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

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 agrotoxins 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).

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