

**SURINAME**

# **THE GREENEST COUNTRY IN THE WORLD?**

**THE CASE OF THE SAAMAKA AND  
THEIR FIGHT AGAINST DEFORESTATION**

*Sara Olga Ramirez Gomez and Jeremy Bourgoin*

**INTERNATIONAL  
LAND  
COALITION**

 **LAND  
RIGHTS  
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Global Platform of Indigenous & Community Lands

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity
CELOS	Centre for Agricultural Research in Suriname
FPIC	Free prior and informed consent
GFW	Global Forest Watch
GIS	Geographic information system
GPS	Global Positioning System
IACHR	Inter-American Court of Human Rights
ITPs	Indigenous and tribal peoples
JRC-TMF	Joint Research Center – Tropical Moist Forests
KKF	Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Suriname
NARENA	Natural Resources and Environmental Assessment
NDC	Nationally Determined Contribution
P3DM	Participatory 3D modelling
SFISS	Sustainable Forest Management Information System Suriname
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNDRIP	United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
VIDS	Association of Indigenous Village Leaders in Suriname
VSG	Association of Saamaka Authorities



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**Cover photo:** a road has recently been driven through the Saamaka territory by logging multinational Palmera. ©ILC/Bram Ebus, December 2023.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Saamaka people, one of six tribal groups in Suriname, have long stood up against the actions of the country's rulers, who for centuries have violated their rights to land. In recent times, despite a ruling in 2007 by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR) against violations of human and land rights, the government has persistently granted concessions for logging and mining on Saamaka territory, without obtaining free prior and informed consent (FPIC). This has led to deforestation, land dispossession and the disruption of tribal livelihoods that are deeply rooted in the land. A recent example is the construction of a 42.7 km long road through Saamaka lands, facilitating access to the forests for a logging company to extract wood.

The IACHR ruling required the Government of Suriname to initiate and legally accept a collaborative mapping process of the Saamaka territory. The map created by the Saamaka people and the Centre for Agricultural Research in Suriname (CELOS), in agreement with neighbouring communities, was presented to the government in 2013, but it has still not been implemented in the national legal system. The government has exploited this gap to justify further concessions, undermining the rights of the Saamaka people. The IACHR mandate for the mapping and recognition of Saamaka territory no later than 19 December 2010 has thus been disregarded, leaving the community and other Indigenous and tribal groups in Suriname without legal acknowledgment of their rights.

In total, over 447,000 hectares of land have been granted as concessions within Saamaka territory, leading to significant forest degradation and loss. Despite national and international commitments to protect forests and recognize the rights of Indigenous and tribal peoples, the Government of Suriname continues to ignore the IACHR's legally binding judgement as well as its own pledges made to the international community to manage forests sustainably with recognition of Indigenous and tribal lands. The court's judgement explicitly called for the revision of concessions in community forests, yet this crucial step has not been taken. This disregard for legal obligations and international agreements helps to perpetuate a cycle of deforestation and disruption of tribal livelihoods. This underscores the urgent need for accountability and action to address the ongoing violations against the Saamaka people.

In light of these injustices, we urge three critical actions: pursuing resistance efforts and legal actions, engaging in international advocacy campaigns, and strengthening land governance.



Photo: © ILC/ Sara O. Ramirez Gomez

Saamaka people on the Suriname River  
in the village of Pikin Seei, November 2022.

# RATIONALE OF THE REPORT

The Saamaka people of Suriname are traditional owners of more than a million hectares of tropical rainforests; they possess invaluable traditional knowledge and have deep cultural ties with their lands and resources. However, they have endured historical injustices and ongoing challenges in defending their forests and their rights from commercial logging and mining, which are increasingly weakening their legal capacity to control and manage their forests sustainably. In 2007, they celebrated a victory when the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR) ruled in their favour (*"the Saamaka judgement"*), offering hope for protection of the rainforest that is central to their way of life (see timeline in Figure 1).

The IACHR ordered the Government of Suriname to legally recognize the collective land rights of the Saamaka people and to put a stop to activities destructive of forests within their lands. However, 16 years have passed since the court ruling and there is still no legal recognition of the Saamaka people's collective land rights. On the contrary, there have been persistent violations of the court's orders, with deforestation and forest degradation within Saamaka lands due to a four-fold increase in commercial logging and mining activities since the date of the judgement.

Suriname has been recognized as a leader in forest preservation for maintaining 93% of its forest coverage and its rich biodiversity and for its international commitments to keep things that way. Yet the government's issuance of logging and mining concessions, as well as its disabling land use and forestry policies, contradict its international commitments to protect nature and respect the rights of Indigenous and tribal people, as evidenced by its signing of the Paris Agreement in 2016 and the Leaders' Pledge for Nature in 2021, its ratification of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and its adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

This report is a response to a request from the Association of Saamaka Authorities (VSG) to the international community to support the Saamaka people's efforts to defend their territory against activities that encroach on forests and to help build evidence of the violations of the Saamaka judgement that have taken place. Its authors make a call for action to international organizations to develop and implement a joint advocacy agenda urging the Government of Suriname to legally recognize the land rights of the Saamaka people, to stop activities that are destroying forests in Saamaka lands and to form an alliance with the Saamaka (and other Indigenous) people to keep Suriname the *"greenest country on earth"*.

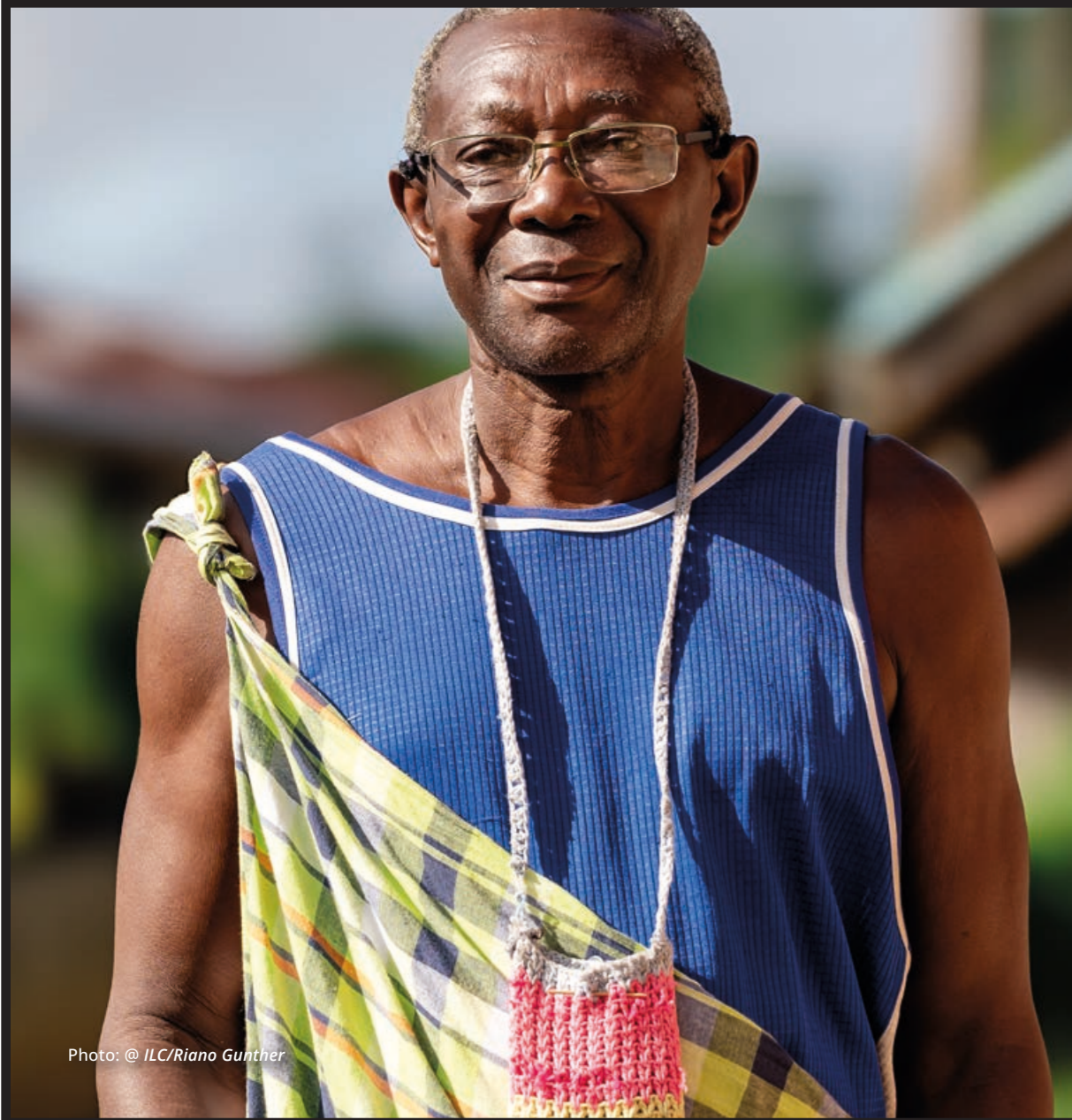


Photo: © ILC/Riano Gunther





# A HISTORY OF HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

The Saamaka are one of six tribal peoples in Suriname and constitute 20% of the country's total population. They are Afro-descendants whose rebel ancestors escaped from slavery and fled to the jungle, where they fought for nearly 100 years. In 1762 they signed a peace treaty with the Dutch colonial government which recognized their freedom and territory along the Suriname River, a century before the abolition of slavery.<sup>1</sup> By then, the Saamaka had already developed autonomous communities with a rooted forest culture and their own language, spirituality, kinship and internal governance system according to their own norms, culture and traditions. Traditionally, their livelihoods have been based on farming,<sup>2</sup> hunting, fishing and harvesting of timber and non-timber forest products.

Saamaka people have historically endured violations of their human rights. After signing the peace treaty with the Dutch in 1762, the Saamaka managed to retain control over their lands and forests for about two centuries. In the 1960s, however, the national government began unilaterally to use Saamaka land for development projects. The first of these was the construction of the Afobaka hydroelectric dam, which began in 1961 and forcibly displaced over 9,000 Saamaka people from their original settlements. The construction of the dam was very traumatic for the Saamaka and caused an irreparable wound to their culture, livelihoods and integrity.<sup>3</sup>

Mining in the Saamaka territory began in 1979 with the granting of the country's first open gold mining concession. Mining activities involved the use of mercury and cyanide, which lethally polluted fresh water sources. These two large developments also saw the construction of a road network connecting the Saamaka territory with the coastal region. The development of road infrastructure has led to further encroachment within Saamaka land that we see today, especially commercial logging and mining concessions.

These land use developments, which have been forced on the Saamaka people, have caused them irreparable social, cultural, environmental and livelihood harms, putting at risk their cultural resilience and their very existence.

1 Price, R. (2002). *First-Time: The Historical Vision of an African American People*. University of Chicago Press.

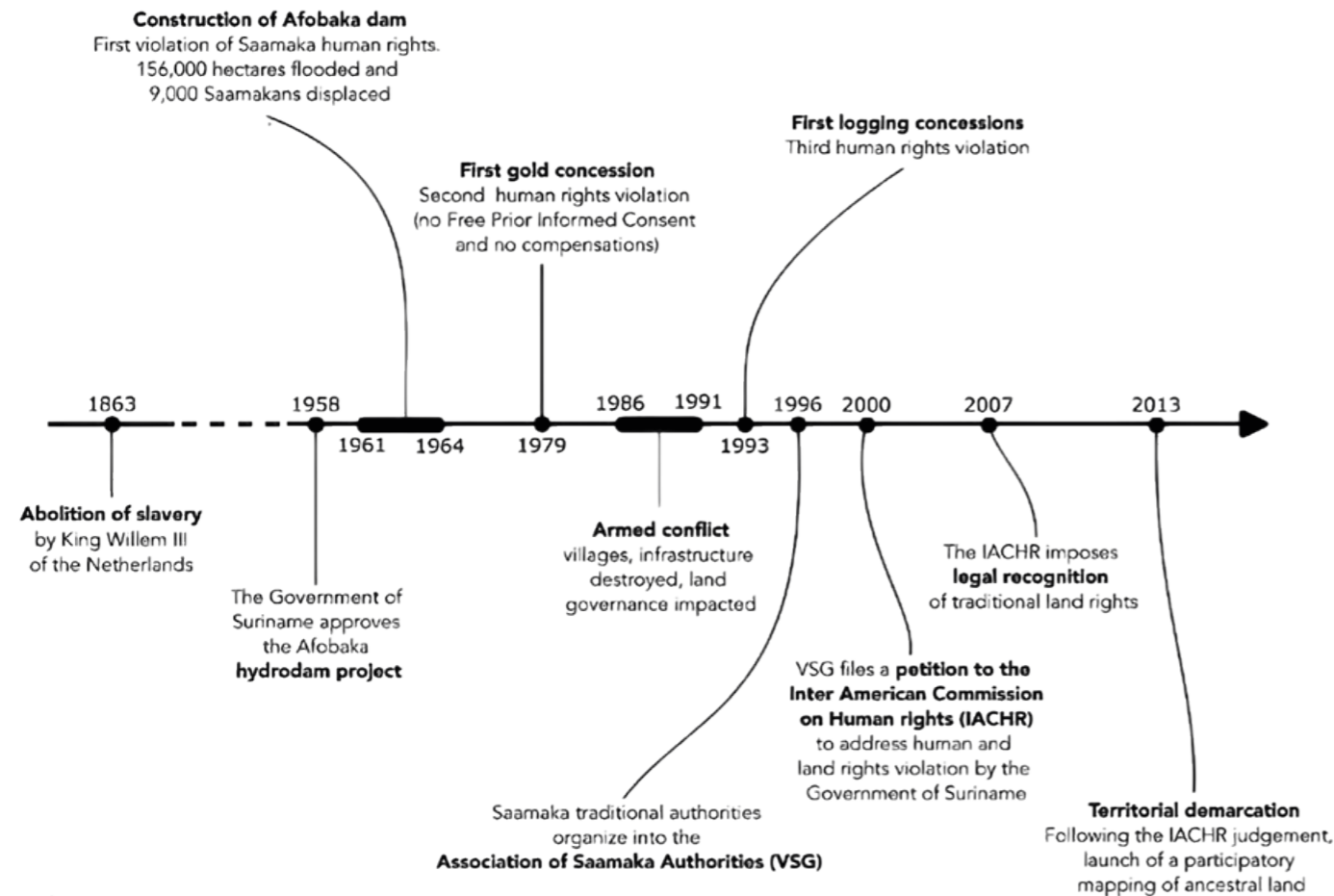
2 See, for example: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/jan/29/rare-rice-species-suriname-saamaka-maroon-slavery-climate-resilience>

3 For more information on the impact of the dam, see Inter-American Court of Human Rights (2007). *Case of Twelve Saramaka Clans v. Suriname*. Affidavit of Dr. Robert Goodland, Expert Witness. <https://www.forestpeoples.org/sites/fpp/files/publication/2010/09/surinameiachrsaramakaaffidavitgoodlandmay07eng.pdf>

As expert witness Robert Goodland testified in 2007 during the court case Twelve Saamaka Clans v Suriname:

*"[...] The Saramaka are a unique people and culture that are not found anywhere else in the world. If they lose more territory, it would be no exaggeration to say that they will face a substantial risk of irreparable harm to their physical and cultural integrity and survival."<sup>4</sup>*

Figure 1. Simplified timeline of the Saamaka territory.



Adapted from Saamaka Timeline (<https://saamaka-oto.org/timeline/>)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p.18.

## THE SAAMAKA'S CLAIMS TO TERRITORIAL BOUNDARIES

The Saamaka live in more than 74 villages spread along the Suriname River. Their **ancestral territory comprises 1.4 million hectares** and is partly delineated by the borders of the Suriname River watershed.<sup>5</sup> The first delineation of Saamaka territory took place between 1999 and 2002, based on the oral history of Saamaka occupation, peace treaty documents and a participatory mapping process that was conducted within the framework of the international court case against the Government of Suriname (Box 1). In its judgement of 2007, the IACHR required the government to officially map the boundaries of the Saamaka territory according to their views and ancestral land rights occupation claims. In 2010 the State commissioned Natural Resources and Environmental Assessment (NARENA), a department of the **Centre for Agricultural Research in Suriname (CELOS)**, to produce a map by technically complementing the ongoing territorial mapping efforts of the Saamaka. The eastern and western borders of the Saamaka land were de facto agreed in writing between Saamaka traditional leaders and leaders from the neighbouring Matawai and Okanisi tribes. The southern limit was orally agreed with the Association of Indigenous Village Leaders in Suriname (VIDS) during the Redi Doti conference on land rights in 2013. In the years since this border mapping exercise took place, official delineation of the northern limit has been more challenging, due to overlapping claims with other Indigenous territories and logging and gold mining concessions.

The CELOS map was presented by the Saamaka people to the Ministry of Regional Development and Sports of Suriname in 2013. In its most recent report on its compliance with the Saamaka judgement, the government indicated that the Saamaka people had mapped their territory as requested by the court but that it would only recognize these borders at the point when a planned collective land rights law was adopted by the National Assembly.<sup>6</sup> Thus, in practice, the government does not regard the borders as official. This is why in April 2023, when the Saamaka confronted the government over the granting of commercial logging concessions to multinational companies within their territory, it argued that they could not know whether the concessions were within their territory or outside it.

<sup>5</sup> Observatorio de Territorios Étnicos y Campesinos, VSG, Tropenbos Suriname (n.d.). Policy Brief: Titling the Saamaka's community territory: territorial rights, governance, and conservation. <https://etnoterritorios.org/apc-aa-files/92335f7b3cf47708a7c984a309402be7/policy-brief-titling-the-saamakas-community-territory.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Republic of Suriname. 2024. Conclusie van Antwoord in de bodemprocedure op verkort termijn, p. 5. The adoption of the collective land rights law (Wet Collectieve Rechten Inheemse en Tribale Volken) has already been delayed by 16 years. In its report on compliance with the Saamaka judgement, the government argues that progress has been slow due to limitations of government policies.



## BOX 1. PARTICIPATORY MAPPING OF SAAMAKA OCCUPATION AND DELIMITATION OF TERRITORIAL BOUNDARIES

### MAP OF TRADITIONAL LAND OCCUPATION

In 2002, the Saamaka people produced a map showing how they had traditionally occupied their lands, in order to justify their claims at the IACHR. The process to create this map consisted of oral history workshops and interviews with Saamaka elders, analysis of aerial photography and GPS ground truthing. First, a base map was produced from aerial photographs, showing the river networks. This map and the aerial photos were used in turn to prepare the map legend. Saamaka people decided for themselves the features to be included. At least 34 features were listed, including farming plots, hunting and fishing grounds and locations that are a source of timber and non-timber forest products and medicines, among many others. Second, a trained team of Saamaka community members interviewed elders to assess their knowledge of important locations, and then a GPS ground truthing exercise was undertaken to map these places. In the final phase, the field data was entered into a GIS system and a printed version of the map was produced (see Figure 8). Due to a lack of resources, fieldwork could not be completed in the most southerly part of the Saamaka territory (the headwaters of the Suriname River), which had been their historical heartland during the early days of Saamaka land use. Information gaps on the southern part were covered during discussions with local people. This first map was instrumental in the Saamaka's legal claims and victory at the IACHR.<sup>7</sup>

### DELIMITATION OF TERRITORIAL BOUNDARIES

The ruling of the IACHR required the State of Suriname to delineate the boundaries of the Saamaka territory according to the Saamaka's views on ancestral occupation. In 2010 the government commissioned NARENA, a department of CELOS, to undertake this process. CELOS built on the process of creating the map of ancestral occupation described above, and approached the VSG and Saamaka communities to ask: *"In your view, where are the boundaries of the Saamaka territory?"*

<sup>7</sup> For more information on this process, see: IACHR (2007). Case of Twelve Saramaka Clans v. Suriname. Affidavit of Dr. Peter Poole, Expert Witness.



Photo: @ ILC/ Association of Saamaka Authorities (VSG)

Figure 2. Commissioned map of Saamaka boundaries produced by CELOS in the period 2010–2012.

The Saamaka explained to CELOS that, according to their elders, the boundaries of the tribal territories were marked by the flow of water to the main rivers (the watershed). In the words of the elders, *"all the land containing the water that flows to the Suriname River is Saamaka ancestral land and all the land containing the water that flows in different directions belongs to the neighbours"* (i.e. watershed borders). However, the northern border was set at a place called Phedra, and not to the watershed line. According to the peace treaty signed with the Dutch in 1762, the Saamaka were not allowed to go further than Post Victoria, located a few kilometres before the plantation areas, but after flooding of their territory they were allowed to set up new settlements north of Victoria as a form of compensation. Based on this information, CELOS produced a map, shown in Figure 2 below. The Saamaka approved this map during a Gaan Kuutu (community meeting) and used it to approach the neighbouring Matawai, Paamaka and Okanisi (N'Djuka) tribes to seek their approval of the eastern and western borders. These three tribes signed agreements on the borders in 2012 (Paamaka and Matawai) and 2013 (Okanisi).

## VIOLATIONS OF THE INTERNATIONAL COURT RULING

In the 1990s, the Saamaka conducted a successful struggle to protect their territory against a Chinese multinational logging firm, culminating, after a decade, in the landmark 2007 judgement of the IACHR in their favour (*Box 2*). The court's ruling included a series of 10 actions that the Government of Suriname was obliged to take. Some of the most important of these were: 1) the State shall delimitate and demarcate the Saamaka territory according to their customary views; 2) the State shall grant legal recognition of their ownership rights over their lands; 3) the State shall ensure the Saamaka people's effective participation in decision-making that affects them through a culturally sensitive process of free prior and informed consent (FPIC); 4) the State shall stop all logging and mining concessions already granted and abstain from acts and land uses that might affect or damage the territory of the Saamaka until such delimitation, demarcation and legal titling are completed; 5) if after FPIC procedures the Saamaka approve a land use development, the State should carry out an independent social and environmental impact assessment; and 6) the State should ensure a fair share of the economic benefit derived from any state-prompted economic activities in the area.

### BOX 2. THE SAAMAKA JUDGEMENT

In 1986 Suriname adopted a new Constitution, which specified that all non-titled lands and natural resources belonged to the State. According to this constitution, the Saamaka people had no legal record and were seen as illegal occupants: they were therefore legally without any defence against violations of their human rights and tenure security and destruction of their forest, culture and livelihoods. In the 1990s, Suriname granted logging and mining concessions to private Chinese multinationals within the Saamaka people's traditional territory without consultation or their consent. The Saamaka were forbidden to carry out their daily forest-based activities within these concession areas.

To resist this invasion, in 2000 the Saamaka people organized themselves into the Association of Saamaka Authorities (Vereniging van Saamaka Gezagsdragers, or VSG) and submitted a petition to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, arguing that, although they did not possess a title for their ancestral territory, they had the right to use and possess it for their cultural, spiritual and economic activities. The case went to the IACHR in 2006. A year later, in 2007, the court recognized the Saamaka as tribal people with rights similar to those enjoyed by Indigenous Peoples, and decided that they did not need a title in order to own their ancestral lands – possession was sufficient.

The court found that the State of Suriname had violated articles 3 (judicial personality), 21 (right to property) and 25 (right to judicial protection) of the American Convention on Human Rights in relation to articles 1.1 and 2 (obligations to respect, ensure and give domestic legal effect of those rights).<sup>8</sup>

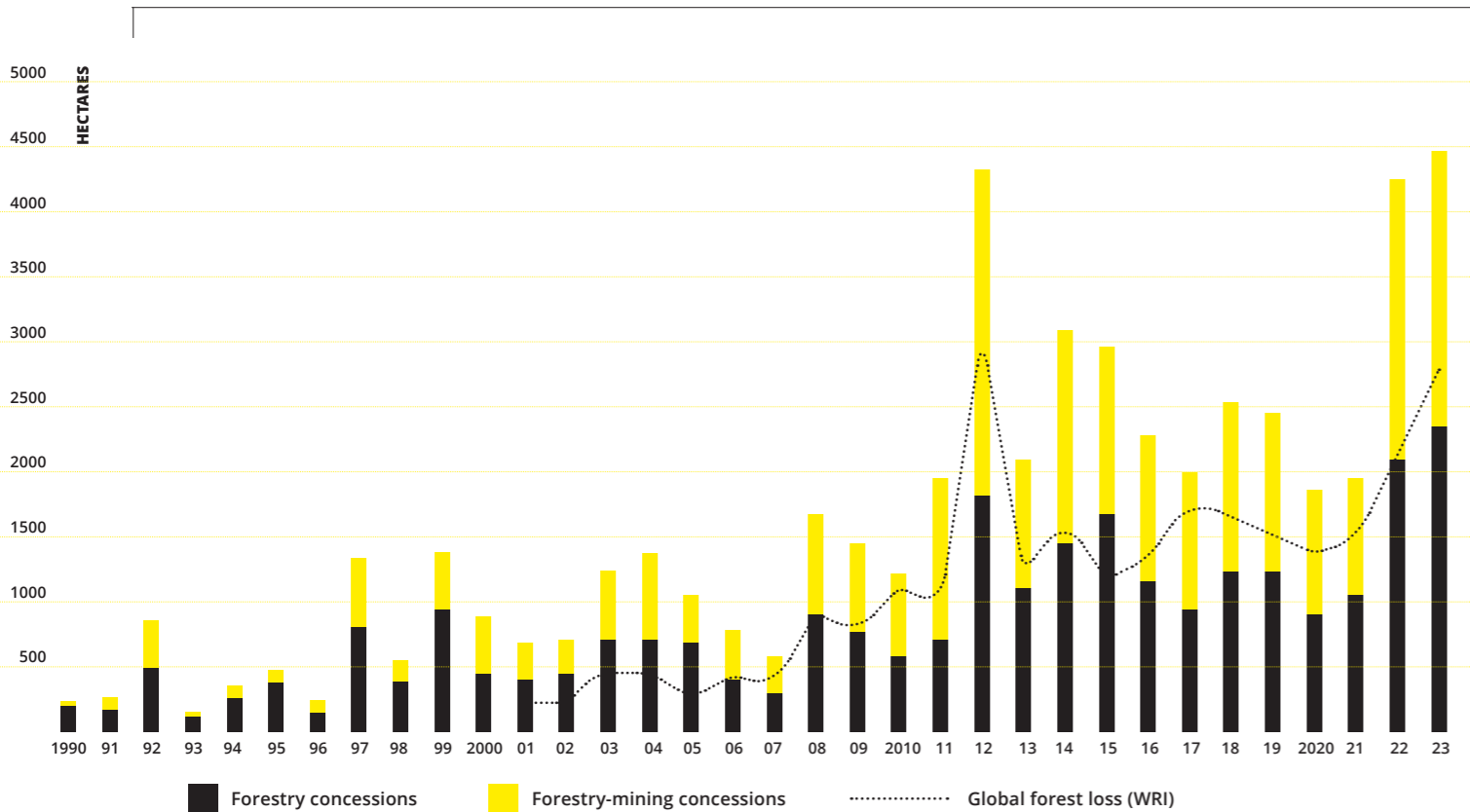
### NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL PRECEDENTS IN ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENCE

The Saamaka people have been pioneer environmental and human rights defenders both in Suriname and abroad. The Saamaka judgement of 2007 changed international jurisprudence so that FPIC should be applied to any development project in Indigenous and tribal lands, not only in Suriname but across the Americas. It also set a precedent for other communities to begin fighting for their rights. In 2005, Indigenous communities of Suriname, inspired by the Saamaka, filed a petition to the IACHR, which in 2015 finally ruled in their favour.<sup>9</sup> With renewed efforts by the Saamaka to protect their forests against logging concessions and to ensure compliance with the Saamaka judgement, other tribes in Suriname, such as the Kwinti and the Okanisi, are becoming motivated to stand together with them.

According to the IACHR, delimitation of the Saamaka territory and legal recognition of their collective rights should have started by 19 March 2008 and should have been concluded no later than 19 December 2010. Delimitation of the territory was completed but the borders have not been officially recognized by the government, putting at risk the self-determination of the Saamaka over their lands. Fourteen years after the court's deadline, neither the Saamaka people nor other Indigenous and tribal groups in Suriname have legal recognition of their land rights. Adoption of the land rights law continues to be postponed due to disagreements over different drafts (*Box 3*), and progress on public debate of the law in parliament has been delayed. Additionally, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Suriname (KKF) has been lobbying the government to hold up approval of the draft collective law (*Wet Grondenrechten*).

8 For more information, see International Network for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (2014). Case of the Saramaka People v. Suriname. <https://www.escri-net.org/caselaw/2014/case-saramaka-people-v-suriname>

9 See Inter-American Court of Human Rights (2015). Case of the Kaliña and Lokono Peoples v. Suriname. [https://www.corteidh.or.cr/docs/casos/articulos/seriec\\_309\\_ing.pdf](https://www.corteidh.or.cr/docs/casos/articulos/seriec_309_ing.pdf)



**Figure 3.** Cumulative areas of forest degradation and deforestation in Saamaka concessions, from the Joint Research Centre Tropical Moist Forests (JRC-TMF) dataset. The IACHR gave the government a deadline of 2010 to stop granting concessions and abstain from acts that would degrade and deforest areas within the Saamaka territory.

On 4 May 2023 it sent a letter to the chair of the Parliament, Marinus Bee, in which it rejected special treatment for Indigenous and tribal people and claimed equal rights to land:

*“We ask for respect for our Constitution, which stipulates the one and indivisibility of the territory, emphasizes the equality and therefore equal rights of every Surinamese and guarantees the joint ownership of all natural resources.”<sup>10</sup> It also stated: “The sovereignty of the country has been jeopardized by the unqualified ratification of treaties and national legislation is subordinated to this.”<sup>11</sup>*

10 Sun Nieuws (2023). KKF eist stopzetting behandeling Wet Grondenrechten. <https://www.sun.sr/Details/24508>; StarNieuws (2023). Assemblee­voorzitter Bee tikt KKF op de vingers. <https://m.starnieuws.com/index.php/welcome/index/nieuwsitem/75579>

11 Dagblad Suriname (2023). In felle repliek: KKF verwijt DNA-­voorzitter Bee solo-­actie in kwestie Wet Collectieve Rechten. <https://www.dbsuriname.com/2023/05/15/in-felle-repliek-­kkf-verwijt-dna-­voorzitter-bee-solo-­actie-in-kwestie-wet-collectieve-rechten/>

Diverging views on the content of the draft collective law, constant amendments and lobbying by the commercial sector have disrupted debate of the law in the National Assembly for almost a year, further delaying the government’s compliance with the actions ordered by the IACHR. Furthermore, in contravention of the court’s orders, the government has continued to grant logging and mining concessions and to invest in infrastructure development without FPIC from the Saamaka people, blatantly violating their rights and threatening their very existence. A total of 447,000 hectares of concessions have been granted within the territory: this represents 32% of the territory, which covers some 1.4 million hectares in total. Since the date of the judgement (2007), 40,855 hectares of forest have been disturbed, with almost 20,000 hectares degraded due to activities within these areas, and a striking 77% of all impacts have occurred since 2007. Forestry concessions are responsible for 53% of all degradation and deforestation (Figure 3).

### BOX. 3. PROGRESS ON ADOPTION OF A LAW ON COLLECTIVE LAND RIGHTS FOR INDIGENOUS AND TRIBAL PEOPLES IN SURINAME

In 2019, the first draft of a law granting collective rights to Indigenous and tribal peoples (ITPs) over their ancestral land (Raamwet Collectieve Rechten Inheemse en Tribale Volken) was agreed between the Government of Suriname and ITP communities. The draft was discussed in the National Assembly but due to parliamentary elections there was no time to approve it. The new government withdrew the draft law in 2021 and put forward a new draft framework law, which was rejected by ITP leaders as it did not integrate their views. In 2022 an amendment was made to the framework law which ITPs accepted; they were not completely in favour but wanted it to go to public debate in parliament. In January 2023, parliament began a public debate of the law, but there were many obstacles related to opposing views and representation of the different political parties.<sup>12</sup> By December 2023, lawmakers had finished the first round of debate and presented the government with their comments. The government still needs to respond to these comments and put forward its own amendments.

12 Star Nieuws (2023). DNA-leden wijzen op obstakels Wet Grondenrechten. <https://www.starnieuws.com/index.php/welcome/index/nieuwsitem/75697>





# LEVERAGING EVIDENCE FOR ACCOUNTABILITY

## ONGOING ENCROACHMENTS IN THE HEART OF THE MOST PRESERVED SAAMAKA FOREST AREA

Since 2022, the Saamaka people have endured another serious violation of the Saamaka judgement, with logging multinational Palmera Hout NV<sup>13</sup> constructing a road through their territory between March and December 2023, despite their opposition. No FPIC was obtained and no social and environmental impact assessment was conducted. Palmera only held a consultation in 2022 in the village of Asihdohopo, where the paramount chief of the Saamaka, Albert Aboikoni, lives, and obtained his consent.<sup>14</sup> However, while the paramount chief is the cultural and spiritual leader of the Saamaka, he does not have the authority to make decisions about land. This decision-making power resides with the owner of the lands, who are the 12 Saamaka clans,<sup>15</sup> and in this particular case the Awana clan. In a written communication to Palmera on 20 March 2022, members of the Awana clan, with the support of the VSG, rejected the construction of any infrastructure within their lands. The construction of the road is a violation of the Saamaka judgement because consultation did not follow the Saamaka's customary procedures, as stipulated by the IACHR, and because the logging company built it despite the objections of the customary owners.<sup>16</sup>

This road has enabled access to hundreds of hectares of tropical rainforest, with cultural, sacred and spiritual value for the Saamaka people. In less than two years (2021–2023), the Palmera road, initially stretching 4 km, was extended to 42.7 km.

<sup>13</sup> Palmera Hout NV belongs to the Saragreen Group, which is registered in Singapore and is owned by the pension fund Samcorp Capital Corporation, registered in Samoa (20% ownership), and M. Ting King Yi from Malaysia (80% ownership). Source: Land Matrix.

<sup>14</sup> On 10 February 2023, Albert Aboikoni sent a letter to the Foundation for Forest Management and Production Control (SBB), requesting it to reserve all the timber harvested along the road for the benefit of the Saamaka communities and especially members of his cooperative, Saamaka WOSU U.A. Source: authors.

<sup>15</sup> All members of the Saamaka community belong to one of the 12 Saamaka clans (Lo). Members of one clan are assumed to have the same ancestor (matrilineal relationship). Each Lo was assigned a piece of land by their ancestors. There is no map of clan lands, but knowledge of which land belongs to which clan is transferred from generation to generation.

<sup>16</sup> IACHR (2007), p. 40.

The 12 Saamaka clans, traditional owners of the land. Each clan has a head representative.



Photo: @ ILC/ Bram Ebus

Aerial photograph of the Palmera road built inside the Saamaka territory, December 2023.

The deforested area directly adjacent to this road has ballooned from 13 hectares to an alarming 268 hectares.<sup>17</sup> The road has facilitated access to the most pristine areas, preserved by the Saamaka for almost three centuries:

***“Our elders told us that the forest on the eastern side of the Saamaka territory should be kept preserved because it is our saving pot. It should also be kept free from settlements as it contains areas with high cultural and spiritual value and memories of our ancestors. We could not keep it this way after the 1960s because the forced displacement of our people, due to the construction of the lake, forced us to give [some] of the displaced communities land to resettle. Now this road cuts open this forest we managed to keep intact for centuries, and makes it accessible for loggers, miners and poachers....”***

**Nicolaas Stiefen Petrusi**, traditional authority of the village of Tutubuka, October 2023.

<sup>17</sup> EOS Data Analytics (2023). The Decades-Long Story of Saamaka, The Forest Defenders. <https://eos.com/blog/decades-long-story-of-saamaka-the-forest-defenders/>

Hotspots of recent change, with associated aerial photographs taken in December 2023, are identified in *Figure 4*. These photographs illustrate the activities that are taking place along the Palmera road and logging concessions that are damaging the forest. *Figure 5* highlights the mining and logging activities that have been taking place in the vicinity of the road and on the outskirts of the Saamaka territory; the opening of the new road will create new possibilities for logging in the heart of the Saamaka territory. Without legal recognition of their land rights, the Saamaka people are without any legal defence against forest loss, livelihood deprivation and land dispossession.

The promotion of illegal extractivist activities in the territory has undermined commitments made by the government to mitigate climate change and protect biodiversity when it signed the Paris Agreement and ratified the Convention on Biological Diversity, among others (*Box 4*).

#### **BOX 4. INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL COMMITMENTS MADE BY THE GOVERNMENT OF SURINAME**

The Government of Suriname has made promises to itself and to the rest of the world to combat the effects of climate change and to uphold the rights of ITPs, including FPIC, and to acknowledge their livelihoods and knowledge through multiple international and national commitments. This is evident in its ratification of key agreements such as the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in 1996, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 1997 and the Paris Agreement in 2019. Additionally, the government has partnered with the UN Development Programme (UNDP) to participate in the Climate Promise initiative, aimed at solidifying countries' ambitions and translating into action their Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) targets under the Paris Agreement.

On 2 June 2021, President Chandrikapersad Santokhi signed the Leaders' Pledge for Nature. With this pledge, the President expressed solidarity with the aims of protecting nature, addressing climate change and promoting sustainable practices. This includes engaging with local communities for sustainable solutions; mainstreaming biodiversity into policies, including for extractive industries; the fair and equitable sharing of benefits; mobilizing resources for nature-based solutions while contributing to livelihoods; and eliminating harmful subsidies to business.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Based in particular on commitment 10. Leaders Pledge for Nature: United to Reverse Biodiversity Loss by 2030 for Sustainable Development. [https://www.leaderspledgefornature.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Leaders\\_Pledge\\_for\\_Nature\\_27.09.20-ENGLISH.pdf](https://www.leaderspledgefornature.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Leaders_Pledge_for_Nature_27.09.20-ENGLISH.pdf)

With regards to mining activities, the country has ratified the Minamata Convention on Mercury to prevent mercury pollution from gold mining; respecting the land rights of ITPs is named as one of the ways to achieve reductions in mercury pollution.

These international commitments translate into national laws and framework acts that aim to mitigate the effects of climate change and acknowledge ITPs' rights. For example, the Environmental Framework Act (*Milieu Raamwet*) addresses land tenure and land rights of ITPs by ensuring the enforcement of consultation and FPIC. Another pending framework act that specifically recognizes the collective rights of ITPs is the Framework Act on Collective Rights of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (*Raamwet Collectieve Rechten Inheemse en Tribale Volken*), which has been on the agenda for years. The VSG submitted an official complaint to the President of the National Assembly on 5 April 2024 about the government's lack of commitment to accept this act, together with proposed amendments of the draft act.<sup>19</sup>

Although the government has made a number of international and national commitments to mitigate the effects of climate change and recognize ITPs' rights, the ongoing issuance of logging and mining concessions shows how existing laws are not being fully implemented. This leads to unsustainable use of forests, with ongoing violations of the rights of the Saamaka people. The government is not delivering on its international and national promises.

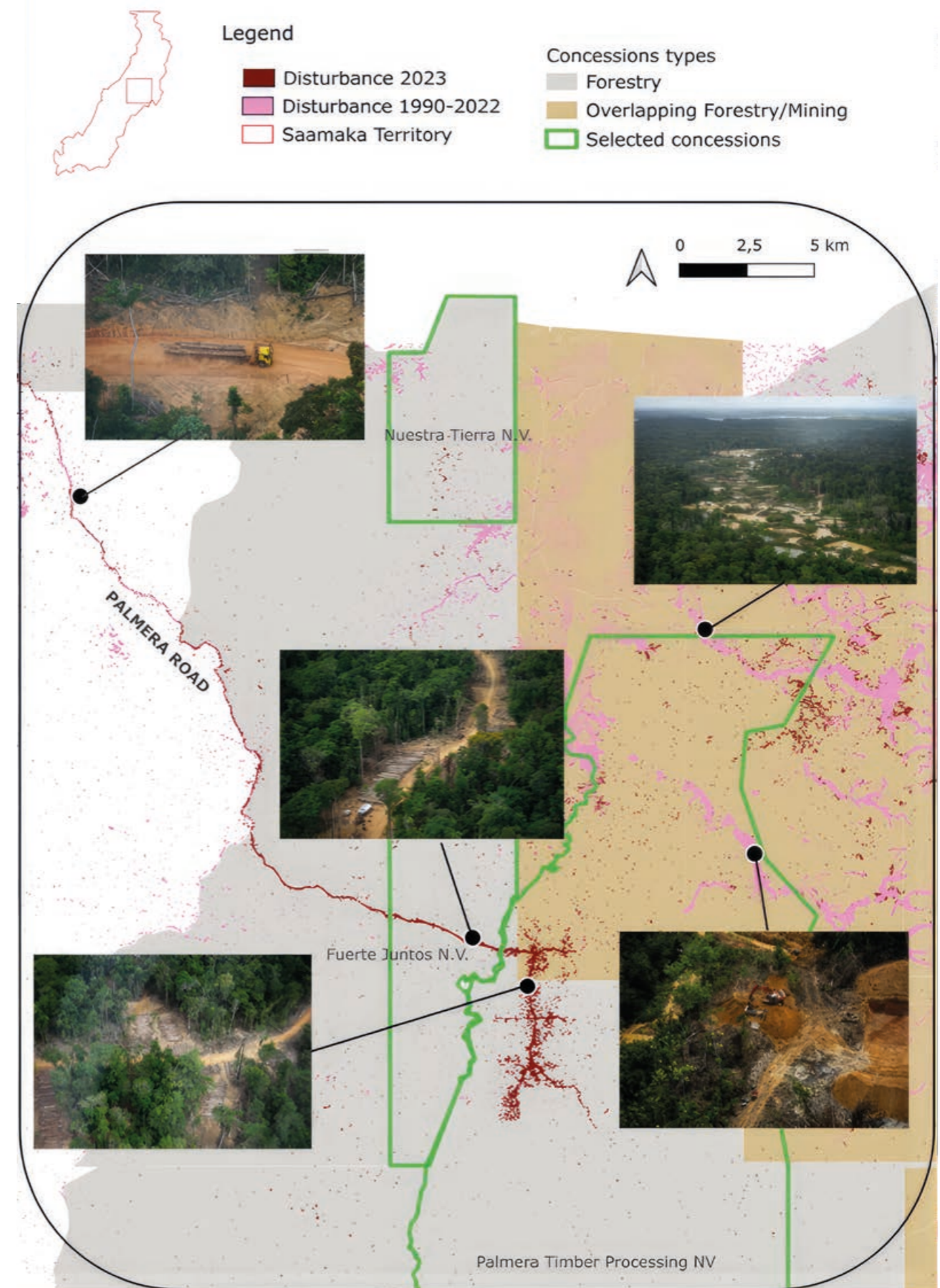


Figure 4. Hotspots of recent change along the Palmera road in the Saamaka territory. Source: LandMark data.

19 Vereniging van Inheemse Dorpshoofden in Suriname (VIDS). Standpunt VIDS, VSG en KAMPOS conceptwet Collectieve Rechten der Inheemse Volken en Tribale Volken. <https://vids.sr/standpunt-vids-vsg-en-kamos-conceptwet-collectieve-rechten-der-inheemse-volken-en-tribale-volken/>

## MOBILIZING EXISTING GEO-DATA

With concession holders continuing to develop their activities in the Saamaka territory, it is urgent to acknowledge and hold responsible parties accountable for forest disturbances and infringement of human rights. The Government of Suriname, through the Ministry of Land Policy and Forest Management (Ministerie van Grondbeleid en Bosbeheer), is the actor responsible for the approval or rejection of concession requests. The following analysis is based on the map of the Saamaka territory commissioned by the State in 2010–2021 (see *Box 1*) and accessible on the LandMark website (which is a reference resource for collectively held lands around the world).<sup>20</sup> Utilizing data obtained through remote sensing (*Box 5*) allows concessions and forestry activities within the Saamaka territory to be located and their impacts quantified, which provides evidence to support their claims for territorial rights and self-determination.

The Saamaka territory (1.4 million hectares) is highly forested and is rich in biodiversity and hydrological and mineral resources. About 80% of this land, roughly 1.1 million hectares, is still covered by untouched forests (*Figure 5*). Degraded and deforested lands account for some 98,000 hectares (7% of the territory); such significant degradation is primarily due to extractivist activities by holders of concessions.

There are many concessions encroaching on the Saamaka territory or in close proximity to it. *Figure 5* shows the extent of this coverage, with some 447,000 hectares of concessions granted inside the territory and 710,000 hectares on its outskirts. In the territory, 66% of the concessions are for forestry, with the remainder being concessions with overlapping claims between forestry and mining. It is important to note that, according to the agreements on the borders made between the Saamaka and the Matawai and Paamaka (2012) and the Saamaka and the Okanisi (2013), no logging or mining concessions may be granted in these adjoining territories without the consent of all the tribes involved.

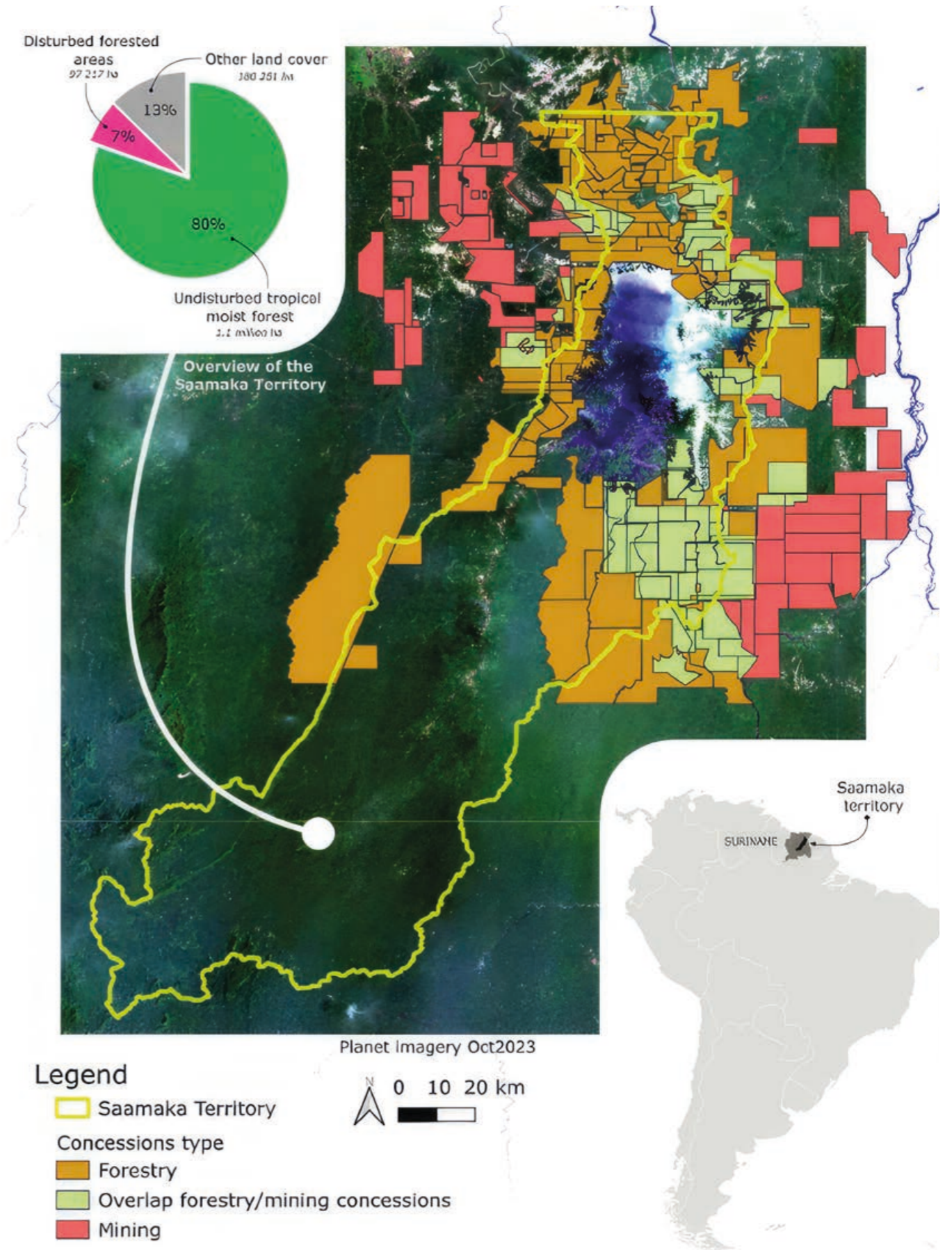
***“For the Saamaka people there is no doubt about the borders, there is nothing in between the Saamaka territory and the borders with the Matawai, Okanisi (D’Juka) and Paamaka tribes.”***

– **Hugo Jabini**, Saamaka human rights defender, Goldman Prize 2009.

The orders of the IACHR specify that no logging or gold mining concessions can be issued within the Saamaka territory, unless each of three safeguards – effective participation through a thorough FPIC procedure following a traditional consultation process, fair sharing of benefits, and prior social and environmental impact assessment – has been met.<sup>21</sup> Yet within the Saamaka territory there are currently four commercial logging concessions and three gold mining concessions granted by the State, about which the Saamaka people were not consulted or informed.

<sup>20</sup> See: <https://www.landmarkmap.org/>

<sup>21</sup> IACHR (2007), p. 40.



**Figure 5.** Forestry and mining concessions encroaching on the Saamaka territory. Transitions 1990-2022 within the Tropical Moist Forest domain, from the JRC-TMF dataset. **Source:** LandMark data.



There was no explanation to the communities about the State's decision to grant these areas to private companies, and no information on what impacts they would have on their lives. None of the safeguards was applied, explicitly violating the orders of the court.

**Table 1.** List of logging and mining concessions granted to private companies within the Saamaka territory

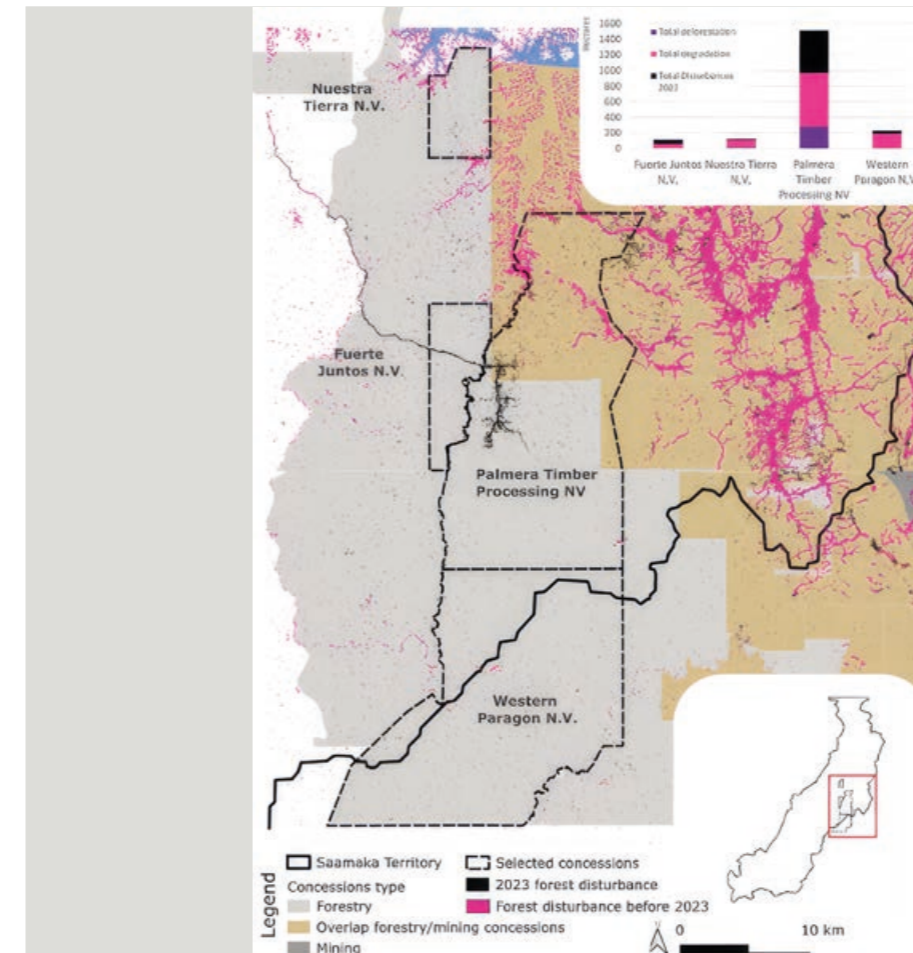
CONCESSION (LAND MATRIX DEAL ID)	TYPE OF LICENCE	HECTARES
Palmera Hout NV (#10409)	Logging	29,738
Western Paragon NV (#10410)	Logging	29,687
Fuerte Juntos NV (#10411)	Logging	4,300
Nuestra Tierra NV (#10412)	Logging	3,592
Dorado Resources NV	Mining exploration licence	N/A
Loyalty Natural Resources NV	Mining exploitation licence	N/A
Sarakreek Minerals Development NV	Mining exploitation licence	N/A

The current footprint of the four logging concessions is presented in *Figure 6*. While for most of these concessions logging activities are just starting, the case of Palmera already illustrates the disturbances to come with the recent opening of its road through the territory. The road was built by Palmera to reach its logging concession, despite strong opposition from local Saamaka communities.

### BOX 5. FOREST DISTURBANCE DATA FROM REMOTE SENSING

The European Commission's Joint Research Centre Tropical Moist Forests (JRC-TMF) dataset tracks spatially explicit areas of both deforestation and forest degradation in tropical moist forests from 1990 onwards using Landsat time series imagery.<sup>22</sup> Forest degradation from selective logging, fire or natural events is defined as a temporary disturbance occurring for up to 2.5 years, while deforestation is a longer-term disturbance where disruptions to tree cover (absence of tree foliage cover within a 30m pixel) are visible for more than 2.5 years. It also provides a classification of undisturbed tropical moist forest (closed evergreen or semi-evergreen forest) where no disturbance (degradation or deforestation) has been observed in the Landsat historical record over the period 1982–2023.

22 Vancutsem, C. et al. (2021). Long-term (1990–2019) monitoring of forest cover changes in the humid tropics. *Science Advances* 7,eabe1603. Doi:10.1126/sciadv.abe1603



**Figure 6.** Location and disturbance trends of recent logging concessions. **Source:** LandMark data.

Global Forest Watch's data on global tree cover loss (or global forest loss) provides spatially explicit areas of forest loss over the period 2001–2023, with pixel values denoting the year of occurrence of loss from Landsat time series imagery.<sup>23</sup>

To allow comparison between these two data sources, the global forest loss data has been extracted based on the extent of JRC-TMF humid tropical forest with a tree cover in 2000 of at least 30% canopy density. Differences between the two sources of data are further presented here:

<https://www.globalforestwatch.org/blog/data/tree-cover-loss-and-tropical-moist-forest-data-compared/>

23 Hansen, M.C. et al. (2013). High-Resolution Global Maps of 21st-Century Forest Cover Change. *Science* 342,850-853(2013). Doi:10.1126/science.1244693

The Saamaka territory is also coming under pressure from concessions operating in its direct vicinity (Figure 7). These concessions are responsible for the degradation of over 70,000 hectares of forest and the direct deforestation of 30,000 hectares. It is important to consider that while these concessions are situated outside the Saamaka territory, they exert substantial pressure on it. The rapid encroachment of such projects raises concerns about the significant impacts they could have on the territory in the near future.

## EXTRACTIVIST CHOICES AND IMPACTS

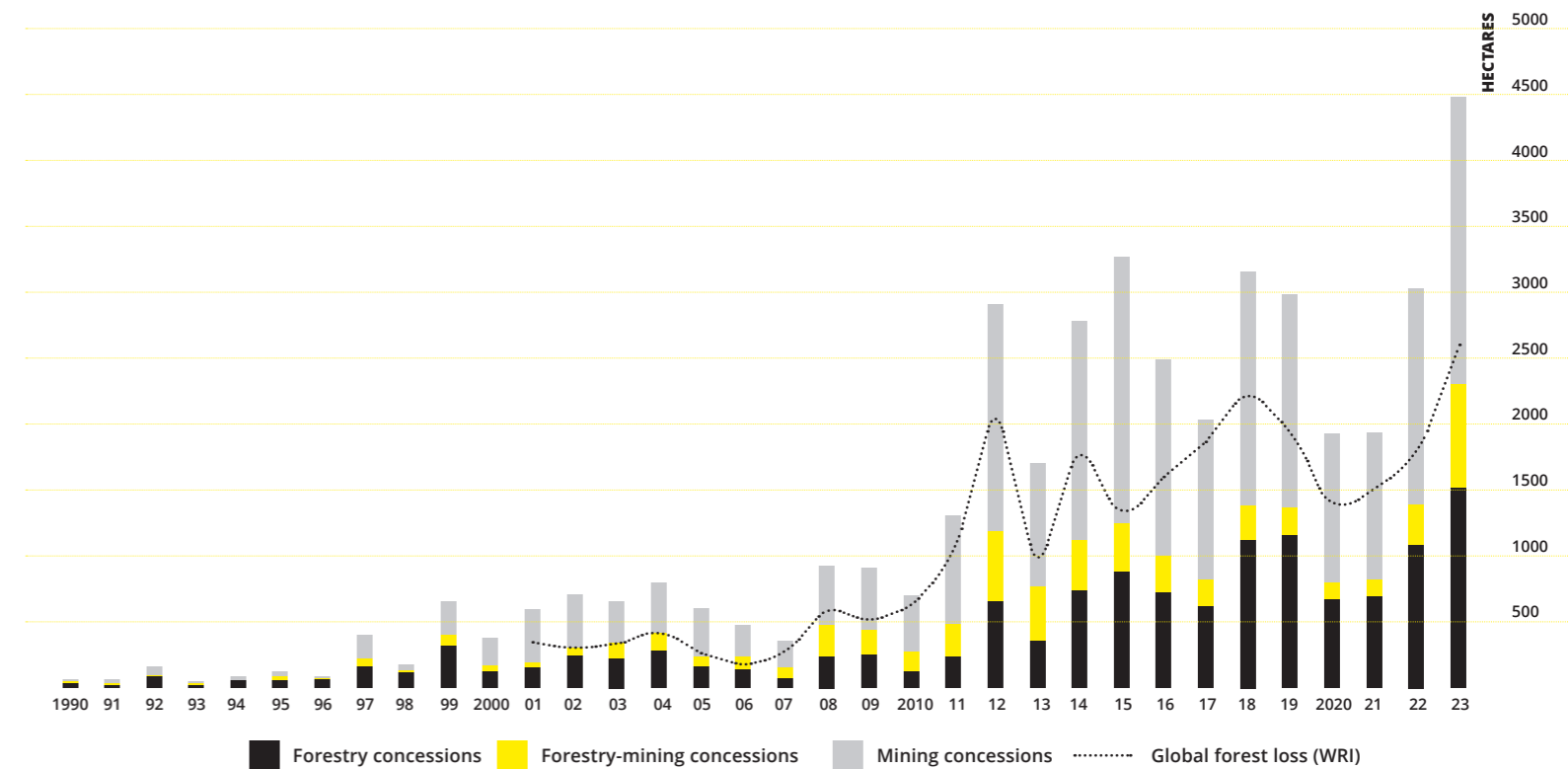
The forest disturbance and deforestation figures presented in this report include those related to logging practices carried out by Saamaka people under community forest licences and as individuals. These are permits issued by the national government to communities so that they can harvest timber and non-timber forest products. However, it should be stressed that the responsibility for forest damage caused by community forest concessions lies primarily with the State. The issuance of these community licences and the *Generaal Pardon* (Box 6) have been the main policies driving the expansion of indiscriminate commercial logging under the guise of community forestry.

Since there is no legal recognition of the land rights of ITPs in Suriname, the government, through the issuance of community permits, made it possible for these communities to apply for the “right” to practise small-scale agriculture, collect non-timber forest products and harvest timber in certain defined areas, both for subsistence and commercial purposes. However, the IACHR was clear in its 2007 judgement that these community forest concessions were another violation of the rights of the Saamaka people, and mandated the State to reconsider and stop using this model:

**“These concessions are presented by the State as a way to provide effective recognition of the property rights of the members of the Saamaka people. In practice, however, community forest concessions confer limited collective rights to the Saamaka people as these are granted to individuals of the community solely on the basis of the discretion of the Minister in charge of forest management and subject to any conditions that the Minister may impose. The allocation of these areas does not acknowledge [the] Saamaka customary system of property according to their customary system and as such is a violation of the rights of the Saamaka people by the State.”<sup>24</sup>**

To acquire a community forest permit, traditional authorities submit a formal request to the Ministry of Land Policy and Forest Management. If the permit is granted, community concessionaires usually enter into a formal agreement with a logging company.

<sup>24</sup> IACHR (2007), p. 33.



**Figure 7.** Overview of forest disturbances from JRC-TMF (forest degradation and deforestation combined) and WRI's Global Forest Watch: forest cover loss caused by different types of concession, in hectares.

### BOX 6. GOVERNMENTAL STRATEGY: CLOAKING TERRITORIAL CLAIMS WHILE GROUNDING THE NOTION OF AN EXTRACTIVE TERRITORY

In 2018 a government measure known as the *Generaal Pardon* allowed local Saamaka community members to take out, without a licence, incidental felled timber trees located outside areas designated as forestry concessions. The purpose of this was to give young members of the Saamaka community opportunities to generate income. However, the measure was poorly monitored and Saamaka community members not only extracted felled timber but logged forest indiscriminately for more than five years under the justification of this policy. The measure was revoked in 2023 but Saamaka loggers are continuing to work extensively and without control. The impacts of their activities are visible in Figure 7, in areas outside the main concessions.

Each agreement requires approval from the Ministry of Regional Development, and the company has to pay a fee; about 20% of this goes to the community and the rest is paid to the ministry.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> van Kanten, R. and Razab Sekh, G. (2020). Improving the outcomes of community forests

The agreement has a payment system based on the amount of timber produced by the contractor. Until September 2019, communities with a community forest permit were exempt from paying annual concession rights fees, meaning that enterprises harvesting wood from community forests had fewer strict regulations to comply with than when harvesting from their own concessions, making their operations less costly. In addition, since community forest concessions did not have to comply with a management plan, timber harvests in these areas were often subject to little control. However, since the introduction of the Sustainable Forest Management Information System Suriname (SFISS) in 2019, commercial logging operations in community forests have been obliged to follow the same regulations as in regular concessions, including annual fees and harvest plans.

Up until 2023, a total of 92,350 hectares of community logging concessions had been issued within the Saamaka territory and another 285,116 hectares were under request for community logging. In addition, 108,658 hectares of gold mining exploitation licences had been issued within the territory and 57,935 hectares of mining exploration rights in the southeastern and southwestern parts of the Saamaka territory had been granted to at least six companies.<sup>26</sup> The use of mercury and (in the past year) cyanide in gold mining has caused lethal pollution of fresh water sources within the Saamaka territory.

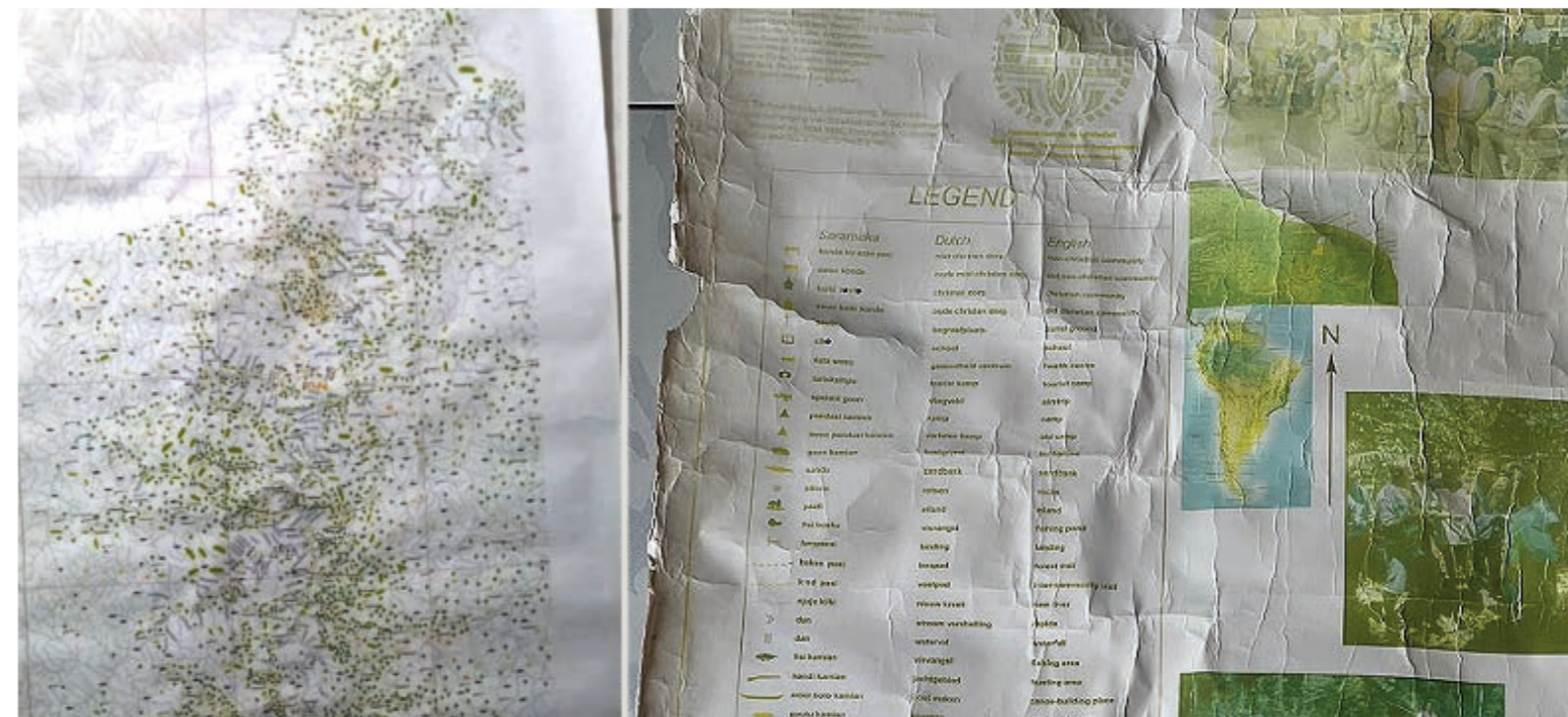
The VSG rejects this model, as it has led to Saamaka communities losing control and management over their lands. It does not provide them with security of tenure as the government can also issue mining permits to third parties within these areas. The model of community forestry imposed by the State on the Saamaka has also delegitimized their customary systems of property. Since community forestry concessions are not allocated in consultation with the traditional land owners (i.e. clans), it is often the case that when issued these permits overlap with several clan lands, creating an internal land ownership conflict.<sup>27</sup> Elite capture and internal tension have been among the social consequences of this forest management model. It is urgent therefore to call on the State to revoke all community forestry concessions and refrain from granting new ones, until the Saamaka have internally agreed on the land use and forest management systems that they themselves want for their land.

## SACRED GROUNDS: THE ESSENCE OF SAAMAKA TERRITORY

Logging, mining and the development of road infrastructure are having negative impacts on Saamaka sacred grounds, which form the essence of their existence as a tribal people. For nearly three centuries, the Saamaka have preserved the forests that contain these places, along with their water sources and biodiversity. IACHR expert witness Peter Poole, who assisted the Saamaka to develop a map to justify their territorial claims at the IACHR (Box 1), declared in 2006:

***“The Saamaka retain strong cultural and spiritual ties. For example, there are numerous sacred sites in Saamaka territory, most of which the Saamaka chose not to record on their map for religious and privacy-related reasons. In fact, there are so many of these sites that it would have been difficult to record them all on the map. I would say that the Saamaka see their entire territory as a sacred space in one way or another and they are deeply spiritual [...]”***<sup>28</sup>

Some of these places are recorded in the first map developed by the Saamaka depicting their local use of their land (Figure 8). A second participatory mapping process, which took place between 2014 and 2016 with the active participation of more than 267 Saamaka community members, complemented this process.



**Figure 8.** First map of Saamaka traditional occupation, which was prepared by the Saamaka with support from the Forest Peoples Programme in 2000. It includes all traditional land uses and areas of high cultural value. **Photo:** ©ILC/VSG.

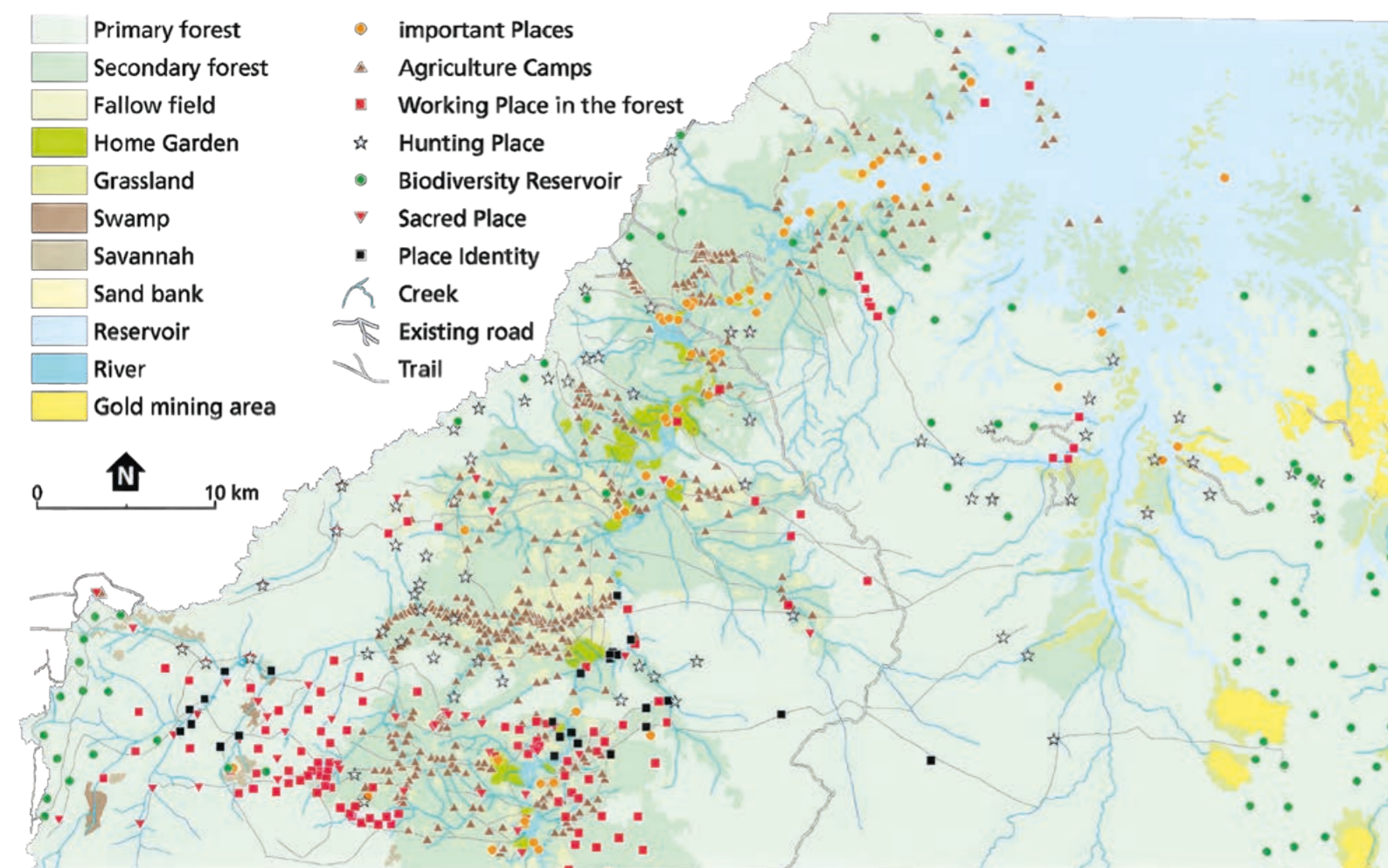
in Suriname. Tropenbos Suriname. <https://www.tropenbos.sr/resources/publications/improving+the+outcomes+of+community+forests+in+suriname>

26 See Gonini, the National Land Monitoring System of Suriname, at: [www.gonini.org](http://www.gonini.org)

27 van Kanten and Razab Sekh (2020).

28 IACHR (2007). Case of Twelve Saramaka Clans v. Suriname. Affidavit of Dr. Peter Poole, Expert Witness.

<https://www.forestpeoples.org/sites/fpp/files/publication/2010/09/surinameiachr+saramaka+affidavit+poole+may07eng.pdf>



**Figure 9.** Second map of Saamaka traditional occupation produced by the Saamaka community in 2014–2015 using P3DM. A third map was produced by Tropenbos Suriname in 2021, covering another area, 2017. **Source:** authors.

This second map was produced using participatory 3D modelling (P3DM)<sup>29</sup> and it documented more than 38 layers of information about Saamaka traditional occupation and natural resource management, some of which are shown in *Figure 9*.<sup>30</sup> In the P3DM exercise, Saamaka communities marked places of intrinsic traditional value such as sacred sites (taku kamia) and other sites considered necessary (fanoudu kamia), as well as locations with intrinsic irreplaceable value, including areas that are important just because they exist. For the Saamaka, these areas provide a critical regulation function for wildlife and other resources they depend upon and as such they have been preserved through customary conservation practices.

<sup>29</sup> See: <https://vimeo.com/144478218>

<sup>30</sup> For more details, refer to Ramirez-Gomez et al. (2017). Participatory 3D modelling as a socially engaging and user-useful approach in ecosystem service assessments among marginalized communities. *Applied Geography*. 83. 63–77. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0143622816302077>

The mapping of culturally, economically and spiritually significant sites for local people within the territory was juxtaposed with the current extent of forestry and mining concessions. The human rights impacts of these encroachments are vividly depicted. The heatmap in *Figure 10* showcases the relative importance of these areas and starkly underscores the disruptions endured, prompting concerns about the potential future expansion of threats under a business-as-usual scenario.

**Figure 10.** Overlap between concessions and tribal landmarks. **Source:** authors using LandMark data.

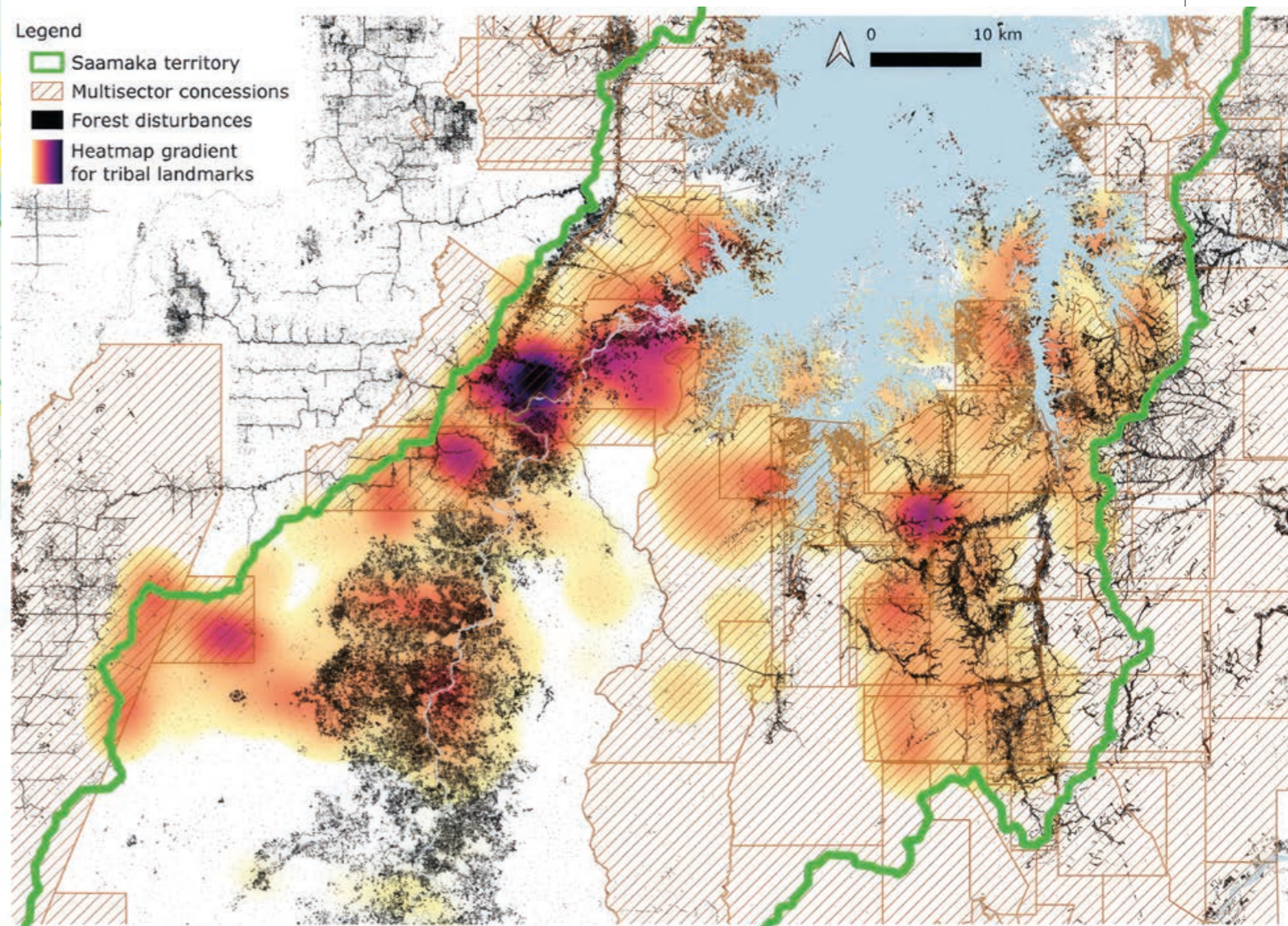




Photo: @ ILC/Riano Gunther



Photo: @ ILC/Bram Ebus

# RESISTANCE AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## STANDING UP TO SECURE AND PROTECT PEOPLE'S RIGHTS AND TERRITORY

Under national law, the Saamaka people are still without any legal defence to protect their territory against threats. However, this has not stopped them from resisting encroachment and human rights violations. The Saamaka are nationally and internationally known for their battles to defend their rights and territory. For example, in 2009 two Saamaka leaders were awarded the Goldman Environmental Prize for their victory at the IACHR.<sup>31</sup>

Since 2022, Saamaka people have been taking action to report non-compliance by the government with the Saamaka judgement and demand that it stop activities by the Palmera logging multinational that encroach upon the forest. By submitting a petition, they managed to persuade the government to revoke plans to construct a bridge over the Suriname River to help with the construction of the Palmera road. However, despite this community stand against the development, in March 2023 Palmera paid a local entrepreneur to set up a ferry service across the river, which it has been using to transport road construction machinery into the forest and trucks carrying timber out.

Seeing the unavoidable threat, in March 2023 community members shared hundreds of WhatsApp messages asking their traditional leaders to take action against road construction, the extraction of valuable logs with no economic benefits to themselves and the destruction of forests. At this point the VSG organized a large meeting in Atjoni, the entry point to the middle and upper parts of the Saamaka territory, to listen to people and organize a response. About 500 people attended and, by written consent known as the Atjoni declaration, reinforced the mandate of the VSG to lead national and international legal action to protect the Saamaka's human rights and their forest lands. The first response of the VSG to this call from the community was to produce **a video** with its own resources, to begin to raise international attention about this issue and to appeal for support from international organizations.<sup>32</sup> This report is a response to that call.

31 The Goldman Environmental Prize (2009). 2009 Goldman Prize Winner: Wanze Eduards & Hugo Jabini. <https://www.goldmanprize.org/recipient/wanze-eduards-hugo-jabini/>

32 See: <https://vimeo.com/817242011>

Palmera has paid for a ferry service to transport road construction machinery into the forest after opposition from Saamaka community members prevented the construction of a bridge, December 2023.

Photo: @ ILC/ Bram Ebus



Photo: @ ILC/ Sara O. Ramirez-Gomez

A gathering took place in April 2023 of more than 500 Saamaka community members, who met to discuss and take action against the intrusion of Palmera NV. The meeting led to the Atjoni declaration, April 2023.

Moreover, as mandated in the Atjoni declaration, in 2023 the VSG filed two national court cases on non-compliance with the 2007 IACHR judgement and another on the new violations by Palmera NV. Further, in November 2023, a group of Saamaka leaders travelled to Washington D.C. to attend a hearing at the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, which they had explicitly requested to report new violations of the Saamaka judgement. An additional hearing was requested at the IACHR to make a report to the court on non-compliance with the judgement and the recent violations caused by the building of the Palmera road.

Finally, in January 2024, the VSG launched an international petition to call for support from the international community.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>33</sup> See: [https://www.change.org/p/stand-with-us-to-protect-the-saamaka-people-and-the-amazon-forest-in-suriname?recruiter=1326481999&recruited\\_by\\_id=e0b7af00-b148-11ee-b745-4312d1f79cc7&utm\\_source=share\\_petition&utm\\_campaign=petition\\_dashboard&utm\\_medium=copylink](https://www.change.org/p/stand-with-us-to-protect-the-saamaka-people-and-the-amazon-forest-in-suriname?recruiter=1326481999&recruited_by_id=e0b7af00-b148-11ee-b745-4312d1f79cc7&utm_source=share_petition&utm_campaign=petition_dashboard&utm_medium=copylink)

While communities have been mobilizing to halt this threat, Palmera NV and others press on with road works and timber harvesting:

***“Trucks run day and night through our forests. If we do not stand strong, if we do not stop this, it will be the end of us.”***

– Mieke Linga, June 2023, community of Ginginstone

### **ACKNOWLEDGING RIGHTFUL LAND CLAIMS, PAVING THE WAY TO DEMOCRATIC SELF-RULE OVER LAND**

This report is a response to the VSG’s appeal to the international community, asking for support to gather evidence that demonstrates the violations of the Saamaka judgement by the Government of Suriname, and a response to their request for help in their advocacy efforts and to amplify their voices in claiming justice and reparation for all the damage their communities have endured.

Accordingly, in this document, we provide evidence that demonstrates that, in contravention of international court orders, the Government of Suriname has not abstained from acts that damage the habitat of the Saamaka, nor has it made sufficient efforts to protect their rights. As such, in the first place this report provides technical support for the three legal actions that the Saamaka have initiated, two in Suriname and one with the IACHR, to stop forest-encroaching activities within their land and to call for full compliance with the Saamaka judgement. Further, according to the Saamaka, this report will help them to gain visibility and credibility within Surinamese society. According to a Saamaka spokesman:

***“This report gives us a stronger voice. It arms us with the confidence to talk about what is happening and it will help us be taken seriously in the advocacy for the legal recognition of our land rights. It gives us credibility because we can demonstrate it is not just talking, we can provide evidence that violations to the Saamaka judgement have been happening. Furthermore, this report will give eyes to the Surinamese citizens in Paramaribo and civil society organizations so that they understand what is happening in their backyard and eventually we can finally gain their support so far lacking.”***

– Hugo Jabini, Saamaka human rights defender, Goldman Environmental Prize, 2009.

### **A CALL FOR JOINT INTERNATIONAL ADVOCACY**

Based on this analysis, we call for the development of an international joint advocacy agenda and for the Saamaka to be offered the critical support they need. We consider it imperative to advocate for official recognition of the boundaries of the Saamaka territory, thereby asserting its legitimacy and validity within legal frameworks. Such recognition serves as a foundational step towards acknowledging the agency of the Saamaka people and for paving the way to their territorial self-determination.

Endorsing the demarcation of the borders of Saamaka land would not only bring justice to their efforts to defend the forest but would establish a precedent whereby the Saamaka people are afforded the legitimacy to engage in self-determination processes concerning their collective future.

Further, it is important to advocate that the Government of Suriname legally recognize the collective ancestral ownership rights of the Saamaka people (and other Indigenous Peoples in Suriname), and for Suriname to ratify ILO Convention 169 on the rights of Indigenous and tribal peoples. Such a joint advocacy agenda should also prioritize actions so that the government puts a stop to land uses that encroach within the Saamaka territory, in accordance with the international commitments it made when it signed the Paris Agreement in 2016 and the Leaders' Pledge for Nature in 2021, and by its ratification of the Convention on Biological Diversity in 1996. During COP 28 in Dubai in December 2023, the President of Suriname, H.E. Chandrikapersad Santokhi, made a high-level commitment to protect "at all costs" Suriname's rich biodiversity and to keep deforestation in check.<sup>34</sup> The Saamaka territory still contains 1.1 million hectares of undisturbed forest, reflecting the traditional capacity of the Saamaka people to control and manage the sustainable use of their forest. We believe in the contribution that the Saamaka have made in helping Suriname to comply with its UNFCCC, CBD and other commitments and we will advocate for the right conditions for this to happen and for this contribution to be internationally recognized.

### ENGAGING IN LAND GOVERNANCE

It is of the utmost urgency that a rights-based approach is adopted to effectively address adverse impacts on human rights and the associated risks. While the driving force of demand for mineral and forest commodities continues to increase, mapping the rights of local communities and Indigenous Peoples is an urgent and mandatory step to ensure the inclusion and legitimacy of previously excluded interests.

Securing land rights must not be seen as a technological or managerial fix but must be considered part of a wider and more systemic transformational adaptation. Subsequently, essential support should be guaranteed to the Saamaka in the realm of land governance, emphasizing the necessity for negotiated internal land use zoning agreements. A strategic approach of this kind will ensure the revitalization of traditional (and more transparent) decision-making processes and enforced FPIC, where the interests of the broader population outweigh those of certain individuals or factions. Through negotiated zoning, policies and regulations can be formulated to optimize communal benefits, fostering inclusive and sustainable development trajectories.

<sup>34</sup> COP 28. National Statement Republic of Suriname by H.E. Chandrikapersad Santokhi. [https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/SURINAME\\_cop28cmp18cma5\\_HLS\\_ENG.pdf](https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/SURINAME_cop28cmp18cma5_HLS_ENG.pdf)

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