

# "Lokono Khotong - Kari'na Tuma"

Traditional indigenous foods, healing and healthy lifestyles in Suriname:  
Challenges and Opportunities for indigenous communities in modern-day society



VIDS Policy report on SDG-3 and SDG-12  
December 2019



## INTRODUCTION

This report was produced within the context of the Indigenous Navigator Project, an EC-funded pilot program on indigenous peoples' data collection and the Sustainable Development Goals, which the Association of Indigenous Village Leaders in Suriname (VIDS) is implementing in Suriname.

One of the project components (output 2.1) was about documenting Indigenous peoples' human development situation with regard to key SDG-themes such as food security, health, education, access to social protection and employment, and communicating these to governmental and non-government development actors.

VIDS decided to focus this research and dialogue with communities and policymakers on the topic of traditional foods, health and lifestyles, as this is considered a key issue for most communities in the interior, facing a lot of pressures and changes with negative effects for communities' wellbeing. For instance, discussions within communities uncovered concerns regarding the increased incidence of chronic diseases, such as high blood pressure and diabetes, that are linked to the change of consumption patterns and communities' traditional territories.

Highlighting and celebrating the importance and sophistication of indigenous traditional practices and food and health systems was therefore prioritized, culminating in a culinary festival and healthy lifestyle event on the national and international day of indigenous peoples, August 9<sup>th</sup> 2019.

A series of events was organized in 2019 that contributed to this report:

- A workshop: "Healthy lifestyle in harmony with nature" on May 18<sup>th</sup> in Pierrekondre-Kumbasi, to identify key issues and develop recommendations on traditional foods, medicine and health;
- An event on Healthy Lifestyle and culinary festival on 9<sup>th</sup> August, including a 'cook out' with traditional dishes, and two lectures/workshops on traditional medicine and healing.

These events served to promote an increased awareness, both within the communities as well as among the government and general society in Suriname, of the value of indigenous traditional food and medicinal plants and the need for legal recognition of traditional territories. By promoting traditional indigenous food and medicines, these events aim to contribute to healthier communities and an increased valuation of indigenous food nationwide, which can lead to a larger agricultural production as well.

The report aims to empower the indigenous community in Suriname to engage in national policy on health in indigenous communities as it underscores SDG 3 (Good health and wellbeing) and SDG 12 (Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns).

It contains an overview of key issues emerging from discussions with communities and experts during the events in 2019, and a list of recommended actions for communities themselves as well as for policy-makers and institutions engaged in areas of relevance on these SDGs.

## KEY ISSUES:

### Traditional indigenous foods, healing and healthy lifestyles in Suriname

#### Traditional foods and lifestyles are healthy and sustainable

- Traditional foods are crucially important for the culture and wellbeing of the indigenous communities. Indigenous peoples in the villages are largely dependent on the natural environment, nature and forests for their food. *“We literally live in the forest and have a very special relationship with our nature that differs from mainstream society; a deep cultural, spiritual and historical relationship”*.
- The foods of Suriname’s indigenous peoples are fully natural, sustainable, and without any ‘modern’ additions like pesticides, artificial additives, preservatives, or genetic modification. It’s healthy and fresh and have sustained indigenous peoples for centuries.
- The traditional food of the parents and grandparents consisted mainly of fresh, smoked game, fish and birds, nuts, root vegetables, berries, oils from palm kernels. Soups were often prepared and deep-frying never happened. Cassava, bananas, forest fruits and nuts, corn, tea and juices from the forest were also consumed. This natural food is rich in necessary vitamins, proteins, etc. In addition, there was sufficient exercise that keeps the body in shape.

#### Indigenous food systems and food security are under pressure

- The global economy and lifestyle have brought negative influence on recent indigenous generations, now that the monetary economy has made its entry into indigenous life, because of school fees for instance. It has, in certain cases, started to replace the traditional way of planting and eating. While the healthy traditional crops and products are sold for cash, indigenous families eat purchased, less nutritional food at home, including soft drinks and other products full of sugars. *“Because the use of money increases everywhere, we also buy food more frequently instead of growing it ourselves or looking for it in the forest”*.
- Today, rice has become the main component of food. American chicken meat is purchased. Government food packages contain non-traditional food products such as rice, chicken, etc. Children are increasingly unfamiliar with traditional indigenous food. A change in lifestyle and recognition of healthy traditional indigenous foods is needed.

#### Traditional health and medicinal knowledge

- Traditional medicine is a part of traditional knowledge. It is based on centuries of experience and is generally transferred from one generation to the next. Indigenous peoples have sophisticated knowledge of the use and preparation of medicinal plants and other products, to prevent and cure a wide variety of diseases and injuries. This knowledge and use is reliant on the abundance of resources in the forests and savannas, and on a system of, mostly, oral inter-generational learning and transmission.
- Degradation and encroachments of forests pose a threat to the abundance of these medicinal plants, and the change in lifestyle and mainstream educational systems impact on the use and transmission of medicinal knowledge.
- There are also opportunities for traditional medicine and healing. Indigenous people can boost economic development through a medicinal plant industry and product development. This needs to be based on strict standards and a legal framework for protection of intellectual property rights, Free Prior and Informed Consent, and adequate compensation. Other conditions are conservation of biodiversity, respect for the land rights of the indigenous peoples, respectful cooperation between shamans,

scientists and the pharmaceutical industry, and unconditional support from the government.

*The level of chronic diseases in the villages is growing in alarming rates*

- The lifestyle has gradually been "westernized", resulting in excessive food consumption (especially sweets, salt and fat) and a lack of physical exercise. This leads to overweight and obesity and to diabetes and hypertension.
- The level of chronic diseases in the villages, like diabetes, which never existed in the past, has grown in alarming rates. The VIDS wants to curb this trend by promoting and supporting indigenous foods among its population, and warn for the risks of decreasing knowledge and use.
- Diabetes and hypertension are increasing in all villages, especially among young people (<60 years). Particularly in the villages in the eastern district of Marowijne, bordering French Guyana, diabetes becomes a problem as the number of patients with complications (amputations, etc.) is on the rise. In the Marowijne area people have easy access to processed food. The causes of diabetes and hypertension are known (unhealthy eating causes obesity). However, more in-depth information is needed, for example about the prevention of complications and improved self-management by patients.
- Both diseases, diabetes and high blood pressure, can be kept under control by changing one's lifestyle; healthy food (preferably directly from nature, without artificial additives) and sufficient exercise. It is known from medical literature that "whole food, plant-based" diets work well for losing weight and reducing blood sugar and blood pressure

*Land rights insecurity and dispossession and degradation and pollution of lands is a key underlying cause.*

- Issuing of land in concession to outsiders for exploitation purposes (logging, mining, etc.) is a threat to the ecology of forests, which is a source of traditional indigenous food, medicine and income.
- Indigenous food systems and food security are under pressure now in many villages in Suriname, as the forests and waters are being invaded and degraded. Hunters and fishers have to go further and longer to find game or fish; and forest products are less abundant. *"Our rights as indigenous peoples and villages are not recognized, so that we always live with the fear that our land might be allocated to others in concessions in our living and living areas, and sometimes we are even prevented from planting on- and hunting in our own territory. Our forest and nature is being polluted and destroyed by others, wildlife is moving away and fish are dying. Climate change, which is also caused by so-called modern development, is hardest for us as nature people"*.
- Land allocation to outsiders, which is taking place on an increasingly large scale, also causes disharmony between villages as a result of competitive and conflicting financial benefits. Uncertainty about the guarantee for the preservation of their ancestral lands leads to increased stress among the indigenous population, which has a negative impact on health (e.g. the ongoing struggle of the people of the villages Hollandse Kamp and Wit Santi).
- Securing land rights is vital for the indigenous peoples to curb this trend, which is also recognized by the Judgment of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in the Kaliña and Lokono case (K&L judgment) of 2016. Land rights offer security for the preservation of traditional knowledge, culture and lifestyle, including traditional food. *"Our land rights, our right to our traditional culture, to our natural resources, to a clean*

*environment, to development at our own pace and insights, but also our right to our traditional knowledge”.*

## **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

### **Promoting and supporting revitalization of indigenous foods, medicine and healthy lifestyles in indigenous communities in Suriname**

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#### *For communities (with government, experts and general society to support):*

- Organize storytelling sessions with elderly/community members about traditional indigenous dishes.
- Organize cook-outs with a demonstration of traditional dishes.
- Publish a list of nutritious traditional foods and medicinal plants for distribution in schools and in communities.
- Where possible, serve fresh, local and traditional food in schools/school trips
- Publish a booklet with recipes of traditional indigenous dishes.
- Strengthen solidarity between indigenous peoples to safeguard land rights, which is an essential part of maintaining a healthy lifestyle.
- Organize educational sessions in the villages about obesity prevention and self-care for diabetes and hypertension.
- Engage youth in growing and processing of local traditional crops and dishes (as part of educational activities) and promote inter-generational learning
- Endeavor to re-adopt elements of the natural traditional lifestyle. Become familiar again with nature which offers healthy food. Increase the use of this healthy forest food more and more instead of processed food.
- Pay more attention to blood pressure, blood sugar and body weight in the communities, by having these checked regularly, and have much more physical exercise - including through working in the planting fields or hunting.

#### *For government policy-makers and implementers, and society in general*

- Encourage a healthy traditional lifestyle - based on food offered by nature and sufficient physical activity as part of the national commitment to implement the SDGs, in particular SDG 3 and 12.
- Preserve the forest and forest ecosystems, and stop the allocation of forests in indigenous territories as concessions to third parties for economic activities
- Legally recognize and protect the collective land rights of indigenous peoples
- Support and enable culturally-appropriate education and intergenerational learning in and outside schools in indigenous communities, in relation to production and preparation of food, sustainable use of resources, and medicinal plants.

#### *For VIDS (with government, experts and general society to support):*

- Continue promoting and supporting indigenous foods among the indigenous population, and warn for the risks of decreasing knowledge and use. Organize more events such as a food market, a panel discussion with indigenous healers / experts, food, including a repetition of indigenous culinary festival, but on a larger scale, with more dishes and with a longer preparation time.
- Present a cookbook with recipes for healthy natural indigenous food.
- Start a campaign for healthy natural indigenous food, with the use of “influencers” (people, music, sambura).

## Annex I: List and description of implemented activities

### 1. Workshop 'Healthy lifestyle in harmony with nature', 18<sup>th</sup> May 2019

The workshop "Healthy lifestyle in harmony with nature" was held on Thursday, May 18 in the village of Pierre Kondre Kumbasi. The total number of participants was 33 men and women from Pierrekondre-Kumbasi, Cassipora, Powaka, Galibi, Matta, Wit Santi, Hollandse Kamp and Philippusdorp.

Workshop program:

Time	Program component
9.00 - 9.30	Walk in/breakfast
9.30 - 9.40	Opening by Mrs. Harriette Vreedzaam
9:40 - 9.50	Short explanation of the purpose and structure of the workshop Carla Madsian (chairperson)
9:50 - 10.30	Presentation "Healthy lifestyle in harmony with nature; vital for indigenous peoples"
10:30 - 11.00	Questions from the audience
11.00 - 11.30	Break
11.30 - 13.00	Working group discussion on three topics. 30 minutes for each theme. <u>Topic 1: Land rights and preservation of traditional food and lifestyle</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Is our traditional lifestyle (incl. food) increasingly endangered by land allocation; give examples?</li><li>- what can we do to maintain and preserve our land rights and traditional lifestyle (incl. food)?</li></ul> <u>Topic 2: Traditional food</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- what did your parents/grandparents eat and how did they prepare it? Give examples.</li><li>- what do indigenous people eat nowadays? What is left of traditional food consumption?</li><li>- what can we do to make traditional food attractive again?</li></ul> <u>Topic 3: Overweight/Obesity and consequences</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- what is the prevalence of diabetes and hypertension in your community?</li><li>- do people know about the complications of these diseases and how to prevent them: give examples?</li><li>- what can we do to raise awareness of the dangers of overweight / obesity and diabetes / high blood pressure among indigenous people?</li></ul>
13:00 - 14:00	Lunch
14:00 - 14.30	Summary of the working group discussions by the chairperson and follow-up.

### 2. Preparatory meeting for the 'Healthy indigenous lifestyle event' on 9 August, May 24 2019

The meeting took place in the VIDS office. The meeting was attended by the director of the VIDS Office (Loreen Jubitana), the VIDS project coordinator (Carla Madsian) and the physician and former director of the Ministry of Health (Marthelise Eersel) as a preparation for the healthy indigenous lifestyle and culinary event ('cook-out') on the day of the indigenous peoples 2019. It was decided to choose the village of Pierrekondre Kumbasi as the location.

It was agreed that the purpose of the indigenous cook-out was to promote the revival of traditional indigenous food. It was decided to offer the following on the day of the indigenous peoples:

- Traditional food and (alcoholic) beverage
- Information and 2 mini lectures on nutrition and medicinal plants
- Posters and information leaflets, banner about land rights and lifestyle
- Determination of nutritional values
- A Cookbook
- Demonstration of baking bread
- Seasonal fruit, medicinal plants and medicines, Krappa oil, and a demonstration of peppers
- A survey about knowledge of traditional native food and nutritional value
- Products from surrounding villages
- Campfire with storytelling
- Panel of village chiefs on land rights and nutrition.
- Cultural performance

It was also decided to organize follow-up activities after the celebration of the day of the natives, including: A separate program on diabetes, high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, and preventive health care. The organization would take place in collaboration with "One stop shop" for chronic diseases.

### **3. Celebration of the national and international day of indigenous peoples: healthy indigenous lifestyle and culinary event - 9 August 2019**

On Friday, August 9, 2019, the celebration of the day of the indigenous peoples took place in the village of Pierrekondre-Kumbasi in the District of Para. The central topic was Indigenous Culinary; "Lokono Khotong, Kari'na Tuma".

Program of the day:

<b>Time</b>	<b>Program component</b>
10.30	Traditional opening
10.45	National anthem
10.50	Welcome - Village chief of Pierrekondre-Kumbasi, Loyd Read.
11.05	Welcome speech by VIDS Chairman, Theo Jubithana on Healthy Indigenous Food
11.15	Cultural performance from Cassipora Kodori
11.30 am - 6 pm	Food court
12.00	Lecture/Workshop Healthy Traditional Lifestyle: Drin 'dresi wakti siki - Dr. Marthelise Eersel
14.00	Lecture/Workshop on Traditional medicine in Suriname: From kwasibita to product development - Prof. dr. Dennis Mans
16.00	Sambura
18.00	Closing

### **4. Evaluation and follow-up of the healthy indigenous lifestyle and Culinary Event.**

On September 10, 2019 an evaluation meeting was held about the implementation and the result of the celebration of the day of the indigenous peoples. The meeting was held in the VIDS office and attended by: the director of the VIDS Office (Loreen Jubithana), the VIDS project coordinator (Carla Madsian) and Dr. Marthelise Eersel.

The meeting concluded that the Indigenous culinary event was a success. Visitors have already asked for a repetition next year, possibly in another village. This activity has once again emphasized that the indigenous lifestyle is connected to the land, and therefore the land is important for maintaining this healthy natural lifestyle.

Other suggestions for activities during next years' celebration of the day of the indigenous people are:

- Before August 9, 2020, organize smaller events such as a food market, a panel discussion with indigenous healers / experts, food, etc.
- Present a cookbook with recipes for healthy natural indigenous food.
- Start a campaign for healthy natural indigenous food, with the use of “influencers” (people, music, sambura).
- A repetition of the Indigenous culinary festival, but on a larger scale, with more dishes and with a longer preparation time.



## **Annex 2: Summary of speech on 'healthy indigenous food' by the chairman of the VIDS - Theo Jubithana (9 August 2019)**

The chair of VIDS, Theo Jubithana, said that "eating" is an enormously important aspect in all cultures. "It is a condition for the existence of a person and of peoples. That is why we must be assured of healthy food (food security). Our traditional food is super healthy, it's just natural, literally a part of nature, without all sorts of modern additives, chemicals or genetic manipulation. "

He further states that natives in the villages are largely dependent on the natural environment, nature and forests for their food. We literally live in the forest and have a very different relationship with our nature; a deep cultural, spiritual and historical relationship. This situation is changing in many villages, because the use of money increases everywhere and we also buy food more frequently instead of growing it ourselves or looking for it in the forest.

At the same time, however, we do not get equal opportunities to participate in modern development. Our rights as indigenous peoples and villages are also not recognized, so that we always live with the fear that our land might be allocated to others in concessions in our living and living areas, and sometimes we are even prevented from planting on- and hunting in our own territory. Our forest and nature is being polluted and destroyed through by others, wildlife is moving away and fish are dying. Climate change, which is also caused by so-called modern development, is hardest for us as nature people.

That is why we, as VIDS, as the traditional authority of indigenous peoples in Suriname, repeatedly emphasize that legal recognition of our rights is so important. Our land rights, our right to our traditional culture, to our natural resources, to a clean environment, to development at our own pace and insights, but also our right to our traditional knowledge. We are therefore satisfied that a joint process has been initiated to incorporate our land rights and other collective rights into Surinamese legislation. The proposals will be submitted to the National Assembly for further discussion to become law.

Ladies and gentlemen, with this rather serious note, I would like to congratulate you again on this day and wish you a very tasty and pleasant Day of the Indigenous Peoples!"

### **Annex 3: Summary of Lecture/ Workshop on healthy traditional lifestyle “Drin dresi waktu siki” - Dr. Marthelise Eersel and Dr. Kloof (9<sup>th</sup> August 2019)**

**In the first part** Dr. Marthelise Eersel held a presentation. Based on past and present examples, she emphasized that indigenous peoples who live according to their tradition have a healthy lifestyle. Their food consists of fish, meat, nuts, root vegetables, berries, oils from palm kernels; everything that nature itself offers, without artificial additives and treatments. This natural food is rich in necessary vitamins, proteins, etc. In addition, there is sufficient exercise that keeps the body in shape. However, only part of this traditional lifestyle still exists in most indigenous communities. The lifestyle has gradually been "westernized", resulting in excessive food consumption (especially sweets, salt and fat) and a lack of physical exercise. This leads to overweight and obesity and to diabetes and hypertension.

For many other peoples, the jungle, as the source of life and well-being, has already disappeared. But for our indigenous people there is still the possibility to return to their natural traditional lifestyle because the jungle is still present. To achieve this, the indigenous peoples should become familiar again with nature which offers healthy food. They should also increase the use of this healthy forest food more and more instead of processed food which is generally bad for health. Furthermore, people should pay more attention to their blood pressure, blood sugar and body weight, by having these checked regularly, and they should have much more physical exercise. Processing the farmland, hunting and the like automatically entails more physical exercise.

Preservation of the jungle is crucial for the survival of the indigenous people and in that context the land rights issue must be solved for the benefit of our tribal peoples. The increasing allocation of our forest in concession to third parties for economic activities, leads to the destruction of all the natural and healthy food that forest ecosystems offer.

**The second part** of the lecture was presented by doctor Kloof, who is also affiliated with the One Stop Shop for chronic diseases. Based on a number of questions and statements prepared in advance, Dr. Kloof elaborated on diabetes and high blood pressure. He explained normal and increased blood sugar and blood pressure, and mentioned the symptoms indicating an increased blood sugar value. There are usually no symptoms for high blood pressure, and it is therefore called a "silent killer".

Both diseases, diabetes and high blood pressure, can be kept under control by changing your lifestyle; healthy food (preferably directly from nature, without artificial additives) and sufficient exercise. It is known from medical literature that "whole food, plant-based" diets work well for losing weight and reducing blood sugar and blood pressure. It happens that patients with diabetes who switch to a healthy lifestyle no longer need any medication. Finally, Dr. Kloof addressed the many questions asked by the public about diabetes and high blood pressure.

The conclusion of this lecture is that a healthy traditional lifestyle - based on food offered by nature and sufficient physical activity - must be encouraged much more. A healthy lifestyle can prevent us from having to deal with all kinds of disorders including obesity, diabetes and high blood pressure and their nasty complications (heart attack, cerebral hemorrhage, kidney damage, amputations). It is therefore very important that our indigenous peoples stand up for their land rights, to guarantee that we can preserve our jungle and follow a healthy traditional lifestyle.

#### **Annex 4: Summary of Lecture/Workshop on Traditional medicine in Suriname: From kwasibita to product development - Prof. Dr. Dennis R.A. Mans (9<sup>th</sup> August 2019).**

Prof. Dr. Dennis R.A. Mans held a presentation on "Traditional medicine in Suriname: from kwasibita to product development".

Traditional medicine is a part of traditional knowledge; the application of traditional medical knowledge that exists within a certain community. It is based on centuries of experience and is generally transferred from one generation to the next.

Traditional medicine is classified as a "alternative medical system". These are all forms of traditional medicine based on a complete system of theory and practice. Some examples: homeopathy, acupuncture, natural medicine, traditional Chinese medicine, Winti, Indian Ayurveda and Unani, Indonesian Jawa, but also Native traditional medicine.

Alternative medicines are usually not researched scientifically and it is often not known how they (would) work. As a result, there are two different views on traditional medicine: the romantic view: a priori belief that it works because it is "close to nature" and the dogmatic view: a priori rejection because it is not based on "western" scientific principles.

Almost 75% of all herbal medicines are based on indications from traditional medicine. Half of the anti-cancer agents approved between 1981 and 2014 were of natural origin. Nearly 30 of the 252 drugs on the WHO's Essential Drug List are derived from medicinal plants. Modern allopathic medicine therefore has its roots in traditional medicine. There are an estimated 250,000 higher plants on Earth, of which no more than 10% have been investigated for their medicinal effect.

Traditional medicine is deeply rooted in all ethnic groups in Suriname. Suriname's land surface houses a very high biodiversity. More than 1,000 of the 5,100 plant species are used for a large number of diseases. Well-known traditional medicines of indigenous origin are: Kwasibita, Urali, Masusa, Kusuwe, Wild yams, Dobrudua, and Hoople. The traditional medicines are prepared according to age-old traditional knowledge of all continents. They have a potential economic value of roughly U \$ 2 billion.

We hardly get any financial benefit from our traditional knowledge in Suriname. The possibilities are certainly there. Native traditional medicine has a lot to offer and can yield a lot. A good example is Sipuinine, which is successfully used against busi yasi in Kwamalasamutu. Worldwide there are more than 12 million patients with busi yasi and the available medicines do not work for 1 out of 4 patients.

Conditions for improving the use of these opportunities are: product development, regulation, standardization, guarantee for strength and quality, guarantee for safety, legal aspects, protection of intellectual property rights. In addition, there are other conditions: conservation of biodiversity, respect for the land rights of the tribal peoples, respectful cooperation between shamans, scientists and the pharmaceutical industry, unconditional support from the government.

The Indigenous people can boost economic development through a medicinal plant industry. This requires production according to strict standards and a legal framework for protection and adequate compensation. The preservation of biodiversity must not be forgotten. All this will ultimately lead to a very improved version of the traditional product!

## Annex 5: media coverage and communication of the Healthy Indigenous Lifestyle and Culinary Event.

- Speech of the chairman of VIDS: [Celebration of the National Day of the Indigenous and international day of the Indigenous Peoples.](#)
- An article on FPP website: [Suriname celebrates International Indigenous Peoples' day with a culinary festival](#)
- An article on VIDS website: [VIDS celebrates Day of the Natives with Indigenous Culinary Festival](#)
- A YouTube video about traditional indigenous food is super healthy: [Healthy lifestyle in harmony with nature](#)

In support of a healthy lifestyle two YouTube video's on the prevention of diabetes and high blood pressure were also uploaded.

- [Awareness among the Indigenous people about the dangers of diabetes](#)
- [Awareness and prevention of high blood pressure among indigenous people](#)