

THE ASSOCIATION OF INDIGENOUS VILLAGE LEADERS (VIDS): ENSURING COMMUNITY VOICES INFLUENCE NATIONAL POLICY IN SURINAME

A LOCAL TO NATIONAL POLICY-LEVEL INITIATIVE
GENDER & REDD+ CASE STUDY SERIES

VID'S Mission:

VIDS' goals and objectives are to promote and defend the rights of indigenous peoples, to speak for indigenous peoples at the national and international level and to support sustainable development in Suriname.



INTRODUCTION:

Forests, which comprise a total of four billion hectares of land cover worldwide, are one of nature's greatest assets—while, at the same time, effective and sustainable forest managements poses one of the global community's biggest challenges. Forests have the ability to absorb carbon dioxide (CO₂), a potent greenhouse gas and primary component of anthropogenic emissions, and act as carbon sinks. However, when forests are destroyed, they release CO₂ into the atmosphere, contributing to climate change. Forest loss produces 12-15% of total annual greenhouse gas emissions, which is why it is essential that forest management be integrated into effective climate change solutions.

REDD+, which stands for Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation plus conservation, sustainable management of forests, and enhancement of forest carbon stocks, is a framework that seeks to provide financial incentives for developing countries that are making those reductions and conserving forests. The ultimate aim of REDD+ is to foster sustainable forest management, which is not only a smart economic decision, but a smart decision for the environment and the people who depend on it.

Women from forest-dependent communities—communities that are often among the poorest—play an integral role in the management of forests, yet are frequently sidelined in decision-making processes and leadership roles. This exclusion is detrimental, as gender equality is essential for undertaking sustainable forest governance and achieving the goals of REDD+. In order for REDD+ to become a successful mechanism to combat climate change, and in order for it to provide concrete environmental solutions, gender-responsive standards and safeguards that incorporate gender equality and women's rights must be at the core of REDD+ policies and programmes.

Integrating gender considerations into REDD+ policy, planning, and implementation is a key issue for numerous countries. Leveraging learning and knowledge sharing for gender and REDD+ is essential in moving toward harmonized policy reform across relevant sectors, including natural resource management, climate change adaptation and mitigation, land use and tenure reform, and benefit sharing. This case study identifies and consolidates existing tools and best practices for greater access and applicability in mainstreaming gender considerations into REDD+.

WHY GENDER MATTERS IN REDD+:

Every day in their roles as farmers, foresters, fishers, caretakers, and household providers, women use and manage natural resources. Women have unique experiences and knowledge with respect to their environments and offer important perspectives in natural resources governance. Specifically, women and men from rural communities often have differentiated knowledge of forest resources and diverse roles in its management. Given their responsibility for meeting food, water and energy needs for the household, depletion of forest resources especially increases burdens on women. Not only does women's equitable participation and representation in REDD+ uphold commitments to women's empowerment and gender equality, it also makes for better development, more effective and efficient climate change solutions, and stronger sustainability and livelihood outcomes.

FORESTS IN SURINAME:

Suriname is a small country on the northeastern coast of South America known for its high forest cover and low rate of deforestation. About 90% of Suriname's land is covered by forests and more than two million hectares is formally protected, while between four and five million hectares has been designated as production forest. Forests are extremely important for livelihoods in Suriname. Indigenous peoples, especially women, depend on forests for shifting cultivation, fishing and game. Even when communities have other income generating activities, women still tend to the family's forest plots, fish and gather non-timber forest products, and men still hunt. Other income generating activities though are often time- and season-sensitive, and not as culturally acceptable as historically traditional livelihood practices.

“One of the upper chiefs used to say: ‘our forest is our supermarket, our butcher and our construction shop, our pharmacy and so on. We use it and we protect it so that many next generations can also use it that way’.”
– Marie-Josée Artist, VIDS Community Development Specialist

VIDS BACKGROUND:

The Association of Indigenous Village Leaders (Vereniging van Inheemse Dorpshoofden in Suriname – “VIDS”) is an association of indigenous village leaders from every indigenous village in Suriname. VIDS was established by village leaders in 1992 and its goals and objectives are to promote and defend the rights of indigenous peoples, to speak for indigenous peoples at the national and international levels, and to support sustainable development in Suriname. VIDS has taken a leading role in promoting indigenous rights, sustainable development and environmental protection in Suriname. It believes that all three are interrelated and must be supported and monitored.

In 2002, VIDS established an office, “VIDS Bureau,” with a team of technical staff so that it can serve as a focal point of operations, including serving as a communications hub between villages. Because VIDS is an organization of community leaders, most information about policy and projects goes from the office to the communities (and vice versa) through chiefs. In addition, VIDS maintains contact with various community organizations, including youth and women's groups. VIDS plays a coordinating role and focuses on programmes, projects and activities that have national importance, are involved in policy at various levels, or are intended to make projects easier to carry out by the individual villages or organisations.

In VIDS' Multi-Annual Strategic Programmes, indigenous women's rights have been included in most aspects of the objectives and strategies, and also focuses on indigenous women's inclusion in decision making, particularly related to strengthening their rights, participation in national policy- and decision-making, and bolstering their socio-economic position. Women in indigenous communities also participated in trainings and workshops on human rights, indigenous peoples' rights, women's rights and micro-enterprise development. They learned to implement community-based and market research, depending on which economic activities they were interested in pursuing and participating in, such as processing food products from raw agricultural harvests and crafts.

In 2004, the first female village chief was appointed by her community. To date, VIDS recognize 10 female village leaders out of 52.



CURRENT STATUS OF REDD+ IN SURINAME:

Suriname is in the early phases of its implementation of REDD+ readiness activities. In 2013, Suriname's Readiness Preparation Proposal (R-PP) document was approved and in 2014 the Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF) accepted Suriname's project document titled "Strengthening national capacities of Suriname for the elaboration of the national REDD+ strategy and the design of its implementation framework". Today, the government of Suriname, in collaboration with its delivery partner, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and other partners, are in the process of implementing these plans. The majority of Suriname's technical REDD+ preparation proposal, in its early stage, has taken place at the national level, leaving unaddressed gaps at the local level that VIDS is now attempting to address by taking part in the major groups collective—a platform for all sectors of the society to which each sector may delegate one person to participate in the REDD + Project Board. Also in the project budget, resources have been allocated for indigenous peoples—as a result, VIDS will work on capacity building of the Government of Suriname in relation to rights of indigenous peoples.

While Suriname is at nascent stages in developing REDD+ projects—communities are beginning to engage and ensure that their perspectives are heard and influence the national process. VIDS has been conducting trainings and other awareness-raising initiatives, as well as developing a process to bring local voices to national decision making. Striking a balance between potential income generation and environmental conservation related to REDD+ is one key issue from community-level, as well as strengthening traditional forestry and land use management, which is also linked to REDD+ related conservation

VIDS chose to utilize REDD+ as a planning instrument rather than a financial instrument, as indigenous peoples traditionally have cared for and sustained their environment and it is not natural for them to put a price tag on keeping forests healthy and intact. Instead, VIDS built programs to empower women and educate youth, thus strengthening their communities. Specifically, the VIDS "Plan for the Future" (Good Life – Buen Vivir) is a program in which facilitators will guide, inform, and help communities strategize natural resource management so they can make their own choices and reach a future that they themselves want. For many, this is a future that is not imposed by the government, global mechanisms or initiatives.

Strategies employed:

- Conducting community-based research by villagers, on-the-ground trainings, and awareness-raising initiatives to strengthen understanding, engagement and influence of communities at different governance levels
- Developing community-based research, exchange visits and long-term community vision planning that are participatory, bottom-up, and culturally- and gender-sensitive
- Complementarily undertaking initiatives and processes at community and national levels based on the outcomes of studies and the community vision in order to initiate activities and implement of range of activities to reach goals
- Bolstering gender- and youth policy, especially to develop a framework for engaging "change agents"
- Strengthening community-based women organizations so they are able to implement autonomous projects
- Aiming for long-term commitment of funders for sustainable initiative processes, working with international environmental donors to build knowledge and capacity of government officials on inclusive and participatory issues
- Holding separate meetings with women to increase women's comprehension of decision-making process and opportunities to participate at national and international fora
- Utilizing the United Nations recommended Human Rights Based Approach to define objectives in light of achieving human rights and empowering rights-holders

OBJECTIVES:

The purpose of the VIDS initiative is to ensure that community knowledge and voices are able to influence Suriname's national REDD+ developments. In order to safeguard indigenous peoples' full participation in these processes, in complement to realizing sustainable development, indigenous peoples need to be afforded the ability to identify their own sustainable development goals and strategies in harmony with their environment. VIDS specifically focuses on strengthening indigenous women's rights, allowing for their participation in policy-making and bolstering their socio-economic position. As the backbone of local communities and their livelihoods, women in Suriname are the main actors in developing plans related to natural resource management for Suriname's sustainable future.

"Although all nine board members of VIDS are men, the female village leaders know how to make their voice heard in VIDS policy meetings. Both women and men are needed to strategize—we have to include indigenous women in the process because of their role in the community, because of how women make use of forests, and because of their knowledge and responsibilities."

MARIE-JOSEE ARTIST,

VIDS Community Development Specialist



OUTCOMES & FUTURE IMPLICATIONS:

VIDS aims to develop a culture- and gender-sensitive approach that involves indigenous village leaders (who are predominantly male) to increase understanding of women's position and agency in climate change, REDD+ and development plans. In Suriname, the land rights of indigenous and tribal peoples are not legally recognized, and prior to VIDS' work, many stakeholders did not look forward to the implementation of a national REDD+ project. However, with targeted interventions and participatory planning approaches that involved not only indigenous peoples, but also women specifically, REDD+ planning will lead to informed community women and men that exist harmoniously with their environment and livelihood needs and activities while remaining in balance with nature. Women have an integral role to play in this process, as they do not only transfer traditional natural resource management knowledge and skills to children, but also because they are the "keepers of livelihoods," and ultimately will inspire others as to act as agents of change.

Results to date include:

- Indigenous peoples are recognized as groups with interests and are included in the Government's REDD+ process as members of major groups; resolution from RPP process now has three of seven articles including text on participation, collaboration and inclusion of indigenous peoples
- Indigenous peoples are recognized as rights holders, rather than only stakeholders
- Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) is recognized and is in the process of becoming part of Suriname national law
- Indigenous peoples and gender-responsive activities budgeted in "Implementing Suriname REDD+ Readiness Plan 2014-2018"
- More indigenous peoples, both men and women, have an understanding of and are involved in REDD+ processes
- Indigenous village leaders (mostly men) understand the impact of women in climate change, REDD+, and development, but

also recognize their role for responding and building resilience in their communities

CONCLUSION

VIDS has helped Suriname prepare for equitable REDD+, however many challenges are rooted in the issue that women do not have legal rights over land in Suriname, thus their position in society is weak and they have little security.

Additional persisting gaps and challenges include:

- Lack of knowledge in the government about the rights of indigenous peoples and gender component; limited faith in national process
- Minimal participation of women at the national level; certain women are engaged because of their already-elevated social status but may not be empowering marginalized women, or understanding the gender-specific dimensions of cc, REDD+ and development
- Minimal budget allocated for gender at the national level with none at the community-level
- Climate change and REDD+ are politically-sensitive in Suriname and politicians are not yet involved to the needed extent
- Lack of transparency and finance at the national and sub-national level
- Villagers need income and cannot invest too much time in trainings only
- The gap between indigenous peoples international law and national implementation continues to grow

NEXT STEPS:

- Formalize a system for legally recognizing indigenous people's rights regarding land and environment
- Work to more fully implement FPIC
- Increase budget allocated for gender at the national level and create adequate budget at the community level
- Guarantee regulation of the post-2015 REDD+ process and clearly establish the process for the grievance mechanism

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This case study is part of the Gender and REDD+ Case Study Series. It was prepared for IUCN with the support of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) via the Gender Equality for Climate Change Opportunities (GECCO) initiative. GECCO leverages advancements in women's empowerment and gender equality through, and for, the benefit of climate change and development outcomes and is designed to provide an array of support options for national, regional, and global activities that advance women's empowerment and gender equality.

More information about GECCO can be found on the IUCN Global Gender Office's website at <http://genderandenvironment.org/>; more information about gender and REDD+ can be found on the REDD Desk at <http://theredddesk.org/>; and more information about USAID's climate change work can be found at www.usaid.gov/climate.