

# **Indigenous perspectives for a just transformation of the mining sector**

**Johanne Hanko Dr.-Eng.**

RINA Consulting Inc.

Email. [Johanne.hanko@rina.org](mailto:Johanne.hanko@rina.org)

## **Abstract**

*This paper examines the importance of Indigenous perspectives for achieving a just transformation of the mining sector in Suriname. It utilizes a Strategic Environmental and Social Assessment (SESA) of the mining sector in Suriname to highlight the environmental and social impacts on Indigenous and tribal (IP) communities. It analyzes the shortcomings of the current regulatory framework regarding Indigenous land rights and public consultation mechanisms. The methodology adopted during the SESA, which incorporated culturally appropriate consultations with IP representatives through the Krutu model, is presented as a best practice. It recommends legal and policy reforms to recognize Indigenous land rights, implement Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC), and strengthen public consultation mechanisms.*

*Keywords: Indigenous rights, Suriname, mining, public consultation, FPIC, SESA, Krutu model*

## **Introduction**

Public consultation and stakeholder engagement are essential for promoting sustainable development, particularly in projects impacting Indigenous and tribal communities (IP communities). In Suriname, a Strategic Environmental and Social Assessment (SESA) of the mining sector identified critical gaps in regulations regarding land rights, public consultation mechanisms, and institutional capacity. Suriname is a heavily forested country with 94% of its land (163,820 sq km) covered by trees. Its population is estimated at 600,000 (2022) and includes Indigenous peoples of Amerindian descent (3-4%), and tribal populations of African descent (17-20%), henceforth jointly referred to as IPs.

The study highlighted the potential environmental and social consequences of mining on IP communities, whose traditional way of life is directly or indirectly affected by mining activities. Conclusions confirmed that recognizing IP participation in decision-making processes is fundamental for achieving a just transformation of the mining sector in Suriname.

## **Development of the SESA**

The SESA developed in Suriname represents a participatory tool designed to integrate environmental and social considerations directly into policy, planning, and programmatic frameworks for the mining sector. This approach fosters informed decision-making and reform within the industry.

Commissioned by the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) and financed by the World Bank, RINA Consulting Inc. carried out the 18-month SESA process. Central to the SESA's success was the active participation of stakeholders, especially IPs. Their continuous feedback served as a crucial guide throughout the consultation period. The SESA is to help ensure that mining development will proceed sustainably, in accordance with best international environmental and social practices and standards.

The significance of IP involvement in the SESA cannot be overstated. IPs are present throughout Suriname, their lives deeply interwoven with the environment. Their profound understanding of ecological dynamics and traditional resource management practices hold immense value. Furthermore, IPs possess a unique worldview, recognizing themselves as interconnected with all life forms within these biodiverse ecosystems. They have their own established leadership structures, with tribe chiefs (Granman) and village captains who play vital roles within their communities; they have yet to be legally recognized.

## **IP Consultation in Suriname**

To ensure comprehensive and inclusive data collection, the SESA implemented a multifaceted consultation strategy that ensured the inclusion of IPs in Suriname. It is important to understand that Indigenous and tribal maroon people are involved differently in the mining sector. Indigenous peoples live off the land through hunting, fishing, and gathering while providing various goods and services to the miners and the mining companies. They may be directly

or indirectly affected as mining activities often occur on their land. Maroon peoples are directly involved in mining activities, employed by mining companies or working as Artisanal Small-Scale miners (ASM).

The SESA consultations with IP representatives relied on the Krutu model, a culturally appropriate process utilized locally. The Krutu is a traditional gathering of the IPs in Suriname, which involves gathering community members to discuss and resolve issues affecting their community for communal decision-making and conflict-resolution. It facilitates culturally appropriate information exchange and ensures that the voices of IP community members are being heard.

For Indigenous communities, representatives from three of the five major groups – the Wayana, Lokono, and Kaliña peoples, directly participated in the SESA consultations. Additionally, consultations were held with the Association of Traditional Indigenous Leaders (VIDS), an organization representing all Indigenous communities in Suriname. This approach ensured the capture of a broad range of perspectives. The SESA's engagement efforts reached a significant portion of the Indigenous population. Eight individuals served as direct representatives from the communities, while an estimated 3,788 Indigenous persons were indirectly engaged. Dissemination of information through the Indigenous VIDS' network has the potential to have indirectly reached all 20,344 Indigenous peoples in Suriname.

Similarly, Maroon communities were included in the consultation process. Four Maroon tribes – Okanisi, Matawai, Paramaka, and Saramaka – were chosen due to their proximity to mining activities and their involvement in the sector. Consultations were also held with the Association of Saramacca Traditional Leaders (VSG), the representative body for Maroon communities. The SESA directly engaged with 85 Maroon representatives. An estimated 15,090 Maroons were indirectly reached through information dissemination efforts, with the potential to have indirectly reached the entire Maroon population of Suriname, estimated at 25,000 individuals, through VSG's network.

The other smaller IP communities not directly or indirectly involved in mining activities and who said not having interest in the study were not consulted.

### **Environmental and social impacts of mining on IP communities**

The SESA of Suriname's mining sector revealed a range of environmental and social (E&S) impacts associated with mining activities, particularly for IPs residing in resource-rich territories. The following shows both the negative and positive consequences identified by the research, and specific issues raised by the IP communities.

#### *Negative Impacts:*

- **Land Displacement and Loss:** Mining can lead to the displacement of IPs from their traditional territories, disrupting their way of life and access to land used for agriculture, hunting, and gathering.
- **Environmental Degradation:** Deforestation, soil erosion, and habitat destruction occur during mine construction activities such as land clearing, tree cutting, road building, and establishment of tailing ponds. This results in biodiversity loss and depletion of natural resources.
- **Water Contamination:** Mercury, heavy metals, cyanide, and acids used in the mining process can contaminate water sources. This poses significant health, social and economic impacts for IPs who rely on these waterways for drinking, cooking, and fishing. Fear of contamination forces them to alter their traditional fish consumption patterns and may impact their economy affected by the difficulty of selling fish as an income generating activity.
- **Air Pollution:** Open-pit mining and blasting operations contribute to air pollution, negatively impacting respiratory health within IP communities.
- **Health Risks:** Exposure to mercury, lead, arsenic, and cyanide used in mining can lead to neurological disorders, respiratory illnesses, reproductive health problems, and increased cancer rates.
- **Cultural Impacts:** Sacred IP sites and traditional knowledge systems can be disrupted or destroyed by mining activities.

### *Positive Impacts:*

- **Infrastructure Development:** Mining projects may lead to the development of infrastructure such as roads, electricity, water supply and sanitation systems, telecommunications networks, and internet access in IP communities.
- **Improved Social Services:** Increased government revenue from mining can potentially translate into improved social services like schools and healthcare facilities in IP communities.
- **Benefit Sharing:** IP communities expect to receive compensation or benefits from mining companies that operate on their traditional territories.

### **Broader issues to be considered**

The SESA also identified indirect environmental and social impacts on IP communities:

- **Economic Shifts:** Mining can bring about both positive and negative economic changes for IPs. Inflation, changes in employment opportunities (both creation and loss), and the potential decline of traditional livelihoods are all possibilities.
- **Social Disruption:** An influx of migrant workers, contractors, and personnel associated with mining projects can disrupt the social fabric of IP communities.
- **Cultural Change:** Exposure to new technologies, languages, customs, and social norms can lead to cultural shifts within IP communities.
- **Land Tenure Issues:** Unresolved land tenure issues and lack of recognition of IP land rights can lead to legal disputes and social unrest.
- **Gender Dynamics:** Traditional gender roles can be altered with the introduction of mining activities. New types of services, including prostitution, may emerge, while women may seek employment opportunities in the mining sector.
- **Environmental Migration:** Loss of fertile land for agriculture and disruptions to hunting and fishing grounds due to mining activities can force IPs to migrate, impacting their traditional way of life.
- **Health Impacts:** Contaminated water and fish due to mercury used in mining can lead to changes in diet and pose health risks for IP communities.

### **IP perspectives in public consultation and impact assessments**

Various factors make the recognition and engagement of IP communities instrumental for public consultation and environmental impacts. Effective impact assessments for mining projects hinge on recognizing and engaging IP communities and understanding their perspective.

IPs offer a wealth of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) about their environment such as biodiversity, ecosystem functions and resource management practices. Integrating TEK into impact assessments improves accuracy and allows for project designs to minimize environmental and social disruptions.

Moreover, meaningful engagement with IPs ensures their concerns are heard and respected. This includes protecting cultural sites and sacred areas and minimizing disruptions to their traditional way of life. Open and transparent communication builds trust and strengthens the legitimacy of the entire process.

Obtaining Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) from IPs and respecting IP land rights are fundamental ethical requirements and should be included in the legislation. This not only upholds community rights but reduces conflicts and promotes sustainable development in the long term while respecting cultural heritage and autonomy. Addressing potential conflicts early in the consultation process helps prevent disputes between mining companies and IP communities, contributing to the overall sustainability of mining operations. Overall, long-term sustainability can be achieved by engaging IP communities in a process that fosters a collaborative approach to sustainable mining development as to minimize environmental harm, protect biodiversity, and support community well-being.

## Critical gaps identified

The SESA of Suriname's mining sector revealed critical gaps during the process.

- Suriname's current legislation lacks explicit recognition of Indigenous and tribal land rights, which jeopardizes the legal protection ensured by documented land titles.
- Suriname is one of the few countries in the Americas that has not ratified the ILO Convention 169.
- FPIC is not yet regulated; therefore, communities often face situations where mining projects are initiated without their prior knowledge and/or consent.
- Public consultation is not compulsory in Suriname.
- Resettlement has yet to be regulated.
- Government officers need to strengthen their capacity to better manage projects and IP participation.

## Conclusion

Suriname's mining sector presents a complex challenge. While it offers potential economic benefits, the SESA study warns of environmental and social risks to IPs living in these areas. To ensure a sustainable approach, the study emphasizes the need for improved practices that minimize negative impacts on IPs. This requires true collaboration, moving beyond simple acknowledgement to actively engage IPs throughout the entire mining process. This can empower their communities by respecting traditional governance and incorporating customary law into decision-making that directly affects their lives and land.

Sustainable development of the mining sector hinges on robust legal frameworks and adherence to international standards. Meaningful consultation with IP communities throughout the project cycle, from exploration to mine closure, is essential. This collaborative approach fosters trust, facilitates conflict resolution, and empowers communities to hold mining companies accountable for environmental and social impacts.

The SESA underscores the value of synergizing traditional ecological knowledge with modern development practices. IPs possess a deep understanding of their territories' ecosystems and sustainable resource management practices. Integrating this into project design and impact assessments can significantly enhance the effectiveness of mitigation measures aimed at safeguarding environmental and local resources.

Holistic approaches that integrate community engagement, participatory decision-making, and respect for Indigenous rights, land, and knowledge systems promote balance between environmental protection, social justice, and equitable social distribution of benefits to local communities. The incorporation of Indigenous perspectives into decision-making processes and impact assessments is fundamental to paving the way for a future where development and environmental preservation coexist in harmony with the well-being of Indigenous Peoples, and to ensuring a just transformation of the mining sector.

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