



The Amazon: Community struggles against old and new threats

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OUR VIEWPOINT

The Amazon Summit: Extractivism and violence in the name of the “bioeconomy” and of “sustainability”

Using the argument of “sustainable development”, governments in the Amazon region continue providing incentives for extractivism. In the face of this, indigenous leader Alessandra Munduruku vents her thoughts: “What we need is the demarcation of indigenous territories. Enough talk of bioeconomy, of sustainability, when there is violence in the here and now.”

On August 8 and 9, 2023, the Brazilian city of Belém hosted the Amazon Summit, an uncommon gathering that brought together the presidents of Brazil, Colombia, Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela, Guyana and Surinam to discuss the region’s questions. A key agenda item, among others, was the main motive for the meeting: the urgent challenge of combating deforestation.

The Summit resulted in the Belém Declaration, where the presidents suggest two lines of action. The first is promoting “sustainable development”; the second is the “full protection” or “preservation” of the Amazon region, with the target of “zero deforestation” by 2030. In one of the sentences in the Declaration the presidents state that they intend to “fight deforestation” and, at the same time, “eradicate and halt the advance of *illegal* natural resource extraction activities” [emphasis added].

Following this line of reasoning, the Declaration seems to suggest that there would be no problems if corporations or other actors involved in extractivism in mining, oil, timber and agribusiness, or the large scale hydro-electric power plants, highways, railways and ports that the extractivist model needs, conducted their activities legally, with up-to-date licenses. But the reality of the Amazon region demonstrates the exact opposite. The abovementioned sectors connected with the model of industrial extractivism are notorious drivers of deforestation. When conducted illegally they only tend to increase their destructive and violent impacts. The Belém Declaration, fails to even mention these causes, let alone analyze their serious impacts on the territories of indigenous peoples, riverine populations, and traditional and peasant communities.

The stark reality is that in the name of “sustainable development” the governments of the Amazon region continue to provide incentives to extractivism. Owing to this, they do not admit committing themselves to structural measures that break with the extractivist model, like ceasing oil extraction in the Amazon region, as proposed by one of the presidents who took part in the meeting. For this reason, the very concept of “sustainable development” has become an underlying, indirect cause of deforestation. It means that when the presidents call for more “sustainable development” in the Belém Declaration, in practice they are also calling for more deforestation.

At present, it is hard to find a destructive sector in the Amazon region that does not term itself “sustainable”: “sustainable” forest management, “sustainable” soy beans, “sustainable” palm oil, “sustainable” mining, everything has become “sustainable”. The sectors also use other artifices, such as “quality seals” issued by voluntary “sustainability” certifiers.

Amazon Dialogues and the bioeconomy

In the days leading up to the Summit, thousands of people, including many indigenous people, gathered in Belém for an event called “Amazon Dialogues”, an initiative of the Brazilian government itself, claiming to intend to encourage civil society participation in the Summit. However, the content of the proposals and reflections handed in, in the form of letters, was not included in the final declaration.

At the same time, what was notable about these “Dialogues” was the strong presence of major conservationist NGOs that make a habit of using such spaces to emphasize concepts and new narratives. In Belém, they talked a lot about the “bioeconomy” and the idea of promoting a “living forest”, in a reference to the Amazon forest itself.

“Living forest” is an expression that sounds nice, but also sounds weird. After all, which forest would not be alive? It reminds one of another term these same NGOs have propagated: forest standing. “Forest standing? I’ve never seen a forest lying down,” said a community leader once, upon hearing the term.

The “forest standing” symbolizes well the vision that the promoters of the bioeconomy – large scale transnationals responsible for the destruction of the Amazon region, as well as the big conservationist NGOs – have of the forest: an opportunity for new business deals, like the sale of carbon credits that benefit polluting companies, now “carbon neutral”, at the same time they re-christen their “old” extractive business activities as part of the “green economy”, producing “biofuels” and expanding mining for the “green transition” of the economy.

The promoters of the bioeconomy seek to ally with governments and major organizations of indigenous peoples and traditional populations. They make invitations to closed-door events with few participants. For example, in January 2023, the governor of Pará state, Helder Barbalho, attended the World Economic Forum in Davos to present his state’s “Bioeconomy Plan” to the elites of global capital – a plan formulated by conservationist NGO TNC, by the way. (1) In June, the “Pan-Amazon Bioeconomy Conference” took place in Rio de Janeiro, with the participation of billionaire Jeff Bezos’ Earth Fund, the World Bank, WWF and also the regional Amazon indigenous organization COICA, among others. (2) In August, the “Amazon and New Economies International Conference” was held. It was supported, among others, by the Pará state government and by Vale, (3) one of the world’s largest mining corporations, responsible for two of the most serious environmental crimes in Brazil’s history, in Brumadinho and Mariana, Minas Gerais state.

Despite not using the word “bioeconomy”, the Belém Declaration summarizes perfectly the idea that its promoters seek to impose: more “sustainable development” with more “conservation” and always with a view to new business opportunities.

“Enough talk about the bioeconomy”

The Belém Declaration also talks about “Guarantee[ing] the rights of indigenous peoples, local and traditional communities, including the right to the territories and lands inhabited by such peoples, [with] full and effective possession”. But events surrounding the Summit soon questioned the validity of this promise.

On the eve of the Summit, in Tomé-Açu municipality, 200km from Belém, four Tembé indigenous people were shot during two confrontations with security guards of a company called Brasil Biofuels (BBF). The Tembé are fighting for the Brazilian government to demarcate their territory seized by BBF. This is a company that with all sorts of state support has and is expanding a monoculture plantation with the aim of producing *dendê* palm oil and biofuel for the bioeconomy ([see the article in this bulletin](#)).

One of the participants of the “Amazon Dialogues”, leader Alessandra Munduruku, from a people that has fought for years to have its territory demarcated, vented: “We must put an end to this violence urgently. What we need is the demarcation of indigenous territories. Enough talk of bioeconomy, of sustainability, when there is violence in the here and now.” (4)

The Tropical Forestry Action Plan (TFAP) released by the World Bank and FAO in 1986 was similar to the Belém Declaration of 2023, proposing actions to promote “development” with the “protection” of the forest. It is worth remembering that TFAP failed. It resulted in more destruction of forests and more problems for communities that depend on the forest and were unjustly blamed for deforestation. Forty years after the World Bank’s failed plan, history repeats itself, thus signaling that for the indigenous peoples and traditional populations of the Amazon region there is no option but to continue strengthening more and more their coordination, their integration and their resistance struggles.

(1) WRM Bulletin, [REDD and the Green Economy exacerbate oppression and deforestation in Pará, Brazil](#), July 2023.

(2) [Conferência Pan-Amazônica pela Bioeconomia reúne líderes e especialistas para debater formas de impulsar a bioeconomia na Amazônia](#), June 2019.

(3) [Conferência Internacional Amazônia e Novas Economias; Pará e mineração valorizam bioeconomia para promover desenvolvimento sustentável da Amazônia](#)

(4) [Na véspera da Cúpula da Amazônia, duas mulheres e um homem do povo Tembé são baleados no Pará.](#)

How different forms of 'green' extractivism are causing the destruction of the Amazon forest

The Amazon region is one of the final frontiers of resistance to capital expansion. This is epitomized by the struggles of social activists such as Chico Mendes, as well as by the presence of most of the earth's remaining indigenous peoples in voluntary isolation. However, different forms of 'green' extractivism are currently and increasingly advancing on this territory.

Even from afar, the Amazon appeals to people's imagination. After all, the region is home to by far the largest rainforest and river on earth. The Amazon spans eight countries, as well as the France-occupied territory of French Guyana. Tributaries of the Amazon River run through several Amazonian countries, including the Madeira and Tapajós Rivers in Brazil, the Madre de Dios River in Peru, the Guainia River in Colombia, and the Beni River in Bolivia. About 385 groups of Indigenous Peoples inhabit the region, as well as most of the earth's remaining indigenous peoples in isolation who reject contact with the outside world.

Numerous books and illustrations have documented the greatness and diversity of species of the Amazon. And in recent years, wonderful pictures of the Amazon have also been featured in the propaganda of transnational companies—especially from the global North—in an attempt to show concern for the Amazon forest. Yet hidden behind these glossy materials are different forms of 'green' extractivism that are causing the present-day destruction of the Amazon rainforest.

Deforestation and forest degradation in the Amazon

Over half of the large-scale deforestation in the Amazon is caused by three specific activities, which often occur in tandem: **logging, cattle-grazing** and **agribusiness**. This explains why Brazil and Bolivia, where most of these activities are concentrated, have the highest deforestation rates—not just regionally, but worldwide. Meanwhile, forest degradation—a phenomenon caused by, among other things, logging and severe periods of drought—receives much less attention than deforestation. This is despite the fact that forest degradation negatively affects a much larger area than does large-scale deforestation. According to a study published in 2023, about 38% of the remaining forest in the Amazon is degraded (1).

Deforestation advances most during the dry season, with the help of thousands of forest fires. These fires are not just unfortunate environmental accidents. In Brazil, for example—where 60% of the Amazon forest is located—forest fires are, first and foremost, political tools that facilitate the appropriation of public lands by large-scale farmers, cattle-grazers and agribusiness companies. After the forest is logged, roads are built to extract the valuable timber and get it to national and international markets. This then enables cattle grazers to access the area, and set fire to the land to plant grass. After cattle grazing depletes the soil, large-scale soy monoculture plantations often become the next use for the land. The same pattern occurs in Bolivia.

Throughout this process of deforestation and the use of lands for cattle-grazing and/or soy production, land titles (often forged) provide a legal appearance to what is a patently illegal process. The people who inhabit these lands—including indigenous, traditional and/or riverine communities—often face violent eviction from their land, as they watch deforestation destroy their livelihoods. According to Global Witness, in 2022, “one in five murders of defenders worldwide took place in the Amazon Rainforest” where “violence, torture and threats are a shared reality for communities across the region” (2). And it is agribusiness and transnational meat companies that profit most from this process (3).

Ever since colonial powers invaded the region, the destructive **logging** of valuable tropical timber has been a key driver of deforestation and forest degradation in the area. Whereas in the past, this wood decorated the palaces, churches and mansions of colonial elites in Europe, today it decorates the luxury cars and boats of business elites in Europe and elsewhere. ‘Green’ logging was introduced in the 1990s under the name of ‘Sustainable Forest Management’ (SFM). But the experience of forest-dependent communities has shown that industrial logging, regardless of how it is practiced, is inherently destructive to their livelihoods and to the forest. Despite all the propaganda around ‘green’ timber, most logging continues to be illegal. SFM is instrumental, because it can give illegally logged timber a legal appearance through the practice of mixing legally- and illegally-logged wood (4). In recent years, balsa wood extraction has become a new trend. Due to its strong resistance, this wood is used in the production of windmills in China. This logging to support the so-called ‘green transition’ of the capitalist economy has led to another wave of destruction in the Ecuadorian Amazon (5).

After a forest is logged for its valuable timber, **cattle-grazing** is usually the first activity introduced in the Amazon region. While other countries with huge tropical forest areas, like the Democratic Republic of Congo or Indonesia, have most of the same drivers of deforestation as the Amazon—such as logging and mining—cattle-grazing is not a key driver in these places. In the Amazon, though, it is, without a doubt, one of the biggest direct causes of deforestation—in particular in Brazil, Bolivia, Peru and Colombia. Not only is cattle-grazing a profit-making activity for large landholders, it is also often the only opportunity that small-scale farmers see; they therefore practice it as well, whether as participants in state colonization schemes or as migrants just trying to survive. It is these small-scale farmers in particular who are blamed for deforestation in the many official reports produced by governments, consulting companies, banks and conservation NGOs about the ‘deforestation problem’ in the Amazon. Meanwhile, big cattle ranchers and their investors, who are responsible for most of the large-scale deforestation, are often praised for their ‘green’ initiatives that are supposedly halting deforestation. Yet behind their propaganda, this inherently destructive but very profitable activity continues.

Along with cattle-grazing, **agribusiness of monocultures like soy, maize, rice, oil palm and sugar cane** is the other main direct cause of destruction of the Amazon forest. Soy is the largest crop, with millions of hectares of plantations in Brazil and Bolivia. Meanwhile, oil palm plantations are expanding in the Amazon region, in Ecuador, Colombia, Peru and Brazil; there are also plans to expand oil palm in the Bolivian Amazon. [An article in this bulletin](#) describes the violence and oppression that indigenous peoples, quilombola communities and peasant communities face from

two big oil palm companies in the state of Pará. The article describes the impacts of this activity, and the communities' organization and struggle to get their lands back.

In a region that is becoming increasingly dry due to climate change, water is especially impacted by the large-scale monoculture of soy, maize and oil palm. An area much larger than just the plantation area is affected, not only due to the massive water consumption of these activities, but also due to the contamination of the water with agrochemicals. Brazilian researcher Larissa Bombardi calls it 'chemical colonialism,' when European countries controlling one third of global sales of agrochemicals sell agrottoxins that are banned in their own countries to Brazil—which is currently the world's leading importer of agrochemicals. According to Bombardi, 'When we think in terms of classic colonialism, we think about physical violence and the eviction of peoples; we see this happening now in land conflicts where Indigenous Peoples are bombarded with agrochemicals' (6).

Mining is another big direct driver of deforestation, in particular in countries like Brazil, Venezuela, Colombia, Bolivia, Suriname, Guyana, and Peru. Industrial mining concessions cover 18% of the Amazon region. Mining activities to extract copper, tin, nickel, iron ore, bauxite, manganese, and gold are advancing further into the Amazon. Mining companies and governments of industrialized countries are currently lobbying and pressuring governments of countries in the Amazon region to ensure access to minerals that are critical in the 'green transition' to a 'low-carbon economy.' This hides, however, mining companies' ongoing destruction of forests and communities on the ground(7).

Small-scale mining has been a century-old practice in South America. However, the number of small-scale miners in the Amazon is currently estimated to be 500,000, and the impacts of gold mining, in particular, are huge. Given its exponential increase, this activity is increasingly controlled on the ground by extensive organized crime networks, which also include influential figures like politicians. And once again, it is companies based in industrialized countries that are profiting the most. Swiss companies, for example, imported at least 4.9 tons of gold from the Brazilian Amazon in 2021. Most of this gold was illegally mined in indigenous territory, and left behind a wake of violence, murders, and rape—in addition to heavily polluted rivers with toxic mercury (8).

Mining is also responsible for **water extractivism**. Water is so essential for mining, that many mining operations extract more water than ore. The 'green transition' and its push for more mining tends to deepen this particular impact, despite the fact that mining causes more deforestation, climate change and pollution (9). An article from Colombia in this bulletin shows how the discourse about the green transition incentivizes copper extraction in Colombia's Andes-Amazon transition zone, and tells how people are resisting it.

Concession areas for **oil and gas extraction**, located mostly in Peru and Ecuador in the Western Amazon, have profound impacts on forests, water and, in particular, indigenous peoples. But this extraction has sparked many resistance struggles too (10). [This bulletin includes an article](#) that describes the recent historical victory of the Ecuadorian people, who, through a referendum and

majority vote, decided that oil extraction infrastructure in the ITT block inside the Yasuní national park should be dismantled, and the remaining oil be left in the ground.

‘Green extractivism’ leads to more oil extraction and thus more destruction, including in the Amazon, where several new extractive projects are planned. Oil and gas companies and national governments in the region claim that in order to finance the ‘transition’ to a ‘low-carbon economy,’ it is necessary to extract more oil. The Brazilian state company, Petrobrás, uses this argument to justify its plans to extract oil in the so-called Equatorial Margin located in the ocean, north of the Amazon region (11).

Since the 1980s, the huge river system that soaks the Amazon region has drawn the interest of large-scale **hydroelectric dam** developers. Companies from this sector claim that this energy is ‘green’ and ‘renewable,’ with zero carbon emissions. However, research has shown this to be a lie; hydroelectric dams result in CO₂ and CH₄ emissions, worsening climate chaos (12). Hydroelectric dams are also a major cause of deforestation. For example, the Chepete and Bala hydroelectric dam projects in Bolivia, with all their associated infrastructure—reservoir, roads, transmission lines, etc—would involve the deforestation of 100,000 hectares, in addition to affecting six groups of Indigenous Peoples (13).

All direct causes of deforestation require **infrastructure**, such as pipelines, roads, railways, ports and transmission lines, which further increases deforestation. Many of the large-scale projects underway are part of the IIRSA initiative, which is a proposal to integrate South America—and, in particular, the many so-called ‘empty’ and ‘isolated’ regions of the Amazon—through energy, transport and communication projects that serve capital interests. One such project, which has led to an increase in deforestation in Peru, is the Transoceanic Highway—which connects the heart of the Amazon to marine ports in Peru, and from there, to Asian markets (14).

Green extractivism

For the economic interests behind the drivers of deforestation just described, the **REDD** mechanism (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation) has never been a serious alternative. These actors can still make much more money from logging, agribusiness, cattle-grazing, mining, oil extraction, hydropower, and infrastructure activities, than from keeping the forest standing by selling ‘carbon credits.’ This is one reason why deforestation in the Amazon has ultimately continued, and why this region has the highest deforestation rates worldwide. In 2022, 4.1 million hectares of tropical forest worldwide were lost. Of the six countries that contributed most to this loss, four were in the Amazon region: Brazil, Bolivia, Peru and Colombia. This means that these countries alone account for 60% of tropical forest destruction worldwide (15).

Big companies that directly or indirectly contribute to deforestation, such as airline companies, claim that they are ‘carbon neutral’ for protecting some forest area in the Amazon. Cleverly, these companies even invite their customers to assume these costs by paying an additional fee on top of their plane ticket to ensure a **‘carbon neutral’** trip.

REDD-type programs and projects also justify the creation of new oil extraction sites in and around the Amazon region. One example of this is from Guyana. In December 2022, the government sold carbon credits totalling USD 750 million to make US company Hess's planned deep-water oil extraction—the riskiest kind of oil extraction—'carbon neutral.' The project will supposedly offset the emissions that will be created from burning the oil that is extracted, by protecting its entire forest area, including lands of forest-dependent communities (16).

In many parts of the Amazon today, it is hard to find indigenous communities that have not yet been approached by a company or conservation NGO promoting **REDD's 'green extractivism'** and wanting them to sign a contract. [An article in this bulletin](#) describes the modus operandi of the US carbon company, Wildlife Works, in the Ka'apor territory in Maranhão, and why the Ka'apor consider such a contract a risk to their autonomy.

Climate chaos in the Amazon

Because REDD does nothing to halt deforestation and climate change, in 2023 the Amazon experienced an unprecedented drought and a dramatic decrease in the water level of its rivers, which severely impacted fish stocks and the livelihoods of riverine populations. Global warming is bringing the Amazon closer to what scientists have called a '**tipping point.**' To pass this point, they warn, would transform the Amazon within decades into a different, much dryer, region—comparable to the savanna biome (17).

With the Amazon in the international spotlight, forest-destroying activities like industrial agriculture have expanded and their destruction has intensified in other regions closely connected to the Amazon—such as neighbouring savanna areas. Because these areas are much less protected and much less in the spotlight, they are now being destroyed much more, and faster. One of several problems with the EU's anti-deforestation law, which came into effect in 2023, is that it only focuses on the Amazon; it does not focus on the large-scale expansion of agribusiness, industrial tree plantations and mining into Brazil's savanna areas. **In 2023, deforestation in Brazil's cerrado region increased by 43%** (18). Due to its connectivity with the Amazon region, this also heavily impacts the Amazon. And despite all the discourse about the need to save the Amazon forest in international arenas—such as the UN assembly and the UN climate and biodiversity conferences—in other conference rooms, ministers of economy and commerce from Mercosur governments (Brazil, Paraguay, Argentina and Uruguay) and the European Union are in the process of finalizing a free trade agreement. This agreement aims to increase exports from Brazil, the largest Amazonian country in Mercosur, thus increasing pressure on the region and causing more destruction (19).

Resistance

When members of Amazonian communities have had the opportunity to defend their interests in national or international fora, where policies that influence the future of the Amazon are discussed, their experience has generally been frustrating. In international fora, the outcome of such discussions is heavily influenced by the interests of transnational companies and big

conservation NGOs, which are eager to access and control the region due to the many commodities—including carbon credits—that they can obtain there and profit from.

People from the Amazon have had an equally frustrating experience with national governments in the Amazon region, which claim ‘sovereignty’ over the Amazon region and often refer to it as ‘ours.’ These governments’ ‘colonial’ approach in the region cannot be ignored, given that they actively support capital interests that are driving the invasion and destruction of the region. They often do this in the name of ‘development.’ However, the vast experience with many large-scale projects implemented so far in the region reveals that ‘development’ does not match the needs and demands of the indigenous peoples, the traditional and riverine Amazonian communities, or the increasingly significant group of community members now inhabiting urban areas in the region.

Due to the fact that extractive policies and projects continue to be implemented, and thus all kinds of violence that comes with the extractive model continues, communities have begun to create and strengthen traditional defense mechanisms, such as indigenous guards to defend their territories. But today they face multiple armed forces—including the police, the military, company security guards and armies, and criminal groups often associated with drug trafficking. Meanwhile, criminalization, and even murder, of indigenous leaders in the region has increased. Data also show an increase in different forms of violence against women, in particular sexual violence. Rape is a way to humiliate women, control their resistance and create fear (20).

With a focus on the Amazon, the intention of this bulletin is to hear what people in the Amazon have to say about the ‘development’ projects in their area, about the violence and humiliation they face from companies and the State, and about how they are organizing and fighting against such projects to defend and/or reclaim their territories.

And while the recent 2023 Belém Summit of Presidents from the Amazon region (where Indonesian and DR Congo government members were also present) once again made clear that they want more of the same ‘development,’ what is perhaps most urgent now is the need to promote dialogue between Amazonian people—who have a wealth of experience resisting ‘green extractivism’—and activists from countries in Central Africa and Southeast Asia. Despite numerous differences, they all face similar threats and the challenge of how to organize and resist these threats.

Over the years, the people of the Amazon have been coming together to seek strength and inspiration from each other’s stories and build alliances, crossing their individual countries’ borders that attempt to separate them. One example of this is the Pan-Amazonian Social Forum. In the last edition’s declaration from 2022, they say:

“We reiterate that, although the dangers have increased, the struggles and resistances have acquired an unprecedented strength, from the experience of the spiritualities of our peoples, who must continue to grow as children of Mother Amazonia. In this sense, the peoples of the Panamazonia are organizing, coming together, fighting for their territories and cultures, to make a

future possible. This is how the anti-racist, anti-patriarchal and anti-colonial struggles are advancing.” (21).

- (1) Embrapa, [Study shows that degradation has affected over a third of the Amazon rainforest](#), January 2023.
- (2) Global Witness, [Almost 2,000 land and environmental defenders killed between 2012 and 2022 for protecting the planet](#), September 2023.
- (3) WRM Bulletin, [Agribusiness Means Fire: Land Grabs, Deforestation and Fires in the Amazon, Cerrado and Pantanal biomes](#), December 2021 and Agro e Fogo, [Weapons in the battle for territorial control: Capitalistic uses of fire against rural peoples](#)
- (4) WRM Bulletin, [An \(incomplete\) List of Concepts that Kill Forests](#), January 2020 and WRM Bulletin, [Are FSC and RSPO accomplices in crime? Jari Florestal and Agropalma's Unresolved Land Question in the Brazilian Amazon](#), November 2018
- (5) WRM Bulletin, [The green paradoxes of an Amazonian country](#), July 2021.
- (6) Brasil de Fato, [Colonialismo químico: por que o Brasil está morrendo pela boca e como o agro tem culpa nisso](#), October 2023.
- (7) World Resources Institute, [Undermining Rights](#), 2020.
- (8) Mongabay, [Swiss pledge to stop illegal gold imports from Brazil Indigenous reserves](#), June 2022
- (9) WRM Bulletin, [Water, Extractivism and Critical Minerals in Brazil: Some Reflections](#), September 2022
- (10) Observatorio petrolero, [Lote 8: cifras de la contaminación petrolera](#), 2022.
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- (12) Instituto Humanitas Unisinos, [Como salvar a floresta amazônica? Entrevista com Philip M. Fearnside](#), August 2023.
- (13) WRM Bulletin, [“Without water there is no life:” The rivers of the Bolivian Amazon](#), September 2022.
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- (15) Statista, [Countries with the largest area of primary tropical forest loss in 2022](#), June 2023 and Global Forest Watch, [Tropical Primary Forest Loss Worsened in 2022, Despite International Commitments to End Deforestation](#), June 2023.
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- (17) Instituto Humanitas Unisinos, [A Amazônia se aproxima do ponto de ruptura, diz Carlos Nobre](#), January 2019-
- (18) Brasil de Fato, [Alertas de desmatamento em 2023 caem pela metade na Amazônia, mas sobem no Cerrado](#), Janeiro 2024.
- (19) Greenpeace, [EU-Mercosur: A nightmare for nature](#), March 2023
- (20) Mongabay, [Triple riesgo: ser mujer, indígena y defensora ambiental en América Latina](#), November 2021.
- (21) [Final Declaration of the tenth Pan-Amazonian Social Forum](#) – FOSPA

The struggle for land in the Brazilian Amazon region against palm oil and mining corporations

In the Acará Valley, Pará state, the Temb  and Turiwara indigenous peoples, and quilombola and peasant communities are fighting to take back part of the living spaces they traditionally occupied. It is not just a struggle for territory, but one to reverse a history of oppression and injustice. Today, they are denouncing structural violence and state omission.

Par  is the second largest state in the Brazilian Amazon region. It is within its boundaries that the River Amazon reaches the sea. Traditionally, the **Temb ** and **Turiwara** peoples have occupied the **Acar  Valley** in the state's northeast, an area situated within Tail ndia, Acar  and Tom -A u municipalities. Starting with the process of colonization, their territory, rich in forests, rivers and fertile land, was gradually plundered in order to extract timber and exploit sugar cane and tobacco monoculture plantations to enrich the metropolis – Portugal. The Temb  and the Turiwara underwent all sorts of violence, not just colonial in connotation, but also patriarchal and racist, exemplified by the process of *aldeamento*, which aimed to remove them from their territories so that these could be appropriated. (1) Violence and repression of their acts of resistance, as well as epidemics, resulted in a veritable genocide, drastically reducing their populations.

Slavery also brought people from the African continent to be submitted to slave labor in the region. “We built the [sugar cane] mills by hand,” says a descendant of these populations, a quilombola leader. “When slavery was abolished, we were thrown here, without reparation or support. The only ‘document’ we have from back then is a sugar cane mill entirely built by our people,” he adds (for security reasons, the names of the people who gave their testimonies for this article are preserved).

On the banks of River Acar , even with the official end of slavery in 1888, until the mid-1970s, Portuguese families – holders of power, prestige and wealth – accumulated vast tracts of land under strict domination. They owned trading houses located at strategic points along the river, kept indigenous (Turiwara and Temb ), quilombola and riverine populations as *agregados*, through relations of domination based on repressive control over workers, in a system of *aviamento* (2) and territorial usurpation. (3) Much of the land usurped by these families of Portuguese origin was later sold to estate owners and major agribusiness concerns in the fields of palm oil, coconut and wood.

Starting in 1952 with the establishment of Projeto JAMIC Imigra o e Coloniza o Ltda in the then municipality of Acar , currently Tom -A u, lands traditionally held by the Turiwara and Temb  indigenous peoples near River Acar -Mirim were subject to intrusion by the official project of Japanese colonization funded by public and private resources.

The pressure on traditional territories increased further with the establishment of timber extraction and ranching projects financed by tax incentives granted by SUDAM (Office of the

Superintendent for the Development of the Amazon). Such incentives were instituted as part of *Operação Amazônia*, launched in 1966, which sought to stimulate the creation of rural companies and “development hubs” in different parts of the Amazon region. In this context, Tomé-Açu municipality was constituted as one of the main “logging hubs” in Pará state.

Regarding this historical process of invasion of their lands, a Turiwara leader tells us: “We are the pioneers, the heirs of the place, where our ancestors left us. Back then we were expelled by the estate owners, who arrived and asked us to leave. (...) They would say ‘look, you have two, three days to vacate, if you don’t leave, we’ll bring more people here for you to leave’, so we’d get scared and [this way] many, many people were expelled from the place.”

The invasion of indigenous, quilombola and peasant territories by palm oil and mining corporations

While in the past colonizers invaded their lands with sugar cane and tobacco plantations, nowadays it is palm tree monoculture and ore pipelines that have taken over Tembé, Turiwara, quilombola and peasant territories in the Acará Valley.

Industrial production of palm oil is dominated by two companies: Brasil Bio Fuels (BBF), which bought Biovale in 2019, and controls some 135,000 hectares of land in the region; and Agropalma, active in the region since 1982, controlling 107,000 mil hectares. (4) Their international customers include Cargill, Hershey, General Mills, Kellogg’s, Mondelez, Nestlé, PepsiCo, Stratas Foods and Unilever (5). In 2022, Agropalma had revenues worth US\$486 million; BBF took US\$305 million. (6)

Despite projecting themselves as ‘modern’, ‘green’ companies producing ‘renewable energy’ such as biodiesel, a large share of their land is public land, with forged deeds. (7) A quilombola leader describes the arrival of one of the companies: “When BBF arrived, it still was Biopalma. The company arrived all quiet, using land grabbers that took land from quilombolas and peasants. The company didn’t show itself. They were the ones who destroyed the forest; for example, I remember when they felled 600 hectares [with a concentration] of Brazil nut trees. It was these land grabbers that passed on the land to Biopalma, defrauding the ownership chain of the land.”

Currently, palm oil is the world’s cheapest vegetable oil, based on a colonial production logic, where you ‘get it without paying for it’. For instance, companies are not accountable for the impacts of the deforestation they brought about. They do not pay for the water they use on the plantations – a level of consumption estimated at 34,000 liters per hectare per day (8) – or in their factories. Neither do they pay for the contamination caused by the synthetic fertilizers and above all by the agrochemicals applied, such as glyphosate, a demonstrably carcinogenic herbicide that has been found in both surface and ground water on indigenous land. (9) Furthermore, indigenous people and quilombolas have denounced the companies for spreading on the plantations a byproduct of the palm oil production process as ‘organic fertilizer’, which has been killing off life in local streams.

The result is destruction. According to a quilombola leader: “The companies contaminate the air, water and they also pollute our lives. Because after the *dendê* starts growing, they apply agrochemicals that contaminate the water, and also the byproduct of palm oil production. Now we’ve lost our land, but also our water, our springs. People have health problems, around 15% of our people are ill because of the oil palm. When you go fishing at 6 in the morning, at 7 o’clock, the fish you caught is already rotten. The color of the water has changed, we see a lot of moths, a sign of imbalance. Cassava does not grow like it used to, it is sick.”

The communities’ small areas were surrounded by oil palm plantations, making the communities’ way of life no longer viable. They feel like they are in a ‘prison’. The São Gonçalves quilombola community, for example, is surrounded by Agropalma’s plantations. The corporation put up an access gate to control who comes in and out, and dug deep ditches, thus barring the quilombolas and indigenous people from their traditional cemeteries, hunting grounds and fishing areas inside the territory controlled by Agropalma.

According to a Turiwara leader: “They don’t like us going down [the river] to do anything, catch a fish, we can no longer do that, so that is affecting us a lot, it really is. We want to do something about this, that’s why we’re here, we’re feeling really humiliated here by this company, animals falling into these ditches, dying.”

There are also ore pipelines that cut across the area, generating conflicts. One of them, which transports bauxite from Paragominas to Barcarena, belongs to the company Hydro, controlled by the Norwegian corporation Norsk Hydro, whose main owner is the Norwegian State. (10) In 2023, the Pará Public Defender’s Office requested the suspension of work on Hydro’s pipeline due to irregularities in its licensing. Quilombola communities complained to the Public Defender’s Office that they feel like ‘refugees’ in their own territory owing to the illegalities involved in the works, with workers and trucks transiting in their areas. (11) Another ore pipeline that crosses the region belongs to the French multinational Imerys; it transports kaolin from Ipixuna to Barcarena. (12) Beyond these, a new project faced by the communities is the Paraense Railway, whose route is from the south of Pará to Barcarena, and which the state government intends to use to encourage soy bean monoculture and export.

Seeking to reverse history: recovering territories

For many years, quilombolas and indigenous people have denounced the invasion of their territories and all the other impacts brought about by corporations. However, the corporations’ attitude has always been to deny the impacts, while seeking to strike deals with promises of social projects. According to indigenous people and quilombolas, these promises are not fully kept and, more importantly, do not solve the key question: the absence of demarcation of their territories.

Despite the ‘donation’ by Imeris of 500 hectares to the Tembê in the late 1990s in an effort to resolve conflicts with the community, the vast majority of lands remain in the hands of large scale corporations with the support of the Brazilian State. Suffice it to compare the 240,000 hectares in the hands of BBF and Agropalma with the size of the indigenous land officially demarcated by the

Brazilian State in the region, namely the Turê-Mariquita Indigenous Land of the Tembê people: 147 hectares. This is the smallest officially demarcated indigenous land in Brazil.

Tired of waiting, in 2021 the Tembê and quilombola communities began a fight to take back their lands, currently in the hands of BBF and Agropalma, in order to ensure possession of at least some of the territory from which they were expelled in the past. In the midst of this process, the Turiwara publicly staked a claim to their identity, demanding lands along River Acará where their forebears were found by German biologist Meerwarth in 1899. (13) They joined their fellow Tembê indigenous people, as Turiwara leader explains: “I am Turiwara, because our ancestors on my mother’s side, we are Turiwara. There is a Turiwara people but also a Tembê people, we are mixed, but united.”

At present, one of the main references of resistance is Movimento IRQ (Indigenous, Riverine and Quilombola), which seeks to unify and obtain more support for their struggle, as explained by one of its leaders: “We fight to ensure all of our rights, but today our biggest fight and challenge is to guarantee the right to our territory. This is why the Movement was created, so that we could make our voices resonate, and reach the ears of the authorities to resolve this territorial problem that we indigenous peoples, quilombolas and riverine populations live through today, when we are having our territory invaded by oil palm monoculture, like Brasil Biofuels, and by mining corporations, like Hydro.”

This leader underscores women’s participation: “The participation of indigenous, riverine and quilombola women is a way for us to demonstrate that our struggle is for our family, for our people as a whole. It is meant to show that our struggle is to ensure the survival of our future generation and that this future generation should have their rights guaranteed. Our participation as indigenous women in this Movement is meant to join forces with the warriors and guarantee the right of our future generation.”

The Tembê, Turiwara and quilombolas have already asked official agencies for the immediate demarcation of their land. In the case of the indigenous peoples the body in question is FUNAI, the federal indigenous affairs agency. And in the case of the quilombola communities the bodies in question are INCRA, the federal land regularization agency, and ITERPA, the Pará state lands agency. Furthermore, peasant communities are in the same fight to ensure possession of their land in the face of the threat posed by the expansion of oil palm plantations:

The fight of the Virgílio Serrão Sacramento peasant community

Peasant communities residing in the area have retaken living spaces from which they were expelled in the past by loggers and ranchers, through land grab processes. The families from the Virgílio Serrão Sacramento community in Mojú municipality are an example of this. In late 2015, several families came together to re-occupy their former territory lost to land grabbers. The motivation was BBF’s threat to take over the land in order to expand its plantation in the environs of Mojú. Beyond that, the families were sure that the land was public. Therefore, it should favor peasant families and not private companies like BBF.

After the re-occupation, the families requested from ITERPA the regularization of the c.700 hectares of the settlement. However, the process was halted in 2020, when BBF was granted a preliminary injunction by a court, ordering repossession of the area in favor of the company. This did not occur because the families managed to prove that BBF used irregular land deeds. In mid-2023, BBF obtained a new preliminary injunction ordering the families to vacate the area. At present, the case is under analysis by the Land Conflicts Commission of Pará state. The families are demanding from ITERPA an inspection of the area to reveal once and for all that the land is public and, therefore, should be legally granted to the families.

Blowing off steam, a member of the community says: “We built everything here: our houses, our vegetable patches, our crops, our animals, for our survival. Today, the families live off of everything that was built by them, collectively, and working in a tender way, looking after the land, respecting the environment, all things that live in nature. Today, the families really need this land to continue living, their daily lives, helping their family, helping other communities that need support from ours. Today, BBF is trying to take away the families’ land through a preliminary injunction, while there are many signs of the land grabs BBF has been engaging in all over Pará state, and through this it tries to remove the families from their land; what is happening is truly deplorable. The community is located on public land, it belongs to the State, so if the land where the families live is public, the state government needs to provide support, to back the families. We express here our repudiation of this situation; may the authorities come here and help us sustain ourselves, to be able to live here as a community.”

State omission in the midst of extreme and structural violence

Since the land re-occupations began in 2021, the communities have faced violent practices by several armed groups, including the State’s police forces, companies’ private security guards and militias, and organized crime. Death threats, humiliation and even racism directed by segments of the regional population against the Temb , Turiwara and quilombola communities have increased frightfully. They stand accused of hampering development. Repeated complaints and police reports filed by the communities have been in vain. Leaders have continuously reiterated: “Agropalma and BBF do not export palm oil, they export our blood”.

BBF in particular has launched a campaign to criminalize the communities by filing hundreds of police reports against community members, accusing them of crimes such as threatening behavior, theft, robbery, extortion and criminal damage, (14) and suggesting that the communities’ objective is to have access to the oil palm plantations. On this point, a Turiwara leader states: “They keep humiliating people, saying that their oil palm we won’t get, because it’s theirs. So, I’ll tell you one thing, we are not focused on the oil palm, we are not focused on anything inside there, we are focused on our territory, it is our territory that we want, to go into what is ours, our home.”

In the midst of worsening conflicts over land, the posture of the international certifier RSPO (Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil) has been one of collusion with the oil palm companies.

After briefly suspending Agropalma's 'green' seal due to the conflicts, RSPO soon gave it back in June 2023. (15)

One of the many episodes of violence occurred on the eve of the Belém Summit in August 2023. This brought together the presidents of Amazonian countries, who met less than 200km away from the area in question. Between August 4 and 7, there were attempts on the lives of four Tembés as a consequence of the fight to take territories back from the hands of BBF in Tomé-Açu. (16)

Upon visiting the area at that occasion, the National Human Rights Council (CNDH) requested, among other measures: the immediate establishment of a crisis management unit by the Office of the General Secretary of the Presidency of the Republic; a change in the police forces charged with public safety in Tomé-Açu and Acará; the creation by FUNAI of working groups to demarcate the indigenous lands; and that INCRA and ITERPA do the same in order to provide the quilombolas with deeds to their lands. (17) The Brazilian Anthropological Association (ABA) sent a formal letter to the authorities regarding the same episode, requesting the immediate resumption of the process of regularization of indigenous and quilombola territories, as well as the investigation of mechanisms of criminalization of leadership figures and the suspension of incentives to companies involved in violence, among other measures. (18)

Almost half a year later, one finds that practically none of the recommendations made by CNDH and ABA have been implemented. Not even the deployment of the National Public Safety Force in the region has prevented the violence from escalating in recent months.

On November 10, 2023, Agnaldo da Silva, a Turiwara indigenous person, was murdered by Agropalma security guards inside land that the company claims, according to a denouncement made by the indigenous group to which Agnaldo belonged. (19) Since December 2023, Movimento IRQ has lodged complaints with the authorities regarding invasions and violent attacks suffered by the communities and death threats against leaders. On December 14, four quilombolas were attacked with firearms; luckily, nobody was killed. Miriam Tembé, a Tembé leader and reference figure in the struggle for land, was arrested on January 3, 2024, with strong indications that this aimed to criminalize and weaken Movimento IRQ. (20) Among such indications is the explicit, unconstitutional and absurd order by Judge José Reinaldo Pereira Sales conditioning her release on her ceasing to be the chief of her community. (21) The Movement has warned that it fears more violence and arrests of leaders.

The omission of the State vis-à-vis this situation is inadmissible. The winners are the corporations mentioned in this article. In their eyes, communities represent an 'obstacle' to their lucrative activities and expansion plans. Clearly, a situation of continued and extreme violence and of criminalization affects the capacity of indigenous peoples and quilombolas to organize, unite and continue to fight for the demarcation of their territories.

In order to stanch the spilling of blood and contain other forms of violence, the recommendations contained in the documents of CNDH and ABA need to be urgently implemented by the

authorities. We want to stress the recommendation that the territories that by right belong to the Temb  and Turiwara peoples, and to the quilombola and peasant communities be demarcated by the relevant state and federal agencies.

Lastly, all our solidarity with the Temb , the Turiwara and the quilombolas, who are the victims of violent practices taking place right now.

(For security reasons, the names of the people who gave their testimonies for this article are preserved).

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Fires and agribusiness: deforestation drivers in the Bolivian Amazon

The expanding agricultural frontier to grow soybean and oil palm, in addition to mining and the potential construction of mega-dams, are advancing upon the living spaces of indigenous and peasant communities. In late 2018, communities organized a coordinating committee to defend their territories and their right to a dignified life.

Eleven percent of the Amazon is in Bolivia. Broadly defined, the Amazonian region of this country comprises the states of Beni and Pando, as well as the northern parts of Santa Cruz, La Paz and Cochabamba.

Deforestation in the Bolivian Amazon has been increasing significantly in recent years, mainly due to the expansion of agribusiness, infrastructure projects, mining, large-scale forest fires, and the creation of government policies that expedite the extractivist agenda.

On December 2, 2018, the National Coordinating Committee for the Defense of Indigenous Peasant Territories and Protected Areas (CONTIOCAP, by its Spanish acronym) was created by the determination of 12 peoples and organizations to resist extractivism. In a context that is increasingly adverse due to extractive policies being promoted in the country, CONTIOCAP's main objective is to join indigenous and peasant communities who have been defending their rights.

In its few years of existence, CONTIOCAP has positioned itself in the public eye as a benchmark for dignity and as a contributor to public debate; its actions have included analyzing the current situation, denouncing the growing violations of human and indigenous peoples' rights, and offering alternative proposals to extractivism.

In late 2023, WRM spoke with Ruth Alipaz, a native indigenous leader from the Uchupiamona Nation in the Bolivian Amazon, and member of CONTIOCAP, to reflect on the situation in this territory and the powerful resistance that Indigenous Peoples have been waging.

The business of burning

An estimated three million hectares of forest in Bolivia were lost to forest fires in 2023. The fires have been aggravated by the drought that the country is going through: in 2023, there was a 17% reduction in rainfall compared to previous years. But this situation is not coincidental. Agribusiness companies, for the most part, are behind these fires. This constitutes a direct attack on territories and protected areas, which largely overlap with indigenous territories.

In order to expand the agricultural frontier, agribusiness entrepreneurs make indiscriminate use of *chaqueo*—the burning of certain areas to later use for agriculture—and in so doing, overstep the agricultural frontier. This is possible because the government does not have any serious

mechanism to control these large agricultural corporations. In turn, these companies often benefit from the profits they produce on community lands, because the inhabitants are forced to rent the lands; they do not have sufficient resources to exploit the land for their own and their community's benefit. These entrepreneurs who illegally cross the agricultural frontier are sanctioned with the ridiculous fine of \$0.20 per hectare burned—which essentially means that there is an invitation to burn more than what is allowed and make huge profits doing so (1).

Ruth Alipaz explains to us how companies discovered the business of burning so that the forest loses value. “Setting fire to the forest is a cruel and low-cost way to deforest primary forests. It allows for a change of land use which then enables the establishment of monoculture plantations, for example,” she says.

Ruth tells us that “every year Bolivians breathe the smoke and ashes of our future, because they are stripping us of our livelihoods and our dignity. And this is not only happening to Indigenous Peoples. Our territory is what gives us our dignity; in our territory we are known and recognized because we are someone. We have dignity when we contribute our dreams to realize a project for our autonomy, making use of our culture and ancestral knowledge.”

In addition to the fires, deforestation in the Bolivian Amazon has been increasing at an accelerated pace.

Deforestation and agribusiness

In 2022, the deforestation rate in the Bolivian Amazon was the second highest in the Amazon region—after Brazil—and the third highest globally in terms of hectares deforested. An estimated 270,000 hectares were cleared that year. According to Fundación Tierra, a Bolivian organization, in the five-year period from 2016-2021, deforestation increased by 73% compared to the period from 2010-2015. There are still no official figures from 2023, but specialists agree that the trend points to a continued increase in deforestation (2).

This massive increase in deforestation rates is largely the result of the expansion of industrial agribusiness to produce soybean and beef for export. According to Fundación Tierra, “the driver of this change is the expansion of the soybean model, whose driving force, in turn, is the consolidation of land ownership rights for large and medium-sized corporate properties. The forests have been cleared to make more land available for soybean, so much so that the soy sector is growing at a faster rate than other commercial sectors (corn, sorghum, wheat, sugar cane, rice). The titling of large forest areas as private property, and the mass issuing of land clearing permits, have laid the groundwork to swiftly put large fields into cultivation. The expansion of industrial agriculture is followed by livestock farming for export.” There are nearly 1.5 million hectares of soybean alone in Bolivia, being among the largest exporters in the world.

To provide an example: The department of Beni, which is located in the heart of the Amazon and is home to 18 of Bolivia's 36 Indigenous Peoples, is not exempt from these pressures. On the contrary, the governments that have been in office since 2016 have pushed to update the Land Use

Plan (PLUS, by its Spanish acronym), and in 2019, there was a review and update of the PLUS for Beni. According to an academic study, this plan was carried out “under the premise of expanding the agricultural frontier and lifting the department out of poverty” (3). However, numerous indigenous organizations harshly criticized the process for not taking them into account or consulting them. They denounce that only the opinions of the business sectors were considered, particularly those of cattle ranchers, who have economic interests in expanding the agricultural-livestock frontier (4).

The new Plan PLUS Beni is, at the end of the day, a tool to enable the destruction of the Amazon, without considering the ways of life of the numerous Indigenous Peoples who have traditionally inhabited, and therefore conserved, these territories.

Oil palm for “biofuels”

Another underlying cause of the fires, according to reports by activists and local organizations, is the promotion of crops to produce so-called 'biofuels.' Under the pretext of creating jobs and reducing fossil fuel dependence, the Bolivian government recently launched a series of measures to promote the planting and expansion of three new crops: oil palm, jathropa palm and macororó. These three new crops, which until now have not been widespread in Bolivia, are now added to the existing hectares of soybean, sugarcane, etc.

Oil palm is a crop that until recently was unknown in Bolivia. Through the so-called “Program to promote the cultivation of oil-rich plant species,” the government has already established more than 18 nurseries that have the capacity to produce 48,000 seedlings. The program is focused on the Amazon region, since palm trees require high humidity to grow. The goal of the program is to have 60,000 hectares planted within five years (5).

According to statements made in the national media by Javier Mamani Quispe, coordinator of this program, “The program will not lead to deforestation, but rather will rehabilitate degraded soils.” However, the experience with this crop in countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America not only shows that industrial palm plantations are a cause of deforestation and contamination of soils and water sources, but that they also cause numerous impacts for the people who live in and around the territories occupied by these monocultures.

Will the thousands of hectares of burned primary forests be declared degraded lands, and therefore viable to be used for palm plantations?

The expansion of oil palm is tied to the violation of the rights of Indigenous Peoples and peasant communities, as well as to the impacts on their livelihoods and cultures. Numerous land rights conflicts have been documented. With the expansion of this industry, women and girls—including women who work on the plantations—suffer the most profound injustices and inequalities, and they face continuous forms of oppression (6).

Mega-dams and infrastructure

Along with extractivism, the construction of infrastructure needed to process and transport the produced goods also advances; this includes mega-dams to produce energy.

For example, in the Beni River basin, which crosses the Madidi National Park—one of the most biodiverse areas on the planet—and the Pilon Lajas Reserve, the government has been trying to promote the Chepete and Bala mega-dams for years. It is estimated that 75 percent of the energy produced by the Bala dam would be exported to Brazil. Both reservoirs would flood thousands of square kilometers, and it is estimated that more than 100,000 hectares would be deforested. Six groups of Indigenous Peoples live on the lands that would be submerged: the MoseTENES, Chimanes, Esse-ejjas, Lecos, Tacanas and Uchupiamonas—the nation to which Ruth belongs (7).

Construction of the dams has been paralyzed so far, but harassment and pressure continue. Furthermore, to build dams it is necessary to create roads, which would open up the territory to logging and mining companies, among other destructive activities. Ruth explains: "It is a fact that this whole avalanche of extractive activities and of regulations that facilitate and encourage them—in addition to large energy and transport infrastructure, industrial complexes of dubious technical and economic viability (such as the San Buenaventura sugar mill) and the encroachment of settlers and land speculators—together constitute of a real crusade of colonization and plundering of the northern Amazon, where the big losers are communities and Indigenous Peoples."

The indigenous view on deforestation and their resistance struggles

However, during the conversation Ruth remarked how Indigenous Peoples in Bolivia have historically played a central role in the defense of the territories, and still stand firm in their struggle.

As a result of the struggles of Indigenous Peoples in Bolivia—from the Amazon, the Chaco, the Valleys and the Altiplano—the New Political Constitution of the State was created in 2009 (CPE by its Spanish acronym). It recognizes Indigenous Peoples, Indigenous Territories, Indigenous Peasant Justice, and mainly the Autonomy and Self-Determination of Indigenous Peoples in their territories by pre-existing right, based on ILO Convention 169, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and Laws 3.760 and 3.897 in Bolivia.

However, Ruth explained that other laws and decrees have been systematically issued which contravene the provisions of the Constitution, the Magna Carta and other laws such as the Law of the Rights of Mother Earth. In Ruth's analysis, it is these lower-ranking regulations that are imposed as government policy, "legalizing illegal and unconstitutional activities to support an extractive, capitalist economic policy, wherein large national and transnational capital and businessmen successfully get regulations made to fit their interests."

Thus, for example, from 2013-2019, a set of regulations known as the "incendiary rules" were passed; these rules directly or indirectly increase the amount of hectares that people are allowed to deforest and burn—thereby making the legal mechanisms in force in the country more flexible. Similarly, the Mining and Metallurgy Law 535 from the same period allows mining within Protected Areas, without the need to comply with regulations such as the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). It also allows mining within Indigenous Territories and exempts mining companies from carrying out Free Prior and Informed Consultation with Indigenous Peoples (FPIC), with the argument that miners have rights established prior to that law.

In recent years, government policies have favored big economic powers, Ruth says. "These policies violate the integrity of Mother Earth, taking away her virtues and her capacity to give, generate and regenerate life. They are cutting her veins—which are the rivers—for gold mining that uses mercury and for mega-dams. They are stripping her skin through unrelenting deforestation—including with fire—for agribusiness and ranching. They are poisoning her oxygen-producing organs—such as her soils and forests—with agrochemicals, in order to grow soybean or African palm. They are poking and dynamiting her vital veins—which are springs and underground and surface water sources—to look for oil. They are mutilating her exuberant mountains and riverbanks, which were created to appreciate beauty and abundant life. This abundance of life is languishing today, because mining companies—which hide behind 'community mining cooperatives' or 'small mining' activities to avoid paying taxes or a paltry 2.5 percent royalty—are connected to Chinese, Brazilian and Colombian transnational companies and large national companies.

Ruth also explains that these policies are subjecting Indigenous Peoples to extreme poverty. "Not having water means extreme poverty. Nothing is possible without water," she warns. "Then the process of extinction of the Amazon will occur through exodus, because those of us who have ancestrally inhabited, cared for, protected and defended the Amazon will leave to look for what we no longer have in our spaces. Or we will undergo a process of transformation and become the destroyers of our own territories, because they will force us to become miners or palm growers in order to survive. And so, once stripped of all our dignity, of our identities, of our principles and values, of our spirituality and veneration of sacred Mother Earth, of our rivers and mountains—the forests and territories will be left without their protectors: the Indigenous Peoples."

But, fortunately, within this cruel panorama for the future of the Amazon and its peoples, Ruth shares her vision of hope, with Indigenous Peoples in ongoing struggle.

New generations are also beginning to rethink the future they want. From Ruth's perspective, as soon as more young people begin to understand that it is not the right of those living today to deprive the youth of what is rightfully theirs in the very near future, hope will grow.

TO FIGHT FOR TERRITORY IS TO FIGHT FOR LIFE!

AND TO LIVE WITH SELF-DETERMINATION IS AN INALIENABLE RIGHT OF OUR INDIGENOUS PEOPLES!

This article is based on an interview with Ruth Alipaz Cuqui, leader of the Uchupiamona Nation from the Bolivian Amazon, and member of the National Coordinating Committee for the Defense of Indigenous Peasant Territories and Protected Areas (CONTIOCAP); and the following sources of information:

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- (5) RTP Bolivia, [Video: Engineer Javier Mamani Quispe, General Coordinator to foment production](#), January 2023
- (6) See the "[Palm Oil](#)" section on WRM's website
- (7) WRM Bulletin, [“Without water there is no life”: The rivers of the Bolivian Amazon](#), September 2022

Peru: Resistance and community organization for the defense of the rainforest

Indigenous communities of the Peruvian Amazon Basin have created a network to defend their rights to territory and self-determination. Their struggle is not only against deforestation, but also against conservation and carbon market projects—such as REDD projects—that cause more injustice and internal conflicts.

The Putumayo River basin covers an area of 12 million hectares and represents 1.7% of the Amazon basin. Its headwaters are in Colombia, and it demarcates a large part of the border between Ecuador and Peru, until finally flowing into the Amazon River in Brazil. It is one of the few Amazonian rivers that still flows freely.

A large portion of this river basin spans indigenous territories, as well as protected areas that States have created—in disregard for the territorial rights of the peoples who live in the region. This is especially the case in Peru. In the Putumayo River basin there are also vast swaths of intact rainforest, where Indigenous Peoples in Voluntary Isolation live.

The Indigenous Peoples who today inhabit the Putumayo region faced what came to be known as the Putumayo genocide, which took place from 1879-1913, during the rubber extraction boom. It is estimated that close to 100,000 indigenous people from the Amazon region were brutally exploited, abused and tortured by rubber companies (1).

The curse of resources

Like other areas of the Amazon, the Putumayo basin is suffering from the terrible impacts of deforestation and forest degradation, in particular as a result of mining and logging. And in recent years, the mafias that control these two businesses have become intertwined with the drug trafficking mafias and armed guerrillas (2). As a result, there has been an increase in armed criminal gangs. This is coupled with the absence of the State, which should be guaranteeing the rights of the people.

The peaceful life that indigenous communities used to have on the banks of the Putumayo River is being lost. Violence has become a daily problem. Drug traffickers are using the region to expand coca cultivation, putting indigenous territories under threat. Communities are unable to prevent their territories from being invaded by drug traffickers. Meanwhile, the complete absence of state programs aimed at generating alternative livelihoods—in particular for the youth—make it tempting for youth to join criminal gangs.

Peru is the country with the second largest area of Amazonian rainforest, after Brazil. It also has the third highest deforestation rate, after Brazil and Bolivia. A recent report estimates that, in the

last two decades, 2.7 million hectares of forest have been lost—in large part due to the expansion of oil palm plantations (3).

At the beginning of the year, the Peruvian Congress approved a series of amendments to the Forest and Wildlife Law; this act further complicates the future of Amazonian forests and the numerous indigenous communities that have occupied these territories for thousands of years. Indigenous and civil society organizations denounce that the law was passed hastily, without respecting parliamentary timeframes. They also denounce that the amendments promote deforestation and facilitate the transfer of rights to their forests to third parties. "They have violated our rights to consultation and to free, prior and informed consent. Even more serious is the fact that this amendment will promote the plunder of our whole, ancestral territories and will increase threats to the lives of indigenous environmental defenders. It will also threaten biological, cultural, environmental and spiritual life and integrity," they stated in a letter sent to congressional authorities (4).

The Inter-ethnic Association for the Development of the Peruvian Rainforest (AIDSEP, by its Spanish acronym), an organization that brings together numerous indigenous Amazonian peoples, issued a statement rejecting the modifications to the Forestry Law. Among their arguments, they state that the most harmful aspect of this amendment is the change in land use for forestry purposes, and the conversion of lands under protection to lands for agriculture and livestock production—which previously only occurred in exceptional cases and in compliance with technical regulations. "However, changes can now be made 'legally' without respecting technical criteria, making it possible to attack forests with impunity—forests which protect us from the impacts of the climate crisis," they warned (5).

The modifications mean clear benefits for agricultural sectors, such as oil palm, which can now accelerate their expansion in the Amazon.

Despite the difficult context, communities living in the Putumayo River basin are still resisting and seeking ways to remain in their territories.

WRM spoke with Arlen Ribeira, an indigenous member of the Witoto People in Peru:

WRM: Arlen, tell us a little about yourself

My name is Arlen Ribeira. I am an indigenous Witoto [also called Muina Murui by its members]. I live on the border of Peru and Colombia, and previous generations of my family have been victims of the rubber boom. Part of our family that survived escaped La Chorrera in Colombia and settled along the Putumayo River, in order to survive and not be persecuted by the rubber bosses.

Since I was a child I have been with my grandparents and with older adults, the wise ones. I have been raised in the maloca. The maloca is our traditional indigenous house, the house of wisdom. So I have very strong roots in the struggle of our peoples. I have promoted territorial and human

protection of Indigenous Peoples in isolation and initial contact, as well as participated in numerous events related to the defense of the territory, in Peru, and internationally.

WRM: The “Network of Indigenous Territorialities of the Amazon Basin for Self-determination” (Tica Network) was recently created. Could you tell us what this network is about and what its objectives are?

This network just began to take shape last year (2023). It brings together four federations that have a lot of protected natural areas, in which Indigenous Peoples in isolation and initial contact also live (in their territories).

The organizations that make up the Tica Network include the Federation of Native Border Communities of the Putumayo; the Matses Community, which is located in Loreto and has one of the largest territories and includes protected areas; the Iskonawa brothers and sisters from the Iskonawa Association for Development are also part of the Tica Network—they are in the Sierra del Divisor region; and finally, the Federation of Native Communities of Purus, which also has the largest protected area in Peru within its territory; they are in Pucallpa, Ucayali.

The combined territories of all these communities and federations span some 13 million hectares [an area the size of Nicaragua]. Part of what we are demanding and fighting for is for all of these protected natural areas—which have been created by the State, often without the adequate knowledge of the Indigenous Peoples—to be recognized as our territories that were taken from us. This situation should be reversed, in one way or another. Or, failing that, there should be a regulation that guarantees our rights to these territories, to our customs, to our sacred spaces and to use of the forest—which we have always had as our source of livelihood.

Additionally, we are seeing that States are allegedly undertaking a huge fight against climate change. But on the ground, it is the Indigenous Peoples who are fighting climate change—through our forests. Our territories generate rainfall, and this rainfall goes to different places—it reaches Argentina, passes through Brazil, and crosses the world. In other words, it plays a very important role.

We also want our territories and contributions to be recognized in the fight against climate change. But we do not want carbon projects, such as REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation). We do not want carbon projects as they are currently designed, because they are a serious threat to our land tenure. Furthermore, the way they are designed makes them contribute to global warming, because the companies doing REDD projects are not reducing their emissions.

Companies are demanding that forests be taken care of, but they are still polluting. And this REDD project, like all carbon deals, comes with a series of loopholes in which Indigenous Peoples lose title to the land. The threat is dispossession of territory, of biological resources, and of human and collective rights. Moreover, these projects cause displacement and hunger, because they entail 20- or 30-year contracts that do not take into account the future of the indigenous peoples of the

region. And the (economic) resources that REDD-type carbon projects supposedly generate for communities are just lies, nothing more. The paltry resources that sometimes reach communities only engender internal conflicts and division among its members. And these internal conflicts create a situation in which some families make the decision to sell the forests.

So what we seek is to guarantee our own autonomy. Indigenous autonomy is what has been contributing to the sustainability of biodiversity, the forests and our planet. What this means is that, through our knowledge, we are the ones sustaining the planet. And what we want is to call the attention of States and the international community. Indigenous Peoples have the climate solution, and it doesn't require destroying societies or plundering territories, as we are currently seeing.

Many protected natural areas have also been created through REDD; this is very serious and detrimental to our rights. To effectively combat climate change, more consideration should be given to Indigenous Peoples' proposals—for example at the Conference of the Parties on Climate Change. We have so many protected natural areas, and yet we don't even have access to, nor do we benefit from, climate or conservation funds. This is our big problem. Our ancestral territories alone cover some 13 million hectares, upon which they have created protected natural areas; and yet the four federations do not receive any type of benefit related to conservation or climate change. So, what we are seeking is to govern our territories—autonomously and with self-determination. In accordance with ILO Convention 169 and the Universal Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

WRM: How did the Tica Network end up forming a critical position against REDD policies?

Well, I have worked with our brothers and sisters from Purus, and with Matses and Iskonawa brothers and sisters. We have had conversations. Naturally, we have wondered: what is the role our territory is fulfilling, and why are they taking it away from us? Then we see them talking about so many billions of dollars; then a lot of NGOs arrive in conjunction with the Ministry of Environment—and they are the ones who have taken away our territories; then they hold workshops and assemblies; and now they have limited our use of our territories. And we wonder: why do these things happen? What is the reason? So from our limited knowledge—because we don't have much access to trainings—we have analyzed this and determined that there is a dark business that nobody is telling us about. And that dark business is carbon.

For example, the Sierra del Divisor National Park has been created in the Iskonawa territory. How are the Iskonawa brothers and sisters participating? Their territories have been divided up, and now the Iskonawa do not have access to resources; they feel dispossessed of their own territory and they don't have titles to the land. When the Iskonawa want to settle in an area, they are removed from it. In other words, we become nomads once again. They take our spaces away from us, and we can no longer live in our ancestral territory.

This is why we have created the Tica Network, but it is a long process and a hard fight. And we call on institutions to show solidarity, to support us. Because when we assert our claim to our territory,

we also suffer threats. We suffer from the actions of both the Peruvian state and NGO authorities, who band together and try to divide our organizations and destroy our territorial unity—so that we won't be able to demand our rights.

We are concerned about how we are going to live 20, 30, 40, 50 years from now, if they keep reducing our territory. We would no longer be able to satisfy our basic needs, such as food, hunting, gathering and fishing. And the State is not creating alternative projects. On top of this, illegal loggers are coming in, miners are coming in, roads are being built over our indigenous territories, and more protected areas are being set up. Our future is very uncertain.

And if we do not stand up now, with support and solidarity so that our voice can be heard, the future will be very hard for our communities. I think there will be more poverty, more needs. And you know that in the Peruvian Amazon the government is absent. We do not live from the government. We live from the forest.

And what will happen later on when there is a need to make use of more ancestral territories? Because we have not destroyed the Amazon. We have always had our forests; wherever there are indigenous people there have always been forests. It is over those forests—that we have conserved—that the State has created protected natural areas. This is our huge concern.

The position of governments at the Belém Summit

Last year there was a meeting of presidents from the Amazonian region, the Belém Summit in Brazil, which led to the Belém Declaration. In it, the presidents lay out their vision for the future of the Amazon, citing the need to continue with development as a way to fight poverty, and the need to promote extractive projects—agribusiness, mining, etc.—to create jobs, wealth, etc. They claim this is necessary to combat "illegal" activities. So, for example, they do not contest mining as long as it is "legal." This is how we've ended up with one of the largest mines in the world, owned by Vale, in the middle of the Amazon—with all the valid licenses and permits. The declaration also establishes the need for protection and for REDD-type policies.

WRM: What is your opinion about this vision that governments have to continue supporting "legal" extractivism?

I was at the Belém Summit. That meeting was about statements and nothing more. Imagine: Peru, one of the signatories of the declaration, has just passed a new forest law that practically authorizes land dispossession and territorial invasions. In other words, governments do comply with their own laws, and governments do not improve the quality of life; on the contrary, they impoverish us. They say: "We are going to develop Putumayo, we are going to build roads." Roads mean more poverty, invasions and crime for indigenous people. Roads bring more illegal miners, illegal loggers, drug trafficking, violence, human exploitation, territorial dispossession and migration from other areas. Roads serve the interests of businessmen who want to extract all of the resources that exist in a place... The only thing that indigenous people have to do is not believe in these declarations, not trust this kind of declaration. Rather, what we must do is work for our

self-determination, and protect our territory and our rights—and that is what we are going to live from. As my grandfather told me: "I don't have money, I don't have wealth; as far as your eyes can see in the forest, that is where you can go—and that is what you are going to live from. Take care of and observe how we grow our food; we have abundance, we have health, we are not lacking in food or sustenance." This is our wealth.

(1) Thomson, N.; Pineda Camacho, R. [El libro rojo del Putumayo](#), 1913.

(2) Rio de vida y muerte, [Rio Putumayo](#).

(3) Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA), [New report exposes illegal Amazon deforestation as Peru approves scandalous 'amnesty' law forgiving past forest crimes](#), February 2024

4) [Organizaciones indígenas nacionales rechazan la modificatoria de la Ley Forestal que atenta contra los derechos indígenas](#), January 2024

(5) Pronunciamiento: [Rechazamos aprobación de la modificación de la Ley forestal y de fauna silvestre que vulnera derechos colectivos de los pueblos indígenas y pone en riesgo la Amazonía](#), December 2023

Yasuní: The significance of a victory

The Ecuadorian people's decision to stop oil extraction in the Yasuní National Park now brings new challenges: How do you recover a territory that has been sacrificed, and bring justice to affected areas, with the solidarity of the whole country?

On August 20, 2023, the Ecuadorian people went to the polls for early elections to choose a president and representatives to the National Assembly. Additionally, there were two popular referenda on the ballot: in Quito, a referendum to stop mining in the Andean Chocó region; and nationally, a referendum to leave oil underground in the ITT block within the Yasuní National Park. Almost 60 percent of voters in Ecuador said Yes to leaving oil in Yasuní. This meant that within one year of this decision, the oil wells would have to be shut down, the infrastructure removed, and a process of repairing the affected area begun.

The Yasuní National Park is one of the most biodiverse areas of the world and home to Indigenous Peoples, including the Tagaeri and Taromenane Peoples who are in voluntary isolation. There is also oil underground in Yasuní, and three oil blocks within its territory: Block 16, which is in decline, and which changed hands from REPSOL to the Ecuadorian state company; Block 31, which has very little crude; and ITT, or Block 43, which the state company, PetroEcuador, has been operating. In 2016, extraction began from its fields, which had proven reserves of almost 900 million barrels of oil. This oil is very heavy. To extract it requires a lot of energy, and the process generates high amounts of toxic waste waters and other contaminants.

Due to this reality, and to the struggle of many organizations and collectives, the Yasuní victory was, without a doubt, very moving and long-awaited. But like any success, it brings challenges.

In Block 43 in Yasuní, also known as Ishpingo-Tambococha-Tiputini (ITT), an oil enclave has been built which must now be dismantled and removed from the site. But what does its removal involve? How can a sacrificed territory be recovered? What are the actions that will bring justice, in light of the abuses committed against nature and the peoples in Yasuní?

As background information, it is worth remembering that on August 22, 2013, various collectives that came together and named themselves Yasunidos presented a request for a popular referendum to the National Electoral Council of Ecuador. The referendum asked the following question: "Do you agree that the Ecuadorian government should keep the crude oil in ITT, known as Block 43, underground indefinitely?" This popular referendum sought to protect the life and territory of the Tagaeri and Taromenane indigenous peoples and the other communities within Yasuní National Park.

Ten years later, on August 20, 2023, and after overcoming all kinds of obstruction on the part of the State, the Yasuní referendum took place. Simultaneously, a regional referendum held in the district of Quito sought to ban mining activities in another mega-diverse area of the country, the

Andean Chocó. In this public referendum, almost 69 percent of Quito residents voted Yes to life over mining.

Lessons Learned

There was broad debate on the public referendum. The choice between maintaining extractivism or stopping it became central during the electoral process. Despite the fact that most of the presidential candidates openly opposed keeping the oil in the ground, and the major media outlets showed a clear bias toward convincing people to vote against it, there was a positive response to the referendum—which received the support of 59 percent of the national electorate. None of the candidates received as much support.

According to the Constitutional Court ruling 6-22-CP/23, the Yes vote in the Yasuní referendum means that the State is obligated to carry out a gradual and orderly withdrawal of all activities related to oil extraction, and within a timeframe of no more than one year after the official results were made public. Furthermore, the State cannot take any action to initiate new contractual relationships to continue exploiting Block 43.

The Yasuní referendum leaves us with several lessons:

- Battles are long, hard, and at different scales. But it is possible to build ecological and social awareness. And we can prevail against the backwards forces that impose a cult of capitalism and extractivism—the spearhead of accumulation and dispossession.
- The way we fight for the future is by caring for life and nature, which is neither alien nor distant. Nature is the forest and its people, rivers and communities, the diverse beings and relationships in our territories. Nature is not an adversary; it is an ally. Current and projected disasters are not natural; they are created by global and local actions and inactions.
- These transitions—which are now inevitable—must involve not only curbing the expansion of extractive frontiers, but also recovering and restoring sacrificed territories. This is not just a battle for the future. It is a battle to rebuild what has been damaged, and to recover nature's regenerative capacity, the self-determination of peoples over their territories, and autonomy in the resolution of problems and conflicts.

There have been several attempts to violate the popular mandate, as well as assertions about the impossibility of applying it. The former Minister of Energy from Guillermo Lasso's administration said that "never in the history of the world has such an important oil field that produces almost 60,000 barrels a day been shut down." However, Petroecuador has already presented a timeline for closure, and it plans to start the shutdown on August 31, 2024. This gives us time to prepare for this process and to monitor it in the territory.

2024 will be a year of a lot of activity in Yasuní. The Inter-American Court of Human Rights has a pending visit related to the case of Peoples in Voluntary Isolation, before it can issue its sentence

on the lack of state protection. The peoples living in Yasuní are calling out the state's lack of compliance with economic, social and cultural rights, and its dependence on the oil industry.

There is also pressure from powerful groups with ties to the oil industry that are reluctant to lose a source of income. Figures related to the costs of decommissioning the block are tossed around—without any explanation—and many people are talking about new cases of corruption. There is no information on what the industry recognizes as the "assets and liabilities" that will have to be withdrawn.

2024 will be a year of much reflection; and there will also be proposals coming from defenders of life and nature, surely with the collaboration and help of nature herself. These are moments to rethink how to build utopia, and how to rebuild autonomy and sovereignty. This is a time to bring justice to areas affected by oil activity, with the solidarity of the whole country. And most of all, it is a time to reconsider, from the ground up, the true costs and impacts of these oil operations—from exploitation, to withdrawal, to holistic reparation.

When we talk about oil operations, we know that there is a series of studies and procedures that companies have to present in order to obtain their license. One of these studies is the abandonment plan; what we didn't know until now was that "abandonment" does not mean merely bringing down platforms or abandoning wells.

A true repair of the Yasuní-ITT should involve removing everything, so that it looks like it used to—before these activities that never should have happened. This infrastructure must be dismantled and removed, the ecosystems must be rehabilitated, and the autonomy of peoples and nature must be restored, repaired and recovered.

Esperanza Martínez

Acción Ecológica

Colombia: The “energy transition” jeopardizes the northwestern Amazon basin

Mocoa is located between the Andean mountains and the Colombian Amazon, in the middle of one of the most important river basins of the country; in this territory, indigenous communities, Afro-Descendants, peasants and settlers coexist. The growing demand for minerals for the “decarbonization” of the world is a threat to this region, where mining companies are trying to move forward with underground copper extraction.

The energy transition (ET) is a major challenge for humanity in this century. It is being propelled as the strategy in the face of the climate crisis, global warming, planetary imbalance, and the disappearance of species, etc. Life is at stake, and if the consumption of fossil fuels and mineral derivatives that release CO₂—primarily by countries in the Global North and Southern elites—continues, this self-destructive process will be irreversible.

The ET is not new. Throughout history, humans have adopted changes and adapted to improve their wellbeing: striking stones together produced fire, and humans' consumption shifted from raw foods to delicious roasts; there have been advancements in transportation systems—steam, rail, motor and air; and industrialization led to dependence on fossil fuels. In the 20th century, the development of new technologies has implied a progressive increase in the consumption of minerals, including copper.

Colombian president Gustavo Petro has promoted the ET as a duty that all countries should assume—through calls for the reduction in fossil fuel consumption and CO₂ emissions. These proposals generate tensions in Colombia with the mining and hydrocarbon sector; it is difficult to abandon this model.

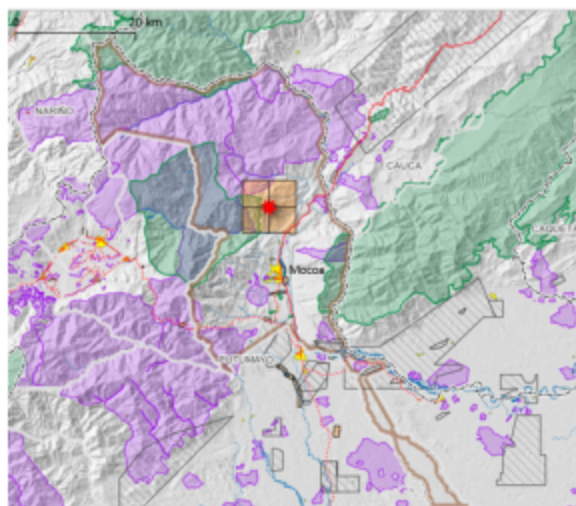
Meanwhile, when talking about ET, little or no mention is made of the numerous community experiences that lead to true energy sovereignty. Such experiences stand in contrast to larger-scale projects underway that involve wind farms and solar panels; these installations require large quantities of copper and rare earth minerals—but because the final energy production process does not release CO₂, they are classified as “clean.”

In this context, the demand for minerals for the decarbonization of the world has intensified, and the ET has become a threat to the northwestern Amazon Basin, given that this area overlaps with one of the country's copper deposits. Currently, Canadian company Libero Copper (registered in Colombia as Libero Cobre) has four mining titles for lands currently in the process of exploration (image 1, red area). In the collective imagination, the assumption is that this mineral will be exported.

The area where the titles are located is 10 km away from the urban center of Mocoa, capital of the department of Putumayo. Approximately 4,600 million pounds of copper and 511 million pounds

of molybdenum are projected to be extracted (1). These titles were acquired during the presidency of Álvaro Uribe (2002 -2010), in the period known as the "mining piñata," in which large tracts of land were sold for the country's mining and oil extraction.

Antecedentes: La "piñata minera" (2002-2010)



- AGA (2004) – Mocoa Ventures (B2Gold, 2009) => Libero Cobre (2018)

- Proyecto Mocoa – 7800 ha – Fase del POA - de 4600 M de libras de cobre y 510,5 M de libras de molibdeno – Pit 177 ha

- Area Proyecto Licenciado (ANLA, 2022)
- Proyecto Mocoa de Libero Cobre
- Limite Mocoa (DANE, 2017)
- Titulos mineros vig. Putumayo (ANM, 2022)
- Areas Protegidas (RUNAP, 2023)
- Resguardo Indigena Legalizado (ANT, 2021)
- Area urbana (DANE, 2021)

Background: The "mining piñata" (2002-2010)

Mocoa: An Andean-Amazonian City

Mocoa is located in the southwestern border of the country, 630 km from Bogotá. The city stands out socio-ecologically as being biocultural, with approximately 63,639 inhabitants representing 16.6% of the total state population. It is ethnically composed of indigenous peoples, Afro-Descendants, peasants and settlers. Territorially, there are five indigenous reservations: Inga Condagua and Yunguillo; Inga-Camëntsa; La Paila Naya; Inga and Koreguaje, and La Florida-Nasa; as well as Siona, Yanacona and Pastos indigenous councils and five Afro-descendent Community Councils.

The territory is an amalgam of cultures where the ancestral is still alive: some families use seeds, fibers and clay to make handicrafts for economic sustenance. Other sources of livelihood in this area include nature tourism, agricultural and livestock production and, in urban areas, the service sector and commerce.

Geographically, Mocoa is located at the confluence of the Massif and the Amazon; this area is one of the country's most important territories in terms of water sources, and is known as the hydrological star (2). Additionally, it shares the Upper Mocoa River Basin Protected Forest Reserve bearing its name (RFPCARM, by its Spanish acronym) with the municipality of San Francisco. It is a strategic ecological reserve, being a corridor that connects several National Natural Parks (NNP) and Environmental Reserves. These include Alto Fragua Indi Wasi NNP, Puracé NNP, Doña Juana-

Cascabel Volcanic Complex NNP, Cueva de los Guacharos NNP, Laguna de la Cocha, Galeras Flora and Fauna Sanctuary, La Corota Island Flora Sanctuary, Paway Mariposario Nature Reserve and the Orito Ingi-Ande Medicinal Plant Sanctuary.

Twenty-one water sources—eight rivers and thirteen streams—cross the territory, making up the Mocoa River wetland complex (3). The Mocoa River, in turn, feeds into the Upper Caquetá River Basin, a region of splendid biodiversity and beautiful landscapes that include moorland, terraces and valleys rich in sediment. Its mountains serve as a refuge for species on the road to extinction, such as spectacled black bears, mountain tapirs and jaguars (4). It is also home to the tree species, *Elaeagia pastoensis*, popularly known as mopa-mopa—from which people extract varnish, a raw material used by artisans in Pasto (Nariño) (5). These species are listed as being vulnerable to extinction, due to habitat loss and other factors.

Being located in the Andean-Amazonian transition zone, Mocoa has special atmospheric conditions. These include a warm, humid climate with annual rainfall exceeding 4,000 millimeters; a geography of high slopes ranging from 600-3200 meters above sea level; and geologically young soils in formation—making this region an active erosion zone.

The Andean-Amazonian territory under threat

Studies on the mining potential in Mocoa have been carried out for more than four decades. In the 1970s, an agreement was signed between the former National Institute of Geological-Mining Research (INGEOMINAS, by its Spanish acronym) and the United Nations. The attached table is the summary of the report on 31 wells that were drilled on the right bank of the Mocoa River.

Variable		Design		
		Open-pit	Underground	Combined Open-pit
Reserves	Metric Tonnes	203,666,000	222,852,000	204,616,000
Tenor %	Cu	0.4319	0.3837	0.4045
	Mo	0.0621	0.0670	0.0700
Operation	Daily (Tonnes)	30,000	30,000	30,000
	Yearly (Tonnes)	10,500,000	10,500,000	10,500,000
Life of Mine	Years	21	23	8
Preproduction	(Years)	5	5	5

Source: INGEOMINAS Report No. 1891, from 1982.

Considering the high environmental fragility of Mocoa, what is projected in the INGEOMINAS report is worrisome. Ironically, Mocoa's bounties also imply risk. The wetland complex, the young geomorphology of the soil, and the fact that it is located in the transition zone between tectonic

plates (which is why it is crossed by geological faults) make this area susceptible to the impacts of climate change.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change constantly warns about the degradation of the planet, and that the impacts will be more evident in areas of high environmental fragility. We witnessed this on March 31, 2017, when the Mocoa Tragedy was unleashed: a torrential flood inundated 17 neighborhoods, completely destroying five of them. The avalanche left more than 333 people dead, 398 people severely injured and 71 people missing, according to official records (6). However, local people say the numbers were higher. Most of the people living in the destroyed neighborhoods were victims of forced displacement. As is the case all over the world, these migrants are the ones who live on the margins of cities.

A year after the tragedy, in April, the presidents of Community Action Boards (JACs, by their Spanish acronym) from the villages of Pueblo Viejo and Montclar were informed that the Canadian company, B2 Gold, would carry out mining operations and needed a social license. The company urged the community presidents to call community meetings for this purpose. Faced with this threat—and with the memory of the disaster still fresh—on May 5, 2018, the citizens of Mocoa held a large demonstration, accompanying the JAC presidents from the area. We expressed our total rejection of, and disagreement with, the intended exploitation of our mountains. Among other reasons, we rejected this proposal because part of the mining titles overlap with the collective territories Inga of Condagua and Camëntsa of San Francisco Reservations.

As a political response to this mobilization, the Municipal Council approved Agreement 020 of 2018, which reads as follows: "Taking into account [these events], the Municipality of Mocoa must make environmental protection a priority, which explicitly means the prohibition of mining activities...The magnitude of the tragedy should lead the Municipal Government to observe the principles of precaution, prevention, subsidiary rigor and progressiveness."

Corporate mimicry

As mentioned above, the "mining piñata" meant that the subsoil of the territory ended up in the hands of Canadian companies: Mocoa ventures, B2 Gold and even some with names that sound like they have deep connections to the territory, such as Libero Cobre's "Mocoa Project." B2 Gold, which was operating under the subsidiary Mocoa Ventures, failed to obtain the social license to operate. Furthermore, its exploration term expired, so it sold its titles to Libero Copper Corporation, a company that acquired a 100 percent stake of the "Mocoa Project" on May 7, 2018.

For environmental defense organizations and the citizenry, the entry of Libero Cobre meant a greater threat of possible exploitation. Libero Cobre's actions have caused violations and have infringed local regulations—given that they have bypassed the municipal Agreement 020. At the same time, they have fractured the social fabric by co-opting part of the area's population through the offer of employment, using children in company advertising, and causing other impacts. All of this has led institutes such as the Environmental Conflict Observatory (OCA, by its Spanish acronym) a branch of the National University of Colombia and the Amazonian Institute of

Scientific Research (SINCHI, by its Spanish acronym) to classify this case as a socio-environmental conflict.

Resistance to extractivism

Social organizations see that the intended exploitation would cause incalculable environmental damage and make life impossible in the territory. As citizens, we have joined together in an alliance called the Guardians of the Andean-Amazon Collective. With the support of NGOs in Bogotá, we have promoted mobilizations, public hearings, and requirements of supervisory bodies and the environmental authority. We have also organized cultural events: the first and second version of the Festival in Defense of the Mountain, Water and Life (2022; 2023).

In closing, it is worth noting that this case of proposed copper extraction in the Colombian Amazon is becoming more visible every day, to the point where we have managed to get it on the agendas of the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development, and the Ministry of Mines and Energy. And we are awaiting the establishment of a roundtable which, per a State Council decision, should limit the mining disorder in the country, as well as make the current government's National Development Plan a reality: to organize territory around water! (7)

Constanza del Pilar Carvajal Vargas

Socio-environmental activist and academic

Threads of Life Collective – Andean-Amazonian Guardians

With the collaboration of: Lucia Barbosa Diaz and William Mauricio Rengifo Velasco.

(1) Michel Rowland, Robert Sim and Bruce Davis in: [Liberio Copper & Gold Corporation](#). Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, January 2022. TechnicalReportMocoaCu-MoDepositColombia150618.pdf Accessed in January 2022.

(2) The Magdalena and Cauca Rivers originate in the Massif, and cross the country from south to north to the Atlantic Ocean; the Patía River heads west to the Pacific Ocean; and the Caquetá River in the eastern Amazon crosses the border into Brazil and flows into the Amazon River. The Putumayo River originates in the foothills of Nudo de los Pastos in the municipality of San Francisco, running for approximately 840 km; its waters are the international border between our country and Ecuador and Peru, and it enters Brazil, where it flows into the Amazon River.

(3) POMCA, Mocoa 2022.

(4) International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

(5) [The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization \(UNESCO\) recognized the “Knowledge and Techniques associated with the Pasto Varnish, Mopa-Mopa” as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity](#). December 21, 2020.

(6) Mocoa tragedy: Why was the State condemned? The Administrative Court of Cundinamarca condemned the State for the events of March 2017. Virtual news from July 14, 2022.

(7) National Planning Department. [El agua, eje central para hacer de Colombia “una potencia mundial de la vida](#). March 2023.

The contradictions of conservation: The territory of the Ka'apor in the Brazilian Amazon

The Ka'apor live in Alto Turiaçu, in the northwestern part of Maranhão state in Brazil. It is the largest indigenous territory of the Eastern Amazon and the largest portion of preserved rainforest in the region. Foreign companies have arrived there to propose REDD projects; this has caused conflict, and part of the community is rejecting these projects and organizing to resist.

The eastern portion of the Brazilian Amazon has the highest rates of deforestation and forest degradation in the country. Yet, in this vast territory there are still large areas in a good state of protection, which—as scientific studies from various parts of the world have corroborated—usually correspond with the territories of Indigenous Peoples and/or local communities. (1) One of these areas is the Alto Turiaçu indigenous territory where the Ka'apor People live, which spans 530,524 hectares throughout six municipalities in the northwestern part of Maranhão state. It is home to a population of approximately 2,600 people in 20 communities. This is the largest indigenous territory of the Eastern Amazon, and also the largest portion of preserved rainforest in the region.

Caring for the territory: Who teaches whom?

The care of the forest, which academia and other social sectors call conservation, is based on—among other things—values and deep relationships with the territory; these include cultural, customary, spiritual and political values. Their traditional knowledge and practices have allowed them to simultaneously make use of and care for, the territory. These concepts and knowledge are not static; on the contrary, they evolve along with their cultures and adapt and respond to emerging needs. This is how the Ka'apor created, for example, monitoring and community-driven surveillance strategies.

The Ka'apor have faced many external threats. Over the years, invasions of their territory have increased, and even public officials have been implicated in assaults, the leasing of land, and the use of fake documents to misappropriate indigenous territory. Faced with this situation, a significant number of village leaders came together in 2012 and started to devise their own surveillance activities. They established small communities at the entrances of roads used by loggers, which they later called protection areas, or *ka'a usak ha* in their language. This was one of the successful experiences to neutralize aggression and invasion of their territory.

In September 2013, the Ka'apor created the first protected area in the municipality of Centro Novo do Maranhão, where, in December of the same year, they decided to bring back an organizational system called *Tuxa Ta Pame*, or Ka'apor Management Council. "It is a form of ancestral and collective organization of the people, which harkens back to and references the ancient *Tuxa*; these warriors left their mark on history for fighting and for giving their lives, for being masters of knowledge and culture, and for being strategists in the defense of their people and culture,"

members of the Council explained in an interview with WRM. In this system there are no bosses, chiefs, caciques or others in power; decisions are not made by a leader, but rather by the community, in groups and collectives. "Everyone is important and has a leading role in the defense [of the territory]. When there is an action of self-defense, the whole group goes. No one claims to direct others, but everyone who feels threatened shows up to the confrontation," they noted.

They also established the *Jupihu Katu Ha*, which is a Ka'apor agreement around coexistence. It was created with the intention to support unity and exercise collective and responsible governance. The *Tuxa Ta Pame* is based on consensual, horizontal and participatory decisions.

It is necessary to highlight the relevance of these decisions in terms of autonomy and sovereignty. In having their own inclusive forms of government and organization—far removed from models such as representative democracy—the Ka'apor make space for the voices and direct participation of different sections of this indigenous group. One example of this is the Ka'apor self-defense guard, which is made up of families, women, elders, children, and even domesticated animals. Everyone has a responsibility and a task to carry out. In other words, everyone imagines, lives in, enjoys, appropriates and defends the territory.

Over time, and with the increase in attacks and threats, the Ka'apor have expanded their actions of territorial defense. They have implemented new forms of protection with community-driven surveillance and carried out a participatory process to map the Ka'apor biocultural ecosystems. They have even adopted and implemented a syntropic agroforestry system, an agricultural and productive system created a few decades ago that imitates the rainforest and its organization—in particular by reducing external inputs, and the accumulation and disposal of energy. This has all gone hand in hand with actions of solidarity related to education and health.

However, as community-driven surveillance has increased, so have assaults and murders—acts in which loggers, landowners, hunters, traders and local politicians have been involved. In the last ten years, more than 50 community members have been assaulted, two communities have been invaded, and there have been almost 15 murders.

Despite all of this, the forest the Ka'apor are taking care of is still largely intact. Recently, outsiders unfamiliar with the territory have arrived, allegedly to teach the Ka'apor how to do what they have done for centuries—protect their territory. They are advocating a REDD project. This raises the question of who actually needs to learn about having a relationship with the forest and caring for it? Have these outsiders really come with the intention of caring for the forest?

Arrival of the REDD proposal and anticipated impacts

In early 2023, the company Wildlife Works and the NGO Forest Trends, both from the United States, arrived in the Ka'apor territory with a proposal to implement a REDD project (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) that would generate and sell carbon credits. They arrived being introduced by indigenous people from the state of Pará.

The *Ka'apor Ta Hury* Association of the Gurupi River is another organization in the territory. The association has a chief with whom the company and the NGO have established closer communication. This association, which does not represent all of the Ka'apor, says they are in agreement with the project. They say the project could improve their quality of life and provide resources to complement forest protection activities. Up to now, a memorandum of understanding has been signed. *Tuxa Ta Pame* denounces this document, because neither the company nor the NGO listened to them in the process that led to its signing.

As happens in many other territories around the world where the best-protected forests are found and fought over for carbon credit projects, indigenous peoples and communities are suffering the impacts. The mere arrival of a project announcement creates internal disputes and divisions.

The Ka'apor who oppose the REDD project proposal do so because it commodifies their way of life and increases internal conflicts. They know this firsthand, as they already suffered a similar experience with a dry timber commercialization project that took place on their territory from 2006 to 2013. In that case, they felt deceived by those who involved them in the project—which included the state itself, the federal government, and even the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI, by its Portuguese acronym). The commercialization project left conflict in its wake, as well as death and suffering, an experience which the Ka'apor do not wish to repeat. (2) Unfortunately, the current presence of outsiders and their proposed project is already causing conflict and deepened divisions among the Ka'apor.

Due to the tenor of the situation, a complaint has already been filed with the Federal Public Ministry (MPF, by its Portuguese acronym), an entity that has stated that any process that involves prior consultation must include dialogue with both groups, and that consensus must reflect a good outcome for both of them. (3)

When Beto Borges, a representative of Forest Trends, was asked about what the NGO's position would be if the Ka'apor did not reach consensus, he said that the project would not proceed—which demonstrates the importance of consensus in a decision of this magnitude. However, the response from the Wildlife Works representative, Lider Sucre, differs considerably, as he does not give relevance to consent. Instead, he emphasizes the decision of the collective: "There will never be complete unanimity. In a community process there are always different points of view. At the end of the process, we will abide by the decision of the collective, whether it is for or against". (4) However, this immediately raises the question: What does this corporate officer understand by the 'decision of the collective'? After all, part of the collective has already decided to reject the project.

In keeping with the *modus operandi* of organizations like theirs, Forest Trends and Wildlife Works have begun to disseminate biased information about REDD; meanwhile, there is very important information that they are not sharing. For example, they have not shared information with the Ka'apor about the irregularities, complaints and impacts of other REDD projects where Wildlife Works is involved, in Kenya, the DR Congo and Cambodia. (5)

In November 2023, The Guardian newspaper published a report (6) based on research carried out by the Kenya Human Rights Commission and the NGO SOMO (7), which documents allegations against Wildlife Works staff in the Kasigau project in Kenya. Senior company staff were accused of sexual abuse and harassment committed over more than a decade. Men associated with the company used their position to demand sex in exchange for promotions and better treatment. The investigation by a Kenyan law firm found evidence of "deeply inappropriate and harmful behavior" by two individuals.

The president of Wildlife Works himself, Mike Korchinsky, apologized for the pain this has caused and reported that three people had been suspended—stressing that this was not a generalized problem. It is worth noting that it this is a very common reaction to downplay the significance or extent of the abuse of this kind of project (8) and insist that they reported incidents are isolated cases.. However, the repetition of these events over time suggests that they are actually systemic in nature.

The fundamental problem behind these serious situations is that REDD projects are encouraged and promoted as an exclusively positive intervention for communities and territories, without mentioning the history of negative impacts. That is, essential information -complete, truthful and impartial- is hidden from people who are faced with making a decision about a project in their territory.

How has the *Tuxa Ta Pame* of the Ka'apor responded?

Once they identified the threat, *Tuxa Ta Pame* determined that it was necessary to seek more information that would allow them to comprehensively understand what the REDD mechanism is about, how it works, what it is based on, and what the implications for the population and territory would be.

After *Tuxa Ta Pame* began its own research process, external actors arrived to provide a simplistic and biased explanation about REDD and the generation of carbon credits to finance the project, which they claim would begin to provide benefits to people upon their mere signing of attendance sheets at meetings. However, members of the Ka'apor have been investigating, seeking other points of view, and most of all, learning about the experience of other communities that have a defined position on the matter. This is how they have reached their own conclusions.

The *Tuxa Ta Pame* council and the communities organized through it understand REDD to be "a camouflaged capitalist mechanism to keep the world polluted and threaten the autonomy of territories. Because it transfers responsibility from public to private power. Because it creates division and monetizes natural goods. We always defend the territory, because we believe it is our life. We never need to receive money in order to live and protect the forest". (9)

Based on that understanding of REDD, they decided to bring the topic into educational and training processes that take place in three training hubs which provide direction for five Ka'apor cultural and community education centers. The topic has become part of school and training

activities, and they created bilingual primers about it. By the end of 2023, they had been carrying out training activities for seven months. This led to the initiative to create a Ka'apor autonomous community protocol which is currently under construction.

So, what is required for the forest to continue to exist?

It is necessary to guarantee conditions for the Ka'apor to remain in their territory in a safe and decent manner; this implies, among other things, respecting their own forms of political organization, decision-making and management of their territory and livelihoods. It must be stressed, once again, that REDD-type projects—which often cause conflict and impacts even before they get approved or implemented—are generally established in territories with a good state of protection, as in the case in Alto Turiaçu. It is the Ka'apor who have guaranteed these conditions, based on their knowledge, practices, relationship with and defense of the territory—without the need for outside projects or market mechanisms that limit or control what "should" be done, according to the people promoting these projects and mechanisms.

This article was prepared by the WRM Secretariat, based on interviews with members of the Ka'apor *Tuxa Ta Pame* Management Council.

- (1) Porter-Bolland L. et al, 2012. Land use, cover change, deforestation, protected areas, community forestry, tenure rights, tropical forests. Forest ecology and management. Vol 268:6-17
- (2) Video: [Intercept Brasil, Empresa americana alimenta conflito indígena para lucrar com reparação ambiental](#), 2023.
- (3) Article: [Intercept Brasil, Empresa americana alimenta conflito indígena para lucrar com reparação ambiental](#), 2023.
- (4) Idem 3
- (5) [REDD-Minus: the rethoric and reality of the Mai-N' dombe REDD+ Programme](#), 2020; [Fortress conservation in Wildlife Alliance's Southern Cardamom REDD+ Project: Evictions, violence, and burning people's homes](#). "We're proud of our work. The forest, the wildlife, you come to feel they're yours". 2021.
- (6) The Guardian, [Allegations of extensive sexual abuse at Kenyan offsetting project used by Shell and Netflix](#), November 2023.
- (7) SOMO, [Offsetting human rights. Sexual abuse and harassment at the Kasigau Corridor REDD+ Project in Kenya](#), November 2023.
- (8) WRM, [15 Years of REDD: A mechanism Rotten at the Core](#), April 2022. .
- (9) Interview with members of the Tuxa Ta Pame Ka'apor Management Council.

RECOMMENDED

Isolated Indigenous Peoples in Peru: How the FSC is borrowing from Big Oil's playbook

This article describes how over a decade, the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) has been certifying two logging concessions of the Maderera Canales Tahuamanu (MCT) company in the Madre de Dios region, which includes territories of indigenous peoples in 'isolation', known as the "Mashco-Piro". The certifying company has turned a blind eye to the fact that the Peruvian government has not only not demarcated the indigenous territory but has also given the company two contracts for concessions. FSC claiming that the company's concessions are not part of the Mashco-Piro territories reminds what certain oil and gas companies have increasingly done "in an attempt to defend their operations in parts of the remote Amazon inhabited by Indigenous People in 'isolation': claim they don't exist, or there's no evidence for them, or they don't use the areas where the company is operating". [Read the article in English here.](#)

Brazil: Coalition Agro é Fogo publishes a dossier

The Brazilian Coalition Agro é Fogo is made up of social movements and organizations that have worked for decades to defend the Amazon, Cerrado, and Pantanal regions, and the rights of their Peoples and communities. Its objective is to expose how the agribusiness chain uses fire in a way that is directly or indirectly associated with deforestation and land grabbing, to promote and consolidate the expansion of the agricultural frontier.

In the past years, the Coalition produced the dossier "Agribusiness' Global Trail of Fire: Land grabbing, deforestation and forest fires in Brazil's Amazon, Cerrado and Pantanal", with the support of a broad network of collaborators who participated in various ways, such as: leaders in the territories who shared their reports on the conflicts; photographers who provided photos from their collections; cartographers and geoprocessing experts who organized maps; and people who co-authored the articles. This dossier also provides an analysis of what is happening in the shared ecosystems of neighbouring countries, such as Paraguay and Colombia, and the relationship with their political systems. [Access the dossier in English here.](#)

Indigenous voices from the Amazon

The production of audio-visual tools, videos and podcasts in the Amazon, where Indigenous Peoples talk about their realities and resistance struggles, is increasing.

Agenda Propia, for example, is a collective of mainly women journalists working in the Amazon region. Through the link we share, you can listen to eight stories of Indigenous Peoples from the Venezuelan Amazon region and border with Colombia, talking about their reality, such as the eviction by the mining activities, conflicts with armed groups, deforestation, but also about their resistance like the creation of guardians of their territories. Access the materials [here](#) (only in Spanish). Agenda Propia also produced a special about women in resistance in the Colombian Amazon. [Only in Spanish here.](#)

In addition, we recommend again an article and videos about the work of young indigenous Munduruku women in Brazil, that uses social media to raise awareness about illegal invasions of their territory. Read the articles and watch the videos in [English](#) or [Portuguese](#).

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