

Taming the Wild Coast: The Politics of Resilience in Climate Adaptation in Suriname

by Katinka Wijsman

“It is fighting against nature” Arjun explains, as we overlook the site where for the last weeks he has been working with a small crew on building a number of STUs - sediment trapping units.* We are waiting for a delivery of building materials in our soiled clothes under the scorching sun, overlooking the muddy flats stretching out before us where mangroves used to stand many and tall. Just the other day a lot of the work became undone as the tide came in, the water’s pressure loosening the construction of walaba poles and bamboo stems, which drifted away into the open water. The construction process has been tiring. What was supposed to take ten days has already lasted more than forty, the work in the water and mud more cumbersome than anticipated. A few weeks ago, Arjun barely escaped a major accident when he sunk into the mud shoulder deep with no-one else around and the tide coming in. With next month being the first of the “r” or “rough” months, weather wise, it is pertinent to finish the job swiftly; but faltering equipment, delayed deliveries, and daily timing and speed of tides not necessarily aligning with the less warm or rain-less hours—or with family obligations—have made it challenging. Without the units ready, the incoming waves will further erode the coastline and a complete season of mud trapping would be wasted, and with that the chance to restore the mangrove forest in this area. Behind us, the pundit is working on his own intervention. His temple used to be surrounded by mangrove trees, but now stands on what has changed into a peninsula encircled by muddy water on all sides but one. Its concrete sides are crumbling and are regularly overtopped by high tides. “Some people are skeptical it will work” Arjun says about the sediment trapping units, while we look at the ad hoc earthen reinforcement the pundit is creating around this place of worship. “They want the government to build a dike, but our country is broke. Replanting mangroves is the only solution we have.”





Mangrove preservation and restoration have become important strategies in dealing with climate change in recent decades. In Suriname, the language of resilience has given mangrove advocates new impetus and vocabulary to posit care for mangroves as a salient issue on the agenda, by positing mangroves as nature-based alternative to hard infrastructures, and replacing the emphasis on conservation for its own sake with one for the sake of resilience. Nevertheless, there is contestation about how, where, and when to care for mangroves, hinging on questions of what exactly needs to be cared for, who should do this, and why this is an important undertaking. In this project, I document how mangroves gain layers of meaning in the pursuit of climate resilience, making their governance of interest to global conservation organizations, international donors and agencies, as well as expert and local communities. As mangroves entangle with assemblages of legislation, expertise, and aid, climate resilience however rubs and meets resistance. What is posited as a technical project of restoration and preservation, reveals itself as political when the responsibilities for climate change adaptation and the terms for its unfolding are contested and the materialization of resilience through mangroves proves anything but clear-cut. Adaptation practices of mangrove restoration in Suriname turn out to be intimately linked to the physical and affective consequences of colonial hydrological projects of the former plantation economy, profoundly shaping the aspirations, hopes, and fears of local communities in the face of climate change.

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I would like to thank TEDC for their support and all my interlocutors in Suriname who have made this project possible. For inquiries about the project please reach out to [katinka.wijsman@newschool.edu](mailto:katinka.wijsman@newschool.edu)

\*Arjun is a fictional name.