

Indigenous perspectives for a just transformation of the mining sector

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of Indigenous perspectives in achieving a just transformation of Suriname's mining sector. It utilizes a Strategic Environmental and Social Assessment (SESA) focused on the mining sector to underscore its environmental and social impacts on Indigenous and tribal communities. The analysis identifies shortcomings in the current regulatory framework concerning Indigenous land rights and public consultation mechanisms. The study highlights the SESA methodology, which integrates culturally appropriate consultations with Indigenous and tribal representatives using the Krutu model. It recommends legal and policy reforms aimed at acknowledging Indigenous land rights, implementing Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) protocols, and enhancing public participation. The findings underscore that integrating Indigenous and tribal peoples into decision-making processes is essential for achieving a just transformation.

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

Introduction

Public consultation and stakeholder engagement are critical for promoting sustainable development, especially in projects impacting Indigenous and tribal communities. In Suriname, a Strategic Environmental and Social Assessment (SESA) of the mining sector revealed critical gaps in regulations concerning land rights, public consultation mechanisms, and institutional capacity. Suriname characterized by dense forests covering 94% of its land (163,820 sq km), has a population estimated at 600,000 (2022), including Indigenous peoples of Amerindian descent (3-4%) and tribal populations of African descent (17-20%), collectively referred to as Indigenous and tribal peoples.

The study underscored the potential environmental and social impacts of mining on these communities, whose traditional way of life is directly or indirectly affected by mining activities. The findings emphasize that recognizing the participation of Indigenous and tribal peoples in decision-making processes is crucial for achieving a just transformation of Suriname's mining sector.

Development of the SESA

The SESA developed in Suriname served as a participatory tool aimed at integrating environmental and social considerations directly into policy, planning, and programmatic frameworks within the mining sector. This approach facilitates informed decision-making and fosters industry reform.

Conducted over an 18-month period by RINA Consulting Inc., commissioned by the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) and financed by the World Bank, the SESA process was pivotal. Key to its success was the active engagement of stakeholders, particularly Indigenous and tribal peoples, whose ongoing feedback provided essential guidance throughout the consultation phase. The SESA aims to ensure that future mining development proceeds sustainably, adhering to the highest international environmental and social standards and practices.

The involvement of Indigenous and tribal peoples in the SESA was of paramount importance. Indigenous and tribal communities are integral to Suriname, deeply intertwined with the environment. Their profound knowledge of ecological dynamics and traditional resource management practices is invaluable. Moreover, they possess a unique worldview that recognizes their interconnectedness with all life forms in these biodiverse ecosystems. Despite this, their established leadership structures, including tribe chiefs (Granman) and village captains, have yet to receive formal legal recognition.

Indigenous and tribal peoples' Consultation in Suriname

To ensure thorough and inclusive data collection, the SESA in Suriname implemented a multifaceted consultation strategy that prioritized the participation of Indigenous and tribal peoples. It is crucial to recognize the distinct roles of these groups within the mining sector. Indigenous peoples primarily sustain themselves through traditional practices such as hunting, fishing, and gathering, while also providing goods and services to miners and mining companies. They experience direct or indirect impacts from mining activities often conducted on their lands. In contrast, Maroon peoples are directly engaged in mining as employees of mining companies or as participants in Artisanal Small-Scale mining (ASM).

The SESA consultations with Indigenous and tribal representatives utilized the Krutu model, a culturally appropriate process deeply rooted in local traditions. The Krutu involves community members gathering to discuss and debate issues affecting their communities, make communal decisions, and resolve conflicts. This approach ensures that information exchanges are culturally appropriate and that the voices of all community members are heard.

Representatives from three of the five Indigenous populations—Wayana, Lokono, and Kaliña—directly participated in the SESA consultations. Additionally, consultations were conducted with the Association of Traditional Indigenous Leaders (VIDS), representing all Indigenous communities in Suriname. This comprehensive approach ensured a diverse range of perspectives were captured. Eight individuals served as direct community representatives, with an estimated 3,788 Indigenous individuals indirectly engaged. Through the Indigenous VIDS network, information dissemination efforts potentially reached all 20,344 Indigenous peoples in Suriname.

Similarly, Maroon communities were actively included in the consultation process. Four of the six Maroon tribes—Okaniisi, Matawai, Paramaka, and Saramaka—were selected due to their proximity to mining activities and their direct involvement in the sector. Consultations also involved the Association of Saramacca Traditional Leaders (VSG), representing Maroon communities. The SESA engaged directly with 85 Maroon representatives, reaching an estimated 15,090 individuals indirectly through information dissemination efforts. This approach potentially reached the entire Maroon population in Suriname, estimated at 25,000 individuals, through the VSG network.

Notably, two smaller Indigenous and tribal communities were not consulted due to their lack of direct or indirect involvement in mining activities and their expressed disinterest in the study

Environmental and social impacts of mining on Indigenous and tribal communities

The SESA conducted on Suriname's mining sector revealed a range of environmental and social impacts associated with mining activities, particularly affecting Indigenous and tribal peoples residing in resource-rich territories. The following presents a review and summary of the findings:

Negative Impacts:

- **Land Displacement and Loss:** Mining operations can displace Indigenous and tribal peoples from their traditional territories, disrupting their livelihoods and access to lands used for agriculture, hunting, and gathering.
- **Environmental Degradation:** Activities like land clearing, tree cutting, road construction, and establishment of tailing ponds lead to deforestation, soil erosion, and habitat destruction. This results in biodiversity loss and depletion of natural resources.
- **Water Contamination:** The use of chemicals such as mercury, heavy metals, cyanide, and acids in mining processes can contaminate water sources. This contamination poses significant health, and social risks to Indigenous and tribal communities that rely on these waterways for drinking, cooking, and fishing. It can also impact their economy by making it increasingly challenging to sell fish.
- **Air Pollution:** Operations like open-pit mining and blasting contribute to air pollution, adversely affecting respiratory health within Indigenous and tribal communities.
- **Health Risks:** Exposure to hazardous substances used in mining, such as mercury, lead, arsenic, and cyanide, can lead to various health issues including neurological disorders, respiratory illnesses, reproductive health problems, and increased cancer rates.
- **Cultural Impacts:** Mining activities can disrupt or destroy sacred Indigenous and tribal sites and traditional knowledge systems, undermining cultural heritage and identity.

Positive Impacts

- **Infrastructure Development:** Mining projects may spur the development of essential infrastructure such as roads, electricity, water supply, sanitation systems, telecommunications networks, and internet access in Indigenous and tribal communities.
- **Improved Social Services:** Increased government revenue from mining activities has the potential to enhance social services such as schools and healthcare facilities in Indigenous and tribal communities.
- **Benefit Sharing:** Indigenous and tribal communities expect compensation or benefits from mining companies operating on their traditional

Broader issues to be considered

The SESA identified a range of indirect environmental and social impacts on Indigenous and tribal communities, highlighting broader considerations:

- **Economic Shifts:** Mining activities can bring both positive and negative economic changes to Indigenous and tribal peoples. These include inflation, fluctuations in employment opportunities (both creation and loss), and potential disruptions to traditional livelihoods.
- **Social Disruption:** The influx of migrant workers, contractors, and project personnel associated with mining projects can disrupt the social cohesion and traditional dynamics within Indigenous and tribal communities.
- **Cultural Change:** Exposure to new technologies, languages, customs, and social norms introduced by mining activities may lead to cultural shifts among Indigenous and tribal communities.
- **Land Tenure Issues:** Unresolved land tenure issues and the lack of recognition of Indigenous and tribal land rights can result in legal disputes and social unrest.
- **Gender Dynamics:** The introduction of mining activities can alter traditional gender roles. It may lead to the emergence of new services, including forms of exploitation such as prostitution, while also potentially offering new employment opportunities for women in the mining sector.
- **Environmental Migration:** Mining activities that disrupt fertile lands used for agriculture and hunting and fishing grounds can compel Indigenous and tribal peoples to migrate, impacting their traditional way of life and social structures.
- **Health Impacts:** Contamination of water sources and fish due to mining-related pollutants such as mercury can necessitate dietary changes and pose health risks to Indigenous and tribal communities.

Indigenous and tribal peoples' perspectives in public consultation and impact assessments

Recognition and engagement of Indigenous and tribal communities are pivotal for effective public consultation and environmental impact assessments in mining projects. These communities possess rich Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) encompassing biodiversity, ecosystem functions, and resource management practices. Integrating TEK into impact assessments enhances accuracy and enables project designs that mitigate environmental and social disruptions.

Furthermore, meaningful engagement ensures that Indigenous and tribal concerns are heard and respected. This includes safeguarding cultural sites and sacred areas and minimizing impacts on their traditional way of life. Open and transparent communication fosters trust and bolsters the legitimacy of the entire consultation process.

Securing Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) from Indigenous and tribal peoples, alongside respecting their land rights, is ethically imperative and should be enshrined in legislation. This not only upholds community rights but also reduces conflicts and promotes long-term sustainable development while respecting cultural heritage and autonomy. Addressing potential conflicts early in the consultation phase helps prevent disputes between mining companies and Indigenous and tribal communities, thereby enhancing the overall sustainability of mining operations.

Critical gaps identified

The SESA conducted on Suriname's mining sector identified critical gaps in the current regulatory framework:

- Suriname's legislation does not explicitly recognize Indigenous and tribal authorities and their land rights, undermining the legal protection afforded by documented land titles.
- Suriname remains one of the few countries in the Americas that has not ratified the ILO Convention 169, which sets international standards for Indigenous and tribal rights.
- Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) is not yet regulated, leading to instances where mining projects commence without community knowledge or consent.
- Public consultation is not mandatory in Suriname, potentially excluding communities from decision-making processes.
- Resettlement policies are not yet formalized, posing risks to affected communities during project implementation.

- There is a need for government officials to enhance their capacity in project management and in effectively engaging Indigenous and tribal communities.

Addressing these gaps is essential to ensure that mining activities in Suriname respect Indigenous and tribal rights, foster sustainable development, and minimize social and environmental impacts.

Conclusion

Suriname's mining sector presents a multifaceted challenge, balancing potential economic benefits with significant environmental and social risks for Indigenous and tribal peoples residing in these regions. The SESA study underscores the importance of adopting practices that minimize adverse impacts and promote sustainable development.

To achieve this, the study advocates for genuine collaboration that goes beyond mere acknowledgment of Indigenous and tribal communities. It emphasizes active engagement throughout the mining lifecycle, empowering these communities while honoring traditional governance and integrating customary law into decision-making processes affecting their land and livelihoods.

Central to sustainable development in mining is the establishment of robust legal frameworks aligned with international standards. Meaningful consultation with Indigenous and tribal communities from exploration to mine closure is critical. This approach builds trust, facilitates conflict resolution, and ensures mining companies are held accountable for environmental and social responsibilities.

The SESA highlights the value of combining traditional ecological knowledge with modern development practices. Indigenous and tribal peoples possess profound insights into local ecosystems and sustainable resource management. Integrating this knowledge into project planning and impact assessments enhances the effectiveness of mitigation measures aimed at protecting environmental and community resources.

Adopting holistic approaches that integrate community engagement, participatory decision-making, and respect for Indigenous rights and knowledge systems fosters a balance between environmental conservation, social justice, and equitable distribution of benefits. Incorporating Indigenous and tribal perspectives into decision-making processes and impact assessments is pivotal for fostering a future where development harmonizes with environmental preservation and the well-being of Indigenous Peoples, thereby ensuring a just transformation of the mining sector.

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