Koina kondre are found in this territory. This region has the majority of young and working population of the Saamaka community, since access to goods and services is easier than the rest of the territory, as well as the immediate economic retribution thanks to the labor supply dependent on gold mining and logging activities. This is the region with the largest amount of forest affected by extractive activities, as it is where most concessions -given by the Suriname State- granted for logging and gold mining activities are concentrated (Arets, et al., 2006).

This phenomenon directly affects the structure of traditional authorities who experience a greater opposition and numerous challenges related to their functions and the effectiveness of their management of the territory. This is due to the agency of external actors with great political and economic influence who exert pressures and take advantage of the vulnerable conditions of the Saamaka people influencing the decisions of its leaders, increasing cases of corruption and weaken bonds of trust. For this reason, the perception of new generations about traditional authorities and the management of the territory is not as positive as in other areas of the territory. The slowness in complying with the IACH (Inter American Commission on Human Rights) ruling deepens the feeling of uncertainty and skepticism in the population about the possible future for the community, breaking the relationship of trust with the traditional authorities and facilitating the influence of economical actors in decision-making.

Mid-watershed region

The second subregion comprises the transition zone from the lower limit of the Borokoondo water reservoir to the northern limit of the Langu region. It is the area where there are the largest settlements of the Saamaka community along the Upper Suriname River watershed and where governance systems begin to show greater evidence of change and weakening that have allowed the increase in sources of ecosystem degradation due to informal economies. Even though it does not present a level of presence of external actors as there is less logging activity and no evidence of gold mining compared to the northern region; still the economic, social, and environmental damages are critical. Every day there is a greater incursion of illegal extractive dynamics and cases of irregularity in the granting of permits for use in collective forests, because the number of community forest concessions has increased and this has promoted the increase in conflicts between villages; a clear example is the case of Nieuw Aurora, whose surrounding forest was granted in concession to Abenaston and now they have the access to use the resources on this area. It is in this region that the need for the officialization of territorial rights becomes more acute because despite being a territory with a large part of preserved forest, there are already sources of extraction of wood and the incursion of young and working population to these





activities increases over time.

The greatest challenge facing this area of the territory is the increase in the granting of community forest concessions which are made ignoring and neglecting the traditional organization of the territory and the governance system that the Saamaka community has had until the day of today. This has made the management of the territory more difficult, and the sources of forest degradation have increased, since the community feels unprotected and without tools to assert their rights when a concession is granted in their territories. At the same time, the conflicts that this generates among the people themselves make cohesion and collective work processes difficult, as well as limit the articulated work between the village leaders.

Southern Region

The southernmost region concentrated in the Langu district is the furthest from the Upper Suriname River watershed, and it is the one with the largest amount of less intervened and with the most presence of traditional governance system. The traditional authorities have a strong structure and an important agency in making decisions about the management and organization of the territory. It is the area where the dependence of the communities on the forest and the river is greater, and where their belief system maintains the harmonious relationship between people and ecosystems. However, although logging and gold mining activities do not currently represent a major issue as in the rest of the territory, this is the area that presents the greatest social challenges related to youth migration in search of access to education and economic sources in the northernmost regions and outside the Saamaka territory.

Due to the ecological characteristics of this area, it is possible to affirm that it is the one that has the greatest conservation potential and given the conditions of its population and its traditional governance system, it could be protected through community conservation mechanisms. All this with the aim of achieving positive results for the conservation of biological and cultural diversity.

Recommendations

Although the following recommendations are intended for the entire Saamaka region, we will make a distinction between those that we consider may work best for a specific area of the territory, according to the differentiation described in the context analysis.

- Effective compliance with the Inter-American Court of Human Rights - IACHR ruling (Inter-American Court of Human Rights, 2007): Legal recognition of the ancestral rights that the Saamaka people have over their territory and respect for their self-governance systems will not only benefit local communities but also the government of Suriname, by allowing local communities to use, organize and govern the territory according to its system of customs and traditions, will undoubtedly guarantee the protection of the ecosystems associated with it. This will better enable the Surinamese government to achieve the goals defined by international agreements, which seek to protect 30% of the planet's ecosystems by 2030 as a mechanism to



protect biodiversity and mitigate climate change.

- Visibility platforms: Potentiate the visibility and relationship of leading actors and organizations such as the VSG around the Saamaka population to strengthen bonds of trust, reinforcing their role as representatives of the collective voice. Strengthening the social capital of leaders and providing mechanisms that facilitate their access to different parts of the territory allowing them to coordinate their activities with specific local needs.
- Visibility of traditional knowledge: Articulate traditional knowledge related to the dynamics of use of natural resources in the territorial management proposals that will be defined for the future of the Saamaka community. People are the ones who have knowledge of the changes that their territory has experienced, for example, the rainy and dry seasons, the soils most suitable for planting, or the harvest seasons of non-timber forest products. Likewise, the knowledge that women have about the processing of fruits such as *maripa* for the extraction of oils rich in nutrients, the use of medicinal plants, and others. It is important to take this knowledge into account when proposing management alternatives, economic strengthening, and even new uses for the land.
- Strengthening of social and human capital: Promote professional, technical, and vocational training for the young Saamaka population that is focused on sustainable management of the territory. In addition, it is necessary to strengthen communication, leadership, and cohesion skills in this population, to encourage their presence and collective work in the territory.
- International cooperation: Call for the presence of international institutions that contribute to the process of building social and economic capital and function as supports for community processes to fulfill the objectives of conservation and sustainable management of the territory. With this it would be possible to increase the development of interdisciplinary scientific research that favors the production of knowledge that can be used to strengthen the community itself as well as it will allow the creation of a forest monitoring system that guarantees the surveillance of the dynamics of intervention of the vegetal coverage in the territory.

For the northern region:

- Articulation with institutional actors: Link private and institutional actors related to extractive activities such as logging and gold mining concerted participatory meetings with the community like a multi-stakeholder's platform in areas where they have an important agency, such as the Brownsweg complex, to build alliances and new management agreements that benefit the community. This because those activities have the most negative effects on the territory and at the same time are the ones which the community depends on the most nowadays.

For the middle-watershed region:

- Strengthening of the economic base: Promote the creation of economic alternatives such as nature-based tourism by enhancing social capital through training and access to knowledge about the natural richness of the region (for ex. diversity catalogs, strategic species, and bird watching), and developing infrastructure management by Saamaka people for this purpose. In addition, it is necessary to strengthen the value chains of products from the villages that can be marketed within the territory to contribute to food security and start the construction of a market network



that can facilitate economic autonomy of the territory in the future.

For the southern region:

- Biodiversity protection mechanisms: Low levels of environmental impacts currently are an opportunity of creating conservation alternatives based on the definition of areas with strict use guidelines, which guarantee the protection of the ecological and cultural values of the delimited areas. For this, it is possible to contemplate the participation of national and international institutions dedicated to the creation of protection figures such as protected areas or special use areas. A good alternative may be Indigenous peoples and community conserved territories and areas (ICCAs), which are areas declared under the jurisdiction of the local communities that have traditionally inhabited them, respecting their self-government mechanisms, and facilitating strengthening processes that allow them to achieve outcomes in terms of conservation of natural richness and cultural values.

Conclusions

The granting of territorial rights to the Saamaka people is not only a great step for the vindication of a community that has had a history characterized by vulnerability and the lack of guarantees to live autonomously on their own land. Also, it is a commitment to the conservation of the natural richness of a country like Suriname, dominated by the Amazon Forest, one of the ecosystems most affected by the economic dynamics of recent decades and one of the most strategic geographic areas for the conservation of global biodiversity and for climate change mitigation. The Saamaka territory is complex and addressing their needs and potentials requires a comprehensive vision that conceives the particularities of the context in each area of its extension. The urgency of the recognition of territorial rights shows the need for pertinent institutional support that reinforces potential aspects such as: (a) the visibility and recognition of traditional authorities; (b) the strengthening of social and human capital through access to education and training focused on the sustainable management of natural resources; (c) the promotion of community articulation and collective work, and the strengthening of leadership organizations that have come a long way in building a voice that proclaims a promising future for the Saamaka community and its territory.

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Suggested resource

