cobra
Future Challenges
Local Solutions

Sharing & Implementation
Best Practice Case Studies

Throughout the Guiana Shield, Indigenous communities have been able to manage their natural resources for centuries without depleting or deteriorating them. Their extensive knowledge of the environment and the practices they implement to manage their land could offer smart solutions to upcoming challenges in the region.

Within the COBRA project, Indigenous communities in six Guiana Shield countries have identified a series of community owned solutions to various challenges they are facing. We defined community owned solutions as local practices that solve economic, social or environmental challenges at the local scale. Community owned solutions are carried out by local people and the planning, implementation and evaluation is organised locally. Similarly, the benefits occur primarily within the community itself but may also have positive effects at regional, national and even global scales. In addition, community owned solutions involve ethical practices; a fair distribution of benefits, involvement of all sections from the community and do not negatively impact on the environment (see COBRA report on Best Practices).

Community owned solutions potentially offer very practical solutions for challenges regarding sustainable development in the Guiana Shield and in other regions. These solutions could be a source of inspiration for neighbouring communities, as well as providing a platform for communities to demonstrate their self-sufficiency to policy makers and governments. Within the COBRA project, each of the Indigenous communities involved identified and documented a number of community owned solutions. From the community owned solutions identified and documented, the communities have selected best practices that have the potential to act as showcases for other communities that are facing similar challenges.

These best practices were documented through the process of participatory video and participatory photography by community members, who were trained as 'community researchers' within the project. The documented best practices, in the form of films and photostories, were then shared with other communities in the Guiana Shield. This sharing of best practices was done in exchange visits where the project brought community researchers from the North Rupununi, Guyana to different communities. A total of nine communities were involved in the project: Fairview, Apoteri,

Briefing

Figure 1 - Map showing the Amerindian communities involved in the COBRA Project

Rupertee in Guyana´s North Rupununi district, Maturuca and Tumucumaque in Brazil, Kavanayén in Venezuela, Laguna Colorada in Colombia, Kwamalasamutu in Suriname and Antecume Pata in French Guiana.

After sharing the best practices with different communities, those communities were able to choose one that they wished to implement in their own local community. This did not mean ´copying´ the best practice but rather adopting the idea behind it and adjusting it to the local context. Within the four years of the COBRA project, six communities have implemented a best practice. In total, four of the North Rupununi best practices were chosen and implemented by the communities involved (see table below).

In this briefing, we provide a description for three of these best practice implementation case studies, namely Kwamalasamutu, Maturuca and Kavanayén. These communities succeeded to organise themselves in order to implement a best practice. In Kwamalasamutu

a broken bridge was restored through self-help, in Maturuca people have started to set up a community radio station, and in Kavanayén a culture group was established. These activities have also brought about other initiatives and enthusiasm within the communities.

After all exchange visits, best practice identification, documentation and implementation, COBRA organised a participatory film festival in Georgetown, Guyana, to facilitate the sharing of the best practices of all communities that participated in the project (see news article on the COBRA website). This provided an important public platform for showcasing the best practices, involving decision-makers and wider practitioners, and building networks and contacts across the Guiana Shield Indigenous communities.

The community owned solutions approaches, involving participatory, visual and systemic methods, used by the COBRA project in the exchange of best practices are published in the COBRA handbook.

Country	Community	Best practice implemented	Project
Suriname	Kwamalasamutu	Self-help	Bridge repair
French Guiana	Antecume Pata	Self-help + partnerships	Pasina group initiation
Colombia	Matavén	Community radio	Radio Kuway
Brazil	Maturuca	Community radio	Radio FM Turuka
Venezuela	Kavanayén	Culture transmission	Culture group initiation
Guyana	Katoonarib	Culture transmission	Culture group initiation

Case 1

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Establishing a community radio in Maturuca
North Rupununi Radio Paiwomak embraced by Brazilian community

The problem

Poor communication among Indigenous villages is leading to ignorance of regional developments that may potentially form threats to the communities. For example, poor communication on infrastructure developments or mining activities might heavily impact on Indigenous territories. Still, in many instances within the Guiana Shield free prior and informed consent is not practiced in large scale developments and the interests of Indigenous communities may thus be ignored in such processes. When communities do not have the possibility to communicate developments that are in conflict with their interests they may be overwhelmed, not well-organised and unable to react and defend their rights.

The community owned solution

Indigenous community members from the North Rupununi region of Guyana described their radio station 'Radio Paiwomak' as a community best practice. It contributes to improved communication, entertainment and information in the North Rupununi. According to the communities, setting up similar community radio stations in other regions will bring significant benefits to Indigenous populations by improving communication of news and by offering a platform for sharing ideas with many people at the same time.

According to the North Rupununi communities, Radio Paiwomak is a solution that addresses many challenges. Through the radio station people in many communities can be reached and the station is used in a way that represents and pleases the whole community. It is well adapted to local needs; presenters, programmes and management of the radio station are fully community owned, even though the initial funding and initiative was external.

The concept of a community radio station has been identified by the North Rupununi communities as a best practice contributing to the communities' co-existence. This co-existence refers to how the community interacts with other communities in the region and with the wider environment.

Description of the community

Maturuca is a Makushi village situated in the Raposa Serra do Sol Indigenous Territory, Roraima, Brazil. It holds a highly significant symbolic importance as it was the centre of Indigenous resistance for the 34 years in which it took the 190 Makushi, Wapishana, Taurepang, Ingarico and Patamona Indigenous communities to gain their land title. On the 19th of April, 2009, the then Brazilian President, Luiz Inácio 'Lula' da Silva, officially inaugurated the Raposa Serra do Sol Indigenous Territory in Maturuca – over 1.7 million hectares of land containing a growing population of 20,000 Indigenous peoples.

It was therefore highly appropriate for Project COBRA to collaborate with the Indigenous community of Maturuca in identifying and sharing community-owned solutions. In November 2013, the North Rupununi District Development Board, representing the 16 indigenous communities of the North Rupununi, were invited to a regional celebration in Maturuca, where the exchange was discussed and best practices screened. In January 2014, the North Rupununi District Development Board hosted the first training event of participants from Maturuca, which was then followed up with another visit in June 2014. The North Rupununi 'best practice' chosen for implementation in Maturuca was 'Community Radio', while the Maturuca best practice for sharing with other communities was the 'cattle project and land rights' where a cattle raising project was initiated by the Maturuca community in their struggle to secure land rights from non-Indigenous settlers. In addition, with a rapidly growing population, Maturuca has developed an organic ranching technique which reduces pressure on hunting for wild meat and fishing.

Sharing best practices with the community of Maturuca

Community members from the North Rupununi travelled to the remote community of Maturuca in northern Brazil to present the best practices that they identified in their own communities. This included the community radio station, the establishment of culture groups, traditional methods of agriculture and fishing, self-help and self-organisation through the development of a local civil society organisation.

Motivation to implement a community radio

In northern Brazil, there is a great communication challenge as nearly none of the Indigenous communities have HF radios, nor radios, nor telephone. Inspired by the successes in the North Rupununi, the community members of Maturuca chose to create their own radio station. The belief was that better communication would improve the sharing of knowledge and expertise within the region and that the village benefits would from it. A radio station would also help in spreading news about developments in the region that might affect the communities or their Indigenous territory.

Implementation process

The enthusiasm of the community members about Radio Paiwomak had to be translated into a plan for implementation of their own community radio: Radio FM Turuka. The implementation process has been challenging due to the bureaucracy involved in setting up a radio station. Nevertheless, the local COBRA researchers organised various community meetings and they received a lot of support for the idea. During these meetings the community chose six people and a director to lead Radio FM Turuka. The proposal for the Radio FM Turuka has been approved by the regional leaders during a regional meeting and contacts have been established with institutions and partners to discuss the viability and financing of the radio. Formal meetings are now planned with these institutions. A license will be requested from the government to establish a community radio (and associated paperwork) and the possibility to use the infrastructure from the instalment of a nearby wind turbine for installing the radio antenna will be explored.

Together with the COBRA researchers from the North Rupununi, the group from Maturuca produced a 30 minute programme on Radio Paiwomak. In addition, training for radio broadcasters in Maturuca was organised in October 2014. The COBRA community researchers from Maturuca documented the implementation process using participatory video and photography. All videos and photstories can be viewed at www.projectcobra.org.

Results and impact

The interaction with other Indigenous communities resulted in plans for establishing a community radio station in Maturuca. At this stage it is hard to say whether the radio will indeed be realised and operational on the short term, but at least we can say that the sharing of best practices has resulted in wider understanding of how other Guiana Shield communities react to upcoming challenges. People were very eager to share their ideas and they have formed groups in which new initiatives came up and are now being developed. The visits of the four members of the Maturuca COBRA team to Bina Hill Institute's Youth Learning Centre in the North Rupununi have already led to exchange and cooperation between Makushi communities living on both sides of the Ireng River, the international Brazil-Guyana border. The idea is to organise students' and teachers' exchange visits in the field of agriculture and tourism. Such visits would represent an opportunity to learn a second language and thereby increase the academic opportunities for indigenous students.

Case 2

Keeping alive traditional culture in Kavanayén
Venezuela community initiates culture groups

The problem

Across the Guiana Shield, Indigenous communities are confronted with a loss of cultural identity and a diminishing interest among youth for keeping alive ancient traditions. In many cases, this process has led to particularly the older generation being concerned about the future of the community culture. How could they keep their traditions alive and how could they improve again the appreciation of Indigenous culture by the younger generation? If the current process continues and no one stands up against it, the local culture may gradually disappear completely and will be replaced by a globalised consumerism culture, which has already spread around the world – a culture that may seriously put pressure on the natural ecosystems in which Indigenous communities live, and the global community relies upon.

The community owned solution

A strong cultural identity and the sense of community are at the heart of the social-ecological system in the North Rupununi. Several of the communities in the North Rupununi have established groups that actively bring young people together in order to transfer traditions and cultural habits from their own community. These so-called 'culture groups' are about bringing together generations, blending traditional and non-traditional, and organising events and performances. The concept of culture groups has been identified by the North Rupununi communities as a community owned practice contributing to the communities' resistance.

Within a culture group various forms of traditions such as dances, food preparation, cloth making, and music may be practiced and taught to the younger generation. While actively practicing, the culture groups bring back the interest in Indigenous traditions and history among community members, thereby addressing the concerns by many of the older generation about the gradual fading of Indigenous culture and traditions.

Using photostories and participatory videos, the community researchers from the Rupununi have extensively documented how their culture groups are established and operate. This material formed the basis for sharing the concept of culture groups with other communities.

Description of Kavanayén

Kavanayén is an Arekuna Pemon community located in the savannas of southern Venezuela within the Cainama National Park and in the Gran Sabana Municipality of Bolivar State. It was founded by a Capuchin mission in 1943 which offered housing to the Pemón Arekuna in return for converting to Christianity. The community has a population of approximately 1350 people, with most people living in distinctive housing made from quarried rock and concrete with corrugated iron roofs. There is a primary and secondary school and a university campus, as well as a clinic, computer and internet centre, shops, restaurants and guesthouses.

There are several levels of organization; the main defined by the 'Captaincy' which is led by an elected representative of the community every three years; and 'Community Councils' implemented by the Venezuelan state. The technical and agricultural school which involves children, youth, parents and guardians, also has organizational functions within Kavanayén. Growing food, especially the staple cassava, is an important family activity. However, with the population rising, finding land in the nearby forest for the farm is becoming increasingly difficult, and people are travelling further away to find fertile ground.

Kavanayén is a popular tourist destination and the community runs its own Emasensen Tourism Cooperative. However, tourism is seasonal and there are several challenges to the Cooperative including limited infrastructure, the state of roads and political and economic instability at national level. As gold prices have increased, mining has become an alternative livelihood option, particularly for young people, but this has been at the expense of traditional farming and with associated social and environmental problems.

Sharing best practices with the community of Kavanayén

In November 2013, community members from the North Rupununi visited the community of Kavanayén in southern Venezuela to present a series of best practices that they identified in their own communities. This included the community radio station, the establishment of culture groups, traditional methods of agriculture and fishing, self-help and self-organisation through the development of a local civil society organisation.

Interestingly, the Kavanayén community already had active forms of self-help and smart agriculture that were comparable with the ones initiated in the North Rupununi.

Motivation to implement a cultural group

In Kavanayén the older generation is concerned about the future of their traditional cultural practices. Loss of culture (including language) has been identified as a priority issue by the community and there have been recent projects to reinvigorate lost traditional practices such as fire management in the savannas. Thus, recognising the importance of maintaining traditional culture, the community of Kavanayén chose to establish a culture group in their community. The community has been willing to bring about effective transmission of culture to youth, but did not known how to do it in a practical way. In fact, they have struggled to find good ways to do it. The videos and photostories demonstrating the culture groups in the North Rupununi convinced a number of community members in Kavanayén to also adopt this concept.

Implementation process

In December 2013, the COBRA team trained community members in Kavanayén in identifying and sharing community owned solutions, including the use of video and photostories. It was this team that received the task to document the implementation process of the cultural groups in Kavanayén using participatory video and photostories. In February and June 2014, the COBRA team returned to the community in order to evaluate the progress made.

Together with the COBRA team it was agreed that the implementation would start with appointing one leader and organising a weekly meeting with a small group of interested community members. The goal of this weekly meeting was to teach and demonstrate traditional skills such as speaking the language, songs, dances, poems, cotton spinning, hammock weaving, making costumes, stories about farming and hunting. Elders would be invited to come and talk to children or take the group to the elders´ house for meetings so they could share their stories. The idea was that this should finally lead to performances of songs, dances, plays to the community, at events, official visits and for tourists. As a final step it was proposed that these performances could be held also in other communities.

The appointed leader indeed succeeded to bring together a group of interested community members to start a culture group. They drew a plan for activities and presented this to the community assembly and to the school in order to get children involved. The group organised a workshop to make traditional costumes for children in which seven mothers and fifteen children participated. Apart from this, the group performed traditional dances during campfire nights, which offered a great opportunity to do traditional activities.

The local team from Kavanayén documented these activities and successfully produced participatory video and photostories on the implementation of culture groups in the village. All videos and photostories can be viewed at www.projectcobra. org.

Results and impact

The COBRA project helped to strengthen on-going cultural transmission activities as well as initiate various new activities within the community of Kavanayén. These activities were organised, implemented and documented primarily by the community members themselves.

Among the most concrete results is the functioning community culture group and in particular the fact that there is a group of people interested in taking this forward. The local community clearly has ambitions to scale up the activities which were started during the course of the COBRA project.

Case 3
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Organising self-help projects in south Suriname
Villagers of Kwamalasamutu implement community work through self-help

The problem

An increasing number of local communities in the Guiana Shield are dealing with a lack of interest among community members to contribute to the collective good. Currently many young community members are leaving their villages and migrate to cities in order to find jobs or to study. Others leave their village behind to go and work in the mines. Mining is a rapidly growing industry throughout the Guiana Shield and foreign interests in mineral resources in the region are increasing. Such developments in combination with the increasing influence of western culture and values on communities and the arrival of a cash income system may have contributed to a loss of pride and togetherness of community members. The fact that such processes are not uncommon in rural areas worldwide makes the search for sustainable solutions imperative and the approaches used in the COBRA project highly relevant.

The community owned solution

Even within their remote locations, and within a national context that does not necessarily provide funding and services for the maintenance of community spaces or for the building of community infrastructure, most communities of the North Rupununi manage to maintain their public spaces

clean, to develop infrastructure, and to carry out tasks that do not seem feasible by members of the community individually (such as opening a new farm). The concept of self-help has been identified by the North Rupununi communities as a best practice contributing to the communities' ideal performance.

Self-help involves community members getting together to carry out tasks, following the famous saying: "many hands make light work". However, getting community members together and organised is not a straight-forward process. At the community level, the key is to have a strong leader. The leader must organise a "self-help" event in such a way that community members participate and projects get carried out successfully.

Sharing best practices with the community of Kwamalasamutu

Community members from the North Rupununi went to the community of Kwamalasamutu in south Suriname in October 2013 to present a series of best practices that they identified in their own communities. These best practices included the establishment of a community radio station, the establishment of culture groups, traditional methods of agriculture and fishing, self-help and self-organisation through the development of a local civil society organisation.

Description of Kwamalasamutu

Kwamalasamutu is a Trio Indian village in the Sipaliwini District in southern Suriname. It is a remote place located close to the Brazilian border in an area that is primarily covered by rainforest. The village is home to the Paramount Chief of the northern Trios. Inhabitants of the village have been living here mainly from fishing, hunting and small scale agriculture. A variety of crops such as cassava, banana and sweet potatoes are being cultivated on small crop fields nearby the village. Cassava is the staple food. It is widely grown and processed into cassava bread, meal and wine. Usually the women carry the harvested cassavas from the fields back the village and process it. Men are in charge of hunting and fishing. Except for chicken, the community does not keep and breed livestock.

The population of Kwamalasamutu has grown over 1.000 people, which is exceeding the carrying capacity of the environment and leading to overexploitation of fish and wildlife stocks. With this development, the dependency on products being brought in from Paramaribo is growing. The traditional way of life in Kwamalasamutu is being influenced by the arrival of a number of modern day facilities such as gasoline powered boat engines, solar panels, a central generator, a medical clinic and a large primary school. Besides this, many of the young people move out of the village in order to study in Paramaribo or find jobs elsewhere. The village chief admits that the traditional Trio culture and even the local language are gradually disappearing in Kwamalasamutu.

Using photostories and participatory videos, the community researchers from the Rupununi have extensively documented how their culture groups are established and operate. This material formed the basis for sharing the concept of culture groups with other communities.

Sharing best practices with the community of Kavanayén

In November 2013, community members from the North Rupununi visited the community of Kavanayén in southern Venezuela to present a series of best practices that they identified in their own communities. This included the community radio station, the establishment of culture groups, traditional methods of agriculture and fishing, self-help and self-organisation through the development of a local civil society organisation. Interestingly, the Kavanayén community already had active forms of self-help and smart agriculture that were comparable with the ones initiated in the North Rupununi.

Motivation to implement self-help

In Kwamalasamutu, people have experienced the downside of losing the feeling of togetherness and losing pride in their own culture. The main bridge in the village had been broken for years. Each day hundreds of people, including school children, had to cross the bridge that was dangerously falling apart. Nevertheless, despite a number of voluntary attempts to initiate restoration of the bridge, the villagers were not able to get a group of people together and complete the job.

In a public session organised by COBRA the visitors were actively engaged in discussing the North Rupununi best practices. Most people were particularly interested in "self-help", "fishing techniques" and "transmission of culture to youth", which all related to challenges Kwamalasamutu was experiencing. The majority of community members voted in the end for implementing self-help in their community. In their motivation several of the community members mentioned the dramatic example of the bridge. Also the village leaders (bashas) and the head of all Trio communities acknowledged the importance of self-help for the future of their village and other villages. The villagers agreed to restore the bridge using the concept of self-help.

Implementation process

The implementation started with training a group of eight young community members, including men and women. One of their tasks as community researchers was to lead on the implementation of self-help in the village and to document the process using participatory visual methods. To organise the bridge restoration, a project leader was appointed who had the responsibility to arrange materials and to bring together a group of workers. All the work was done on a voluntary, no cost basis. All steps taken in the process were documented and after three months, the bridge was successfully completed. The local team from Kwamalasamutu documented these activities and successfully produced participatory video and photostories on the implementation of self-help in the village. All videos and photostories can be viewed at www.projectcobra.org.

Results and impact

Clearly, the most direct and visible result of this best practice implementation was the restored bridge, now safe to cross and used intensively by the whole community. Community members experienced the bridge restoration as a very positive development. The hope is that through this experience, community members start to realise the importance of working together to achieve a common goal – a goal that benefits the whole community. Perhaps self-help offers potential to improve natural resource management in areas where the community is currently facing overexploitation. Examples may include a responsible fish breeding programme and protection of natural breeding grounds in the river.

The success of rolling out the selfhelp best practice in Kwamalasamutu may indicate that this community is a suitable candidate for potential future work on community-based solutions or the possible implementation of community-based Payments for Ecosystem Services projects. However, in Kwamalasamutu it will definitely be challenging to keep selfhelp initiatives alive. The drivers behind the loss of community interest remain strong and it will probably take continuous effort to start community initiatives that last for the long term. On the other hand, we saw positive changes as well, including young people getting a voice in the community, women talking up and the skills acquired during the COBRA project.