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Suriname Indigenous Women and Climate Change: Case study by Hariette Vreedzaam-Joeroeja and Ethel Jubithana

Communities involve are :

1. Galibi, a community at the border between Suriname and France Guyana. With approximately 800 inhabitant, this village is one of the largest Indigenous community. The oldest Indigenous women’ CBO (25 yrs) is in this community.
2. Konomerume, a community about 8 hrs from the capital city. It harbors about 500 inhabitant and a women CBO (22yrs)
3. Pierre kondre, a community about 2hrs drive from the capital city. Inhabitant about 25 household ( 70 persons).

Suriname and Climate Change : General information

The Republic of Suriname is geographically situated at the North -Eastern part of the continent South America. The land area is about 164,000 sq. km. Its boarder countries are Guyana, French Guyana and Brazil and in the North lies the Atlantic Ocean. Suriname is geographically and socio-politically part of the Amazon region but also socio-politically and economically part of the Caribbean basin. There are 16 different languages of which more than 5 indigenous language spoken in Suriname. The official language is Dutch.

The government and people of Suriname are aware of the fact that the natural systems of the country are vulnerable to many dramatic climate changes, in particular the humid tropical forests. The country is also aware of climate change and its related problems for human beings worldwide and that it too has responsibilities to contribute toward world society in mitigating the effects as result of changes in the climate. It has therefore committed itself through the ratification of the United Nations Conventions, to Combat Desertification (the UNCCD in 2000), on Biological Diversity (UNCBD in 1996) and the United Nations Framework on Climate Change (UNFCC) in 1997. The Kyoto Protocol was ratified in September 25th 2006.

Indigenous peoples and Climate Change : Occurrences,
Threats and impact.

Suriname is home to approximately 18000 Indigenous persons (census of 2005). Approximately 90 % lives in 50 autonomous communities in the interior and coastal area according to their own tradition, culture and collective way of life. Indigenous peoples distinctive way of life has contribute in sustaining the biological diversity in the Amazon region while the rainforest, savannahs and coastal forests have sustained them since time immemorial and for the most part remain their most important source of subsistence resources. This is widely recognized and accepted by GO’s, researchers and others.

Generally, Indigenous peoples are not too familiar with the term “climate change”. They, however are aware of periodically occurrences of changes in nature i.e. the changes in the climate, the periodically decrease and or abundance of food supply as fish and games are visible and perceptible.

Some dramatic occurrences in the past 20 years i.e. which was observed by the village chief of Christiaan Kondre - Galibi, a coastal village, was for instance that a couple of times the rainwater was very dirty.

When asked about Climate change and its impact on his life and the life of the people he governs, this is how he described the situation of his community: “Food certainty and food security in my and nearby communities are in jeopardy due to nature but mostly due to human – non-indigenous activities”.

The weather in the old days (before the sixties (60) for example was clearly defined in seasons namely dry and rainy seasons and the activities of the communities were planned accordingly. At present the weather is very unpredictable; the rainy seasons could start very late or very early and it could rain in such a way that it become very difficult to separate small/ mild rainy season from the heavy rainy season. This situation has its impact not only on daily activities of the communities but also on agriculture food production. For instance, the fixed period for arable farming, hunting and fishing is now not reliable. Due to the many rainfall the agriculture land/plots are not longer suitable while hunting and fishing seasons are in jeopardy.
Since the introduction of modern technology however, some things has changed for the better and some for the worse. The introduction of outboard motor, fishing nets and cooling system to keep the catch on ice, has contribute in the change of life and circumstances of the community. The villagers encounter poaching and stealing by their countrymen (non-indigenous persons) as well as by foreigners. These men are using that type of fishing net which catches also small-tiny fishes which cannot be sold. This fishing method has had not only huge impact on the availability year round of protein for Indigenous communities but also on the fish trade with other communities.

Since 2006, the village is suffering from loss of land at the Surinamese side of the river. Some indicator of the loss of land due to nature is the fact that the roots of coconut trees at the beach are standing high above the ground. Loss of land at certain areas where the sea turtles have their nests is also very visible. So far the villages have encounter flooding and gust of wind. One major change is the fact that till two or three years ago the waves at the beach were so loud that if you were standing at the beach you could not hear you own voice. Now the noise has disappeared and the waves has become silent.

In the old days one look at the stars and sky and listen to nature people understood what to expect the next day, the coming days and or the coming year. People could make proper planning. Now a days there is a need for empowerment of traditional knowledge and a cooperation between this knowledge and western science. Traditional knowledge is also loosing its stronghold with the younger generation and it seem like that nature is also mixed up.

**Indigenous women and Climate Change**

**Introduction**

A base element in a Surinamese Indigenous peoples household is the collectiveness of its existence. Although there are specifically male and female activities, husband and wife assist and support each other in performing their respective task and responsibilities. The phenomena “women headed household” as how it is know in Western society does not really exist in Indigenous communities. Women in approximately 12-
15% of the communities are organized in community based women organizations. These women do not only take part in women related programs but they are also involved in the overall social and economic development processes of their community. Women are part of traditional leadership. There is one community which is headed by a female leader.

We are thankful to Tamushi, our Creator for his blessings and protection. Our first encounter with major flooding was in 2006 which effected less than 10 Indigenous communities and less than 15 Moroon communities. But we believe that it will come to pass. We are also aware to be watchful with regard to government forest policy in relation to employment.

**Food security**

Food security is partly the husband and partly the wife’s responsibility. The husband will clear the plot and the wife will plant the needed crops, she will care for it, she will harvest and at the end provide food for her family. The agriculture method which is used by the Indigenous peoples is the age old traditional method of dry land method (no irrigation). This section of the paper will deal with ‘the effect of climate change on the manioc root’ one of the main staple in Indigenous peoples household.

Women in Galibi, Konomerume and Pierre kondre have experience the impact of changes in the climate as follows: “the root of the manioc crops from which cassava bread is produced becomes very dry when exposed to unlimited sun (this occurs due to climate change). To much sun causes the root to loss it juice and its natural starch which are mayor substance of this crop. As a consequence, processing of the root is not only very hard but during the process of baking the cassava the flower must be kept moist by adding water”. In the old days women would be very proud to maintain their manioc field weed free because a weed free manioc field will yield good crops. Now a days the weed at the stem of the manioc tree is used as a cover against unlimited sun exposure at the stem.

However, there are no solution for flooded field. After the flooding of 2006, the government was thinking about to relocate communities but this “suggestion” is not accepted by communities as a adaptive and mitigation solution.
The flooding of 2006 provided a forum for communities to talk about and to discuss the impact of CC not only but also discuss irrigation and other possibilities with regard to excess of water in the ground. The manioc crop is a highland crop so the excess of water will cause the crop to rot very fast. In the old days possible manioc crop field was chosen after carefully inspection of the area and soil during the rainy season. Now a days nothing is sure anymore.

This situation becomes a burden for households and uncertainty for women.

Sustainable Forest Management and Governance

Specific women’ role is the teaching of young women/girl when and how to harvest certain types of fruits and other forest bi-product. Some community, like the Kalina peoples, does not allow women to enter the forest or go near rivers and creeks or prepare food during their on-clean cycle-period.

Because it is a woman’ prerogative to choose where to grow crops, they are taught by their mothers and grandmothers how to choose plots for specific crops. They will use the plot max 3 years depending on what crops is cultivated and let it be for about 8-10 years so the forest can regenerate.

Spiritually speaking, if someone decide to open a field for crops or to use the forest, they have to consult the elders because the elders knows the forest and they certainly know if that plot is suitable for what purpose. This knowledge or “knowing” does not have to belong to a man it could also be with elder women who has used that part of the forest since she was young or she hold the knowing because of what she was taught by her parents. 

Advise from these persons are fundamental.

Voices of women does have a place within the community. Their voices reflects in the following :
- women are part of the traditional authority of the community;
- women as traditional mid-wives and healers
- community based women organizations.
All CBO’s are given opportunity to participate in the Village Leaders conference which takes place every five years. This is a collaborative mechanism where women and young people can and may voice whatever concerns they may have.

**Women’s Security**

Women everywhere are always vulnerable to all what comes from outside into the country or community. In the case of Indigenous communities, the impact from outside contact imposes more danger to women than gender inequality especially to those in communities where there is direct linkage with the outside world or economic activities like gold mining. Foreign goods and technology like mobile phone and nice cloths have created destructive needs in those communities.

There are few known domestic/gender violence and there are reports of prostitution which takes place in the interior in areas where there is gold mining. In the case of prostitution there could be also human (adult and under age) trafficking involved. The last (oral) report (6 mnds) tells about Indigenous women involvement in prostitution.

There is a known case of discrimination of Indigenous women in a community by a government representative. This person has tried to prevent the local Indigenous women organization to start market and selling their produce by claiming that the land where the marketplace was setup to be government land. The women organization in question had request and received permission from their traditional authority to use that area which is in Indigenous peoples territory for their activities. Being aware of their human rights, nothing could remove them from that place. They are now very successful in their economic and other activities.

In all community where there is a women CBO, efforts are made to educate women about their rights.

Although all the human rights instruments has been ratified by Suriname including CEDAW and Belem do Para and in 2007 voted in favor of the U.N.DRIP, Indigenous peoples basic human rights including collective human rights of the communities are not being recognized and or protected by law.
Land tenure and Security

The more than 50 autonomous communities are on the land they have inherent from their ancestors on which land these ancestors lived before them. The inheritance includes that the land collectively belonging to the communities. This means that the phenomena of individual land title and the trading thereof does not exist within Indigenous peoples culture.

The Indigenous peoples inherent the land from their ancestors on the basis and according to their centuries old tradition and culture. They therefore do not hold a European based title of these land.

Here lies the major conflict because law of the land does not recognize collectively land own by Indigenous communities. Surinamese constitution recognizes rights of the individual person only.

Agricultural plot of the household is at disposal of the wife. Even if there a separation between husband and wife, no one can or will try to hinder a women to harvest from her labor. A women can and will access land through or outside her husband providing that peace of land does not have a current user.

Important are the traditional laws of the communities which are the guidelines for young and old.

Needed Support for community in the coastal area

1. The people need to have early warning systems for the different regions and in the interior. Galibi, a coastal area community, need such a system which is to be fully operated by its own peoples. They need also support in training processes for the villagers in the operation and management of such a early warning system, in collecting data and in schooling the young generation;
2. There is a need for cooperation between government and local communities and to use traditional knowledge and western science as tools to combat and or reduce impact of climate change;
3. There is also the need to recognize the importance of Indigenous peoples traditional knowledge and for them to be involved and taking part in all activities with regard to their life and survival.
4. More over there a need to observe and record the changes that occurs where ever and when ever that takes place.

**Needed Support for women CBO’s**

1. strengthening of their organization,
2. awareness programs with regard to CC and its effect, research and documenting the different methods of practices related to CC and food availability.
3. exchange programs with other communities
4. recognition and protection of IP’s collective Human Rights

**Source**

1. Chief Pané is 56 years old. He is the president of the Association of Indigenous Village Leaders in Suriname (VIDS) and village chief of Christiaan kondre (Galibi) in the district of Marowijne. Galibi is a collective name for 2 communities next to each other namely Christiaan and Langaman kondre. Galibi is a coastal Indigenous village. Its main source of living comes from the Atlantic Ocean and the Marowijne river.
2. Mrs. Greta Pané. She is teacher by profession and member of the women CBO.
3. “Marowijne – our territory”. Traditional use and management of the lower Marowijne arear by the Kalina and Lokono. A Surinamese case study in the context of article 10(c) of the Convention on Biological Diversity, February 2006. By the Commission Land Right Lower Marowijne river (CLIM).
4. Ethel Jubithana, Chair women of Konomerume Indigenous women CBO,
5. Hariette Vreedzaam-Joeroeja, Chair person of Sanomaro Esa Foundation,