

Freedom and Development in Suriname

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For indigenous peoples, development does not always enhance freedom, as can be learned from the case of a bauxite mining project in west Suriname. Even witnessing the impacts of decades of bauxite mining in east Suriname was not enough to dissuade the Lokono and Trio from supporting the Bakhuis project, because the mining company assured them that the new project would be different. At present they expect the development of the mine to provide them with new forms of economic freedom, but it may also reduce other important freedoms associated with being indigenous.

When Amartya Sen (1999) redefined development in terms of freedom, he argued that political freedoms are required along with security, opportunity and transparency to realise economic development. Central to his perspective is the recognition that the goal of development is to enhance human freedom, including people's ability to shape their own destiny. Sen's work also promotes the values and institutions of the liberal democratic state. Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000), however, has argued against the identification of the modern state with freedom, an identity achieved through projects of reform, progress and development that may be coercive or violent. Also at risk in development projects are other freedoms that may not be acknowledged or protected by liberal states.

For indigenous peoples, development does not always enhance freedom, as can be learned from the case of a bauxite mining project in west Suriname.* The author previously carried out long-term research on the Ok Tedi copper and gold mine in Papua New Guinea, where he observed the devastating consequences of that project (see Kirsch, 2006). This experience encouraged him to focus his research earlier in the production cycle by collaborating with indigenous communities at risk from new mining projects.

A key challenge of this work is the difficulty in conveying the stakes of these development projects to people who lack previous experience of negotiating with mining companies. Even witnessing the impacts of decades of bauxite mining in east Suriname was not enough to dissuade the Lokono and Trio from supporting the Bakhuis project, because the mining company assured them that the new project would be different. The purpose of the author's trip

was to assist these communities by contributing to an independent review of the corporate-sponsored environmental and social impact assessment of the bauxite mine.

The Lokono and Trio peoples living along the Corantijn River generally support the mining project in the Bakhuis Mountains because of the economic benefits they hope it will bring them, though they also express concerns about its social and environmental impacts.

But their ability to consent to the project is compromised by Suriname's refusal to recognise indigenous land rights, which contravenes its international obligations. Suriname approved the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, but in 2008 the Inter-American Court criticised the country for ignoring indigenous and Maroon land rights. For the Lokono and Trio, their lack of legal title to their land creates a double bind: they must endorse the project if they wish to influence it or benefit from its operation. The result is a coercive form of participation that bears little resemblance to the standard of free, prior and informed consent.

Attitudes towards the project have also been influenced by the lack of independent information about the social and environmental impacts of the bauxite mine, which is expected to strip -mine at least 5 per cent of its 2,800 km² concession during a period of 50 years. Even with the promise of progressive reforestation, the effects of the project are likely to be extensive and long-lasting, including potential impacts on the three major watersheds of the region: the Corantijn, Nickerie and Coppename Rivers. The bauxite mine may also affect

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Maroon communities living near the Nickerie River and indigenous communities located on the Guyanese banks of the Corantijn River.

Central to indigenous identity in Suriname are practices of hunting and fishing in the rain forest. The Lokono and Trio value their freedom of movement and are able to use the resources of other indigenous peoples once they have secured their permission. Paul Riesman once described the importance that the Fulani attach to independence, suggesting that the principle of freedom is “founded on the possibility of each person’s entering into a direct relation with ... nature without the mediation of another person or any social institution” (Riesman, 1998, p. 257). Something similar might be said about the Lokono and Trio, who equate freedom with being able to leave the village on hunting and fishing trips to the rain forest.

The Lokono have already observed a decline in certain fish species and game animals, and the mining project will certainly have further impacts on local wildlife. The mining concession was off-limits to local use during the exploration phase of the project. A proposed conservation area would not prohibit indigenous hunting and fishing, but neither would it guarantee future access to these lands. In response to a question about the potential effects of the mine on the environment, one of the indigenous leaders declared that if hunting and fishing were no longer possible in the vicinity of their villages, they would ask the mining company to provide them with transport to better hunting and fishing grounds. It is difficult for them to imagine a world in which they would no longer have free access to the forest for hunting and fishing, a circumstance that would contravene one of their strongest cultural values, yet the mining project may hasten its materialisation.

Specialised knowledge about the rain forest, including traditional medicines, is decreasing across generational lines. More fundamentally, their underlying relationship to the forests and the animals that live there are also vulnerable to change. These interactions include making libations and direct invocations

to the animals hunted or the trees cut down as a way of asking permission, much as one must ask the owners of the land before using their resources. There are also rules to guide interactions with animals and trees, that favour conservation over accumulation. A sacred relationship connects these people to the landscape in ways that transcend economic value, including compensation.

Despite their ties to place, the Lokono and Trio have become enchanted by the prospect of economic development. Although the men recognise that modern mining projects provide relatively few jobs, they hope the mine will have a trickle-down effect on the local economy. Comparative evidence, however, suggests that when economic opportunities arise, people with greater social capital will be better placed to exploit them.

The main economic concerns of the women in these communities are related to the ways in which gender roles have already been affected by the cash economy. In the past, there was a complementarity to their sexual division of labour. For example, both men and women contributed labour to making gardens, with men clearing the forest and women planting, weeding and harvesting the plots. In contrast, men now have greater control over financial resources and women object to their increasing dependence on them. The women hope the mining project will stimulate the local economy, creating opportunities for them to become more directly involved in the cash economy and independent of men.

Finally, young men support the mining project because of their desire for vocational training, job opportunities and university education. With the development of the mine, the region will become more densely populated. People will open businesses to provide supplies to the mine. The town will become a magnet for people seeking employment, many of whom will stay even if they do not find jobs.

Members of the indigenous communities also expressed concerns about the influence that people with different cultural “manners” and practices will have on

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their lives, especially on local women. Currently, outsiders tend to be assimilated into local modes of interaction, such as asking permission before using local resources, but this dynamic is likely to change along with regional demography. The very thing the indigenous communities are trying to safeguard through new economic activity—good life in the villages—is vulnerable to elimination by an influx of outsiders.

In the wake of the global economic downturn, the primary developer has withdrawn from the bauxite project in west Suriname, although the government continues to search for an alternative corporate partner. The resulting hiatus provides the Lokono and Trio with an opportunity to consider whether the proposed mining project is compatible with their most important cultural values, including their freedom to hunt and fish in the rain forest, the kinds of relationships they have with the trees and animals with which they share the landscape, and the kinds of social relations they have among themselves. At present they expect the development of the mine to provide them with new forms of economic freedom, but it may also reduce other important freedoms associated with being indigenous, freedoms that are not recognised or protected by the state.

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