

## PRE-CONDITIONS FOR EFFECTIVE RESEARCH



## **SOME ASPECTS OF THE TROPENBOS-GUYANA PROGRAMME**

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*The Tropenbos-Guyana programme*

I have a sense of both ›challenge= and ›opportunity= as I approach the task of presenting what is described, ambitiously I feel, as a case study of the Tropenbos-Guyana programme - a case study designed, so I am advised, to illustrate ›pre-conditions for effective research=, and, more intimidating, to identify ›failing factors= and ›success factors= in the organising of research programmes directed at sustainable use of tropical rain forests.

What more, I have asked myself, can I add to the very professional study of the Tropenbos-Guyana case which was completed by the Evaluation Mission four months ago?

But I draw some confidence from the fact that I do have a possessive interest in the Tropenbos-Guyana programme, having been associated with it long before ›biodiversity= and ›sustainable development= became international buzzwords; and also from my abiding hope for what a programme such as this can contribute to the ›sustaining development= of Guyana.

This presentation is therefore made, more as a personal testament than a professional case study. I speak, on this occasion, for myself. The opinion I express, like the possessive interest and the abiding hope, are entirely my own!

The July 1997 Evaluation Mission report of the Tropenbos-Guyana programme is, as the Team itself put it, ›very positive=- which borders, I suggest, on rank understatement!

The Mission listed among its positive findings that ›Tropenbos (Guyana) is unique= since ›with the exception of early work by the Guyana Forestry Commission=- which, in this connection, I suggest, might more appropriately have been given the colonial name of the ›Forest Department=- ›very little, if any, research has been undertaken and published in the country, other than in the Tropenbos programme=

This statement in itself opens the way for any assessor to make an international comparison. As an example, I can quote the opinion of a very senior, very experienced, very disinterested, international public servant and Forestry expert: ›This is one of the best programmes I have ever seen, anywhere!=- As an illustration, I can refer to the fact that every prospective researcher, every forestry consultant who comes to Guyana, comes sooner or later to the Tropenbos-Guyana office, to seek information or to acquire a publication. (This is a paradoxical comment on the view that Tropenbos-Guyana does not publicise its work and is little known. But more of this later.)

The impressive list of Tropenbos-Guyana publications is itself largely the result of the fact that the programme has depended for its execution mainly on the postgraduate programme of Utrecht University, an excellent programme blessed with a continuing stream of talented and dedicated students. But the PhD connection may also be a little bit of a ›fail factor=. Of which, again, more later! Equally ›unique= in Guyana is the Tropenbos-Guyana contribution to training. As noted in the Evaluation Mission Report, eight out of nine students working locally toward University of Guyana (UG) MScs in Forest Biology, and all the three Guyanese women studying for PhDs of British and Dutch universities in this field, are in the Tropenbos-Guyana programme. I have myself, on more than

one occasion, commented publicly on the fact that opportunities for higher degrees and short courses available to Guyanese students through Tropenbos usually exceed the number of suitable students available for training. Another valid comment is that the UG MSc (Forest Biology) Programme depends almost entirely on Tropenbos student sponsorship.

In the light of what I have described -- accurately, I am sure -- as the outstanding success of the Tropenbos-Guyana programme, and this success in the two broad areas of its mandate, Research and Training, it would seem almost contradictory for me to list ~~fail factors~~. I prefer to speak of what, to me, are ~~areas needing improvement~~.

When ideas of protecting the world's forests first began to gain popular currency in the 70s and 80s, the greatest emphasis seemed to be on concerns such as pollution control, saving wildlife, and even maintaining aesthetic beauty. In so far as Guyana is concerned, two subsequent consequences, among several others, might be mentioned. One was the occasional use of the term ~~Rabid Environmentalists~~ (Josh Ramsammy, a member of the Evaluation Team was a Rabid Environmentalist!) and the other, popular among a small but influential group of producers, was the idea that scientists who preached the developing doctrine of sustainable management of tropical forests were to be looked at with, at least, suspicion.

This lingering suspicion may help to explain the paradox of a programme, so well-favoured by many in Guyana and abroad, receiving the stigma of the statement that Tropenbos appears to be pursuing its own interests (see Evaluation Mission Report); and why the image of Tropenbos among some locals, particularly timber producers, may not be as bright as the scientific success of its programme deserves.

The conservative inclinations (conservative in more than one sense) of the 70s and 80s are evident in the Tropenbos-Guyana Agreement (1989), which recognised ~~the danger of continuing deterioration of humid tropical forest lands~~ and which aimed to prepare plans to conserve and develop the humid tropical forest lands of Guyana. My own simple sermon, repeated *ad nauseam* has been that any programme of tropical rain forest research should aim to conserve the forest and develop the **people** - and that means **all** the people, not just the people who live in the forest. Moreover, if we are talking about a partnership programme between two nations, I mean the people of both nations, recognising that development need not mean the same thing for both nations or even for all groups within each nation.

One of the ideas that I think that I can claim to have nagged the Tropenbos director about, in my own small way and whenever I had the opportunity, was the inclusion of specific reference to economic development in the Tropenbos Aims and Objectives. I note, with some personal satisfaction, that the sub-objectives of the Tropenbos-Guyana programme now refer to the establishment of ecological, economic, social, and operational parameters for sustainability . But my greatest expectations for the future arise from two concepts which were passed on to me during my visit to the Netherlands last September. The first, in a draft paper received from the director of Tropenbos, defines a sustainable forestry system as a coherent set of conditions and activities to produce timber in an ecologically sustainable, and financially profitable, way, while maintaining the ability of the forests to deliver other products and services. In this paper, the sustainable forestry system is seen as comprising three interlinked sub-systems, namely:

- Ecological system;
- Financial system;
- Social system.

Further, one illustration of the interlinkages is the statement that if, technically seen, the ecological system and/or the financial economic system cannot meet the requirements, a sustainable forestry system does not even exist in theory.

The second encouraging concept that I caught during my visit to the Netherlands, is the concept of win-win, which it seems that more and more leaders are openly promulgating.

I make my own point that »win-win« has to be tangibly and impressively evident, even enshrined in a new Agreement - plus - Administrative Arrangement; and the winnings, on both sides of the Agreement, must be available to all who hold a stake - including industry, environmentalists, individual researchers, and their organisations.

The Evaluation Mission has identified as an »area needing improvement« the fact that a significant number of people interviewed felt that »Tropenbos was little known « and that, by implication, there was need for better-focused dissemination of information, and for the promotion of a public image which more sharply reflects the importance and excellence of Tropenbos research. The very fact that such an opinion could be expressed, and by a set of such influential »insiders«, is a matter for attention; but the opinion itself requires analysis and raises questions:

Why, the »Internet« apart, does such a comparatively large proportion of involved persons overseas, producers as well as environmentalists, compared to Guyanese, either know about Tropenbos or are very ready to take the trouble to find out?

Is Tropenbos-Guyana so little known to the more than one hundred local individuals and agencies to whom previous issues of Tropenbos-Guyana newsletters or the provisional manual of the CELOS forest management system were sent? Or to the thousands of newspaper readers who at least see the advertisements inviting, for example, applications for postgraduate research assistantships?

Is it, in some cases, that people **don't know** about Tropenbos or that, in idiomatic language, they **»don't want to know«,** which is loosely translated as they **»don't care«?**

A don't-want-to-know attitude may perhaps be illustrated by the negative opinion received by the Evaluation Mission that »Tropenbos appears to be pursuing its own interests«. Or in the boast, made by some members of the (Guyana) Forest Products Association from time to time: That they do not need foreign researchers to teach them sustainable management of the forests! (»Look at our forests! Fly over them! They are just as they were sixty years ago!«)

Herein, I feel maybe lies a »fail factor« inherent in the policy of executing Tropenbos-Guyana research through PhD students - that the research and the results may be perceived, perhaps prejudged, correctly or incorrectly, as mainly reflecting the academic interests of these students and their supervisors, and not the concern of »real forest managers«.

One further point of interest: While I associate myself with the Evaluation Mission's position on the need for greater emphasis on public relations and outreach by Tropenbos-Guyana, I feel that such an extension programme, if it covers all forestry research work in Guyana, might more appropriately be coordinated by the Guyana Forestry Commission.

The lesson that all this aspires to teach is that Guyanese stakeholders, and I mean all stakeholders, need continuously to be convinced that the Tropenbos-Guyana programme is for their tangible and sustainable benefit - that the programme is **sustaining** as well as **sustainable**.

In Guyana, one of the most failing-of failing factors has been perceived to be the difficulty involved in obtaining meaningful participation of local research agencies and researchers. However, from its objective perspective, the Evaluation Report rationalised the present position, and found no noticeable shortcoming in this area. But the Evaluation Team, and, by implication, the persons the Team interviewed, also found the level and quality of participation of the various agencies was limited.

Causes of this limitation are more or less identifiable, and solutions seem more or less feasible. The causes include, but are certainly not limited to, low local capacity in the agreed research areas -- which may be taken as an argument for tailoring the programme to fit proven local skills, other things being equivalent -- and competing demands for the services of the few qualified staff. One solution, but certainly not the only one, is a change in strategy which temporarily makes MSc and PhD training of Guyanese students contracted to the participating institutions, the main vehicle for implementation of the Tropenbos-Guyana programme. While it is not intended to go into detail in a short paper, it must be pointed out that, as far as Guyanese participation is concerned, such training would more easily allow for continuous change in the shape of the Tropenbos-Guyana programme, rather than just response to the previously agreed shape.

Other factors which might promote more effective local participation include:

The Institutions must be held responsible for their own performance. Or, in other words, the Guyana Government, as a show of ownership, should demand more of the local institutions. Participation must bring better financial rewards to participants.

A review by Tropenbos of the process of project approval has gone some way to removing the dissatisfaction which existed locally in this matter. However, several points of unease remain, mainly linked to what are commonly described as breakdowns in communications. The mechanism recommended by the Evaluation Mission to address such situations seems reasonable; and it could help toward both the quality of other new proposals, and the execution of approved projects.

Also, the influence of counterparts on the evolving shape of the programme and the fixing of priorities remains very low. It is a little ironic that Tropenbos should be concerned, in a major way, about whether its research programme was helping policy formulation in site counties, but should appear to be indifferent to how a site country's already agreed national policies should be reflected in the shaping of the research programme. But perhaps the root cause of the problem has been that, for Guyana, such agreed national policies, and strategies, are only now beginning to emerge in key areas such as forestry in general, and in land use and biodiversity.

A number of Structural Issues have been raised by the Evaluation Mission. Together, they constitute a major area needing improvements. They may have arisen from changing circumstances, political and institutional, which make several provisions of the Agreement(s) now invalid or inappropriate. Or they

may have been introduced in *ad hoc*, piecemeal, ways, without the necessary formal acceptance at the highest levels.

They affect:

- The (Bi)-National Committee. (The brackets are themselves a part of the problem!);
- The Administrative Committee (My own solution for a particular problem). The Guyana Executive Authority. (Should the responsibility be delegated?);
- The Implementing Agencies (Their roles? Which should be the Main-one? Should they each have separate contracts?);
- The Coordinators and the PTL (Conflicts {definitely plural} of interests and loyalties!).

These matters all require to be addressed by the provisions of a new agreement. And the most fundamental aspect of a new agreement could be a synchronisation of purposes, a clear statement on what each of the two sides, working together, will give to and get from the cooperation.

Nowhere does there appear to be a greater need for a synchronisation of purposes than in the area of Biodiversity and Non-Timber Rain Forest Products.

As the nation possessing the resource, Guyana's purposes must be guided by the collective view of the Elected Heads of American States, who recognised that better choices regarding the use of our natural resources require that we develop the necessary knowledge and information regarding their nature, status, and potential. But this must be done in a controlled way, even though with the very minimum of bureaucratic regulation.

Two examples taken from the WWF Environment Handbook illustrate the inter-linkage of ecological, financial and social studies which comprise a sustainable and sustaining forestry system.

The first example, which is now chosen to illustrate the importance of financial studies as a basis for forest management decisions, describes a study carried out near Iquitos in Peru, which showed that while extracting all the marketable timber from 1 hectare of Amazonian rain forest in a single operation would yield a one-off payment of only US\$ 1,000, harvesting the NTFPs on a sustainable basis could earn an annual income of an unexpected US\$ 6,280, both at local markets.

In acknowledging the value of Social Sciences research, I also cite from the WWF Environment Handbook the case of the Yanomani people, where a finding that they make no clear distinction between physical and mental illness has suggested to bioprospectors that their knowledge and use of plants may point the way to treatments for conditions such as schizophrenia and severe depression.

I am a little embarrassed at the fact that I have been able to identify so many areas needing improvement. But they have a common thread -- they can all, or almost all, be addressed through negotiation of a new agreement -- one which would take us into a new Tropenbos-Guyana phase, in a new century, with new visions, new goals, and new performers.

## **SOME ASPECTS OF THE TROPENBOS-GUYANA PROGRAMME**

### **Achievements**

- Programme is successful in terms of scientific output, training of local academics and as information source about forestry in Guyana.

### **Challenges and Problems; Information Needs**

- Programme has the image of pursuing its own interests, possibly exacerbated by strong dependence on PhD students.
- Programme is insufficiently known with the public in Guyana.
- Problems with obtaining meaningful participation of local research agencies and researchers.
- Limited influence of host country on formulation of research programmes.

### **Points for Future Research**

- Create a win-win concept while setting up research programmes, with clearly identifiable benefits to all parties.
- Improve the mechanisms and transparency of project approval.

### **Conclusions**

- Any programme of tropical rain forest research should aim to conserve the forest and develop the people.