



Saamaka Toko: A Story about Climate Change, Environmental Injustice, and Resilience in Suriname's Amazon Forest

By
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A story on Lived Impact of The
Climate Crisis in The Amazon Region



The Saamaka have been custodians of at least 1.4 million hectares for over 300 years but still lack legal recognition of our ancestral lands. This ongoing struggle highlights a critical link between climate impact, systemic injustice, and the urgent need for climate justice that recognizes our traditional practices as part of the solution.

However, our resilience and determination to protect our lands and traditions remain unwavering, inspiring hope for a better future.



INTRODUCTION

Hailing from the Saamaka tribal people, a proud Afro-descendant group settled in the lush Amazon rainforest of Suriname. Known as 'the greenest country in the world,' Suriname boasts over 90 per cent of its land covered by Amazonian forest, an encouraging achievement amid global deforestation—primarily sustained thanks to the stewardship of Indigenous and tribal peoples (ITP) like my community.

In Suriname, the Indigenous and tribal peoples have successfully preserved and managed over 3 million hectares of this vital ecosystem, demonstrating our conservation efforts and crucial role as environmental stewards. Yet despite our deep connection with the forest—intricately tied to our identity, culture, and spirituality—we face daunting challenges exacerbated by climate change and long-standing environmental injustices.



The changing climate is putting a lot of pressure on our resources, with frequent droughts and higher water levels highlighting the pressing impacts we face daily. Land-grabbing impacts our environment negatively, compromises our livelihoods, and threatens the delicate balance of our ecosystem.

By sharing our experiences, I aim to highlight the intertwined realities of climate change and systemic injustice faced by ITPs in Suriname and the necessity for land tenure security as a fundamental right.



Boatmen navigating a rapid during the drought 2024.
Source: Samunda Jabin Suriname Amazonian Forest. Source: Association of Saamaka Communities (VSG)j, Marjet Zwaans & Stichting Totomboti

A DEEP CONNECTION TO NATURE

For the Saamaka people, the forest is not just a resource but our lifeblood. Our daily lives are deeply rooted in the environment, which provides nourishing fruits, herbs for traditional medicine, wood for construction, and other products necessary for survival.

Our communities traditionally select locations near rivers and creeks optimized for accessibility to clean drinking water sourced from protected areas. However, the increased accessibility of our territory through road development has brought opportunities and newfound challenges.

The challenges we face due to the previously mentioned activities have impacted our livelihood, health, food security, and ancestral heritage, among other things. Our livelihood is intrinsically connected with our territory because we harvest most agricultural products from our plots or gather crops from designated areas in the dense forest we call home. In some cases, people have encountered strangers on their agriculture plot/garden destroying or stealing their crops, claiming that the government permitted them to operate in that area.

Logging and mining concessions have been given to national and multinational companies with little benefit-sharing mechanisms for the local communities. Due to these activities, our drinking water sources and the soil in our territories are being polluted; animals are migrating out of the hunting areas because they are disturbed by the many machines operating in their habitat. Another challenge our communities face is the increased human-wildlife conflicts impacting the food security of animals and humans due to several types of animals that raid plots and can empty a plot in one day. The raiding of the plots happens when there is not enough food for the animals in the forest due to extensive logging activities in our territory.




Our cultural practices revolve around sustainable harvesting, hunting, fishing, and agriculture—activities that connect us spiritually to the land. Before the roads were constructed, the rivers were our only transportation routes, linking us to the coastal regions and forming lifelines for trade and mobility. Now, our rivers are still our central mobility infrastructure.

Boatmen navigating a rapid during the drought 2024.
Source: Samunda Jabini, Marjet Zwaans & Stichting Totomboti

THE GRIM IMPACT OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Growing up in Suriname, we are accustomed to a saying: *'Suriname is a blessed country.'* This saying usually relates to the various climate-related natural disasters. Compared to many Caribbean countries, we don't experience extreme hurricanes regularly. However, over the past few years, I have noticed high levels of disturbing changes in our local climatic patterns, stressing the immediate and real impacts of climate change on our community. My observations since 2020 have proved that seasonal weather transformations, as we once knew them, have become less noticeable, underscoring the pressing need for immediate action. Suriname is experiencing it all, from strong winds and frequent floods to extreme droughts

An aerial photograph showing a large-scale mining operation in a tropical forest. The mine is a complex of terraced pits and roads, with exposed earth and rock. The surrounding area is a dense, lush green forest. In the background, there are rolling hills under a cloudy sky. The text is overlaid on a dark teal rectangular background in the bottom left corner.

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In 2023, while facilitating a meeting with the Foundation of Forest Management in my community, we were suddenly confronted with devastating flooding after days of downpours. The rainfall was relentless, causing the water level to rise alarmingly fast. We have seen for ourselves the destruction it caused: buildings submerged, and fields that once flourished with crops were overcome, thus creating dire food scarcity for so many families.



The event signified the pressing need for resilient strategies to take up the growing impact of climate change on our communities. Extreme weather conditions have just become the norm, from stronger droughts to frequent flooding. Each severe drought reduces river levels, rendering some creeks completely dry and disrupting mobility. For instance, students must navigate challenging boat rides to school, often needing to disembark and walk in shallow waters.

River impacted by drought Source: Samunda Jabini, Marjet Zwaans & Stichting Totomboti



Palmeras loading area near Atjoni. Source: Association of Saamaka Communities (VSG)

While some argue about the interplay of climate change and local human activity, the harmful effects of unchecked deforestation caused by logging and mining operations in our territories cannot be ignored. Such practices compound the needs of our community, putting additional pressure on our already strained resources.

Systemic Injustices Compounding Environmental Threats

As we grapple with climate change, it becomes clear that a more significant threat stems from persistent systemic injustices covering our rights and land. Despite our victories at the Inter-American Court on Human Rights (IACHR) against the State of Suriname, we continue to face disregarded collective rights.

The ongoing distribution of logging and mining concessions in our ancestral territories occurs without our consent, undermining our role as guardians of these natural resources. Such actions demonstrate a blatant disregard for the principles of free, prior, and informed consent, which continues to facilitate exploitation that disproportionately benefits a select few while stripping our community of essential resources.



Active gold mining concessions in the Saamaka territory.
Source: Association of Saamaka Communities (VSG)



Active gold mining concessions in the Saamaka territory.
 Source: Association of Saamaka Communities (VSG)

Furthermore, uncontrolled logging and mining activities contribute to forest degradation and water pollution, eliminating access to clean drinking water and compelling our community members to abandon long-held traditions and use of our ancestral lands. The relentless drive for resource extraction threatens both our social structures and the ecosystems that sustain us.

An aerial photograph of a dense tropical forest. A narrow, cleared path or road runs vertically through the center of the image. At the bottom of the frame, there is a large pile of cut logs, suggesting logging activity. The surrounding forest is lush and green, with varying shades of green indicating different tree species and canopy heights. The lighting is bright, suggesting a sunny day.

On a broader scale, the contrast between nations committing to drastic emission cuts and developing countries like ours grappling with injustice and adaptation creates additional barriers. However, our country's emissions are minimal, and we grapple with climate consequences and entrenched systemic issues.

The Path Forward

In the face of these challenges, one of the silver linings is the perseverance of the Saamaka people. We went from rejecting enslavement to creating free, strong societies deep in Suriname's forest. Every time our survival was threatened, we adapted by using traditional knowledge and skills to cope with societal injustices, climate change, and various inequalities. When the creeks no longer flow because of drought, we still use our traditional skills to find water. Traditional practices of sustainability are further embedded in every aspect of our lives.



However, addressing the root causes of these injustices is essential for raising awareness about ITP rights and accountable governments to prevent and/or mitigate ecological destruction.





WAKE DI
MATU TÖÖN
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SABANA

We should emphasize the importance of protecting indigenous rights, cultures, and land. Let's prioritize supporting organizations and individuals who advocate for indigenous rights and honor traditional practices. One can make a difference by participating in advocacy/awareness campaigns and sharing/amplifying indigenous voices worldwide.

Although the journey may be prolonged, if we stand together and commit to justice, we can create a future where Indigenous wisdom is preserved and respected.