
Guyana: Empowerment of indigenous peoples through participatory mapping

Despite decades of lobbying successive governments for full legal recognition of their traditional land rights, the 55-60,000 Amerindians in Guyana still find themselves in one of the most precarious land tenure situations in South America: many communities lack any legal land title whatsoever, while the others can only count on an insecure title which covers just a fraction of their ancestral territory, and which can be revoked unilaterally at any time by the Minister of Amerindian Affairs. Since national independence in 1966, the Guyanese state has titled just 6000 square miles of the 24,000 square miles recommended for title by the Amerindian Lands Commission (ALC) --a body set up by the British in 1966 to resolve the Amerindian land question in response to consistent pressure from grassroots Amerindian leaders. Indigenous peoples complain that Government's repeated broken promises on land rights issues constitute the large-scale theft of their ancestral territories by the state.

Untitled areas on so-called "state land" are the subject of mining and timber concessions issued by central government without prior consultation with Amerindian Communities. Gold and diamond concessions, for example, cover around 35% of the country --an area that affects many of the traditional territories of the Akawaio, Macusi, Wapichan and Wai Wai peoples. Indigenous communities protest that poorly regulated commercial resource extraction dominated by outsiders from the coast has caused environmental damage in their territories and wrought social and cultural upheaval in their communities.

The indigenous struggle for land security and their rejection of top-down destructive resource exploitation on their lands took a major step forward in 1991 with the formation of the Amerindian Peoples Association (APA). The APA unites more than 80 Amerindian communities that represent all nine indigenous peoples of Guyana. Many of the local APA "units" are linked to its central office in Georgetown via a radio network. The APA works to promote indigenous rights at the national level, to keep member communities informed of government policies, laws and projects that may affect their welfare and to raise local Amerindian concerns with central government. A key part of APA activity involves training workshops for indigenous leaders on the national and international laws relating to indigenous rights and natural resources.

In 1994, Amerindian leaders from Region 7 of Guyana and APA staff had a meeting with their country's President in order to once again press for inalienable title to the full extent of their ancestral territory that covers 3000 square miles in the Upper Mazaruni. In response, the President challenged them to show how they use their land and why they demand ownership over such an extensive area.

Following a series of meetings in the six Amerindian communities in the Upper Mazaruni, the Akawaio and Arekuna people decided that they would need to map their traditional land and demonstrate that all the forests and savannahs in their territory have been used and occupied by them according to their custom for generations. They agreed that drawing up their own map could help demonstrate that their view of property, ownership and resource use is very different to the government view.

In 1995 the mapping project began in the field with technical support from the APA and international NGOs including the Forest Peoples Programme and Local Earth Observation. A team of four indigenous mappers were trained over six weeks in map work and the use of Global Positioning System technology (GPS). Over nine months the whole territory was mapped to show boundaries, past and present-day settlements, natural resources and cultural sites using names and categories defined by the communities themselves in accordance with their language and traditions. The final community map showed the whole Upper Mazaruni basin to be covered in an impressive blanket of indigenous place names, extensive and multiple indigenous land uses, burial grounds and special traditional areas such as bodawa: "hunting and fishing reserves". Since the map was published in 1998 it has been praised by many individuals and organisations including the Organisation of American States and the World Bank. Sadly, however, the government of Guyana still refuses to acknowledge the map as a legitimate claim to indigenous land ownership.

Undeterred by the stubbornness of the national government, Amerindian communities throughout Guyana have been inspired by the Upper Mazaruni mapping project. Since 1998, the APA has carried out further projects with its own indigenous cartographers who are trained in digitising base maps, inputting the field data and printing off draft maps for verification by the participating communities. This in-house team has worked with Arawak, Carib, Wapichan, Wai Wai and Akawaio communities to complete four more community mapping projects covering a total of 14,000 square miles. Two more projects are also currently underway and several more are planned. The local mapping teams for all these projects have been trained by an Arekuna Amerindian tutor who first gained his skills as a team member on the original mapping project.

Those who have participated in the mapping activities point out that the projects have been an empowering experience in a number of ways. They emphasise that traditional knowledge has been revitalised as younger people have worked with elders to collect the information for the maps. Mapping has also raised grassroots awareness about land use and resource management issues. Community mapping has turned out to be a useful tool for the defence of indigenous territories. An increasing number of trained indigenous mappers are now able to use the GPS technology and their own maps to pinpoint resource concessions that overlap their boundaries. Likewise, they can spot cases where companies have made incursions into indigenous lands, plot this infringement on a map and show the company that they are on Amerindian territory without permission. Already, companies have been obliged to withdraw their equipment when faced with this strong evidence.

The benefits of the pioneering community mapping work in Guyana are now spreading to other countries. The indigenous tutor has already helped Amerindian communities in neighbouring Suriname to map their traditional lands in the lower Marowijne. Practical lessons gained through the APA's innovative mapping projects are now being shared with indigenous peoples' organisations in the Ecuadorian Amazon who are preparing projects to self-demarcate their traditional territories. One lesson from Guyana is clear: a combination of village-level capacity building in land rights issues and participatory mapping can be empowering for local people and also provide the basis for an effective territorial defence strategy.

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