

# Improving the outcomes of community forests in Suriname

## *Recommendations for CSOs*



### Summary

- In Suriname, indigenous and Maroon communities can apply for a community forest permit, giving the communities the right to practice small-scale agriculture, collect non-timber forest products and harvest timber, both for subsistence and commercial purposes.
- Most permit-holders enter into a contract with a logging company, which then pays the community per cubic meter of extracted timber.
- Permits used to be awarded to the village leader as the representative of the community. Since 2008, the Ministry of Regional Development demands that a community-level committee participates in the application process.
- We consulted 10 Surinamese professionals representing civil society, academia and the government, and asked them about the outcomes of community forests, how the conditions for success can be improved, and the potential role of civil society organisations (CSOs). Additionally, focus group discussions were held in one indigenous and three Maroon communities.
- Regarding environmental outcomes, respondents stress that companies they are involved with are seldom following sustainable logging guidelines, and this leads to forest degradation and deforestation.
- The community-level livelihood benefits are considered to be minimal. Benefits tend to accrue to the village leader, who is often the person signing the contract with a company, without much involvement of other community members.
- CSOs need to lobby for new regulations to ensure that contracts with companies are transparent, and include benefit sharing mechanisms and requirements for sustainable logging practices. CSOs should also help strengthen the capacity of communities, so that they can choose between either entering into partnerships with third parties based on their own terms, or managing the community forests themselves.

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### Introduction

Globally, Suriname is the most forested country and has among the lowest annual deforestation rates (less than 0.1%). The government wants to keep it that way, and aims to maintain a national forest cover of 93%. The vast majority of the forest is located in the interior,

which is home to about 15% of the population—mostly indigenous peoples (4%) and Maroon tribes (11%). Since the publication of the Forest Law in September 1992, communities can apply for community forest permits, giving them the right to practice small-scale agriculture,

collect non-timber forest products and harvest timber, both for subsistence and commercial purposes. Permit-holders are also allowed to enter into contracts with commercial logging companies.

The community forest model grants a community with the rights of access, withdrawal, management, and exclusion, but it does not provide them with the right of alienation, so the community forest cannot be transferred to another village or legal entity. Although a community forest permit is usually issued for 10 years, it can be extended indefinitely, unless the community decides to withdraw.

Previously, community forest concessions (*houtkapvergunningen*) were issued in the name of the captain of a village. As from 2008, the Ministry of Regional Development changed this, and now all new community forest permits are issued in the name of a community-level committee. Existing *houtkapvergunningen* can be converted to community forest permits. Although the Surinamese government grants community forest permits, it does not recognise formal land tenure rights for indigenous and Maroon people. This occasionally causes conflicts when common timber harvesting concessions are issued in areas which the indigenous and the Maroon people consider theirs.

The process to acquire a community forest permit starts with the traditional authority submitting a formal request for a community forest permit. The request is dealt with by the Ministry of Spatial Planning, Land and Forest Management, with advice from the Ministry of Regional Development, the Department of Geology and Mining, the District Commissioner's office, and the Department of Public Domain. In case the advice is positive, the state surveyor drafts a map of the area in question, and the Minister can issue the permit. Communities are not obliged to develop a management plan in order to obtain a community forest permit. However, as from September 2019, the government's Foundation for Forest Management and Production Control (SBB), started requiring inventories and harvest plans, in case a community wants to use the forest for commercial timber harvesting. SBB has also set up the Sustainable Forestry Information System Suriname (SFISS), to improve monitoring.

There are currently 140 community forests in Suriname, covering an area of 797,238 hectares. In the majority of the current community forests, the community has entered into a formal agreement with a logging company. Each agreement requires approval from the Ministry of Regional Development. The company has to pay around US\$2,500. About a fifth of this amount goes to the community, and the rest is paid to the ministry. The agreement has a payment system based on the wood production of the contractor. The fee paid to the village ranges from US\$10 to US\$15 per cubic meter, and is transferred to the bank account of the community-level

committee. The bank account is managed by the captain and the committee. The captain and committee members receive an allowance of 5-20% of the income for logistics and administration. The rest is intended for community development projects, such as the construction of meeting buildings or guesthouses.

Until September 2019, communities with a community forest permit were indemnified from the guidelines and conditions that apply to common timber harvesting concessions. Enterprises that harvested from community forests thus had to comply with fewer/less stringent regulations than when harvesting from their own concessions, making their operations less costly. With the introduction of the SFISS, commercial logging operations in community forests are now obliged to follow the same regulations as in regular concessions.

## Approach

We conducted a review of the community forests in Suriname, to understand the extent to which they result in positive conservation and livelihood outcomes, and to identify the conditions for their success and ways in which Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) can help with achieving these. The review is based on literature, interviews with representatives of government bodies and CSOs, focus group discussions in four communities, and validation interviews with four representatives of government bodies and CSOs. Below we will highlight some of the results of the review, followed by the main recommendations for CSOs.

## Results

### Tenure security

We asked respondents to judge the effect of community forest permits on communities' tenure security, i.e., their ability to manage and make use of forest resources on a continuous basis, free from imposition, or interferences from outside sources. According to several respondents, the community forest model does not provide sufficient tenure security, primarily because the government is able to issue other permits or economic activities within community forest areas, such as mining. The Mining Law takes precedence over the Forest Law. This means that, if there are valuable ores in the soil, the government can withdraw the community forest permit to allow access for mining companies. In such a case, the community must be compensated with another area of the same size, but often this is not the case.

Respondents would also point at conflicts that may emerge when the government issues a community forest permit in an area that, according to local custom, falls within the land inherited by a family of another tribe. The establishment of a community forest may thus be considered an intrusion by another community. This can happen, because the determination of the borders

of the community forest does not occur in consultation with neighboring communities. The lack of criteria for processing of community forest requests, and delineating the area, makes the system weak and susceptible for arbitrary treatment and corruption. This creates problems, both within the communities (families, clans), as well as between communities.

### Community-level governance

The traditional authority in indigenous communities usually consists of a village leader (captain) and several leadership assistants (basja's). Traditional leadership in Maroon communities consists of village leaders and assistants, as well as clan elders and a paramount chief (Granman). Prior to 2008, the community forest concession (*houtkapvergunning*) was granted to the village leader, who served as the representative authority of the community. Community members were often not able to participate in decision-making regarding forest use, or share in its benefits, according to the respondents. A common perception is that the *houtkapvergunning* essentially handed down all management power to one person — the village leader. Since 2008, community forest permits are granted to a community-level committee, but many respondents argue that even today, it is the captain who has all the power, and benefits most from the logging contracts. This is because decisions regarding commercial exploitation by a logging company are often made by the village leader alone, without involvement of other members of the traditional authority, let alone other community members. In the opinion of respondents, this decision-making process is seldom transparent. According to local custom, the village leaders need to involve other members of the traditional authority in their decision making, but in practice they often fail to do so.

### Conservation and livelihood outcomes

The community forest model is strongly focused on timber extraction, while there is very little attention to other options, such as agroforestry, commercial exploitation of non-timber forest products, carbon credit schemes and nature-based tourism. Respondents agree that the focus on logging, in combination with a lack of stringent harvesting regulation and monitoring, has caused deterioration of the forest resources. Logging operations within community forests used to not have any harvesting guidelines and requirements that are meant for regular concessions (such as inventories and management plans). According to respondents, many community members feel that logging companies have been robbing them from the natural resources they inherited from their ancestors. There are, however, some community forests that have dedicated areas for conservation, following the tradition of indigenous and Maroon communities to designate certain forest areas as 'reserved for the Gods'.

With regard to the livelihood outcomes, respondents' opinions were divided. As positive outcomes, some

mentioned the construction of meeting buildings (paid for with a share of the revenues from logging enterprises), employment opportunities at logging companies for some villagers, and improved access through the construction of logging roads by companies. But according to many other respondents, the livelihood benefits have been limited, because most revenues flow to the logging companies. Communities are paid per cubic meters extracted from the forest, but transparency is limited, and community members themselves are not able to monitor how many logs the companies extract. According to respondents, community members see themselves as bystanders, rather than 'shareholders of a joint venture'.

### Barriers

The review identified the following barriers that hamper the conservation and livelihood outcomes of community forests.

- Communities fall prey to the commercial timber harvesting companies that offer payments in order to harvest timber based on rough estimates of commercial volumes in standing forests. In some cases, the community authority's motivation for requesting the community forest permit is based on this external persuasion and not on internal community development strategies.
- Village leaders have a weak negotiation position when dealing with third parties, being either logging companies or public servants who act as brokers for companies. This is because they tend to lack (western style) negotiation skills, detailed knowledge about their rights and the value of their resources, and experience. As a result, they are often not able to recognise the risks in the proposed agreements with third parties.
- Agreements between companies and communities do not contain detailed requirements (e.g., inventories, management plans, monitoring systems), safety standards and penalty clauses.
- Communities do not have the capacity to adequately monitor the way logging companies execute the agreement.
- Communities do not have the investment capital, knowledge or skills to engage in commercial logging practices themselves.

### Recommendations for CSOs

Representatives of CSOs who participated in the review agree that the community forest model will only generate conservation and livelihood benefits if the position of communities is strengthened. Empowered communities should be able to choose between either managing the community forests themselves, or entering into partnerships with third parties based on their own terms. In both cases, it should lead to actual benefits for the community as a whole, rather than profits for a few. To achieve this, CSOs

will need to engage in hands-on support at the village level, as well as in lobby and advocacy efforts aimed at the Surinamese government.

### Hands-on support

- Support traditional authorities to discuss the objectives, and potential risks and benefits of community forest permits and logging contracts with the wider community.
  - Increase community-level access to information and skills to engage in negotiations with third parties (e.g., in terms of benefit-sharing, quota for local employment opportunities, and corporate social responsibility benefits) and control logging activities. This should also involve training on SFISS, so that villagers learn how to monitor third parties' activities in their forests.
  - Increase community-level access to information, tools, facilities, and financing, so that communities can develop sustainable forest management businesses themselves, including timber harvesting, but also other options, such as non-timber forest product trade, carbon credit schemes, and nature based tourism.
  - Support communities with Community Development Plans to determine the priorities that will be funded with revenues coming from exploitation of the community forest.
  - Work with forest enterprises to help them with adhering to standards for dealing with communities, and developing fairer benefit-sharing mechanisms.
- » The development of a community forest management plan.
  - » The legal recognition of traditional structures and of land-tenure rights.
  - » Inclusion of different clans and neighboring communities in determining the appropriate and accepted location and boundaries of the community forest.
  - » Zoning of the (intended) community forest, based on traditional criteria for use and conservation.
- Revise the Forest Law, as well as the Mining Law, to stipulate the requirement of comprehensive community consultations prior to issuance of mining and timber concessions.
  - Clearer definitions of requirements, roles and responsibilities in standard agreements and contracts, in favour of transparency and accountability.
  - Develop a robust programme of assistance for communities that receive a community forest permit, based on a consultation and engagement process to determine the conditions under which a third party could exploit forest resources.

### Lobby and advocacy

The Surinamese government is currently in the process of reviewing and adapting the existing community forest model. CSOs should make use of this opportunity and engage in lobby and advocacy, aiming to:

- Make the process for issuance of community forest permits more transparent, with clear conditions and criteria for:
  - » The size of the area and the objectives for use, including non-timber forest products and recreational use.

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