Exclusive: With UNICEF to Tepu, Upper Tapanahony river
"We see people only on photos”

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(Translation from Dutch into English and adaptation by Ksenia Glebova, UNICEF Suriname)

PELELU TEPU - The Millennium Development Goals, including ending poverty and fighting HIV/AIDS, are of course relevant not only for city dwellers. Interviewers sent by the General Bureau of Statistics and supported by UNICEF have been operating in all districts of Suriname for the past few weeks. The teams are on the ground to conduct the research for the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS).

De Ware Tijd accompanied one data collection team on their three-day long trip to the indigenous Amerindian village Pelelu Tepu (or Tepu) located over 300 km south of the capital Paramaribo. Tepu – which means rock in the local Trio language - was founded by missionaries in the sixties. The missionaries wanted to establish a permanent settlement for the wandering Trio tribes to facilitate their missionary work.

The Baptist Church still reminds of that time.

When our plane lands on a bumpy airstrip, dozens of children are watching our arrival. About 750 people live in Tepu, of which around 150 are children. Today, the Trio tribe is living in Tepu together with the Wayana and the Akuriyo. "Although we are not all Trio, the Trio is our language," said the administrative superintendent Thomas Shokopo. He will accompany us for three days of MICS fieldwork by in the village.

How many hours did the child fetch water or collect firewood for household use?

How often do you read a newspaper or magazine? Have you ever heard of an illness called AIDS? These are some of the dozens of questions that the residents of Tepu were asked for two days long by the research team supervised by the General Office of Statistics and monitored by UNICEF.

The bags of the investigators were full of green (for women between 15 and 49 years of age), blue (for household) and yellow (for children under 5) MICS questionnaires. The survey is undertaken by the Surinamese government, with support from UNICEF. The fieldwork stage is conducted by the General Bureau of Statistics.

UNICEF developed the global survey to assist countries to gather quality data on their youngest citizens and women.

The national MICS exercise began on July 20 in the capital Paramaribo, and runs until September 17. It goes without saying that it is very important.  The government can use the results of the survey to shape policies to match the real needs of the population. The score on the Millennium Development Goals - with 2015 deadline - must become clearer through the survey.

As with any visit to an indigenous community we are first brought to the granman of the tribe. Ankarapi Pikumi awaits us in the Krutu of the village, an impressively large traditional cabin with a high roof and no walls. The Krutu construction is effective enough to lead the heat outside. "We have come from the city to Tepu to investigate the situation of children and women. On the basis of this information, the government can make good decisions for you," team coordinator Thomas Hardjodikromo from the General Bureau of Statistics tells granman Pikumi.

In turn Pikumi welcomes us and leads us around the village and finally he points us to our first household. The sweltering heat makes clear that this is not a pleasure trip, and the tight schedule keeps everyone on track. In two and half days, we will interview members of twenty households about their life situation. Though the community of Tepu may be small, the village itself is geographically vast. Some villagers are living thirty minutes away; others are only accessible by canoe. "In the same way as the capital Paramaribo has different neighborhoods, Tepu consists of several parts. The Krutu building stands in the centre of the village, but there are several residential areas around it, "explains Shokopo. This also presents the interviewers with practical problems, for instance when and where the canoe to be taken. The canoe trip to the other side of the river costs us extra 20 SRD per person.

"That is not the only difference with our approach in the city," says MICS interviewer Denise Verbond. "The work here is sometimes really difficult - not only because of the local conditions but also because of the language. What we ask people in Dutch, an interpreter must translate to Trio. Sometimes I have to split a long question into four parts. Everything takes longer here."

House calls in Tepu sometimes supply beautiful scenes. When a man was asked about his family registration book, he climbed the stairs into his home. Under a thick layer of dust, he dug out a red metal box, from which he - as if by magic – produced the family book. Weathered and faded green, you wonder when he had to use it last. Later it turns out the content is incomplete; the youngest child is missing from the records. On the first day it takes it takes half an hour to measure a child frightened by the imposing wooden structure of the UNICEF measuring board. Lots of tears and tons of creativity eventually lead to success. "Boy, you have no idea how many children cried when we weighed and measured them," laughs Brian Kliwon, the team editor. Fortunately, on the second day things are easy and children and being weighed and measured without tears.

The research team is welcome here, this much is clear. A form of direct participation and attention from the respondents is characteristic for this area."We have one hundred percent cooperation from the villagers," says Hardjodikromo. "I think they see it as a really good thing that people from the city give them their attention and want to know more about their lives. Of course we explain the potential significance of this research. We had to first seek permission from the village elder, the granman, to conduct our research."

Administrative superintendent Shokopo confirms this. "We see other people only on photographs. A little further on is a lodge for tourists, fully equipped with toilet and solar panels. Yet for over one year we have not had any tourists here. This is extremely unfortunate, because the whole village loses revenue. Many people make ends meet, simply because that’s what you do. We do have some agriculture, hunting and fishing, but that is it. "In addition, some of the villagers also bred hunting dogs for sale. Shokopo is an official employed by the Ministry of Regional Development. If there are people from the city visiting Tepu, then he takes most of this work upon himself. "It sometimes causes jealousy. “Yes, I find that very sad”, he muses.  But checking the prices at the local tour operator keeps many potential guests at bay. Seven days in and around Tepu will easily cost you a thousand euros per person.  During the day there is no electricity and there is no mobile phone coverage. Though the latter may soon change. "Last week, some people from Telesur, the government telecoms operators, were here to do measurements.  Apparently they want to install a mast here - finally, "says hopeful Shokopo. "They have waited a long time, but it's very good that it is happening now. It is still very difficult to convey a message to the city, even if someone is seriously ill. "

Thus, even the far south of Suriname gradually is opening up. Not that there are no urban influences to be found in Tepu, on the contrary. DVD players are certainly not new to the village, and the band in the Baptist Church plays electric guitars. What of the politics in the city, do they sometimes hear something? " During the election campaign for the parliamentary election many parties - NDP, ABOP, BVD, DOE, SPA – were here. After that we never saw them again, they just come here to campaign, "regrets Shokopo.

After two days of field work in Tepu all interviewers unanimously agree: the work went well. And what is more glorious than after work - surrounded by village children playing - to enjoy a swim in the rapids before sunset?

The visit to Tepu ends as it began, with another meeting with the granman. Team coordinator Hardjodikromo explains to the granman what happens after the departure of the MICS team. "We now have our share of the work done. All data will be entered, processed and analysed. The next part of the work is to be done by the government. They must transform our findings into policies, ensuring that your issues are resolved. Do not expect this will happen immediately. We hope that it eventually does happen, "concludes Hardjodikromo. For Tepu yet another year of waiting has begun.  The government with support of UNICEF now will work to produce reliable figures on the situation of children and women, including the villages in the interior. The MICS Suriname report will be published in 2011.

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