Want in a rich country

Suriname ranks seventeenth among the world’s richest countries in development potential. At the same time, the vast majority of the population live under the poverty line, and economic inequality almost doubled over the last 30 years. Decades of ethincal divide and rule, political patronage, and a stifled civil society have left governance institutions open to both national and international destructive influences.

Politics and power, patronage and poverty

Since the late 1950s the mining and processing of bauxite has kept the economy afloat. It has also provided successive governments with the means to distribute wealth without the need to stimulate or develop other production sectors. The strong centralised government control that still reigns today is built on a political patronage system whereby political factions, followers and friends can be rewarded with civil service jobs, houses, and other scarce commodities.

The political patronage system works both ways: it gives jobs and positions to people who are politically loyal but not necessarily qualified or competent, and in return it expects their collaboration in serving the interests of political friends.

In a total population of 481,146, with an unemployment rate ranging between 11% and 14%, a total of 36,151 civil servants make up 37% of the labour force. Furthermore, almost 25% of the labour force is comprised of office-based civil servants (23,987), a figure ten times the number of army personnel (2,042), more than twenty times the police force (1,142) and almost twenty times the total number of nurses (1,235)!

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The worst threat to human security in Suriname is the governance crisis, which is becoming increasingly unbearable. Decades of ethnical divide and rule, political patronage, and a stifled civil society have left governance institutions open to both national and international destructive influences.

Total control, but no checks and balances

The extensive role assigned to the State impedes development in the private sector and increases the risk of the arbitrary use of power by the State. The Government’s dominant position makes it profitable for individuals to invest in politics. Control over the apparatus means control over all public goods and services, including electricity, water, telephone, healthcare, access to land, tariffs, permits, etc.

The last budget approved by Parliament dates to 1964. Since 1988 budget accounts are not even published by the Ministry of Finance, so control over expenditures is non-existent. Budgets for the following year are submitted without accounting for the expenditures of the previous year. Throughout the decade 1990-2000, utility companies did not submit a single annual report. The Central National Accountants Agency, which supposedly controls them, has only one qualified accountant on its staff.

Economic and monetary insecurity

With imports far exceeding exports, huge government expenditure (45.5% of GDP) and stagnant production, it is not surprising that the economic situation is poor. The exchange rate for the US dollar has been artificially fixed at around USD 1 = SRG 2,700 since 2001. To rebuild trust in the country’s own economy and monetary system, the Central Bank created a new national currency, the Surinamese Dollar (SRD). Without taking any other monetary or economic measures, three zeros were disposed of in order to raise the exchange rate to USD 1 = SRD 2.7. The promotional campaign to support the launch of the SRD on 1 January 2004 was hampered by the fact that the new banknotes had not been printed.

Many questions have been asked about deals made by the Government with several transnational corporations in 2003. Although there is public support for attracting foreign investment, there has also been widespread concern that the promises made were not met.

5 Ibid, Tables 8, 10, and 11.
forms of crime.15

well as adequate legislation to combat these new
attractive to marginalised youth. Investment in law
consumption patterns and lifestyle of drug barons prove
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laundering, kidnappings, vendettas and extortion) (related crime. The actors are national and interna-
with an increase in drug consumption and drug-
institutionalised corruption goes hand in hand
and financial and private institutions. The increase
it easier for criminal forces to penetrate government
mining corporations - Billiton (Holland) and Alcoa
(USA) - competing for a concession took advantage
of the indecisiveness of their government counter-
part by joining forces and presenting the Govern-
ment with a joint agreement that was to their mutual
benefit. Not a single deal so far has offered clear-cut
guarantees regarding employment, transfer of skills
and technology, or the use of local products.12

Crime, drugs and violence

“Nothing poses greater threats to civil society in
Caricom countries than the drug problem; and noth-
ing exemplifies the powerlessness of the regional
governments more.”14

Weak governance and weak institutions make
it easier for criminal forces to penetrate government
and financial and private institutions. The increase
in institutionalised corruption goes hand in hand
with an increase in drug consumption and drug-
related crime. The actors are national and interna-
tional criminal networks, whose crimes (money
laundering, kidnappings, vendettas and extortion)
are not only related to the drugs circuit, but also
include fraud, gambling, prostitution, child pornog-
raphy and child trafficking. The criminal networks
are very well organised and have generated huge
profits which they reinvest in both legal and illegal
activities. Members of these groups protect them-
selfs by infiltrating legitimate organisations, thus
rupturing and compromising the legal order.

The effect on the social fabric is disastrous.
Not only is the use of drugs increasing, but the con-
sumption patterns and lifestyle of drug barons prove
attractive to marginalised youth. Investment in law
enforcement and security institutions is lacking, as
well as adequate legislation to combat these new
forms of crime.15

Crimes against property rose from 15,729 in
2000 to 19,071 in 2002. These crimes have also
become more violent, and include grievous bodily
harm, rape, arson and murder, and contribute largely
to feelings of fear and frustration in society.16

Ordinary citizens are caught between a rock
and a hard place; without the capital to invest in
sophisticated security technology or professional
neighbourhood watch,17 they are the first to be
victimised by criminals who choose the least risky
operation. They are also the victims of police bruta-
tality encouraged by understaffing, fear and frus-
tration within the corps. Suspects taken into cus-
tody are detained for as long as three months due
to understaffing at the Court of Justice.

Who to trust?

With corruption within the police force widely
recognised, and even acknowledged by the Minis-
ter responsible,18 the average citizen is blamed for “not showing enough
citizenship”19 to report crimes. The fact is that the
tradition of punishing crime is not very strong in
Suriname. A former military coup leader accused
of drug trafficking and sought by Interpol is now
member of the National Assembly for his party. A
former guerrilla and bank robber, accused of drug
trafficking, is now paid staff in the National Safety
Service.

On 8 December 1982, fifteen opponents of the
military regime (journalists, lawyers, academics and
trade union leaders) were murdered by the military
authorities. Decembermoorden (December mur-
ders), as it is known, is an issue in every election
campaign of the ruling party, but the victims’ rela-
tives have still had to press the Government into
continuing to investigate this atrocity regardless of
the 18-year statute which would have proscribed
the crimes in 2000.

Environmental crime

National and international environmental organisa-
tions have expressed alarm about the huge ground
and river water pollution produced by the large quan-
tities of mercury used in small-scale gold winning
in the interior of the country. Gold diggers are usu-
ally foreigners, mostly from Brazil, or inhabitants
of villages near gold winning areas. The 150 regis-
tered gold diggers are a small minority compared
to the estimated 15,000 to 30,000 illegal gold dig-
gers who operate without a permit. They use the
cheapest method of gold winning, which causes
40% to 50% of the mercury to go straight into the
soil and river. The rest of it ends in the atmosphere
in the form of mercury vapour. Mercury intoxica-
tion affects local inhabitants who eat fish, use river
water for drinking and inhale mercury vapour on a
daily basis.20

Although not many cases of mercury intoxica-
tion have been reported in Suriname, on the Brazil-
ian side of the border there is a growing number of
cases in indigenous communities, where children
are born with birth defects directly related to mer-
cury intoxication of the mother during pregnancy.21

To date no legislation has been passed prohib-
iting the sale or use of mercury.

The environment and public health are also
threatened by the generous use of pesticides in ag-
riculture. Farmers associations acknowledge the use
of heavy pesticides on vegetables up to the day be-
fore the harvest: “if you do not spray, you do not reap.
And if you do not reap, you do not sell and you do not eat”22 In 2002 exported vegetables were
sent back to Suriname from the Netherlands because
of the unacceptable high level of monochrotophas
found in them. This pesticide, meant for rice farm-
ing and not vegetables, causes premature death,
birth defects and brain damage, and affects bone
marrow and DNA structure. The Ministry of Agri-
culture does not, however, consider it necessary to
monitor vegetables for the national market because
“as far as we know, all importers of pesticides com-
ply with the rules and regulations”.23

The challenge for civil society

The good news is that today there is widespread
agreement in all sectors of civil society that gover-

10 For example, the Bauxiet Akkoord, that had taxes fixed at
an exchange rate of USD 1 = SRG 8.
11 Wood logging transnationals like Berjaya and Musa
(Indonesia).
12 Concession given to gold mining multinational Golden Star
(Canada) in the economic zone of the community of Nieuw
Koffiekamp, a village whose inhabitants had already
migrated once against their will to make way for a hydro-
electric dam built in the late 1950s/early 1960s.
13 On the contrary, Cambior (Canada), a gold mining
transnational informed local bakeries in the district of
Brokopondo that they would not need their services any
more because they would open their own bakery. Protests
from the Ministry of Trade and Industry and the Ministry of
Regional Development were of no avail.
14 Caribbean Community (Caricom). Crime and Security
15 Santokhi, Ch. “Threats to Good Governance” in Good
Governance, Condition for Economic Development,
16 Ibid.
17 Paid service offered by security officers and companies.
18 Minister of Justice and Police, New Year’s speech, 2003.
19 Minister of Justice and Police in a radio-interview, Radio
20 Lie A Kwie, K. Mercury intoxication as a result of small-
scale gold mining in Suriname, 1997.
21 Lafaix, Philippe. The Law of the Jungle, Documentary,
2003.
22 Crab, J. “Poison on our Plate” in Paramaribo Post, 13
February 2003.
23 Acting Director of Ministry for Agriculture, Husbandry and
Fishery in an interview for Paramaribo Post, February
2003.
24 Paraphrased from the lyrics of “War” by the late Bob
Marley.