



Improving rural livelihoods in the heart of Suriname's rainforest

The forest plays a moderate role as a source of livelihood in the forest-adjacent village of Pokigron in the heart of Suriname. This can be attributed to a lack of access to markets and poor infrastructure as well as to people's desire to engage rapidly in 'modernization'. People prefer making ends meet by combining various sources of non-forest income. These are the main conclusions of a study by Eleonora Zito, student in International Development Studies of the University of Amsterdam, carried out during the first half of 2009. The study, facilitated by Tropenbos International Suriname, was meant to contribute in efforts to reconstruct a village that was virtually abandoned during the armed conflict that raged in the interior from 1986 to 1992.

During the armed conflict, almost all houses in the village were burned down, forcing most of the inhabitants to move to the capital Paramaribo or elsewhere. Many of the refugees ended up in unfinished installations of a sports complex called 'Anthony Nesty Sporthal' (ANS) in Paramaribo. This place, locally also referred to as 'achter NIS', has no electricity, running water or sewage system while the area is prone to flooding.

When the migrants arrived in the city they were dependent on support from the government and private social organizations. This support was often insufficient, partly due to rising living costs associated with the then overall financial economic crisis in the country. The pressure to return to the village, to strive for independence and to return to their familiar living environment was increasing. This pressure led to the creation of the STIWEPO Foundation (Stichting Wederopbouw Pokigron) that aimed to reconstruct the village so that its former inhabitants would resettle in Pokigron living in a sustainable way from the riches of the forest. The Centre for Agricultural Research in Suriname (CELOS) and the World Nature Fund (WWF) have conducted research on the options for such sustainable livelihoods. However, the expectations have not yet been fully realized since only a part of Pokigron's residents have returned to the village.



Pokigron

Pokigron was established by the Wepo family around 1880 along the Suriname River about 183 km south of Paramaribo in Sipawilini district. The inhabitants belong to the Saramaccaners, a maroon tribe.

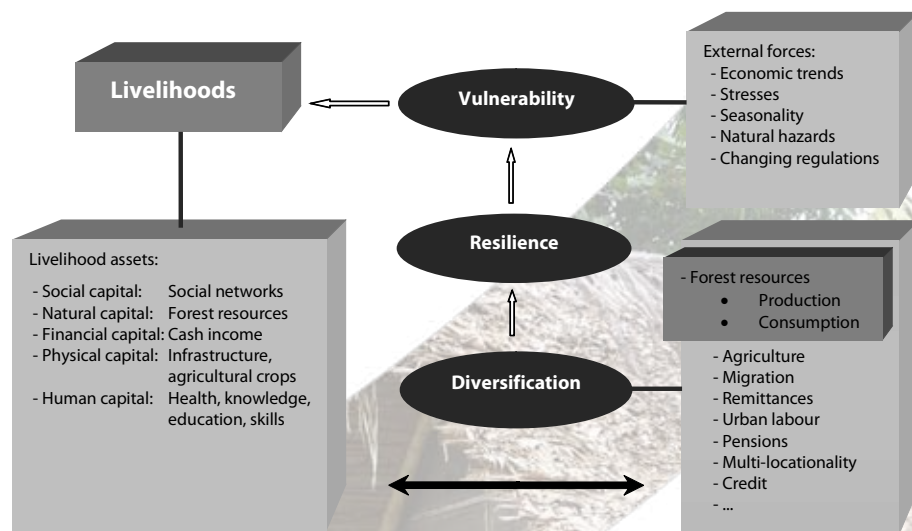
The village is situated in an area which is prone to flooding and drought, and pests destroy large quantities of food crops that the inhabitants plant. Consequently, the inhabitants of Pokigron are highly vulnerable to natural hazards. Furthermore, the village suffers from isolation since asphalt roads were until recently limited to the northern part of Suriname along the coastal area. The majority of the inland roads are laterite roads which are impassable during the rainy season. This makes travel between such inland villages and the city costly and time-consuming, and very difficult during the wet season. As a result, most of the inhabitants who have returned to Pokigron live in poverty.

Research set up

As outlined in the study's conceptual framework (see figure), the key to improving livelihoods is reducing vulnerability and building resilience. Diversification can do both, for which several kinds of capitals and resources are needed. Zito employed several research methods to find out to what extent people in Pokigron manage to build their livelihoods. To address the question what kind of forest and agricultural products people use for their own consumption and for the market, she undertook

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transect walks – an observation and data-gathering method for identifying the location and distribution of resources and main land uses along a given transect. Part of these walks went along the agricultural plots – locally referred to as ‘kostgrondjes’ – where households grow their food products. Other transect walks were made through the forest along the Suriname River and through the village, in order to find out where the inhabitants gather- or plant food products or products used for material purposes.



Another method employed was the execution of semi-structured interviews among 32 households in Pokigron to find out how they built their livelihoods and what role the forest played therein. The informants were also asked what they thought should be improved in the village to create a higher standard of living, to prevent further out-migration (mostly by young people) and to encourage former inhabitants to return to Pokigron. Two focus group discussions were held with men and women respectively, to find out how vulnerable the village was, how the inhabitants perceived this vulnerability and what, if any, strategies they employed to cope with shocks and stresses. With a view to completing the picture, semi-structured interviews were conducted among ten households in ‘achter NIS’ in Paramaribo. Questions included if and how informants helped their family members in Pokigron and what they thought should be improved in the village before they would reconsider moving back. Finally, a female villager’s life story was recorded and the method of participatory observation was used to get more in-depth knowledge about the village and its history.

The research by Zito shows that the forest plays a moderate role as a source of subsistence and a very limited role as a source of cash income. This is partly due to people’s view that work in the forest is too labour intensive and not economically lucrative (because of bad roads and limited access to markets) while there are also preferences for other livelihood options. Many of the households in Pokigron rely primarily on petty trade and other sources of non-forest income, while the elderly rely mostly on support from the government and relatives. They increase their resilience by using livelihood diversification strategies whereby each household combines various sources of income and subsistence such as formal and non-formal jobs, remittances, and multi-locality. They generally prefer these strategies above forest-related ones in the expectation that it will bring them a much-desired ‘modernization’ sooner. Together with good roads to improve market accessibility people perceive the availability of electricity and machinery, to facilitate various tasks such as rice peeling, cassava grating and oil processing, as the major needs for improvement.

Forest-based poverty reduction?

The aim of organisations like Tropenbos International, WWF, CELOS and STIWEPO is that forest-adjacent communities can benefit in several ways from the forest. Several studies, including this one, have shown however that poverty elimination in forest-adjacent communities proves to be very difficult. The people living in these communities are often extremely vulnerable to economic shocks and stresses like floods, droughts and pests.

The governmental foundation for the development of the hinterland (FOB) is developing projects to re-establish Pokigron in a way that is in line with the inhabitants’ needs. If these projects ensure the participation of the local community in the decision-making process and accountability in the implementation of the plans, they might meet the inhabitants’ desire to escape poverty and increase their quality of life.

For more information:

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