

**Developing Partnerships between the
North Rupununi District Development Board (NRDDB)
and the Iwokrama International Centre Programme for
Rain Forest Conservation & Development**

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Overview

The North Rupununi District Development Board (NRDDB) is progressing as a fairly successful initiative by the Makushi people and other settlers in the Hinterland of Guyana to take control over their resources and development processes. One of the ways in which this is being done is through a constructive (and sometimes critical) engagement and interaction with the Iwokrama Programme, the Government of Guyana, the private sector and civil society. Focusing on the improvement of their livelihoods through the wise use of the resources of the savanna, mountains, rivers and forests, the NRDDB has begun to build a basis for economic and social well being. It has endorsed the vision and priorities for Amerindian development proposed in Guyana's National Development Strategy and has been an active player in consultations and recommendations for Constitutional Reform and the recent revision of the Amerindian Act, which frames the rights and privileges of the first peoples of Guyana. In addition, NRDDB played a key role in the definition of Guyana's Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) and is cited as an institutional model in the PRS.

Location

The NRDDB communities are situated in the south western, hinterland region of Guyana with two of the world's most important ecological systems: the Guiana Shield and the Amazon Basin. The Republic of Guyana is located on the northern coast of the South American continent sharing borders with Brazil, Venezuela and Suriname.

Context & Background

Some ten to fifteen years ago, the North Rupununi Region was one of the most neglected and inaccessible areas of Guyana. According to the documented testimonies of villagers it took two weeks paddling north down the Essequibo River to Rockstone by canoe to purchase bare essentials such as salt, matches and soap, or a two week round-trip walking to Lethem, the nearest town to the south. An epic journey is described by parents seeking medical attention for their firstborn child; undertaking this trip on foot with the help of a donkey, the child nonetheless died before reaching the clinic in the town. In those days (1980's and before) access to the lone secondary school was a sometimes insurmountable challenge for the children of the North Rupununi. The former chairman of the NRDDB (William Andries) recalls the stress and strain and the intermittent food supply. The route was at best circuitous, traveling by horseback or on foot sometimes through Brazil and back into Guyana and in rainy season, it was cut off entirely.

Winds of Change: A Road and a Rainforest Programme

Since then, two critical changes have impacted on the livelihoods of the 13 communities living in this area. First, an unpaved road was built through the area, linking Georgetown on the coast in the north to the border with Brazil in the south, bringing with it unprecedented threats and opportunities. The challenge

this road poses is best described in the following words: “ We must prepare ourselves to use the road – so that the road does not use us.” However, what continues to lag behind is the implementation of a sound road management plan. The communities have discussed and recommended critical steps and actions required to implement this, but neither the Government nor the Iwokrama management or Board have, apparently, prioritized the implementation of this plan. Second, a major rainforest programme was established; the Iwokrama International Centre for Rainforest Conservation and Development.

Iwokrama

Iwokrama is an ambitious conservation and development programme that seeks to demonstrate that the rainforest resources in poor and developing countries can be utilised to earn income and establish businesses while conserving the integrity of the resources through knowledge-based management. Iwokrama was discussed as a success story of the Latin America & Caribbean region at a special session of the UN to review the implementation of Agenda 21 at the Rio +5 meeting in New York in June, 1997. There are two important tenets of the Iwokrama Act; one is that Iwokrama is set up to bring benefits to Guyana and Guyanese and to the wider world, the other is that the traditional rights to the use of the Iwokrama Forest by the Indigenous Peoples are enshrined in the Iwokrama Act within the Laws of Guyana. These two principles provide a decent basis for developing genuine partnerships and stakeholder relationships in the implementation processes of the Iwokrama programme. Mainly through the committed work of a strong local team of dedicated Guyanese attached to the Iwokrama Programme, who worked through community structures and village councils, and the organisational base provided by the NRDDDB itself, Iwokrama has been able to embark on a series of working partnerships with the NRDDDB and its constituent communities.

The NRDDDB has emerged as the key forum recognised by Iwokrama and the Government and society as a whole, as representing the local, frontline stakeholders in Iworkama’s programme.

Iwokrama’s genesis itself is vested in the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in 1989, at which Guyana dedicated part of its pristine forest to demonstrate the practice of sustainable development. In 1996, the Iwokrama International Centre for Rainforest Conservation and Development (referred to hereafter as Iwokrama) was established through an Act of Parliament with a mandate to manage 371,000 hectares of frontier rain forest on the edge of the North Rupununi area. At the local level, Iwokrama facilitates participatory and collaborative management approaches to management and it is expected to bring with it opportunities for business ventures, and employment. Through the NRDDDB, Iwokrama engages in social processes which promote the interests and protects the rights of the people. The NRDDDB therefore mandates Iwokrama to take a people-centred approach.

In the beginning however, Iwokrama was not a good example of democratic decision-making. There was no authentic consultation with Guyanese as a whole, nor with Indigenous peoples as a major group. Iwokrama began as a big political decision with a vision – not a bad one– but one that did not harness, at the outset, the views, fears, hopes or interests of the rights holders / stakeholders – the Makushi and other peoples whose lands and the sacred and spiritual values as well as their modern aspirations were at stake.

Iwokrama was not a popular thing to start with. Although it was a matter of pride that small, poor, underdeveloped Guyana could bring to the world stage the spectacular prospect of the Iwokrama mission to coincide with the Earth Summit held in Rio in Brazil – the internal processes did not measure up. In fact the whole presentation of Iwokrama to Commonwealth Heads of Government was done with most Guyanese in the dark. Also, at the start, only two communities within the perimeters of the site were earmarked to benefit from or be involved with Iwokrama's programme – Surama and Fairview.

Suspensions and worries about this Iwokrama giant looming in the front yard of the Makushi & North Rupununi peoples grew. At this time, the communities themselves were discussing and looking for a way to increase their collective strength and voice to guard their interests and secure their development. A series of community meetings and open forum discussions were held between and amongst the North Rupununi communities and/ or their representatives. This process was facilitated through an outreach programme designed and implemented by a local Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO), Red Thread, which had experience of social development processes in Indigenous communities. Red Thread was hired by IDRC on behalf of Iwokrama to conduct this information-sharing and communications initiative and out of this process the NRDDDB was formed in January of 1996. The NRDDDB emerged with a strong self-directed agenda in mind that was inclusive and mindful of the role and rights of women, youth, non-Makushi, non Indigenous and/ or mixed communities that were legitimate residents of the district. Importantly, NRDDDB saw itself as the legitimate representative of the district and as the monitor/ watch dog of Iwokrama and other types of development agencies waiting in the wings with a variety of projects and programmes. The NRDDDB also drafted a constitution which specified from the start that it would retain the right to elect an Amerindian to sit on the Iwokrama Board of Trustees to represent Amerindian interests. It was only in 2002 that this lobby prevailed and the President of Guyana appointed the NRDDDB's nominee to the Iwokrama Board

It is also true to state that the Iwokrama programme could not and would not survive and would never meet its mandate without the good will and participation and leadership of the peoples of the North Rupununi. The NRDDDB will have an increasingly significant role in brokering equitable returns from Iwokrama business enterprise development and in ensuring benefit-sharing that is fair and tangible, especially since the playing field is by no means a level one.

The three-legged stool – a partnership approach

The three-legged stool is the symbol that I like to use and it is more or less adopted by NRDDDB. One leg represents local communities, one leg the government / state sector and the other leg, the non-government sector, which includes the private sector. These legs together support the seat of sustainable development. If one is weak the system is compromised. The link between the natural environment and human development is understood and applied in an intrinsically pragmatic way. This is rooted in the comparative advantage its people hold through their wealth of traditional ecological knowledge and their sense of communal ownership over resources and rights. Through the NRDDDB, the communities of the North Rupununi, have lobbied for and, are slowly but surely, gaining a seat at the table of major planning and decision-making fora.

SUSTAINABILITY

A Strategic Outlook and an Institutional Base

Since its formation in 1996, NRDDDB has convened some 45 general sessions and holds statutory meetings on a bi-monthly basis. The NRDDDB brings together local government officials and community-based groups for planning, monitoring and problem-solving purposes. It serves as the umbrella organisation for a number of local groups and institutions, which it has fostered. This spectrum allows for internal power-sharing mechanisms, and division of roles and responsibilities which in turn provides for leadership development and broad based ownership of the process. It has a written constitution and is registered as a trust. Independently audited and operating a modest bank account opened with earnings from the Women's Makkushi Research Project it also owns and co-manages the North Rupununi Credit Development Centre.

Through a grant from the UK National Charities Commission, NRDDDB in partnership with British Charity, the Commonwealth Human Ecology Council (CHCE), a two year institutional strengthening project is now underway for the operationalisation of the Bina Hill Institute. The Institute, under the aegis of the NRDDDB, will put into place its own sustainability strategy, including earnings from an agriculture micro-enterprise venture, and linking with other vocational and environmental institutes and centres as a service provider of courses. NRDDDB-Bina Hill hopes to establish a telecommunications centre that will operate on a cost basis.

A Strategic Plan has been developed and is currently being discussed in a series of community-based meetings and with the Ministry of Amerindian Affairs, which puts forward a bold and innovative lands claim application to include the North Rupununi wetlands as an extended communally held land.

SNAPSHOTS of SELECTED ACCOMPLISHMENTS & INNOVATIONS in the NRDDDB – Iwokrama Partnership process

Milestones in the Local Knowledge Industry: The Makushi Research Unit

This is a unique success story which links and transforms traditional and specialised knowledge held by women into non-traditional skills and capacities. This group of women, some who had barely completed primary school, pioneered the use of solar powered portable computers to record data, draft texts and translations of their booklets on fishes, birds, cassava, stories of the sacred Iwokrama Mountains and on the traditional uses and modern abuses of alcohol. The Makushi Research Unit named this project and one of the main books they produced “Makusipe Komanto Iseru” freely translated as “Sustaining the Makushi Way of Life”. The celebration of culture, the affirmation and revitalisation of native language and the increased status of the women themselves within their own families and society are some of the tangible and verifiable impacts of this project.

Empowerment through Language

A spin off of this project is the introduction of Makushi into schools in the district as a pilot, with the support of the Ministry of Education. With the teachers on board, and the help of a Makushi language expert from Roraima State in neighbouring Brazil, as well as resource persons and advisors from the Makushi Research Unit, a first ever Makushi dictionary is in the making with both English and Portuguese meanings included. This will be a landmark achievement. Also being produced is a basic Makushi language primer: “Let’s Read & Write Makushi”. The fact that Makushi is an oral language is a challenge being well met. Women lead the way as the captains of this knowledge-based industry.

Junior Wildlife Clubs – The Future Stewards of the Environment

Youth, too, lead the way through the 13 Junior Wildlife Clubs (one in each community). Members meet to study and observe the area’s abundant wildlife and to discuss social issues and risks. Their theme for 2002 is “Healthy Youth for A Healthy Environment” and links social responsibility, and healthy lifestyles to conservation. The School Yard Ecology approach is popular and teachers and students discover the world in their back yards. The Annual Youth Festival with costume & banner parade, tradition skills competitions, archery, cotton spinning, art poetry and quiz is a big event enjoyed by the young who transfer traditions and cultural pride. Supported by Audubon Society & the Guyana Environmental Protection Agency, the future stewards of the North Rupununi are moving forward.

Radio Paiwomak – The first hinterland community radio in Guyana

Named after the three mountain ranges and beacons in the communities, Pakaraimas, Iwokrama, and Makarapan, the establishment of Radio Paiwomak FM 97.1 by the NRDDDB in collaboration with Iwokrama, UNESCO and the Guyana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC) is a big achievement. Radio Paiwomak’s mandate is rooted in UNESCO’s “Culture of Peace”, using the power of communications to connect communities and build bridges of understanding and cooperation for reaching shared goals through a shared vision. The station is

entirely solar powered. In March 2002 Radio Paiwomak was the recipient of an International Year of The Volunteer (IYV) award for innovative Community Service.

Women Put Makushi Culture on the Map and Money in the Bank

The recent Poverty Survey (1999) in Guyana shows that over 80% of Amerindians in the Rupununi area live below the poverty line. And of these, women are the poorest. However, as the Makushi women show, being cash-poor does not take away from the richness of culture and general ability to be self-reliant. With start-up funds from the Global Environment facility, channeled through UNDP and Iwokrama and support from CIDA, the follow-up phase was cemented as a gender equity initiative and became the first flagship project of NRDDDB. Six books have been published in the name of the NRDDDB / Makushi Research Unit and sales from these have netted approximately CDN\$ 10,000.00 in the bank. Some of these funds have been paid as a gratuity to the women researchers themselves, some has been loaned as start up capital for a fundraising venture for the community radio station and some has been allocated to the purchase of a boat for fisheries research & business development. The Eden Project in the UK paid a royalty to the Makushi Research Unit for the use of selected text and illustrations from the booklet: "Cassava – Our Gift to The World" for its own cassava exhibit. The Sewing Groups have developed exquisite hand embroidered pictures in a related Makusipe documentary project. Shell Antillies Company sponsored 12 of these embroideries for their 2002 corporate calendar, paying the women a royalty fee for the use of their images.

Microcredit

Some three years ago, the first Hinterland-Indigenous Peoples credit facility was set up under a poverty alleviation programme implemented by NRDDDB, under the aegis of the UNDP. This system has had its fair share of ups and downs, but, on balance, has strengthened financial management capacities within the communities and supported micro-enterprise initiatives. This experience is readying the communities for commerce and trade on a wider scale. Soon to come on stream and linked to the Conservation Contract pilots is a CIDA sponsored Eco-Tourism Revolving Fund scheme targeting the communities. Each of the NRDDDB communities will be eligible to borrow around CDN \$3,000 - 5,000 and a maximum of up to CDN\$10,000.00.

The idea is to link conservation efforts to small-scale community managed ecotourism products and to connect these with appropriate business partners in the long run. There is good opportunity here with the Makushi culture and the beauty and values of the varied ecosystems as the principal drawing card. A related CIDA-Iwokrama contract has recently constructed a canopy walkway at the edge of the Iwokrama Forest Reserve and near to the boundary of the Community Lands. This novelty provides a bridge between Iwokrama, locally based private sector resorts and the communities for joint ventures in the eco-tourism business.

BIODIVERSITY IMPACTS

Mapping Community Resources

Maps are powerful tools. Using participatory methods and practical surveys, 13 cartographic maps are being produced and ground-truthed. These are applied to land rights conflict resolution; resource management plans; agreements and arrangements; between and amongst multiple user groups, as well as negotiation of community conservation contracts and related trade offs.

Conservation Contracts

Building on the process of community resource mapping and community management planning, NRDDDB have negotiated 13 contracts with Iwokrama to conserve and sustainably manage a specific resource under threat, with business potential identified by the communities themselves. By protecting these genetic resources from localized extinction and implementing management systems, villagers benefit from the regulated and equitable sharing of these key resources as well from the development of eco-based businesses. They monitor progress, identify contentious issues and potential conflicts between and among user groups, and design their own solutions. Local skills and expertise are harnessed and developed and technical support required which may be unavailable in the village is frequently provided by Iwokrama Rangers, themselves villagers who have become qualified forest surveyors, workshop facilitators, and general environmentalists. Transfer of skills is an ongoing, hands-on business in the partnership arrangement between Iwokrama and NRDDDB. The following are examples of such conservation contracts:

- Reforestation and management of threatened palms – ite (*Mauritia flexuosa*) and kokorite (*Maximilliana maripa*): Due to the depletion caused by unfriendly harvesting techniques and lack of resource management, villagers have to walk 3 miles or more to harvest and fetch these essential roofing materials also used for food processing implements and food products;
- Surveying of forested mountains with valuable hardwoods such as paurine (*Centrolobium paraense*) and water cedar and laying management plans for protection and/or sustainable harvesting of these. Developing nature trails and other eco-tourism products;
- Taking Stock – Inventories & Cost Analysis Surveys of Fruit & Nut Trees such as Crabwood (*Carapa guianensis*) and cashew (*Anacardium giganteum*) trees for the potential development of organic nut and oil-based products.

- Protecting Forest Road and Village Water Source from pollution and garbage. Road Users are urged through a children's campaign to keep environment safe and clean.
- Developing seasonally occurring natural fish pond for village food security. Surplus to be marketed. Fish pond site supports palm reforestation initiative and creation of fish habitat study site for school yard ecology, researchers and tourist;
- Application of forested land by village to establish buffer zone between Iwokrama and village thereby protecting environment from possible mining and logging leases. Area to be kept for biodiversity and nature tourism;
- River Management through establishment of community checkpoints and monitoring system if effort to conserve Arapaima and River Turtles.

A Future for Fish & Fishers: Laying Plans for Conservation-based Business

NRDDB scored a first for Guyana by devising a River Management Plan for Arapaima (*Arapaima gigas*), the largest freshwater fish, a top-of-the-world predator, and key commercial species. Arapaima has decreased drastically over the last three decades in the North Rupununi, as a result of a free for all exploitation regime. Results of the first Arapaima survey conducted by community fishermen in 2000 showed only 450 Arapaima in the rivers in North Rupununi. Based on this figure, a self-imposed moratorium was agreed to by consensus at the NRDDB for two years. A subsequent survey conducted one year later showed an increase to 800 Arapaima. A conservation-based business strategy that will bring income to fishers is included in the Plan, which is currently in negotiation with relevant Ministries and the Environment Protection Agency and Guyana's major international hotel – Le Meridien. The Mamirawa Reserve in Brazil is a partner and the model for this venture. The Aquarium Fish Trade holds big potential and a sister plan for developing this business is underway.

PARTNERSHIPS

NRDDB is well networked and promotes cooperation and synergy between its partners to maximise contributions, results and benefits for the good of the communities which it represents. Some of the key partnerships are described below:

National Government & State Agencies

NRDDB has been enabled to establish relations with national agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency, Guyana Forestry commission, and Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock. Representatives from these have participated in NRDDB meetings and/ or served as technical advisors and contact agents for communications and consultations between NRDDB, and the Government. The Ministry of Amerindian Affairs has a special relationship with NRDDB with the Minister designated an ex-officio member of the NRDDB, attending statutory

meetings as often as she can and through the newly appointed Community Development Officer of the Ministry who is a respected villager, a positive relationship is being developed. NRDDDB is engaged in discussions on Land Rights and entitlements and has put up a comprehensive plan for an extension of communal lands. It will also be represented on an advisory committee to review the Amerindian Act.

International Donors / Agencies in partnership with National Agencies and NGOs

Through UNESCO's Caribbean Office, IDRC also supported the setting up of the NRDDDB's community radio station – Radio Paiwomak in partnership with the Guyana Broadcasting Corporation.

GEF: Funds were provided by the Global Environment Agency, channeled through the UNDP, for the initial phase of what emerged as the NRDDDB's Mukushi Research Project with training and coordination provided by Iwokrama in partnership with the Amerindian Research Unit of the University of Guyana.

CIDA: Through the Canada-Caribbean Gender Equity Fund support was granted to the NRDDDB to advance the Mukushi Women's Research initiative. The "Makusipe Komanto Iseru" project which resulted demonstrated the links between traditional women's knowledge, environmental management and women's empowerment. Considered a "success story" by CIDA-Caribbean, a new phase is currently being planned The Guyana Book Foundation: supported through the Canadian Organisation for Development through Education (CODE) has distributed the MRU's publications to libraries and schools throughout Guyana, and supported the Makushi language pilot in schools. Calgary University has contracted the Makushi Research Unit to conduct a research and data collection project on diet and nutrition intake of mothers and children between ages of 0 and 5. This links with a wider 10 year study on the Makushi in Brazil as well.

UNDP: Funds provided through a Poverty Eradication Project set up the North Rupununi Credit Development Centre and the women's Revolving Fund. The Institute of Private Enterprise development (IPED), a Guyanese NGO, partner, was contracted to assist. This is now co-managed by the NRDDDB itself through a Board of Trustees and locally employed credit manager with oversight and technical assistance supplied by the Ministry of Amerindian Affairs.

With youth in focus, a number of International NGOs have come on board. These include the Audubon Society in support of a Citizen Science project with links to the School Yard Ecology method. The latter is partnered at the national level by the Ministry of Education, Jacksonville and Philadelphia Zoos have provided support and satellite link-up exchanges between schools and youth in NRDDDB villages and the USA. The Ghost River Re-Discovery Programme – a native

peoples' cultural development project in Canada with links to Youth Challenge International, has been working closely with the youths of NRDDB and are in the process of consolidating a partnership with study tours and youth exchanges.