A photograph of a deforested area in the Colombian Amazon. The foreground is dominated by a large pile of cut, dry tree trunks and branches. In the background, a dense, lush green forest rises on a hillside under a cloudy sky.

A DANGEROUS CLIMATE

Deforestation, climate change and violence against environmental defenders in the Colombian Amazon

LEGAL NOTICE

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A DANGEROUS CLIMATE

**Deforestation, climate change and
violence against environmental
defenders in the Colombian Amazon**

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ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|--------------------|---|
| AATI | Traditional indigenous authority <i>(Asociación de Autoridades Tradicionales Indígenas del Amazonas)</i> |
| ACT | Amazon Conservation Team |
| AGC | Gaitán Self-defence Forces <i>(Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia)</i> |
| ANT | National Land Agency <i>(Agencia Nacional de Tierras)</i> |
| AUC | United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia <i>(Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia)</i> |
| CERREM | Committee for Risk Assessment and Recommendation of Measures <i>(Comité de Evaluación de Riesgo y Recomendación de Medidas)</i> |
| CIPRAT | Territorial Early Warning Monitoring Committee <i>(Comisión Intersectorial para la Respuesta Rápida a las Alertas Temprana)</i> |
| Conaldef | National Council to Combat Deforestation and Other Environmental Crimes <i>(Consejo Nacional de Lucha Contra la Deforestación)</i> |
| CONPES 4021 | National Policy for the Control of Deforestation and Sustainable Forest Management |
| ELN | National Liberation Army <i>(Ejército de Liberación Nacional)</i> |
| EPL | Popular Liberation Army <i>(Ejército Popular de Liberación)</i> |
| FARC-EP | Armed Forces of Colombia People's Army <i>(Fuerzas Armadas de Colombia Ejército del Pueblo)</i> |
| FCDS | Foundation for Conservation and Sustainable Development <i>(Fundación para la Conservación y el Desarrollo Sostenible)</i> |
| FIP | Foundation Ideas for Peace <i>(Fundación Ideas para la Paz)</i> |
| FZS | Frankfurt Zoological Society |
| Gaia | Gaia Amazonas Foundation |
| GEF | Global Environment Facility |
| INCORA | National Institute of Agrarian Reform <i>(Instituto Colombiano de la Reforma Agraria)</i> |
| LAC | Latin American and Caribbean |
| MOTRA | Regional Land Management Model for the Colombian Amazon <i>(Modelo de Ordenamiento Territorial Regional para la Amazonía Colombiana)</i> |
| NDC | Nationally Determined Contribution |
| NGO | Non-governmental organisation |
| PATR | Action Plans of Regional Transformation <i>(Planes de Acción para Transformación Regional)</i> |
| PDET | Development Programmes with a Territorial Focus <i>(Programas de Desarrollo con Enfoque Territorial)</i> |
| PER | Regional Strategic Plan <i>(Plan Estratégico Regional)</i> |
| PISDA | Comprehensive Substitution and Alternative Development Plans <i>(Planes Integrales de Sustitución y Desarrollo Alternativo)</i> |

| | |
|---------------------|---|
| PIVA | Environmental Governance with Indigenous Peoples <i>(Pilar Indígena Visión Amazonía)</i> |
| PNN | National Natural Parks of Colombia <i>(Parques Nacionales Naturales de Colombia)</i> |
| PNIS | National Comprehensive Programme for the Substitution of Crops Used for Illicit Purposes <i>(Programa Nacional Integral de Sustitución de Cultivos de Uso Ilícito)</i> |
| RAP Amazonía | Administrative and Planning Region for the Amazon <i>(Región Administrativa y de Planificación para la Amazonía)</i> |
| REM AV | REDD+ Early Movers Amazon Vision Programme |
| RNIMC | National Network of Community-Based Monitoring Initiatives <i>(Red Nacional de Iniciativas de Monitoreo Comunitario)</i> |
| RRI | Comprehensive Rural Reform <i>(Reforma Rural Integral)</i> |
| SISEP | Integrated Security System for Executing Policies <i>(Sistema Integral de Seguridad para el Ejercicio de la Política)</i> |
| SMBYC | Colombia's Forest and Carbon Monitoring System <i>(Sistema de Monitoreo de Bosques y Carbono de Colombia)</i> |
| UNP | National Protection Unit <i>(Unidad Nacional de Protección)</i> |
| WWF | World Wide Fund for Nature |
| ZME | Strategic Mining Zones <i>(Zonas Mineras Estratégicas)</i> |
| ZRC | Peasant reserve zones <i>(Zonas Reserva Campesina)</i> |
| ZRFA | Amazon forest reserve areas <i>(Zonas de Reserva Forestal de la Amazonía)</i> |

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A deepening security, human rights and environmental crisis in the Colombian Amazon

The Colombian Amazon is facing a deepening security, human rights and environmental crisis. Since the signing of the Peace Agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC in 2016, deforestation rates have been on the rise – the loss of primary forest in Colombia has been greater than any year previously recorded. At the same time, violence against those who try to protect the environment and build a more just and peaceful future has also been increasing to alarming levels. In 2020, Colombia was the country with the most environmental defenders killed worldwide. Indigenous communities in the Colombian Amazon are especially hard-hit: they are losing their land and livelihoods, and are the subject of human rights abuses, violence and displacement.

This crisis has been long in the making: It is rooted in over 50 years of armed conflict, illegal armed groups as well as mismanagement and exploitation of natural resources, combined with deep social, economic and political inequalities. However, the dynamics of conflict and environmental degradation have changed significantly since the signing of the Peace Agreement in 2016. A complex and ever-changing network of illegal armed groups, private actors and corrupt officials used the power vacuum left by the demobilisation and disarmament of large parts of the FARC in some areas to expand their power and illegal economic activities. As a result, the magnitude, intensity and speed of resource exploitation in the Colombian Amazon has increased.

The surge in resource grabbing, illegal economic activities and in particular the cultivation of coca crops for illicit uses, as well as mining, cattle ranching and agriculture, did not only drive environmental degradation and deforestation, but also increased violence.

Local communities, non-governmental organisations and state institutions trying to protect the Amazon came into conflict with the interests of these powerful groups and have, as a consequence, increasingly become targets. In the best case, they are hindered from doing their important work; in the worst case they are threatened, abused or even killed.

Worryingly, these dynamics have created a vicious circle of increasing instability and environmental degradation: The conflict-driven degradation of the Amazon's ecosystems contributes to global climate change as forests

lose their carbon-storing abilities. At the same time, the degradation of the environment and ecosystems increases the vulnerability of local communities to the impacts of a changing climate, including changes in the water cycle, higher temperatures and more extreme events. And as climate impacts increase, they further undermine human security and drive environmental degradation. The longer this crisis continues, the greater climate change impacts will be and the weaker ecosystems and societal institutions that are crucial for breaking this vicious circle will become.

Responses to the crisis

The Colombian state has responded in various ways to these challenges, but with limited success. Protection measures for environmental defenders and other vulnerable groups have lacked sufficient resources and capacities, and fallen short of playing a significant role in reducing security risks for those most affected. The military and security operations set up to curb deforestation have failed to weaken the networks that drive insecurity and environmental degradation. Instead, they have been a source of concern due to the alleged abuse of force, the violation of fundamental rights and the tensions they generated within the communities.

The Peace Agreement laid out a range of actions to address the root causes of conflict and instability, but implementation is lagging. Progress has been slow due to a lack of political will and capacity as well as budgetary constraints, especially with regards to implementing a comprehensive rural reform, local development initiatives and the substitution of coca crops for illicit uses. Furthermore, where actions have been implemented, they have not always been aligned with conservation imperatives.

Despite the significant progress Colombia has made with regards to its environmental and climate change strategies, challenges remain in these areas. In the past, environmental management and protection programmes have often failed to properly include local communities and to address the root causes of conflict. With the scale of insecurity that the Amazon is facing today, they are also not able to effectively protect the environment. In addition, there is a general lack of coordination between different policy areas; for example, it is not entirely clear how security policies contribute to creating conditions for environmental protection and conservation, and to what extent measures and provisions adopted in the environmental and development fields are sensitive to the vulnerabilities and risks faced by communities and environmental defenders.

This means that in many cases civil society and indigenous organisations have had to step in to fill the gaps left by the state. They have developed their own self-protection strategies and mechanisms and both civil society and indigenous communities have played key roles in developing sustainable local livelihoods while protecting the environment. However, the success of these efforts has been hindered by rising insecurity and violence.

The way forward: recommendations

It is imperative to respond to the current security, human rights and environmental crisis in the Amazon before degradation and deforestation reach a tipping point, before the world loses an important carbon sink and to safeguard local livelihoods. This can only be done by addressing the different dimensions of the crisis: the immediate protection needs of local communities and environmental leaders, as well as deforestation and illegal economies, along with their root causes.

The most urgent task is to protect people's lives and human rights. However, it is also necessary to work towards guaranteeing their security in a broader sense, combining the protection of natural resources with the provision of public services, thus securing livelihoods and future prospects for the communities. Importantly, all the responses to the crisis must take the specific local context and its people as a starting point. They should build upon and strengthen the socio-political institutions and economic needs of the diverse population of the Colombian Amazon, rather than ignore them.

To this end, we recommend five lines of action to which different actors can contribute, according to their respective fields of work, skills and mandates:

1. Improving the protection of environmental defenders and local communities

This is an immediate priority and needs to receive more political attention and sufficient financial and institutional capacities. In particular, existing institutional arrangements and policies that seek to improve cross-sectoral coordination must be strengthened.

2. Addressing deforestation and illegal activities as part of a broader peace strategy

Tackling deforestation and illegal activities requires a comprehensive approach that critically analyses past experiences from the military and security sectors, together with environmental perspectives. This must reflect the underlying causes of conflict and environmental degradation and draw on a combination of confidence-building, socio-economic

development, law and order approaches and, to a limited extent and with precise mandates, hard security measures.

3. Stepping up environmental and climate policies, accounting for their peace and conflict dimensions

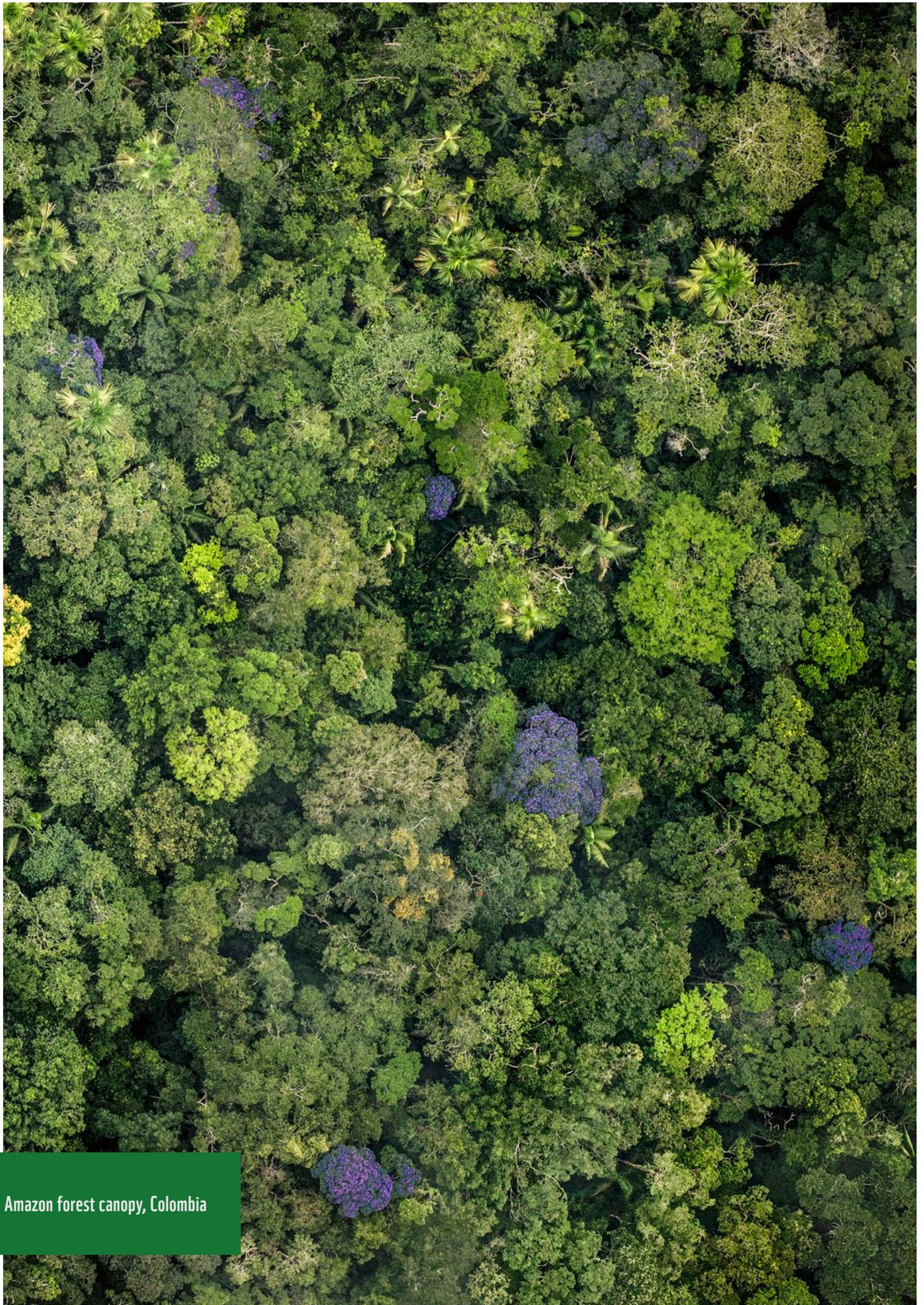
The Colombian Amazon is central to achieving the country's sustainability goals. It is, however, facing enormous conflict-related obstacles with regards to the success of environmental policies. At the very least, environmental protection and climate action need to be conflict-sensitive and take into account the region's specificities. Going further, taking the close links between environment and conflict in Colombia as a starting point, these actions can also actively help to build and sustain peace. This would mean integrating environmental and climate action and policies into an overall peace strategy.

4. Recognising and strengthening the role of local communities in protecting the environment

Any solution to the crisis in the Colombian Amazon must be compatible with the needs and perspectives of local – indigenous, peasant, and Afro-descendant – communities, strengthening their governance structures and socio-political institutions. Their management efforts are indispensable to protect the natural and cultural riches of the Amazon region and to develop sustainable livelihoods.

5. Transforming the root causes of the crisis and building long-term resilience to climate change and conflict

The measures suggested above can all only succeed if they are embedded in a long-term strategy for peace and security. Such a strategy should lay out a plan allocating resources in a way that addresses the broader social and economic needs of rural communities in the Amazon region, while simultaneously restoring trust and cooperation between communities and the Colombian state. Although activities to transform the root causes of the crisis and build resilience are intended to have a longer-term impact, they should start now. They can and should be implemented in parallel with, as opposed to after, actions to protect environmental leaders, combat environmental crime, strengthen the role of indigenous communities, and advance environmental protection and climate action.



Amazon forest canopy, Colombia

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 INCREASING VIOLENCE AND DEFORESTATION IN THE COLOMBIAN AMAZON

Since the 2016 Peace Agreement, attacks against environmental defenders have increased in Colombia, especially in the Amazon.

In 2020 Colombia was the deadliest country for environmental defenders: of 227 murders worldwide, 65, occurred in Colombia (Global Witness 2021). Paradoxically, these kinds of attacks have been on the rise since the signing of the Peace Agreement between the government and the guerrilla group Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia — People’s Army (FARC)¹ in 2016. The Colombian Amazon has been especially badly hit; between 2016 and 2019, seven environmental defenders were murdered and ten leaders of indigenous communities and environmental organisations received direct threats, while others have been victims of attacks, forced displacement, and sexual violence (Pardo 2020).² Environmental officials in charge of conservation and environmental protection have also been targets of this violence. In February 2020, a dissident group of the former FARC rebel group told officials of the national parks located in the Amazon³ that they had 48 hours to leave these areas. The officials had to comply quickly to save their lives (Cárdenas et al. 2020).

As security conditions for environmental defenders⁴ deteriorated, deforestation in the Colombian Amazon skyrocketed. Since 2016 the loss of primary forest in Colombia has been greater than ever previously recorded (WRI 2021). Between 2014 and 2018, 56% of deforestation happened within only 15 municipalities. The six Colombian municipalities with the highest deforestation levels are all in the Amazon region and among those most affected by armed conflict: San Vicente del Caguán and Cartagena del Chairá (in Caquetá), San José del Guaviare and Calamar (in Guaviare), La Macarena (in Meta), Puerto Guzmán (Putumayo) (CONPES 2020).

1 The guerrilla group Armed Forces of Colombia People’s Army (*FARC-EP – Fuerzas Armadas de Colombia Ejército del Pueblo*) was created by a group of peasants in 1964, after failed amnesty processes of the previous guerrilla and liberal self-defence groups that emerged during the bipartisan violence of the mid-century. Since its establishment, the FARC grew, strengthened, expanded and became the longest-lived and strongest guerrilla group in the Americas until 2016, when it demobilised and largely disarmed after the signing of the Peace Agreement with the government (García 2020).

2 Human rights organisations and reports note that the number of violations against environmental defenders may be underestimated, as some of the victims also include community leaders, human rights defenders, traditional authorities, and civil servants, among others (see, e.g. Global Witness 2021). Records usually take into account only one of these categories, and do not necessarily relate them to the environmental struggle or the objectives related to the defence of territories, water and natural resources that these individuals may have been pursuing.

3 Specifically, these were the National Parks Chiribiquete, Cahuinarí, Yaigojé Apaporis, La Paya, and Puré.

4 Throughout the report, we use the term “environmental defenders” to designate environmental defenders, managers and organisations, unless otherwise specified.

The six Colombian municipalities with the highest deforestation levels are all in the Amazon region and among those most affected by armed conflict.

While deforestation in the Amazon in 2019 saw a slight decrease of approximately 38,265 hectares (Minambiente 2021), experts and interviewees from the region warned that the phenomenon is far from being under control (WRI 2021; Botero 2020; interviews with members of environmental organisations, February 2021). Indeed, deforestation in the Colombian Amazon region increased from 98,256 hectares in 2019 to 109,302 hectares in 2020. This was also reflected in the overall trend of deforestation in Colombia, which rose from 158,894 hectares in 2019 to 171,685 hectares in 2020 – an increase of 8% (Minambiente 2021).

Taken together, the increasing rates of deforestation and violence against environmental defenders are clear indicators of the growing security, human rights and environmental crises in the Colombian Amazon. This crisis has been long in the making, but has been exacerbated with the signing of the Peace Agreement in 2016, and the governance issues that arose following the partial disarmament of the FARC. It is not only threatening the environment and people of the Colombian Amazon, but can also have disastrous impacts on the global climate system due to the essential role that the ecosystems of the Amazon rainforest play in regulating it (WWF 2020). A recent study confirmed for the first time that the Amazon rainforest is now emitting more carbon dioxide than it is able to absorb – more than 1.1 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide a year (Gatti et al. 2021) – the equivalent of the amount the entire country of Japan emits in one year (Global Carbon Atlas 2021).

Box 1: The Colombian Amazon: a diverse and interconnected region of global importance



Geography, biological and social diversity

The Colombian Amazon region is located North-West of the great Amazon basin, from where several of its tributaries originate: the Guaviare River (the largest tributary of the Orinoco River), the Caquetá and Putumayo Rivers (two of the largest northern tributaries of the Amazon River) and the western headwaters of the Negro River (Guainía, Isana, and Vaupés Rivers) (Guio and Rojas 2019). The dense and interconnected forests that make up the region create "aerial rivers" that, through evaporation and precipitation, transport water from the Atlantic Ocean to the Andes and South America (Gaia Amazonas 2020c).

The Colombian Amazon region has a tropical climate, characterised by rainy and dry seasons and average temperatures ranging between 24° and 26° Celsius (IDEAM et al.2017). Its tropical rainforest extends over about 65% of Colombia's territory and represents approximately 67% of the country's total forest cover. It is also rich in biodiversity,

A common squirrel monkey (*Saimiri sciureus*). Isla de los micos, Colombia.

hosting 170 types of ecosystems and a wide variety of vegetation cover, which makes Colombia one of the world's megadiverse countries (Álvarez Grueso et al. 2018; Herrera Montoya et al. 2020; Prüssmann et al. 2016; CBD n.d.).

Indeed, the ecological and socio-cultural systems of the Amazon are of vital importance not only for Colombia but for the entire world.⁵ The Amazon rainforest provides a number of important ecosystem services: the region is responsible for regulating the global climate, stores 10% of carbon stocks in its terrestrial ecosystems, absorbs energy, and is essential for the global water cycle (WWF 2020). Its rich flora and fauna are an important source of livelihoods for indigenous communities. Moreover, as the whole Amazon connects with the Andes and the Orinoquia, it also affects the water cycles and climate there.

Socio-political structures

The unique richness of the Colombian Amazon region is reflected in its social and cultural diversity. Covering territories in ten departments,⁶ the Colombian Amazon is inhabited by 62 indigenous peoples who speak 42 different languages. For centuries, indigenous communities have lived in these territories, integrating themselves into their natural cycles under the laws of Origin and Major Government,⁷ according to their cosmologies, uses and customs. They recognise themselves as part of nature, which has strongly influenced their relationship with, and governance and use of, their territories, all of which are generally oriented towards protection and conservation (Salazar and Riaño 2016; Herrera Montoya et al. 2020).

In addition to indigenous communities, the Colombian Amazon is inhabited by peasant communities and, to a lesser extent, Afro-descendant communities, mainly located in the North-Western Amazonian Arc,⁸ in Putumayo and in the territories bordering Nariño and Cauca.

5 The Amazon Biome is one of the most biodiverse and largest areas in the world. It represents 50% of the planet's forests and covers 6.7 million square kilometres in 9 countries: Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, French Guyana, Guyana, Suriname, Peru and Venezuela (WWF 2020). In this report, we focus on the Colombian Amazon.

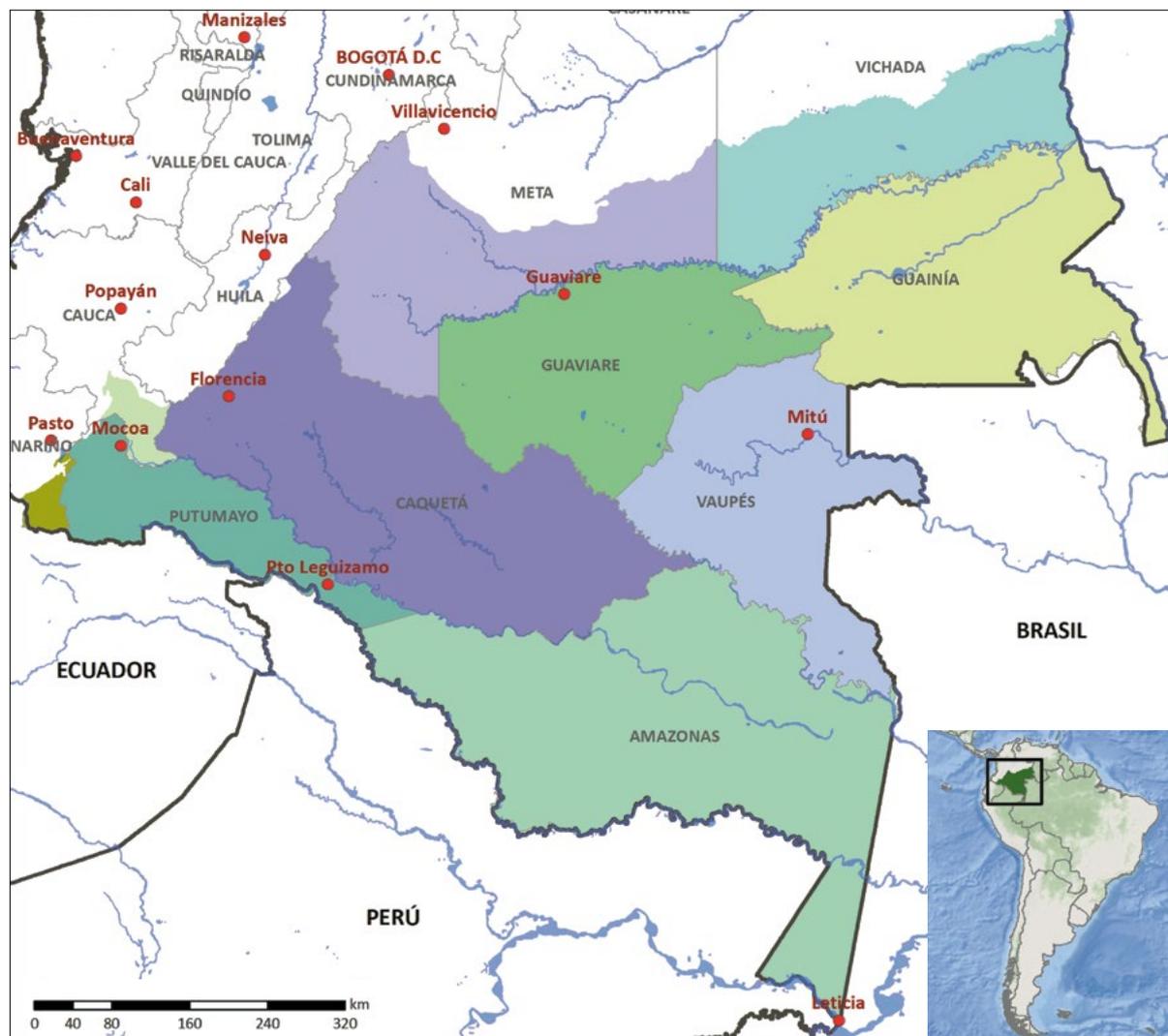
6 The territories of the departments of Amazonas, Caquetá, Guainía, Guaviare, Putumayo, and Vaupés are located entirely within the Amazon biome; the departments of Vichada, Meta, Cauca, and Nariño only partly

7 The law of origin, natural law, greater law or indigenous peoples' own law is the indigenous knowledge, science, tradition and wisdom that guides indigenous people's understanding of the universe, representing for them the foundation of life and governance (Rodríguez et al. 2017).

8 *"The North-Western Amazonian Arc is comprised to the west by the eastern limit of the Eastern Cordillera, in the area known as the Amazonian foothills, in the departments of Caquetá, Putumayo; on the northern flank, the Arc runs through the south of the department of Meta and the department of Guaviare, south of the Guayabero and Guaviare rivers; to the east, it extends from San José del Guaviare towards Miraflores, in the department of Guaviare."* (FCDS 2020c).

Map 1: Political-administrative division of the Colombian Amazon

Source: WWF



1.2 AIMS AND CONTENT OF THE REPORT

Against this background, the report aims to shed light on why deforestation and violence against environmental defenders is rising and on the growing crisis in the Colombian Amazon. In particular, it sets out to:

1. Broaden the understanding of the crisis in the Amazon region by analysing its causes and drivers, as well as the interplay between security risks, environmental impacts, and climate change. In chapter 2, we will analyse the context and the multiple dimensions of the crisis.
2. Assess why existing strategies and responses fail to address the crisis effectively and identify practices for building peace and protecting the environment that are often undermined by the current crisis. To this end, chapter 3 will examine some of the measures taken to respond to the crisis by state authorities, local communities, and environmental organisations.

3. Provide recommendations on actions that environmental organisations, state institutions and international organisations can take to address the crisis more effectively. After a short summary of the key findings of our analysis in chapter 4, chapter 5 will identify options in the immediate, medium and long term, as well as entry points to address the root causes of the crisis.

The report is based on a comprehensive analysis of the available academic literature, civil society reports and official documents, as well as interviews conducted online and during three field trips to La Macarena (Meta), San José del Guaviare (Guaviare) and Mocoa (Putumayo) in February, March and April 2021.⁹ As this report is being prepared, Colombia is at a time of sustained social mobilisation and protest, revealing unresolved structural issues, as well as tensions surrounding the use of force and human rights violations by state institutions. While the protests are not the main focus of this report, it is important to note that many of their root causes are the same as those that underlie the security, human rights and environmental issues that we examine here.¹⁰

This report is an initiative conceived by a group of civil society organisations and a state entity: Amazon Conservation Team (ACT), Gaia Amazonas Foundation (Gaia), Frankfurt Zoological Society (FZS) Colombia, World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), Foundation for Conservation and Sustainable Development (FCDS), Tropenbos and the Amazon Territorial Directorate of the National Natural Parks of Colombia. This group has been instrumental in defining the scope and focus of the report and has provided regular inputs and feedback throughout the research process.

The Foundation Ideas for Peace (FIP – *Fundación Ideas para la Paz*) and adelphi produced this policy paper in response to the request of this group of organisations, with the aim of better understanding the current crisis in the Colombian Amazon and contributing to the identification of possible ways to address it.

9 We conducted 59 semi-structured interviews, both face-to-face and virtual, with members of indigenous communities (5), peasant communities (5), members of environmental, social and international cooperation organisations (35) and state officials (14). We also participated in a meeting of the Inter-Institutional Committee for Rapid Response to Early Warnings (CIPRAT – *Comisión Intersectorial para la Respuesta Rápida a las Alertas Tempranas*) that took place in the city of Mocoa, Putumayo department, in March 2021. Additionally, the group of organisations commissioning this report provided inputs at different stages of the research process.

10 Protests in Colombia started in April 2021, triggered by an unpopular tax reform, but rapidly escalated to express frustration over the country's rising inequality, laid bare by the impacts of COVID-19, particularly on vulnerable communities, as well as by police brutality. According to a recent analysis by the International Crisis Group, the protests, which led to 58 deaths (as of 7 June 2021), including many at the hands of the police, reflect unresolved questions about the distribution of wealth, income and economic opportunity (International Crisis Group 2021b).



Community leader, municipality of Calamar,
Guaviare Department, Colombia.

2. EXPLAINING THE SECURITY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND ECOLOGICAL CRISIS IN THE COLOMBIAN AMAZON

The current crisis in the Colombian Amazon has its roots in the country's history of armed conflict, illegal armed groups and mismanagement and exploitation of natural resources. However, the dynamics of conflict and environmental degradation have changed significantly since the signing of the Peace Agreement in 2016. This chapter examines the main changes in conflict dynamics and actors that occurred after 2016, how they led to an expansion of illegal economies and what impacts these are having on local communities, environmental defenders and the environment itself. It also explains how conflict, environmental degradation and climate change interact to form a vicious circle of increasing insecurity, vulnerability and environmental destruction.

2.1. HOW THE CONFLICT CHANGED

Conflict dynamics before the 2016 Peace Agreement

Land access and tenure and the profound economic and social inequalities, especially in rural areas, continue to be the root causes of the conflict in the Colombian Amazon.

Colombia has experienced the longest internal armed conflict in Latin America, lasting for more than five decades. At the heart of the conflict were – and still are – the ongoing struggle for land access and tenure and the profound economic and social inequalities, especially in rural areas.

One central dynamic of the conflict has been the concentration of rural property in the Andean and Caribbean areas of Colombia, which have closer economic and political links with the country's centre. This has led to the increasing economic use and appropriation of more remote, forested territories, including the Colombian Amazon. Indeed, in the 20th century, the Colombian Amazon experienced multiple waves of in-migration from other parts of the country (Richani 2015). This so-called “peasant colonisation” process saw thousands of peasants move to the Amazon in search of land that was not previously assigned, or not recognised by the state as ancestral indigenous territories. They could acquire this land by simply settling in and working on it (see, for example Hoffmann et al. 2018; Revelo-Rebolledo 2019).

Occasionally these processes were state-led to resolve land claims and avoid redistributive conflicts and/or driven by violence in other parts of the country. In other cases, it was the possibility of accessing land “after clearing

Various illegal armed groups have been using the region as a rear-guard zone, a territory for resource extraction and for exercising territorial, military, political, and social control.

the jungle”, i.e. after forested and jungle areas had been transformed into grasslands, that attracted people to the Amazon. Largely this clearing occurred to make space for extensive cattle ranching, which resulted in a continuously growing number of animals using the land, despite low efficiency in meat and milk production (Unigarro Caguasango 2020). Other economic activities accompanying the colonisation process were agriculture, fur, rubber, oil and gas, minerals, and coca crops for illicit uses (Fajardo 1996; Domínguez Ossa 1975; Gutiérrez-Sanín 2021).

At the same time, the Amazon region was also of great interest to the various illegal armed groups involved in the conflict, including guerrillas, paramilitary groups, drug traffickers and organised crime, and more recently FARC dissidents and rearmed guerrillas. They used the region as a rear-guard zone, a territory for resource extraction and for exercising territorial, military, political, and social control. The Amazon was a strategic asset for them, due to its long borders with other countries (i.e. Venezuela, Brazil, Peru and Ecuador), its geographical and ecosystem characteristics, and its remoteness from the centres of government and state control (Guio and Rojas 2019; Rodríguez et al. 2017). The actions of these illegal armed groups also had wide-ranging impacts on the civilian population, violating their rights and limiting their ability to govern and control their territories (GMH 2013).

However, it is important to note that the effects of the conflict and other challenges have differed widely across the Colombian Amazon. The departments of Caquetá, Meta, Guaviare and Putumayo have been hit the most by violence, armed conflict and deforestation, but they have also had higher levels of economic integration and state presence. In contrast, the departments of Guainía, Amazonas and Vaupés have experienced lower levels of both conflict and deforestation, but have traditionally been characterised by a weaker central state presence and less economic integration with the country’s centre (Revelo-Rebolledo 2019; see box 2). Throughout this report, we will take these two types of areas into account separately when analysing the dynamics of the crisis and formulating recommendations to address it.

Box 2: Territorial planning and recognition of indigenous territories in the Colombian Amazon

Today 85 % of the Colombian Amazon has a legal status that promotes environmental conservation (Guio and Rojas 2019; Gaia Amazonas 2021). There have also been improvements in the recognition of *resguardos*¹¹ of indigenous peoples and collective territories of Afro-descendant communities, providing them with a legal title to their lands (Herrera Montoya et al. 2020; ACT 2018a). Some *resguardos* are located within national parks (Guio and Rojas 2019). Overall, Colombia has allocated 69% of the Amazon region to indigenous *resguardos* and 24% to 15 protected areas (Guio and Rojas 2019). In addition, there are a number of indigenous peoples living in voluntary isolation in the Colombian Amazon, whose territories require special protection and whose exact location is kept confidential (ACT 2018b/c; interview with: member of environmental organisation, February 2021). There are also different types of territories where the use of land for economic purposes is permitted under specific conditions to ensure environmental sustainability and the preservation of cultural heritage.

In other types of territories, including forest reserves and peasant reserve zones (ZRC – *Zonas Reserva Campesina*), the use of land for economic purposes is permitted under specific conditions to ensure environmental sustainability and the preservation of cultural heritage (see the annex).

There are also some non-municipalised areas in the departments of Amazonas, Vaupés and Guainía (corresponding to ca. one-sixth of the departments' territories), whose political-administrative order has been in legal limbo for thirty years. The 1991 Constitution recognised these and other territories, called "*comisarías*" and "*intendencias*", as new departments, and established the "*corregimientos departamentales*" to govern them.¹²

However, in 2001, these administrative units were declared unconstitutional and became non-municipalised areas. Since then and in contrast to other municipalities, they have not received resources from the General System of Participations and have not had mayors' offices. As a consequence, different forms of indigenous self-governments have prevailed, although they were only officially recognised in 2018 (Gaia Amazonas 2021).¹³

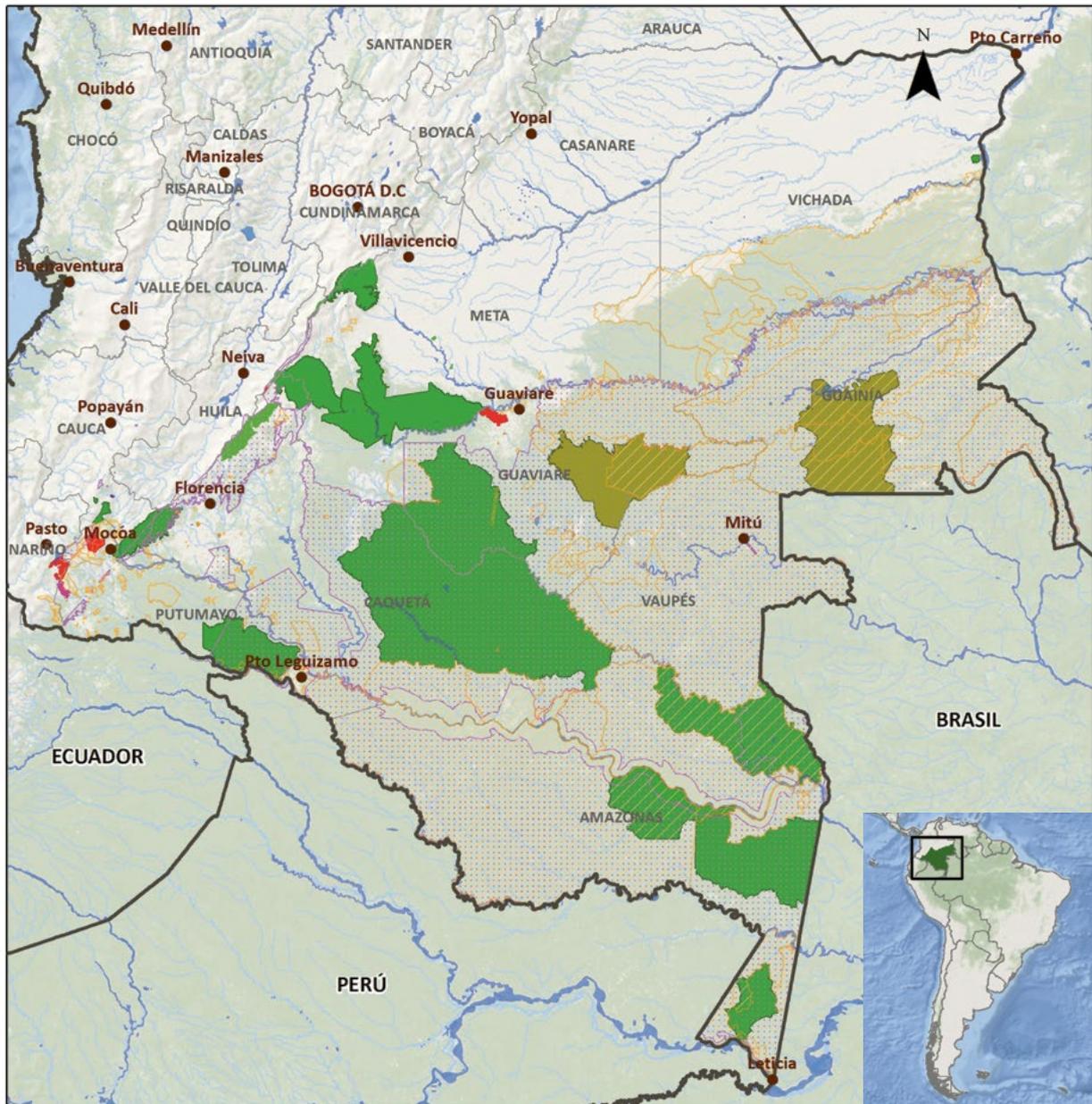
11 An indigenous *resguardo* is a legal territorial division that, by means of a title, guarantees a certain indigenous group the collective ownership of the territory it traditionally inhabited (OEA 1993).

12 According to *Decree 2274 of 4 October 1991*, these were divisions of the department, which included a determined population cluster and were not part of a given municipality. They were only located in the departments of Amazonas, Vaupés and Guainía (they also existed in Vichada, but were subsequently incorporated into the municipality of Cumaribo). Although geographically similar to today's departments, the administrative regime of these territorial subdivisions was very different, in that they were centrally controlled by the Administrative Department of Intendencias and Comissarías, which no longer exists.

13 *Decree 632 of 2018* recognised Indigenous Councils as the self-governing bodies tasked with directing the functioning of the indigenous territories as public entities of a special character.

Map 2: Protected territories of the Colombian Amazon

Source: WWF



Legend

-  Indigenous Territories
-  Forest Reserves

Protected Areas

-  National Park
-  Regional Parks
-  Natural Reserve
-  Civil Society Nature Reserves

From the 1970s, guerrilla activity in the Amazon was concentrated in the departments of Caquetá, Meta and Guaviare, and expanded to Putumayo in the 1980s. In these areas, the FARC maintained a strong presence and territorial control during much of the armed conflict, until the Peace Agreement in 2016, they provided state-like governance functions, including administering rural property rights, collecting taxes and even imposing codes of conduct related to social and environmental issues on peasant, settler and indigenous communities (Aguilera 2013; GMH 2013). However, they also committed various crimes ranging from homicides, kidnappings, extortion and forced displacement against individuals, communities and organisations that disobeyed their rule or challenged their interests (Aguilera 2013; GMH 2013).

For decades, the armed conflict has had a paradoxical environmental conservation effect (Guio and Rojas 2019). The Colombian Amazon showed less deforestation than neighbouring countries due not only to conservation efforts in the form of indigenous reserves and natural parks,¹⁴ but also to the de facto barriers that violence imposed on the entry of large-scale legal extractive economic activities into these territories (Rodríguez et al. 2017). The FARC controlled deforestation inside and outside protected areas. The group defined permitted areas for “colonisation”, promoted the construction of infrastructure and strongly influenced local production systems, such as cattle ranching and coca crops for illicit uses (Rincón-Ruiz et al. 2016; Clerici et al. 2020).

The conflict reached a new phase from the late 1980s onwards with the arrival of drug traffickers, large landowners and paramilitary armed groups, including those linked to emerald dealers. Land grabbing by these actors started in large parts of the Orinoquia, but also began to spread to the areas of greatest guerrilla presence in Meta, Guaviare, Putumayo and Caquetá (Gutiérrez-Sanín and Vargas 2016). The conflict affected Putumayo, Nariño and the Pacific region the most, with especially high paramilitary violence hitting peasant, indigenous, social and trade union organisations. In other departments, such as Amazonas, Vaupés and Guainía, the civilian population was also affected, although with less intensity (Observatorio de Memoria y Conflicto 2021).

In 2012 the Colombian government and the FARC guerrillas started a dialogue and negotiation process, which concluded with the signing of the Peace Agreement in 2016. This agreement comprises several points that seek to transform the structural causes of the armed conflict, including a comprehensive rural reform, a reform of political participation, the

14 See annex for definitions and more detail.

reintegration of ex-combatants into civilian life, a solution to the problem of illicit drugs and an agreement on the victims of the conflict and their rights to truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-repetition. The agreement also included provisions on environmental protection, such as the delimitation of the agricultural frontier, participatory environmental zoning and a multi-purpose cadastre (for a more detailed discussion of the Peace Agreement, see chapter 3.1.).

Local communities and environmental organisations in the Amazon region saw the peace negotiations as an important window of opportunity to transform their territories. The four years of negotiations went hand in hand with several improvements, including a decrease in violence, killings and kidnappings. Environmental organisations were also able to enter areas previously restricted by the conflict (interviews with: member of environmental organisation, environmental official and indigenous representative, March 2021).

After the Peace Agreement

After the signing of the Peace Agreement in 2016, there was a reconfiguration of the conflict accompanied by the fragmentation and proliferation of armed groups.

After the signing of the Peace Agreement in 2016, the dynamics of power and violence in the Colombian Amazon changed. The demobilisation and disarmament¹⁵ of most FARC combatants created a power vacuum in some areas, which was quickly filled by various illegal armed groups, rather than by the state (International Crisis Group 2017).

The reconfiguration of the conflict was accompanied by the fragmentation and proliferation of armed groups. Parts of the former FARC structures did not demobilise, but instead rearmed (Pappier and Johnson 2020; Álvarez-Vanegas et al. 2018).¹⁶ In addition, different organised crime groups emerged, or became more visible and active. These groups both started competing with each other and sometimes built ad-hoc alliances

15 The 2016 Peace Agreement included provisions for the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) of the FARC. The agreement foresaw a collective reintegration process, which allowed for the continuous physical and social cohesion of former combatants, with a view to transforming the FARC into a political party (Gluecker et al. 2021). By August 2017, the disarmament and demobilisation process was officially completed. However, the reintegration has been slow, raising frustration among former guerrilla members, some of whom have reverted to violence. Moreover, some FARC members have rejected the Peace Agreement entirely and refused to participate in the process.

16 The implementation of the peace agreement faced major challenges at regional and local levels due to the presence of other armed groups and in particular the National Liberation Army (ELN – *Ejército de Liberación Nacional*), neo-paramilitaries such as the Gaitán Self-defence Forces (AGC – *Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia*) and the remnants of the Popular Liberation Army (EPL – *Ejército Popular de Liberación*). These groups opposed the peace process and continued their armed actions in the departments that had traditionally been under their control, or in those areas abandoned by the FARC (International Crisis Group 2017).

(International Crisis Group 2017; Álvarez-Vanegas et al. 2017). This new situation was even more complex and fluid than before and was accompanied by an increase in violence and deforestation (interviews with: members of environmental organisations, February 2021).

2.2. ILLEGAL ECONOMIES AND RESOURCE GRABBING

Recently, the magnitude, intensity, and speed of resource exploitation and illegal economies in the Amazon increased.

Illegal economies and resource grabbing are not new phenomena, but have long been part of the conflict dynamics in Colombia. While illegal armed groups maintain their interest in the control and exploitation of natural resources, some of their behaviours and practices changed after 2016. This has coincided with an increase in the magnitude, intensity and speed of resource exploitation in the Amazon (Clerici et al. 2020; EIA 2019). The expansion of the deforestation arc¹⁷ during the implementation phase of the Peace Agreement is in fact linked to extensive economic activities that require significant financial investments, rather than just the development of small-scale agriculture, including those associated with historical “peasant colonisation” (Botero 2021a; Clerici et al. 2020; Perm et al. 2018; WRI 2021).

Indeed, the control and management of natural resources are a key part of armed groups’ goal to control the territory and generate economic profits. However, it is not only illegal armed groups that are involved in these economies to finance and expand their military operations, but also economically and politically powerful actors (Gutiérrez-Sanín 2021). In some cases, legal businesses have been found to rely on criminal actors to facilitate their activities, for example to obtain permits and authorisations for forest exploitation, or to rely on criminal groups as providers of security services for illegal mining or land-grabbing operations (interview with: member of environmental organisation, February 2021). Legal and illegal activities are often linked and feed off each other, involving both legal and illegal actors and networks. This is underpinned by weak governance structures and corruption at regional, national, and international levels.¹⁸

17 The Colombian Arc of Deforestation includes the municipalities of Puerto Asís, Puerto Guzmán and Puerto Leguízamo (Putumayo); Solano, San Vicente del Caguán and Cartagena del Chairá (Caquetá); Vista Hermosa and La Macarena (Meta); San José del Guaviare, Calamar, El Retorno and Miraflores (Guaviare).

18 For example, the former governor of Putumayo, who is also a former congressman, was imprisoned for his alleged involvement in illegal mining activities, and the mayor of Puerto Leguízamo has been arrested for alleged links to a criminal network of illegal gold mining in the Caquetá and Putumayo rivers (El Tiempo 2019).

The following table gives an overview of the areas that are most affected by different types of illegal activities.¹⁹

Table 1: Most affected areas by type of illegal activity

| Illegal activity | Severely affected areas |
|--|--|
|  <p>Land grabbing (FCDS 2020c)</p> | <p>Colombian Arc of Deforestation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tinigua and Serranía de la Macarena National Parks • Serranía de Chiribiquete National Park with the northern zone and the vicinity of the Camuya River on the park's eastern border • Nukak Makú indigenous reserve (eastern boundary) |
|  <p>Coca crops for illicit uses and drug trafficking (Bernal et al. 2020; FCDS 2020c)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Parks: Serranía de la Macarena, Tinigua, Serranía de Chiribiquete, La Paya, and Nukak national reserves, as well as the Nukak Makú indigenous resguardo • Forest reserves in Guaviare, Caquetá, Putumayo and southern Meta |
|  <p>Illegal mining (DNP et al. 2019)</p> | <p>Lower basin of the Caguán River, Putumayo River and Caquetá River, as well as their tributaries, and the territories of the Río Puré, Cahuinari, Yaigojé-Apaporis and Puinawai National Park</p> |
|  <p>Illegal road infrastructure (FCDS 2020c)</p> | <p>North-Western Amazonian Arc with the municipalities of La Macarena and San José del Guaviare, accounting for 48% of the new roads, most of them in the direction of protected areas and indigenous reserves</p> |

¹⁹ These are just examples of some of the most affected areas; instances of the cited illegal activities can also be found in other areas of the Colombian Amazon.

Figure 1: Actors involved in the current crisis in the Colombian Amazon

Source: adelphi/FIP/WWF/M.Küsters



2.2.1. LAND GRABBING

Land and land rights have been at the centre of both Colombia’s conflict and the conflict dynamics in the Colombian Amazon. High levels of wealth inequality and an especially high concentration of land ownership, have been central to the grievances underpinning the conflict. At the same time, the process of rural property concentration has been largely driven by the dispossession of land from peasants through a combination of violence and legal mechanisms (Fajardo 2002; Reyes Posada 2016).

The Amazon region still lacks a multi-purpose cadastre and thus has no clear definition of property rights, which perpetuates land conflicts.

Land grabbing is also linked to the persistent challenges surrounding property rights in rural areas. On the one hand, decades of armed conflict and violence have led to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people who, as a consequence, have often lost their property rights and resorted to the “colonisation” of forested areas as a means of securing land and livelihoods (Reyes Posada 2016). On the other hand, the Amazon region still lacks a multi-purpose cadastre and thus has no clear definition of property rights, which perpetuates land conflicts (interviews with: environmental official and peasant leader, March 2021).

This has led to the development of an illegal land market, especially in areas that are less suitable for agricultural purposes and that cannot be formalised or transferred because they are located in indigenous *resguardos*, forest reserve zones under Law 2 of 1959, or other protected areas (DNP et al. 2019). The cases of the *resguardo* Yaguará II and the Nukak National Reserve show that legal restrictions have not been respected (see boxes 4 and 6). Interviews conducted for this report confirmed earlier research (Perm et al. 2018), indicating that recent large-scale deforestation tends to be carried out by private actors who hold significant financial and political means, and who are interested in appropriating large tracts of land for livestock. For example, interviewees noted that investors are financing land grabbing processes in southern Meta, northern Caquetá and Guaviare (interviews with: peasant leader and member of international cooperation, March 2021).

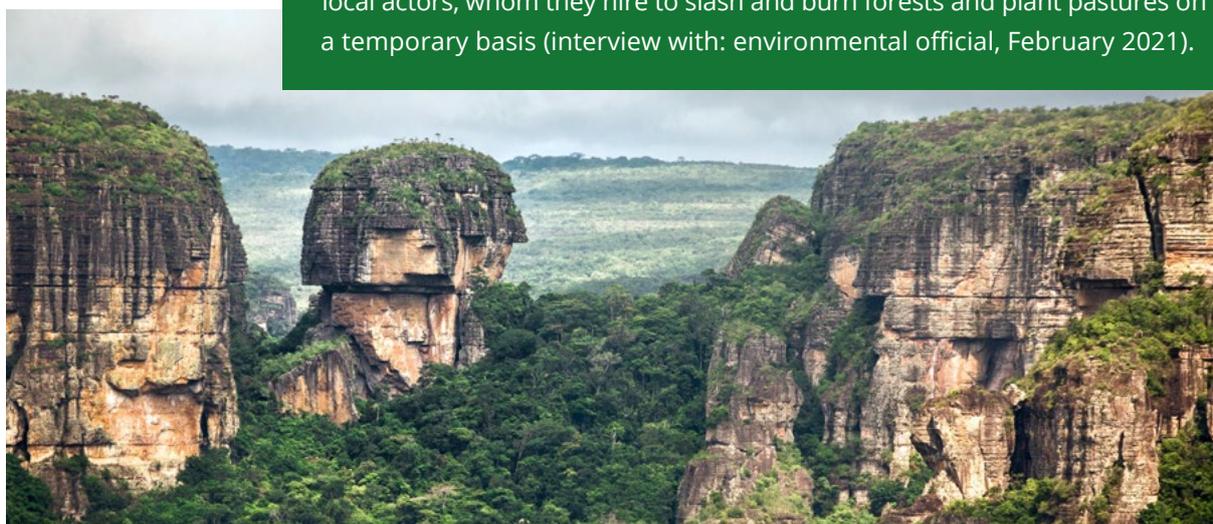
There are different mechanisms by which land is appropriated. A typical one is through powerful economic actors and landowners taking over the land that peasant settlers have opened up for agricultural purposes (LeGrand 1986; Fajardo 2002; Gutiérrez-Sanín 2021). Normally, this begins with peasants using slash-and-burn agriculture and planting maize, bananas, coca crops for illicit uses and other crops, or creating pastures for livestock from forested areas. Subsequently, economic actors with greater purchasing power, often from other departments or from abroad, expel these settlers and occupy the land for themselves. These actors usually have to make deals with and pay a fee to criminal groups beforehand; this happens through an intermediary, who then occupies the land on behalf of the appropriator by simply living there, or by working as a farmer (interviews with: members of environmental organisations, March 2021; LeGrand 1986; Fajardo 2002; Reyes Posada 2016).

Between 2000 and 2010, forest conversion to pasture remained the main driver of deforestation in the Amazon.

In general, land grabbing was and remains one of the key drivers of deforestation and has been a key driver of the constant expansion of the agricultural frontier, although other illegal economic activities such as coca crops for illicit uses and mining in protected areas also play a role (FCDS 2020c). Indeed, the Amazon is the region with the highest rates of deforestation linked to cattle ranching, especially in the departments of Caquetá, Guaviare, Sur del Meta and Putumayo. Between 2000 and 2010, forest conversion to pasture remained the main driver of deforestation in the Amazon (above coca crops which are used for drug trafficking), accounting for two-thirds of the total deforested area (García 2012). According to IDEAM and WWF, 20% of deforested land in the Amazon is dedicated to the establishment of pastures without livestock and 80% to pastures for extensive cattle raising (González et al. 2018). After the signing of the Peace Agreement, deforestation in these Amazonian departments has indeed largely been associated with an increase in livestock numbers (Botero 2020).

Box 3: Land grabbing in the Serranía de Chiribiquete National Park

The Chiribiquete national park is well known for its table top mountains that abruptly rise from the forest, called Tepuy.



The Serranía de Chiribiquete National Park, created in 1989 and expanded in 2013 and 2018, is the largest rainforest national park in Latin America. It covers an area of 4,268,095 hectares in the municipalities of San José del Guaviare, Miraflores, Calamar (Guaviare), San Vicente del Caguán, Solano and Cartagena del Chaira (Caquetá). The Chiribiquete National Park was declared a UNESCO Natural and Cultural World Heritage Site in 2018 for its important biodiversity and cultural and archaeological value (Minambiente 2018).

In the national park, large-scale land grabbing has increased dramatically for grazing, cattle ranching (which is not permitted inside national parks),²⁰ and coca crops for illicit uses. Between July 2018 and December 2020, 5,758.64 hectares were deforested (Parques Nacionales Naturales de Colombia 2020). Recently, it was revealed that cattle that graze in the park could be sold in chain stores in Bogotá, without any action being taken (EIA 2021). The park's buffer zone has also been subject to land grabbing for cattle grazing, especially on the borders with the indigenous resguardo Yaguará II and with the communities of San José del Guaviare and Calamar. FCDS indicates that, in the municipalities along the border of Chiribiquete that were most affected by deforestation, cattle numbers increased by more than 690,000 heads in the period of 2016–2019. During the same period, these buffer zones lost 290,000 hectares of forest (FCDS 2020b).

This form of land grabbing is apparently financed by private actors from outside the region who have economic and political capital and see an economic opportunity to exploit these territories. To do so, they often rely on local actors, whom they hire to slash and burn forests and plant pastures on a temporary basis (interview with: environmental official, February 2021).

²⁰ Livestock farming has not been allowed inside Colombia's national parks since 1959, as is true of any activity other than conservation, education, recreation, culture, research, recovery and control. The territory surrounding and adjacent to national parks must fulfil a buffer function and contribute to the protection, planning, and management of renewable natural resources and the fulfilment of general conservation objectives (EIA 2021).

2.2.2. COCA CROPS FOR ILLICIT USE

In the interviews conducted as part of the field research, coca crops for drug production²¹ emerged as one of the main challenges in terms of security and the environment. Several studies have shown that coca cultivation for illicit uses is also a driver of deforestation, both directly (as large areas of forests are cleared for cultivation) and indirectly (as eradication actions force growers to relocate and cause direct deforestation elsewhere) (Dávalos et al. 2011; Rincón-Ruiz et al. 2016). Recent studies also showed that, since the 2016 Peace Agreement, each hectare of coca for illicit uses is associated with a greater extent of forest loss (Mendoza 2020). Coca production for illicit uses is resulting in a 177% increase in the deforestation rate when comparing the time period of 2013–2015 with the period after the Peace Agreement, i.e. between 2016 and 2018 (Clerici et al. 2020).

Since the 2016 Peace Agreement, each hectare of coca for illicit uses is associated with a greater extent of forest loss.

The areas of coca cultivation for illicit uses vary substantially across different departments of the Colombian Amazon. Since 2016, Caquetá and Putumayo have been most affected. However, from 2017 to 2020, the area of coca cultivation has decreased in these departments. Part of this reduction might be due to the voluntary substitution programme that is part of the 2016 Peace Agreement (see chapter 3.1.), although this is still uncertain, as a proper evaluation of these programmes has not been conducted. At the same time, Guaviare and Vaupés have seen slight increases in coca cultivation from 2019 to 2020 (UNODC-SIMCI 2021) (see Figure 2).

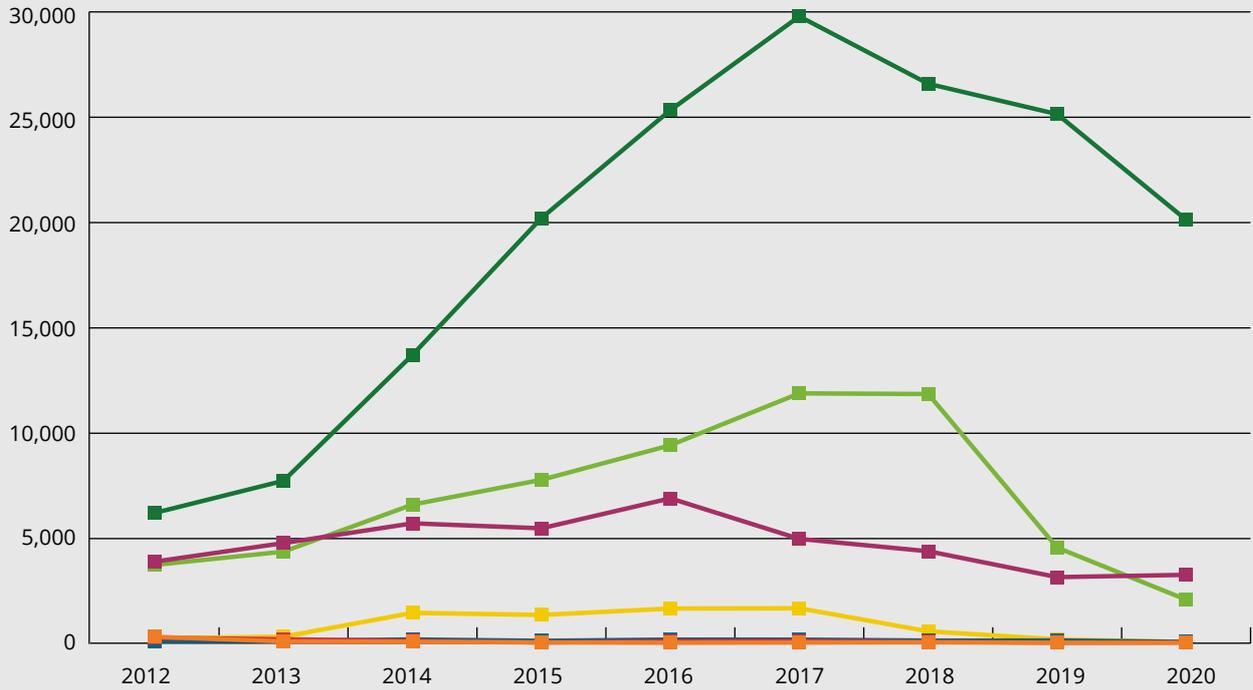
Overall, the Colombian Amazon region remains an important coca production area and has become a strategic corridor for trafficking cocaine and marijuana produced in the rest of the country (UNODC-SIMCI 2020). This is partly because its river corridors are used by Brazilian and Colombian drug traffickers for marketing to Venezuela and Brazil (Defensoría del Pueblo 2021b). Importantly, coca cultivation for illicit uses and drug trafficking are a great challenge for protected areas. In Meta and Guaviare, 45% of the total coca crops are cultivated in the protected areas of the Nukak National Reserve and the Sierra de la Macarena National Park. In the national park of La Paya, located in Bajo Putumayo on the border with Ecuador, coca crops have seen continuous growth during 2017–2019, with a slight decrease in 2020 (Bernal et al. 2020; UNODC-SIMCI 2021).

Historically, illegal coca cultivation in Colombia has been associated with the expansion of the agricultural frontier. As a result of forced eradication

21 It is important to underline that a significant amount of coca is consumed as part of the diet and for ritual use by many indigenous groups. We specifically refer here to the illicit and illegal use of coca for drug production.

Figure 2: Coca cultivation in the departments of the Colombian Amazon

*For the department of Meta, only the municipality of La Macarena was included. Source: elaborated by FIP based on UNODC-SIMCI 2021.



and glyphosate spraying, coca crops have increasingly moved into protected areas such as national parks, where glyphosate spraying is prohibited (see map 3) (Bernal et al. 2020).

Thus, coca crops for illicit uses have also become one of the only viable sources of income for peasants in many parts of the Colombian Amazon (Ciro 2019). Coca crops for illicit uses represent a livelihood alternative in areas lacking infrastructure and public goods, and provides a better income than most other crops. However, most of the large profits derived from the illicit uses of the crops still go to middlemen and drug traffickers, rather than to peasants (Gutiérrez-Sanin 2021).

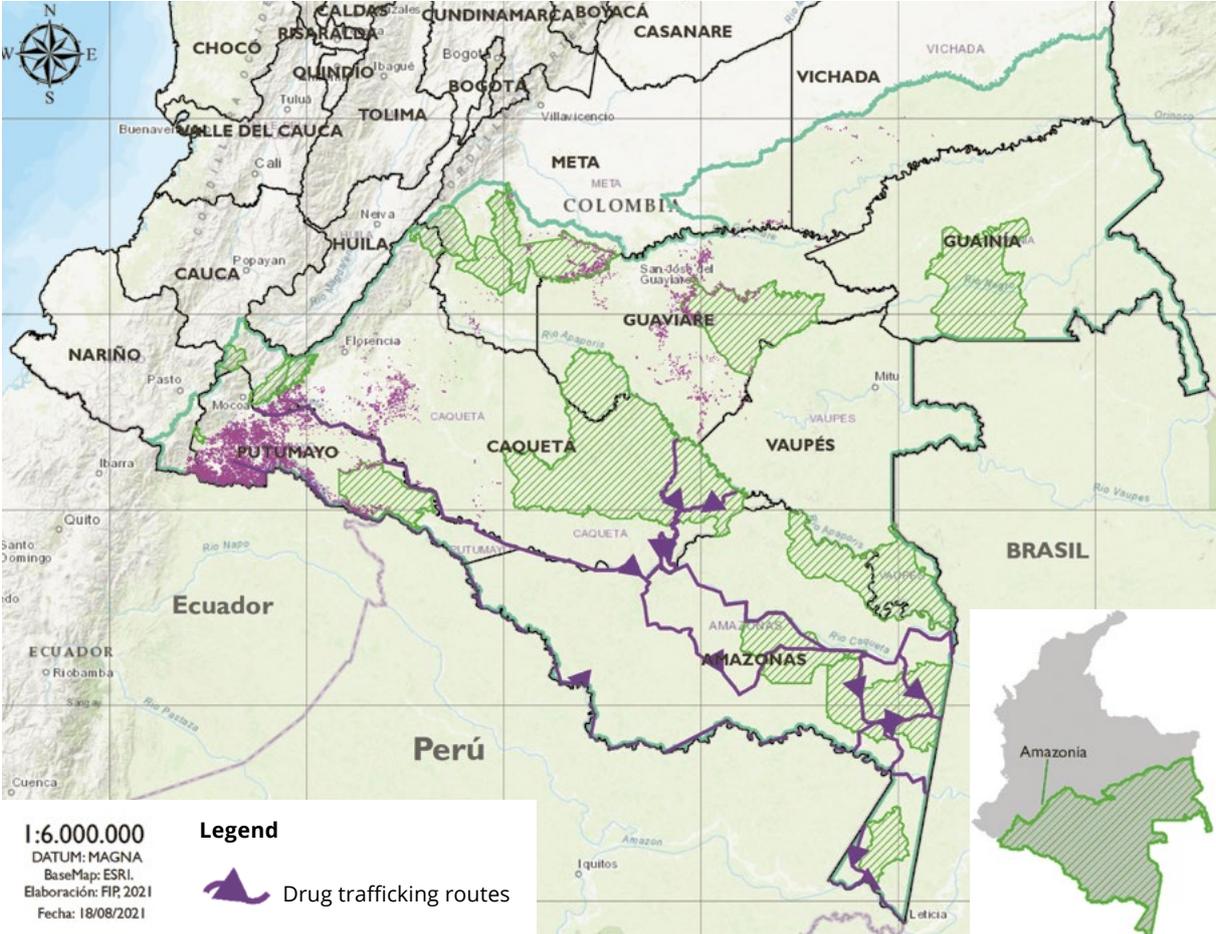
Often, coca production for illicit uses involves land grabbing. Illegal armed groups seize land which they then hand over to peasants for coca leaf cultivation. This has occurred both within and outside protected areas, such as in the lower Ariari river basin and around the towns of Puerto Lleras in the Meta department and San José del Guaviare in the Guaviare department (interviews with: members of environmental organisations and representative of local authorities, March 2021; Clerici et al. 2020). Political and economic actors are also involved in the business of growing coca crops for drug trafficking. Such actors enter these regions, start using partly abandoned routes and generally benefit from these economies (see e.g. Wesche 2020).

The expansion of coca cultivation for drug trafficking and the reactivation of routes has caused the security situation to deteriorate in many areas.

In general, the expansion of coca cultivation for drug trafficking and the reactivation of routes has caused the security situation to deteriorate in many areas. This is due to disputes between illegal armed groups and criminal actors competing for control of the territories where coca leaf is grown and converted into coca paste and the routes or corridors along which it is trafficked. It is also due to the multiple alliances that are quickly being formed and broken, also internationally with Mexican and Brazilian criminal organisations (interviews with: member of environmental organisation, representative of indigenous community and environmental officer, March 2021). According to a recent report on the issue, “this new drug production and trafficking architecture is extremely fluid and complex. In the corridor connecting the Pacific to the Amazon, for example, residents often report they are no longer sure which groups or how many of them are present” (International Crisis Group 2020, p.8). This situation has resulted in high levels of violence and threats to peasants and their communities. Coca leaf growers are constantly under pressure and victimised by armed groups and intermediaries and subjected to state repression and persecution (Ramírez 2011; Gutiérrez-Sanín 2021).

Map 3: Coca cultivation in the Colombian Amazon in 2020

Source: Fundación Ideas para la Paz

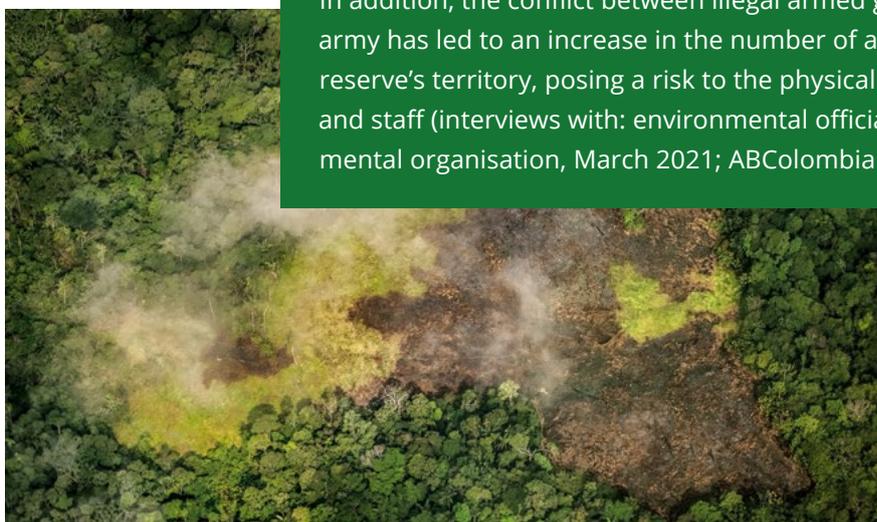


Box 4: Coca cultivation for illicit use in the Nukak National Reserve

In recent years, the Nukak National Reserve, a protected area comprising 875,651 hectares in the municipalities of San José de Guaviare, El Retorno and Miraflores (Guaviare) and Carurú (Vaupés), has suffered negative social and environmental impacts from the expansion of coca crops for illicit uses. The reserve is the source of the Inírida River, one of the main tributaries of the Orinoco basin and of other important tributaries of the Orinoco and Amazon (FCDS n.d.). The reserve was created in 1989 to protect its rich biodiversity. Indigenous peoples inhabit parts of the Nukak National Reserve, and have contributed to its conservation through traditional practices (Parques Nacionales Naturales de Colombia 2021c).

Given its strategic position and access to the river which allows for the easy transport of goods and people, the reserve was an important area for FARC guerrillas in the past and continues to be so today for FARC dissident groups. As a consequence, in recent years, the Nukak National Reserve has suffered increasing rates of deforestation, largely due to the expansion of coca crops for illicit use. Its north-western and southern areas, as well as the upper Inírida river basin, have been occupied by peasants whose main economic activities are the cultivation of coca crops for illicit uses and the first phase of coca leaf processing. Indigenous communities have been used as a labour force and drug use among young people has reportedly increased (interview with: member of environmental organisation, March 2021 and environmental official, April 2021). Operations by state security forces to eradicate coca crops are also common in the area (interview with: environmental official, April 2021).

In this context, officials working in the reserve have received threats from illegal armed groups, had their equipment stolen and have been stigmatised because of their conservation work (interview with: environmental official, March 2021; OHCHR 2018; Amnesty International 2020; Dunne 2021). In addition, the conflict between illegal armed groups and the Colombian army has led to an increase in the number of anti-personnel mines in the reserve's territory, posing a risk to the physical security of its inhabitants and staff (interviews with: environmental official and member of environmental organisation, March 2021; ABColombia 2021).



Forest fires in the Nukak National Reserve.



Illegal gold mining, Caqueta River, Amazonas, Colombia

Illegal mining is often carried out in the same areas where coca crops are grown or traded for illicit uses, creating strategic high-risk corridors for illegal activity.

2.2.3. ILLEGAL MINING

Illegal mining, mainly small-scale gold and coltan mining, has also historically been associated with the armed conflict in the Colombian Amazon.²² In many instances, it is carried out in the same areas where coca crops are grown or traded for illicit uses, creating strategic high-risk corridors for illegal activity, as in the cases of the Putumayo, Caquetá San Miguel, and Guamuez rivers (interview with: representative of local authorities, March 2021). Small-scale illegal alluvial gold mining is concentrated in Valle del Cauca, Cauca, and Nariño (Cremers et al. 2018), while the illegal coltan production is located in the extremely isolated south-east corners of Colombia, near the borders with Venezuela and Brazil (Molinski 2012).

Illegal mining activities have serious negative social and environmental impacts. Gold mining, for example, is often accompanied by mercury pollution and the clearing and degradation of land, which in turn destroys biodiversity and affects water quality and the food supply of local communities, while also causing severe health problems (Salazar Cardona et al. 2019; Abdenur et al. 2019). Moreover, illegal mining has profound social implications for local communities, often leading to increased alcohol consumption, sexual violence and child labour (Salazar Cardona et al. 2019).

22 Although in this report we mainly focus on illegal mining, it is important to draw attention to the challenges that legal mining creates in environmentally vulnerable territories. Mining licence applications increased in 2018: a total of 527 applications were registered, applying to a total of 846,603.42 hectares of land. According to a recent analysis, many of the mining titles are for operations in special protection areas, including indigenous reserves (Cuervo 2021).

Box 5: Illegal mining in the Southern Amazon region

Illegal gold mining has been a significant challenge for the Puinawai National Reserve and the Rio Puré, Cahuinarí²³ and Yaigójé Apaporis National Parks.²⁴ In these areas, Colombian illegal armed groups – such as the Frente 1 Carolina Ramírez²⁵ and the group “La Mafia” (more recently called “Comandos de la Frontera”),²⁶ provide illegal Brazilian miners with private security for the extraction and commercialisation of gold. In return, the income they receive from the miners is used to finance their operations and to launder drug money (Defensoría del Pueblo 2021a).

The expansion of illegal gold mining in these areas has had negative consequences for indigenous communities. Mercury contamination from gold operations has caused their health to deteriorate (Parques Nacionales Naturales de Colombia 2018) and due to the security situation, traditional authorities can no longer move freely across their territories, limiting their ability to govern them. National park officials have been forced to leave these areas and have not yet been able to return. Similarly, the actions of environmental organisations have been hindered and even stopped in some cases (interview with: member of environmental organisation and environmental official, March 2021). At the same time, some indigenous families were forcibly displaced to the departmental capital and indigenous children and youth have been recruited by armed actors to work at the mining sites (Defensoría del Pueblo 2021b). Indigenous peoples living in voluntary isolation have also been exposed to the threats posed by illegal armed actors.

To curb illegal mining and protect the indigenous population living in these areas, the Attorney General’s Office and security forces carried out *Operation Soberanía* on the Puré River in August 2020. The security forces destroyed Brazilian rafts and dredges and made some arrests. A few days later, however, illegal armed groups retaliated and burned down a national park control post on the border with Brazil (Defensoría del Pueblo 2021b; interview with: member of environmental organisation, March 2021).

23 This is not a recent phenomenon. For more than two decades, the Cahuinarí National Park (in the middle zone of the Caquetá River, between Puerto Santander, Araracuara and La Pedrera in the Amazonas department) has been affected by illegal gold mining. While there has been a decline in this practice since 2012, recent trends indicate a new increase (interview with: member of environmental organisation, March 2021).

24 The indigenous communities of Tarapacá in the Amazon have also denounced the presence of illegal mining dredgers in the Cotuhé and Putumayo rivers, their main source of water and food (interview with: member of environmental organisation, March 2021).

25 This FARC-EP dissident group was known as Armando Ríos, but in 2018 changed its name to Frente 1 Carolina Ramírez (Defensoría del Pueblo 2021a).

26 According to the Ombudsman’s Office, this group “is apparently made up of former members of what were the 32nd, 48th and 49th fronts of the former FARC-EP, and has also incorporated coca buyers and sellers into its structure, as well as links to the post-demobilisation United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC – *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*) group La Construcción” (Defensoría del Pueblo 2021a).

2.2.4. ILLEGAL ROAD INFRASTRUCTURE

The expansion of illegal road infrastructure is an important part of deforestation, land grabbing and the cultivation of illicit crops destined for drug trafficking (González and Gómez 2020). Roads are often part of the so-called first phase of deforestation (FCDS 2020c; 2021); they open up areas for other legal or illegal economic activities, such as cattle ranching, mining and coca production, thus contributing to the expansion of the agricultural frontier. At the same time, roads are logistically important for illegal armed groups to move armed personnel and goods around (Botero 2020; González and Gómez 2020; interviews with: members of environmental organisations, March 2021, and environmental official, February 2021). There are also numerous routes which were historically used for the movement of FARC troops, supplies and goods, which continue to serve illegal armed groups that are currently active in the region (interviews with: members of environmental organisations, March 2021, and environmental official, February 2021).

It should be noted that the expansion of the illegal road network in the Colombian Amazon has gone hand in hand with major road infrastructure development projects initiated by the government in recent years. For example, in 2014, the government launched the fourth generation of road concessions (4G) programme to rehabilitate some 8,000 kilometres of the nation's most important transport roads (Neves 2016). Its successor, the 5G programme, planned for 2027, will also cover rail, air and river transport, including the dredging of the Magdalena River, traditionally the main transport link between the coast and Colombia's mountainous interior (Long 2020). While these projects themselves risk driving deforestation by encouraging the expansion of the agricultural and live-stock frontiers, they are also being used as starting points for creating other informal and illegal road accesses that go deep into forests. FCDS reported that between 2018 and 2019, more than 700 kilometres of new road accesses were opened in the areas of the Amazon deforestation arc (Botero 2021a).

Between 2018 and 2019, more than 700 kilometres of new road accesses were opened in the areas of the Amazon deforestation arc.

Box 6: The Indigenous Resguardo of the Llanos del Yará - Yaguará II

The indigenous *resguardo* Yaguará II serves as an important corridor of ecological connectivity between several protected areas. It was created in 1995 and comprises 146,500 hectares between the municipalities of San Vicente del Caguán (Caquetá), La Macarena (Meta) and Calamar (Guaviare). It was the result of a process of indigenous “colonisation” in the 1960s, led by the National Institute of Agrarian Reform (INCORA – *Instituto Colombiano de la Reforma Agraria*) with the purpose of providing land to the Pijao, Tucano and Piratapuyo peoples (interview with: representative of indigenous community, March 2021; Mininterior n.d.).

The indigenous families of this *resguardo* have suffered severe violence, including the forced disappearance of three members of their community and forced displacement by the FARC in 2004. In 2017, they were recognised as collective victims of the armed conflict and several precautionary measures were put in place to promote their protection and return to their territories. Furthermore, in 2019, their request for land restitution was admitted by the First Civil Judge of the Specialised Circuit on Land Restitution of Ibagué (interview with: representative of indigenous community, March 2021; FCDS n.d.; Mininterior n.d.).

As a result, the community has been gradually returning to the *resguardo*, but this process has faced challenges, due to the security situation and the presence of farmers who have settled in this territory and who are taking advantage of the lack of official boundaries to extend their economic activities. In addition, illegal logging, primarily for the construction of illegal roads across the *resguardo*, is occurring at an alarming rate (Rama Judicial República de Colombia 2017). Once the forest has been cleared to make space for roads, the surrounding area is also used for planting crops for illicit uses which are proliferating in the *resguardo* (FCDS n.d.; Pardo 2020).

In 2017, the First Civil Court of the Specialized Land Restitution Circuit ordered both the environmental authorities with jurisdiction over the *resguardo* and the Ministry of Environment to take action to stop deforestation and establish an environmental recovery and reforestation plan (Auto 0263 of 2017). However, the environmental authorities have indicated that there are difficulties in complying with the orders issued due to the security situation and the presence of several armed groups in the area (Mininterior n.d.).²⁷



Jaguar (*Panthera onca*)

²⁷ In particular, Frente 1 Carolina Ramírez led by Alias Iván Mordisco and the dissident Front 7 led by Gentil Duarte are active in the area (Ministerio del Interior n.d.).

2.3. IMPACTS ON ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENDERS AND COMMUNITIES

The changed dynamics around the conflict and illegal economies have created greater risks for and violence against environmental defenders, social leaders as well as peasant, indigenous and Afro-descendent communities in the Colombian Amazon. Increasingly, their conservation and environmental protection efforts are seen as direct threats to the economic interests of illegal armed groups and powerful economic and political actors.

The signing of the Peace Agreement and the partial demobilisation and disarmament of the FARC were important drivers of these changes, in that they created a power vacuum that facilitated the entry of different illegal armed groups into some of the areas previously controlled by the FARC.²⁸ They also led to increased interest in the resource exploitation of the Colombian Amazon, against the conservation and protection agenda of environmental leaders, organisations and communities (interviews with: members of environmental organisations and representative of international cooperation, March 2021; International Crisis Group 2020).

Between 2018 and 2019, the number of environmental defenders killed in Colombia increased by more than 150%, from 24 to 64.

In this context, violence against environmental defenders has risen.²⁹ The number of environmental defenders killed in Colombia increased by more than 150% between 2018 and 2020, from 24 to 65 (Global Witness 2021). Between 2016 and 2019, the Tierra de Resistentes project reported the murder of seven environmental defenders in the Amazonian departments (six in Caquetá and one in Putumayo), including indigenous, peasant and community leaders (Pardo 2020). These records, however, do not include murdered civil servants.³⁰ National park officials have in fact also been victims, as their monitoring and control tasks and even their contact with local communities, are often perceived as threatening to the interests of illegal armed groups (interviews with: members of environmental organisations, March 2021). Moreover, environmental defenders have faced threats, disappearances, forced displacement, sexual violence, stigmatisation, discrimination, interruption of their work and restrictions in their movement, especially when entering protected areas (Pardo 2020; Defensoria del Pueblo 2021a/b; interviews with: members of environmental organisations, March 2021 and environmental official, February 2021).

28 In some cases, these groups were FARC dissidents that refused to disarm.

29 In this paragraph, we use data from different sources, which do not always use the same terminology when referring to individuals that were the target of human rights violations; for example, while the figures sometimes specifically refer to individuals working on environmental issues, they use broader categories such as social leaders or also include human rights defenders in other cases.

30 For example, this was the case for Francisco Parra Cubillos, regional coordinator of the Corporation for the Sustainable Development of the Macarena Special Management Area (Cormacarena), who was murdered in December 2020 by illegal armed groups (Paz Cardona 2020).

The more committed and visible actors are to environmental protection and conservation, the more exposed they are to threats and violence (FCDS 2020a).

Homicides of social leaders increased across the Colombian Amazon after 2016, reaching a peak in 2018 and have since stabilised at levels higher than the period before the Peace Agreement.

However, it is important to note that violence also extends to other people in the communities; social leaders and traditional authorities involved in the implementation of the Peace Agreement, for example, are also regular targets of armed groups (Front Line Defenders 2021a). Between the signing of the Peace Agreement and 30 December 2020, 904 social leaders were killed nationwide (JEP 2021). Victims were mostly social, indigenous or peasant leaders seeking to protect their lands from illegal, polluting and destructive activities (FCDS 2020a). According to the FIP database of attacks on social leaders, which includes environmental leaders and managers, homicides of social leaders increased across the Colombian Amazon after 2016, reaching a peak in 2018; they have since stabilised at levels higher than the period before the Peace Agreement (FIP 2021).

Figure 3: Homicides of social leaders in the departments of the Colombian Amazon

Source: FIP 2021

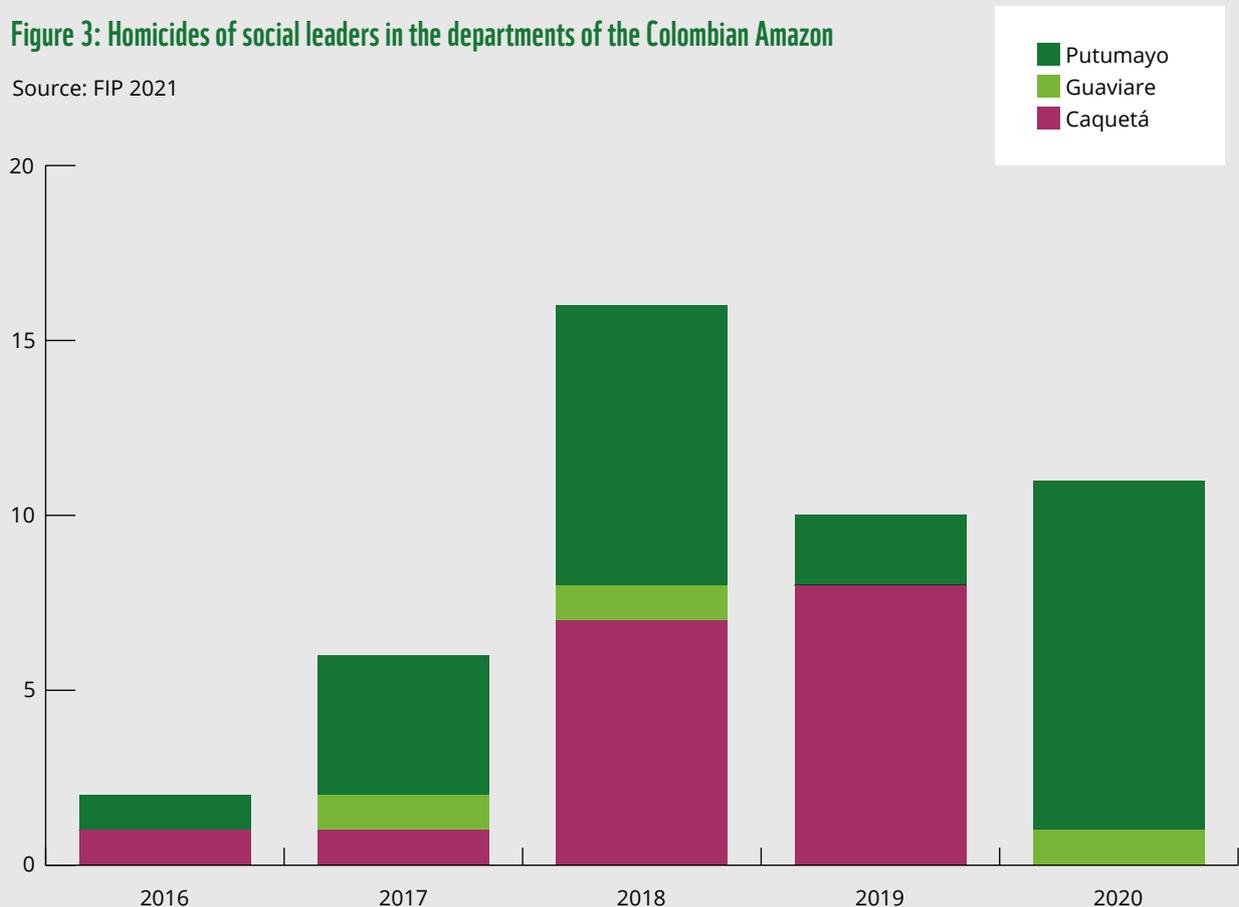


Figure 4: Homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in the departments of the Colombian Amazon

Source: Prepared by FIP based on National Police and DANE 2021



This dynamic is also reflected in the higher homicide rates in these departments, which are well above the rest of the country (National Police and DANE 2021).

In several Amazonian municipalities, the situation is far more severe, especially in the departments of Caquetá and Putumayo, with rates exceeding 50 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 2020 – twice the national rate (National Police and DANE 2021).

This rise in deadly violence against environmental and social leaders has gone hand in hand with the forced displacement of local and indigenous communities and the loss of their traditional livelihoods. For example, indigenous peoples have been displaced from the rural areas of the departments of Amazonas and Putumayo as a consequence of the pressures exerted by illegal armed groups, including the recruitment or use of young

people for their operations (Defensoría del Pueblo 2021b).³¹ Social leaders, environmental organisations and indigenous peoples in some parts of the departments of Putumayo and Caquetá are also at serious risk, mainly in the municipalities of Puerto Guzmán, San José del Fragua, Curillo, and Solita (Defensoría del Pueblo 2021a).³²

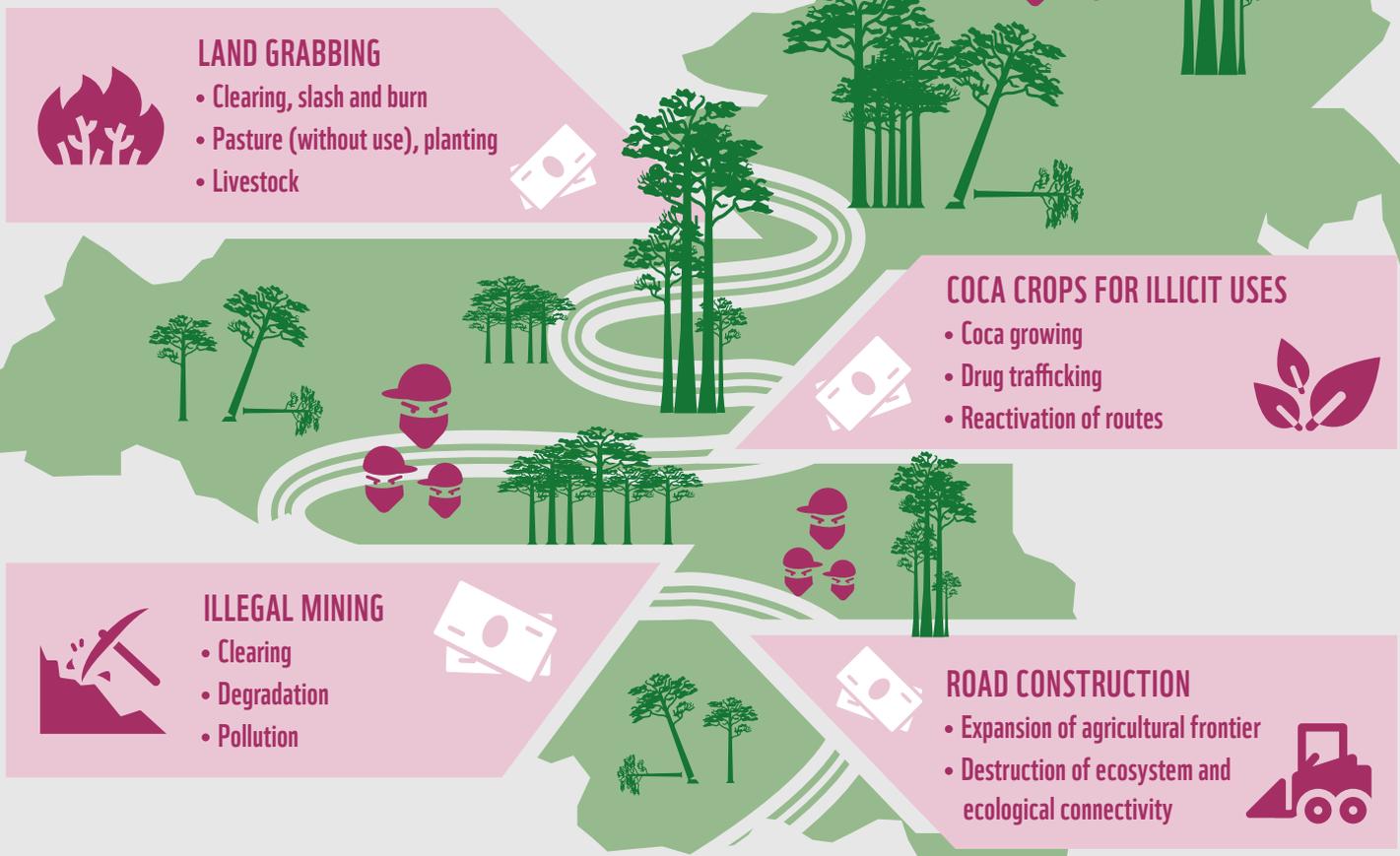


Community forest guardians, Caquetá, Colombia

31 “The risk looms over the indigenous and settler communities located on the Amazon and Putumayo river basins, in the department of Amazonas and especially in the Trapecio Amazónico sub-region, which includes the municipalities of Leticia and Puerto Nariño, where the predominant indigenous communities are the Yaguas, Ticunas and Cocamas, among others. The risk also extends to the Eje Putumayo sub-region, which covers the non-municipalised areas of Puerto Alegría, El Encanto, La Chorrera, Puerto Arica and Tarapacá, where several indigenous peoples live, including the Muina, Inga, Uitoto, Murui, Ticuna, Ocaína, Bora and Muinane.” (Defensoría del Pueblo 2021b).

32 In the sub-region of the Putumayo Axis and the Amazonian Trapezoid (the corridors between Caquetá and Putumayo, Cauca and Nariño), various armed groups are present. These include *El Frente 1 Carolina Ramírez*; the *Comandos de Frontera*, who have co-opted with the group *La Mafia* or *Sinaloa* and the post-demobilisation paramilitary group “*La Construcción*”. Organised crime groups such as “*Los Azules*”, “*Los Escorpiones*”, “*Los Niches*”, and “*Los Cobras*” have also been reported to operate in the San José del Fragua – Piamonte – Puerto Guzmán corridor. In this area, the Ombudsman’s Office has recorded territorial disputes between *Los Comandos de la Frontera* and FARC Front 1 over drug trafficking routes, mineral exploitation, timber trafficking and the co-optation of marijuana from the department of Cauca in the Putumayo River corridor (Defensoría del Pueblo 2021a/b).

Figure 5: Deforestation, insecurity and climate change in the Colombian Amazon



DEFORESTATION, ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Ecosystem destruction and pollution

Deforestation

CO₂ emissions

Change in weather patterns

Further pressure on ecosystems

IMPACTS ON LIVELIHOODS AND SECURITY

Threats and violence against local communities and environmental defenders

Displacement

Higher pressures on community members to engage in illicit activities

INCREASED VULNERABILITY AND RISKS FOR LOCAL COMMUNITIES AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENDERS

2.4. CLIMATE CHANGE, ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION AND CONFLICT

Climate change, ecosystem degradation and conflict create a vicious circle in the Colombian Amazon. As shown above, the dynamics of insecurity are driving illegal and unsustainable economic activities that further degrade the environment and drive deforestation (see also figure 5). This situation contributes directly to climate change, as forests lose their function of storing carbon (Prüssmann et al. 2016; Guio and Rojas 2019; Phillips 2017). A recent study confirmed for the first time that the Amazon rainforest is now emitting more carbon dioxide than it is able to absorb – up to a billion tonnes of carbon dioxide a year (Gatti et al. 2021). Cattle ranching, mining, coca crops for illicit uses and the construction of new roads stand out as the main causes of deforestation in the Colombian Amazon. While it is clear that cattle ranching is the main driver of deforestation, the contributions from other drivers remain unclear (Lopez et al. 2020; Perm et al. 2018).

Resource grabbing and illegal economic activities are key drivers of environmental degradation and increasing violence.

In addition to the loss of forest cover and related carbon dioxide emissions, these deforestation drivers put increasing pressure on biodiversity protection and conservation. Extensive cattle farming is a major driver of the loss of native vegetation, in addition to causing greenhouse gas emissions. Moreover, clearing forests for roads causes the fragmentation of forests and consequently, the loss of ecological connectivity (Gonzales and Gómez 2020). Coca crops for illicit uses have also been found to lead to significant natural habitat loss, often of primary forests, with profound effects on biodiversity (Clerici et al. 2020). Mining also has negative environmental impacts, including land and bed clearing as well as mercury contamination of the soil and of water resources, thereby destroying biodiversity (Salazar Cardona et al. 2019; Abdenur et al. 2019). Indeed, deforestation has been and is projected to have major impacts on several species in Colombia, with 40% of all forest-dependent species projected to lose at least half of their habitat by 2040 (Negret et al. 2020).

In the long term, the transformation of primary forests caused by these activities may intensify the effects of climate variability caused by the La Niña phenomenon (Forero et al. 2018). In a worst-case scenario, the negative impacts on the environment, biodiversity and climate could lead to the crossing of tipping points and the permanent change of parts of the Amazon from rainforest to savannah (Lovejoy and Nobre 2018). In some areas of the Colombian Amazon region, changes in the water cycle and in particular rainfall patterns, are already evident (interviews with: members of environmental organisations, representatives of peasant communities, and representative of local authorities, March 2021; Forero et al. 2018). For example, in the municipality of Puerto Leguízamo in Putumayo, where the La Paya National Park is located, forest conversion into pasture has led

to a gradual increase in mean annual temperature, which is higher than the increase observed on both national and global scales (Forero et al. 2018).

Overall, the Amazon region is expected to become hotter and drier, with less predictable rainfall patterns, more extreme events and negative impacts on biodiversity (IDEAM et al. 2015; Lovejoy and Nobre 2018; USAID 2018a). Under conditions of increased dryness and heat in a changing climate, illegal forest burning further destabilises ecosystems and can lead to an increase in large-scale fires in the Amazon (Lovejoy and Nobre 2018; Amador-Jiménez et al. 2020). The impacts of these changes are likely to be felt first at the local level (FCDS 2020a; Forero et al. 2018).

The impacts of climate change are already negatively undermining livelihoods in the region, particularly those of indigenous communities, thus deepening existing vulnerabilities.

Indeed, these changes are already negatively affecting livelihoods in the region and particularly those of indigenous communities (Echeverri 2009). For centuries, the indigenous people of the Colombian Amazon have contributed to conservation efforts with their traditional ways of life. These, however, are increasingly unviable due to the combination of climate change impacts, conflict and human activities driving deforestation and environmental degradation, all of which undermine their resilience and livelihoods. For example, some interviewees noted that phenomena such as water scarcity, changes in rainfall patterns, erosion, low nutrient levels in the soil,



Grandpa Marcelieno and his son, Aracuara indigenous people, holding mamebo and ambil which are sacred plants from the region of the Department of Caquetá in the Colombian Amazon, Colombia.

and more intense fires affect the *chagra*,³³ the traditional rotational agricultural system (interviews with: members of environmental organisations, March 2021). Heavy rains and droughts have left indigenous communities without access to safe drinking water and some have lost their ancestral seeds, which could not resist higher temperatures and inundations (interview with: member of environmental organisation, March 2021).

The role of local communities in these dynamics is complex. On the one hand, they face multiple overlapping risks of conflict, climate change and environmental degradation, which affect their human and physical security. Women and girls, especially of indigenous origin, are disproportionately affected by the deadly combination of historical inequalities, intensifying climate change, environmental crime and exacerbating disputes over natural resources in the Amazon as they lack access to land tenure, technical and financial assistance (UNSC 2021; IUCN 2020; Yoshida and Céspedes Bàez 2021; Folly and Abdenur 2021).

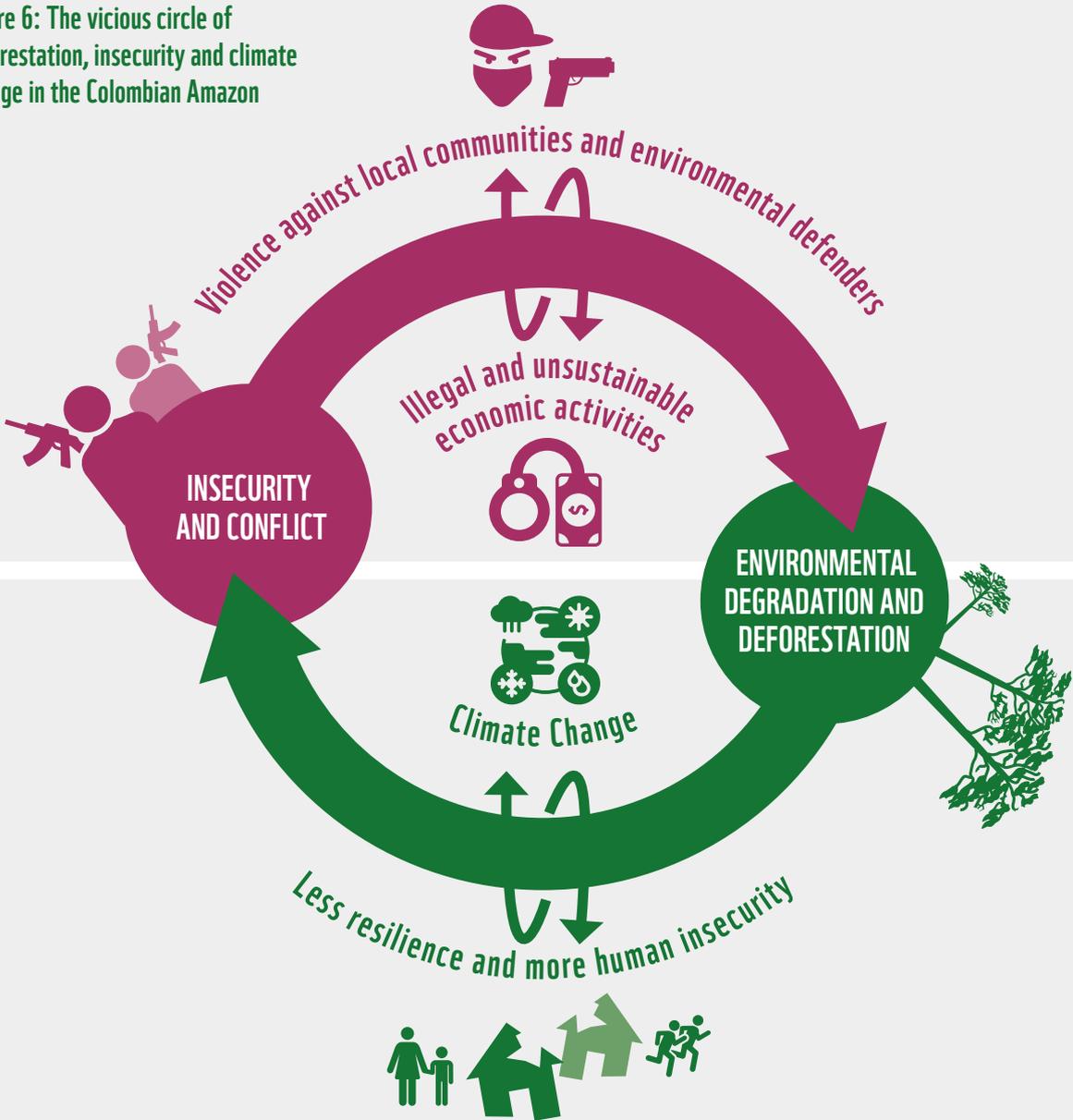
On the other hand, these vulnerabilities feed back into conflict dynamics. For example, increasing livelihood insecurity is one factor driving recruitment of the local population, particularly young people, by illegal armed groups (interviews with: environmental official and members of environmental organisations, March 2021).³⁴ Interviewees noted that, when the *chagra* was disrupted, young people were more likely to be recruited by illegal armed groups (interviews with: members of environmental organisations, March 2021). The interviews also showed that local actors might be increasingly forced to participate in illegal economies by armed groups, particularly with regards to coca production (interviews with: member of environmental organisation and representative of local authorities, March 2021).

33 The *chagra* is a traditional agricultural system constituting an integrity of interrelationships (ecosystem, social and spiritual), which is present in various forms in all indigenous communities in the Colombian Amazon. The system includes horticulture, hunting, gathering wild fruits and fishing, integrating knowledge, wisdom and practices that are specific to women and men, in a complementary and interdependent manner. The *chagra's* value goes beyond its function of providing food, rather it is a blend of practices, knowledge and behaviours, in which interactions are repeated with beings such as plants, animals and minerals, as well as with other entities, such as spiritual masters (Gaia Amazonas 2019).

34 Forced recruitment has also been observed as a threat by illegal armed forces, especially targeting young people (interviews with: members of environmental organisations and environmental official, March 2021).

All of this creates a vicious circle of increasing conflict leading to more environmental degradation and ultimately more climate change, with climate change further undermining human security and driving environmental degradation (see figure 6). A prolongation of this crisis will not only amplify the impacts of climate change, but also weaken the ecosystems and societal institutions that are crucial to breaking this vicious circle.

Figure 6: The vicious circle of deforestation, insecurity and climate change in the Colombian Amazon



The conflict-driven degradation of the Amazon ecosystems contributes to global climate change. At the same time, the degradation of the environment and ecosystems increases the vulnerability of local communities to the impact of a changing climate. As climate impacts are expected to increase in the future, they will further exacerbate human insecurity and environmental degradation.

Source: adelphi/FIP/WWF/M.Küsters

Box 7: The impacts of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated and fuelled the crisis in the Colombian Amazon. Three main dynamics stand out in this regard.

Firstly, armed groups have been imposing quarantines and restrictions on mobility (aimed at containing the spread of the virus) by violent means. This has allowed armed groups to extend their control and limit opposition to their illegal activities, also from environmental defenders and social leaders. In addition, enforced isolation exacerbated the vulnerability of environmental defenders and social leaders, as they were forced to remain in one place, rather than moving frequently to stay safe (Global Witness 2021). This has made it easier for criminal groups to harass and attack them.

Secondly, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and staff of national parks who usually work closely with communities have been limited in their ability to do their work for over a year. This has weakened previously established relationships and cooperation, and halted ongoing work, such as consultation and dialogue processes and the implementation of Development Programmes with a Territorial Focus (PDET – *Programas de Desarrollo con Enfoque Territorial*) (interviews with: members of environmental organisations and representative of peasant community, March 2021, and environmental official, February 2021). At the same time, illegal armed groups have taken advantage of the reduced monitoring capacity of state and conservation organisations during the COVID-19 outbreak to expand their control, for example by establishing new routes and grabbing land. This has also increased clashes between groups (interviews with: members of environmental organisations, March 2021).

Thirdly, all these dynamics, taken together, have led to a deterioration of the environmental situation. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, deforestation has worsened in Colombia (Front Line Defenders 2021b; interviews with: member of environmental organisation and representative of indigenous community, March 2021 and environmental official, February 2021), increasing by 83% in the first half of 2020 compared to the same period in 2019 (Dil et al. 2021). Satellite data published by IDEAM shows that the Colombian Amazon region, which is not naturally prone to fires, experienced an increase in forest fires that coincided with the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, with municipalities controlled by FARC dissidents being particularly affected (Amador-Jiménez et al. 2020).



Forest fires, Amazon

3. RESPONSES TO THE CRISIS

There have been a number of responses to the worsening crisis in the Colombian Amazon. This chapter critically reflects on what the state, non-governmental organisations and local communities have done so far. This analysis does not cover all actions taken, but rather focuses on the most relevant policy areas to identify recommendations for further action.

3.1. STATE RESPONSES

3.1.1. THE FINAL AGREEMENT TO END THE ARMED CONFLICT AND BUILD A STABLE AND LASTING PEACE

The “Final Agreement to End the Armed Conflict and Build a Stable and Lasting Peace” (National Legislative Bodies / National Authorities – Colombia 2016) is of central importance to understand and assess state responses to the crisis. The agreement is based on the shared understanding that Colombia’s long history of armed conflict has its roots in the rural-urban divide and the lack of state presence in some of its regions. It also intends to reflect the fact that the conflict has been shaped by different local contexts and that peacebuilding requires a “territorial” approach, whereby peace is built from within the region through bottom-up, participatory processes (the concept of “territorial peace”, or *paz territorial*) (Cairo et al. 2018).

The agreement places a strong emphasis on environmental and land governance issues. Indeed, its first item is a comprehensive rural reform (RRI – *Reforma Rural Integral*) that aims to foster development as well as economic and social equity in the countryside. The RRI includes a number of land reform initiatives to close the rural-urban divide and address issues such as poverty, health, inequality and citizenship (National Legislative Bodies / National Authorities – Colombia 2016). However, the RRI does not have the necessary budget allocation for achieving its objectives and so implementation has been lagging (Procuraduría 2020).

A central policy instrument to implement the RRI are the PDET. They support broad rural transformation in 16 regions encompassing the 170 municipalities that were most affected by the conflict. Three of the Amazonian areas are PDET sub-regions.³⁵ Overall, PDET cover 36% of the national territory and

³⁵ These include 12 municipalities in Macarena-Guaviare; 17 municipalities in Cuenca del Caguán y Piedemonte Caquetense; and 9 municipalities in Putumayo.

45% of protected areas. In a participatory process that involved around 200,000 people, the Action Plans of Regional Transformation (PATR – *Planes de Acción para Transformación Regional*) were also established in PDET regions. These plans recommend over 32,000 actions to be undertaken towards rural transformation and socio-economic development (ART n.d.).

Another element of the RRI is the Land Fund, which was established to provide 3 million hectares to landless peasants over the first 12 years, while also formalising 7 million hectares of small and medium-sized properties (National Legislative Bodies / National Authorities – Colombia 2016). The National Land Agency (ANT – *Agencia Nacional de Tierras*) is in charge of this process. This is accompanied by the creation of a multipurpose land registry or multipurpose cadastre (*cadastro multipropósito*) aiming at fostering productive land use, increasing tax revenues and helping to clarify and enforce the legal status of protected territories (see section 3.1.4. for more detail). A special legal dispute mechanism and an environmental zoning plan, allowing for the protection of areas of environmental importance and to limit the expansion of the agricultural frontier, are also part of the RRI (National Legislative Bodies / National Authorities – Colombia 2016).

The fourth item of the Peace Agreement, “Solution to the problem of illicit drugs”, also directly addresses environmental governance and deforestation through the National Comprehensive Programme for the Substitution of Crops Used for Illicit Purposes (PNIS – *Programa Nacional Integral de Sustitución de Cultivos de Uso Ilícito*), which is a part of the RRI (see section 3.1.5. for more details). According to the PNIS, in return for giving up illicit crops, Comprehensive Substitution and Alternative Development Plans (PISDA – *Planes Integrales de Sustitución y Desarrollo Alternativo*) provide rural communities with immediate food and technical assistance together with support for the implementation of development projects (National Legislative Bodies / National Authorities – Colombia 2016).

Many of the state actions foreseen as part of the agreement have not adequately responded to the needs of local actors and communities and there has been a lack of participation and transparency.

Many of the interviewees noted that the effective implementation of the Peace Agreement could be one of the most successful ways out of the current crisis. It would help better protect the environment and natural resources, as well as addressing some of the historical inequalities, also in terms of land access, that have been at the root of the conflict (interviews with: environmental official, members of environmental organisations, representative of peasant community, representatives of local authorities and representative of indigenous community, March 2021). However, they also observed that some of its aspirations may have been too ambitious, generating expectations among the public that exceeded the capacities of existing state institutions (Rettberg 2020). One overarching problem has been that

many of the state actions foreseen as part of the agreement have not adequately responded to the needs of local actors and communities and there has been a lack of participation and transparency (FIP 2020).

For example, in all three sub-regions of the Colombian Amazon that have been included in the PDET, a process of social, community and institutional participation has taken place to identify priority actions that corresponded to local development needs (interviews with: representative of peasant community and members of environmental organisations, March 2021). Nevertheless, local actors have pointed out that the prioritisation of projects and budgets was instead carried out by local authorities, with local communities only playing a marginal role (interviews with: representative of peasant community, representative of local authorities and member of environmental organisation, March 2021). The risk of this approach is that the actions that end up being implemented might not actually address the communities' needs, while still claiming the legitimacy provided by the initial participation processes (interviews with: representative of peasant community, representative of local authorities and member of environmental organisation, March 2021). Several actors have also noted that the approach of using single PDET-related development projects falls short of addressing more structural, long-standing problems. A further critique launched against the PDET is that the implementation of the projects has been slow, as institutional and financial capacities are often lacking (interviews with: members of environmental organisations and representative of local authorities, March 2021).

3.1.2. PROTECTION OF ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENDERS

The Peace Agreement also strengthened and expanded the existing normative framework for the protection of human rights leaders and defenders, which was created by the victims and land restitution law 1448 of 2011 (Gómez 2020), followed by a number of decrees that were passed by the Colombian government in 2017 and 2018.³⁶ Institutional changes were also introduced, including the deployment of protection mechanisms by the National Protection Unit (UNP – *Unidad Nacional de Protección*);³⁷ the creation of inter-institutional cooperation structures, such as the CIPRAT, which convenes state institutions at the national, departmental, and municipal levels if the Ombudsman’s Office³⁸ issues an early warning; and the establishment of the Municipal and Departmental Prevention and Protection Committees, made up of representatives of relevant local authorities and CIPRAT, which develop plans and mechanisms to respond to human rights threats in a timely manner (see, e.g. Amnesty International 2020; USAID 2018b).

However, there have been gaps in the implementation of these policies, especially at the local level. This is largely because the municipalities and departments most affected by the violence do not have sufficient capacities and resources to ensure that the local Prevention and Protection Committees can take effective action and implement programmes and projects for the protection of individuals or groups at risk (information received by the authors during a CIPRAT session, March 2021). These challenges have been mirrored at the national level, where the budget, human resources and institutional capacity of the UNP are insufficient to deal with the magnitude of reports of violations or threats it receives for the Colombian Amazon (interviews with: member of international cooperation, February 2021 and representative of indigenous community, March 2021; CCJ 2020).

36 Among these is the creation of an Integrated Security System for Executing Policies (SISEP – *Sistema Integral de Seguridad para el Ejercicio de la Política*), which aims at the protection of individuals and collective subjects (*Decree 895 of 2017*), the strengthening of territorial prevention bodies (*Decree 1581 of 2017*) and the inclusion of the protection of collective subjects and the strengthening of national and local inter-institutional coordination (*Decree 660 of 2018*).

37 The National Protection Unit assesses the security risks in each case and deploys measures, such as the provision of bodyguards and armoured cars or bulletproof vests, depending on the estimated risk level. When the threat is not against an individual person, but against a collective or organisation, collective protection can be requested from the unit. In these cases, the collective Committee for Risk Assessment and Recommendation of Measures (CERREM – *Comité de Evaluación de Riesgo y Recomendación de Medidas*) is in charge of defining an implementation plan (*National Protection Unit website*, accessed 23 July 2021).

38 The Ombudsman’s Office of Colombia (*Defensoría del Pueblo* in Spanish) is the national government agency that is charged with overseeing the protection of civil and human rights in the country. It receives and investigates complaints related to human rights abuses and plays a key role in handling the early warning component of the Early Warnings and Rapid Response System run by the Ministry of Interior in coordination with the local authorities and law enforcement forces (Amnesty International 2020).

This is further complicated by the large number of protection mechanisms now available, which diffuse resources and duplicate efforts (HRW 2021). Human rights organisations also noted that existing protection schemes are still inadequate because they do not respond to the specific rural dynamics of the Colombian Amazon (including large areas of jungle, few roads and extensive waterways) or to the specific needs of indigenous, Afro-Colombian and peasant communities (HRW 2021).

Because of narratives that stigmatise them, environmental leaders and individuals in the targeted communities are reticent to report threats and crimes to the relevant authorities, as they are afraid that they will be dismissed or, worse, put at further risk.

Local organisations and actors also expressed concern about narratives that stigmatise environmental and social defenders as well as local communities. For example, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights notes that these groups are often labelled as ‘guerrilleros’ (insurgents) by political leaders and public officials, as they operate in the same areas as illegal armed groups (IACHR 2019). Some authorities at the national level have also described attacks and killings of environmental leaders as episodes linked to fights and disputes between citizens, thereby downplaying their seriousness (Indepaz et al. 2017). As a consequence, environmental leaders and individuals in the targeted communities are reticent to report threats and crimes to the relevant authorities, as they are afraid that they will be dismissed or, worse, put at further risk (interviews with: representative of indigenous community and members of environmental organisations, March 2021).



School teacher and children during a practical lesson outside of the classroom, planting trees in the school grounds. La Chorrera, Predio Putumayo Indigenous Reserve, Amazonas, Colombia.

3.1.3. MILITARY AND POLICING RESPONSES TO CURBING DEFORESTATION AND ILLEGAL ECONOMIES

One of the government's main responses to curbing deforestation and illegal economies in the Colombian Amazon has been the military "*Operation Artemisa*". This operation began in April 2019 with the objective of tackling deforestation and related environmental crimes (Paz Cardona 2019; Ortega 2021; France24 2020). As part of this initiative, between April 2019 and February 2021, nine major operations were jointly conducted by the national army and law enforcement, including the Prosecutor's Office and judges, focusing on so-called strategic environmental areas, such as the national parks in the departments of Meta, Guaviare and Caquetá, and deploying a total of 22,300 personnel (FCDS 2020a).³⁹ According to government sources, *Operation Artemisa* contributed to preventing and halting deforestation by recovering 12,358 hectares of land in natural parks; rescuing 9,137 endangered birds, mammals and reptiles; and arresting 81 people for different environmental crimes (Ortega 2021).

However, the scope and results of *Operation Artemisa* have been questioned. Local actors and human rights organisations have criticised the initiative for its excessive use of force and for its focus on arresting peasants, rather than those actors that actually drive and finance the illegal economies (interviews with: environmental official, April 2021 and representative of international cooperation, March 2021; Garzón et al. 2020; Front Line Defenders 2021a). The high costs of the initiative have also been controversial, particularly in view of its limited results in terms of investigating and prosecuting corrupt officials and private economic actors (Garzón et al. 2020). In addition, while some deforestation was stopped, there have been no follow-up actions for the restoration and rehabilitation of deforested areas (Volckhausen 2020; interview with: member of environmental organisation, March 2021).

Even more concerning is the fact that different local actors interviewed for this report saw militarised responses, such as those carried out under *Operation Artemisa*, as counterproductive to addressing the risks that local communities and environmental defenders face. Instead, they argued, military actions contributed to increasing the vulnerability of and risks for communities, environmental defenders and state officials, as they can become targets for retaliation by illegal armed groups (interviews with: environmental officials, March 2021). Moreover, militarised responses

³⁹ For comparison: an elite force deployed to fight illegal armed actors, including drug trafficking networks and targeting coca crops and illicit mining, was established in the beginning of 2021 with 7,000 personnel (Acosta 2021).

increased the stigmatisation of local communities, who are assumed to be or presented as “links in a chain of illegal economy” or “helpers of armed groups” (interviews with: members of environmental organisation, March 2021). Lastly, the alleged excessive use of force against local communities, and human rights violations during such operations, can increase grievances against the government and push them to withdraw their support for conservation and environmental protection efforts (Garzón et al. 2020; Duffy 2016; Duffy et al. 2019).

Another worrying development is the Colombian government’s recent announcement that it will resume aerial spraying of coca crops with glyphosate. The Santos government suspended the programme in 2015, after a statement from the World Health Organization saying that glyphosate may be carcinogenic to humans (Guyton et al. 2015). In 2017, Colombia’s Constitutional Court placed important restrictions on any future use of glyphosate from aircrafts, but did not ban it (Isacson 2019). In April 2021, the Ministry of Justice published a decree, explaining how the government planned to meet these conditions and restart aerial herbicide fumigation. This announcement has generated controversy about the environmental and health effects of this practice, as well as its effectiveness (Camacho and Mejía 2017; Rubiano et al. 2020).

The current government has focused on forced eradication, which is carried out by the police and military forces, while voluntary substitution has not received the necessary support and resources.

According to the Peace Agreement, fumigation must be the last resort, only to be used when farmers refuse to substitute crops and when manual eradication is too dangerous. In general, the current government has focused on forced eradication, which is carried out by the police and military forces, whereas voluntary substitution has not received the necessary support and resources. While manual eradication does not carry the same environmental and health risks as aerial fumigation, it does entail significant risks for violence and human rights violations as it brings the military and police into direct confrontation with coca growers (International Crisis Group 2021a).



Aerial view of recent deforested land for traditional subsistence farming, La Chorrera, Colombian Amazon.

3.1.4. ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE CHANGE POLICIES

Colombia's environmental and climate change strategies have made considerable progress in recent years. In 2020, the Colombian government updated its Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC), which now aims at a 51% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030, one of the most ambitious targets in the Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) region, and zero net deforestation by 2030. Compared to the first submission of the NDC in 2015, the 2020 update focused much more on reducing greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture, land use and forestry, which account for 58% of Colombia's total emissions (Vergara et al. 2021).

In the 2020 NDC update, the Colombian government also reflected on the mechanisms needed for coordinating climate action with sectoral and territorial planning processes⁴⁰ as well as with adaptation and mitigation projects carried out by sub-national and non-state actors (Gobierno de Colombia 2020). It also specifically mentioned the importance of addressing illegal activities including mining, coca crops for illicit uses, land grabbing and drug trafficking, recognising human rights as a transversal element of climate action. However, it failed to discuss links to peace and security more broadly than the 2015 submission did with regard to Colombia's climate adaptation needs (Minambiente 2015a; Gobierno de Colombia 2020).

Colombia is also signatory to a number of important environmental conventions that are relevant to the Amazon, in particular the Convention on Biological Diversity,⁴¹ the Minamata Convention on Mercury,⁴² and the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance⁴³ (Guio and Rojas 2019).

President Iván Duque also signed the Escazú Agreement⁴⁴ in December 2019, becoming the latest signatory to the first regional environmental

40 Specifically, the Comprehensive Sectoral Climate Change Management Plans (*Planes Integrales de Gestión del Cambio Climático Sectoriales*) and the Comprehensive Territorial Climate Change Management Plans (*Planes Integrales de Gestión del Cambio Climático Territoriales*) are mentioned as important milestones (Gobierno de Colombia 2020).

41 Colombia ratified the Convention on Biological Diversity in 1994 through the creation of Law 165 (Guio and Rojas 2019).

42 Colombia implemented the Minamata Convention through Law 1892, which was adopted by the Colombian Congress in 2018 and approved by the Constitutional Court in June 2019 (Guio and Rojas 2019).

43 The Ramsar Convention was introduced in Colombia in 1997 through the creation of Law 357 (Guio and Rojas 2019).

44 The agreement guarantees the public's right to access information on environmental issues and to participate meaningfully in environmental decision-making processes. It also recognises the public right to live in a healthy environment, resulting in improved judicial and administrative mechanisms for environmental and human rights defenders (ECLAC 2018).

agreement in LAC (Glatsky 2021). The agreement consists of pillars that aim to safeguard environmental rights and contribute to sustainable development in the region. It focuses on access to environmental information, the right to participate in the environmental decision-making processes, access to justice in environmental affairs, capacity-building and cooperation (UN 2018). By equipping individuals with these rights and legal instruments, the agreement also paves the way for implementing more robust national and transboundary environmental standards (Maihold and Reisch 2021). Notwithstanding this, the agreement faces strong opposition and still requires approval by Congress and the Constitutional Court before ratification, which in turn is needed for implementation to begin (Glatsky 2021).⁴⁵ In 2019, Colombia and six other Amazon countries also signed the Leticia Pact, underscoring the importance of harmonising and coordinating implementation efforts between the Paris Agreement on climate change, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the post-2020 global biodiversity framework (IISD 2019).

Perhaps the most progressive of all measures taken by Colombia to address the global climate and ecological crisis is the historic decision (ruling 4360) of the Colombian Supreme Court in 2018 to designate the Amazon as a legal person. This means that instead of having to prove that deforestation affects the rights of human beings, it is now sufficient to refer to the violation of the Amazon's own rights as a legal person (Krause 2020). Similar to the Escazú Agreement, the Supreme Court ruling specifically acknowledges the rights of future generations to live in a healthy environment and effectively holds that the health of the Colombian Amazon is inherently connected to these *fundamental* rights (ESCR-Net 2019). The court also established that the Colombian government had not fulfilled its legal obligations to halt deforestation; therefore, it ordered the respective authorities to engage with the plaintiffs, the affected communities and the general public to articulate the required action plans to tackle deforestation, greenhouse gas emissions, and climate change in the Colombian Amazon (ESCR-Net 2019).⁴⁶

45 On 17 June 2021, the Escazú Agreement was presented for ratification by Congress, after it had already been postponed several times due to opposition from the private sector, as well as from some Senators (ABColombia 2021). However, the vote was postponed again; proponents sought to reschedule voting to 20 June when the legislature ends, but it was still not on the agenda then. The current Minister of the Environment recently announced in July 2021 that a new bill will be presented for approval by Congress, with the first debate expected to take place no later than 31 August 2021 (López Romero 2021).

46 Specifically, the ruling consisted of four mandates, viz. 1) to create short, medium and long term action plans to reduce deforestation in the Colombian Amazon; 2) to establish an "Intergenerational Pact for the Life of the Colombian Amazon"; 3) to implement and update local land management plans (directed at municipalities in the Amazon); and 4) to formulate an action plan to halt deforestation (directed at environmental institutions with governing authority over the Colombian Amazon) (León and Dávila 2020).

There have also been a number of environmental policies and initiatives to address deforestation in recent years. This includes the National Policy for the Control of Deforestation and Sustainable Forest Management (CONPES 4021),⁴⁷ which was issued in 2021 and provides a framework for combating deforestation. CONPES 4021 pursues a broad approach to counteract deforestation trends under four overarching objectives: provide sustainable livelihood alternatives; promote policy integration of sectoral, territorial and environmental planning; increase efforts to fight illegal economies; and improve the information basis. As part of this approach, CONPES 4021 also recognises the role of illegal economies, conflict and the structural factors behind them (CONPES 2020).⁴⁸ The National Council to Combat Deforestation and Other Environmental Crimes (Conaldef – *Consejo Nacional de Lucha Contra la Deforestación*) is the main body to coordinate the measures required for its implementation.⁴⁹

While CONPES 4021 addresses the different dimensions of deforestation and identifies its links to the current crisis and illegal economies, doubts remain as to whether it can be a platform for integrated conflict-sensitive action. This is primarily due to concerns that CONPES 4021 could lead to strengthened coercive approaches that are not sensitive to local conflict contexts, while focusing on short-term results rather than long-term development gains, thus mirroring the flaws of *Operation Artemisa* (workshop with the working group, June 2021⁵⁰). It also remains unclear how the planned actions under CONPES 4021 consider and ensure compatibility with the perspectives of local communities and their conservation practices (Botero 2021b). In addition, CONPES 4021 reportedly faces budgetary constraints (presentation by an environmental official at the event “Environmental governance for peacebuilding in Colombia”, Thursday 19 March 2021; Trujillo 2021).

Colombia has a number of mechanisms in place to meet its environmental and climate change commitments. The main mechanism is the Amazon Vision Programme, which lays out the country’s vision for sustainable, low-carbon development in the Colombian Amazon, building on the country’s

47 CONPES is short for the National Council for Economic and Social Policies (*Consejo Nacional de Política Económica y Social in Spanish*). It is the highest national planning authority, integrating all Ministries of Colombia and other governmental agencies, and is tasked with advising the government on all socio-economic development topics (Mininterior 2021).

48 It underscores the importance of PDET, mentions post-2016 dynamics and also highlights key conflict drivers, including corruption, lack of territorial control by the state, lack of traceability of commodities and products and the role of armed groups (CONPES 2020).

49 The cross-sectoral Conaldef was created in 2019 as part of the National Development Plan to coordinate environmental, economic and military responses (Minambiente 2018).

50 The first draft of this report was discussed in a June 2021 workshop with the working group. The comments received through this feedback process are therefore cited as “workshop with the working group, June 2021”.

National Development Plan 2014-2018 “*Todos por un Nuevo País*” (DNP 2015; Minambiente 2015b). The programme is tied to the National Strategy REDD+, and can be understood as an umbrella initiative encompassing several other programmes or projects, including the Global Environment Facility (GEF), GEF Heart of the Amazon Project and the REDD+ Early Movers Amazon Vision Programme (REM AV) (Minambiente n.d.b).

The GEF Heart of the Amazon Project was among the first projects to be implemented under the Amazon Vision Programme. Started in 2015, it aimed at tackling deforestation in the departments of Guaviare and Caquetá. The project pioneered approaches and set standards for subsequent environmental conservation efforts (FAO 2020). Among its primary achievements are the improved management of the Serranía de Chiribiquete National Park, a protected area covering around 4.3 million hectares of forest; successful coordination with indigenous authorities to implement zoning, land planning and environmental management strategies; and community engagement and voluntary conservation agreements with families and social and producer organisations (FAO 2020; World Bank 2020).

REM AV is another central element of the Colombian government’s efforts to tackle deforestation. With initial funds from Norway, Germany, and the United Kingdom worth US\$100 million, the programme was launched during the time of the 2016 peace negotiations, aiming at halting deforestation by 2020. As this has evidently not happened, donor countries pledged an additional US\$366 million in 2020 with the stated intention of reducing deforestation by 21% by 2022 and 50% by 2025 (Volckhausen 2020). The central tenet of the programme is a performance-based payment scheme that provides financial rewards if emissions are reduced through preventing deforestation (FAO 2020).⁵¹ While the mid-term evaluation report concludes that the programme has been rather successful, it concedes that there have been delays in the spending of the programme’s funds and in the implementation of some of its components (Mancala Consultores 2020).⁵² Other concerns have been expressed with regards to the programme’s indigenous component, in particular the limited support it provided to affected communities in the field, and the difficulties for NGOs to monitor and accompany these processes due to the security situation on the ground (workshop with the working group).

51 This pay-for-results scheme was recently renewed, and payments will reportedly only be made if successful reductions (based on annual compliance milestones) do occur (Volckhausen 2020).

52 REM AV consists of five pillars, namely 1) forest governance; 2) sustainable sectoral development and planning; 3) agro-environmental development; 4) environmental governance and indigenous peoples; and 5) enabling conditions (Minambiente n.d.b).

Land access, tenure, control and distribution were at the heart of Colombia's civil war and continue to be a key challenge to peace.

3.1.5. LAND AND TERRITORIAL PLANNING POLICIES

Land access, tenure, control and distribution were at the heart of Colombia's civil war and continue to be a key challenge to peace. The land-related provisions of the Peace Agreement presented new opportunities to address land issues and to strengthen sustainable environmental and territorial planning in the areas affected by the armed conflict. This included limiting the expansion of the agricultural frontier, while increasing conservation and indigenous areas and clarifying rural property rights in areas available for agricultural use (García 2020). The peace process also opened possibilities to advance collective reparations for peasant and indigenous communities that have been victims of violence in the Amazon region (workshop with the working group). These efforts can build on the legislation introduced in 2011,⁵³ which also created a specialised governmental Unit for Assistance and Integral Reparations to Victims (Victims' Unit).

However, the post-2016 dynamics have stalled these opportunities, rather than strengthening the comprehensive system of territorial planning aimed at safeguarding ecosystems and cultural diversity in large parts of the Amazon region (see box 1 in chapter 1). As discussed in chapter 2.2., illegal economic activities are taking place in natural parks and indigenous reserves and large territories of protected areas are controlled by illegal armed groups together with other powerful economic and political actors (interviews with: members of environmental organisations, March 2021). In turn, these dynamics undermine territorial planning – one of the most important state instruments to counteract deforestation – and put disproportionate pressure on the officials of national parks, endangering their lives as well as the lives of those working with them (interviews with: members of environmental organisations, representative of peasant community and environmental officials, March 2021). Moreover, tensions over land continue, as two key land-related elements of the Peace Agreement, i.e. the Land Fund and the multi-purpose cadastre, face implementation challenges, further undermining conservation goals.

As outlined above, the Land Fund aims at providing land for landless peasants and formalising a large number of small and medium-sized properties. The land to be redistributed should come from unlawfully occupied land and land to be used sustainably in forest reserve areas, among others (National Legislative Bodies / National Authorities – Colombia 2016). According to the Procurator General's Office, most of the land that is part of the Land Fund (1.2 million hectares) presents problems of prior occupation,

53 The so-called "Law of Victims" 1448/11 and the Decree-Law 4633 of 2011, Decree-Law 4634 of 2011, and Decree-Law 4635 of 2011, specifically concerning reparations for indigenous peoples.

which will delay its acceptance as suitable land to be included in the reform. In addition, the number of land properties to be formalised by the Fund have been overestimated (Procuraduría 2020). To date, ANT has only been able to clarify the status of 200,000 hectares of land and distribute 100,000 hectares to landless peasants out of the 1.2 million promised (Forero Rueda 2021). No robust and comprehensive data on land distribution through the Fund in the Amazon region could be found as part of the research for this report, therefore the actual implementation progress remains unclear.

Overall, the interviews showed that land issues remain a source of tensions, insecurity and environmental degradation in the Colombian Amazon. Peasants are waiting for the formalisation of their land property and clarification on what areas can be used (interviews with: representative of peasant community and environmental official, March 2021). Where agricultural use is permitted, land is often illegally acquired and accumulated (interviews with: representative of peasant community and environmental official, March 2021). While peasants seek to secure land ownership, in many areas only land *use* is possible under a “use contract” with state authorities (interviews with: environmental official, February 2021, and member of environmental organisation, February 2021). Therefore, finding solutions for landless peasants would entail both ensuring that the limits of protected areas and indigenous territories are respected, while addressing some of the root causes of environmental degradation (interviews with: representative of local authorities, representative of international cooperation, and member of environmental organisation, February 2021). Models such as the ZRCs can foster sustainable agriculture and contribute to resolving land use conflicts. However, establishing them entails a challenging bureaucratic process that has been further complicated by the region’s conflict dynamics (Moreno et al. 2018; Forumciv 2019).

Finding solutions for landless peasants would entail both ensuring that the limits of protected areas and indigenous territories are respected, while addressing some of the root causes of environmental degradation.

The multi-purpose cadastre seeks to gather and update precise information on all territories of Colombia by 2025. It was established as a response to the fact that this data was only available for around 2% of the territory; as of January 2021, the updated cadastre covered around 15% (IGAC 2021). If fully implemented, it could help address illegal land uses and enforce the respective territorial regulations in face of unsubstantiated claims, while also clarifying land rights in areas where agricultural use is permitted (interviews with: representative of local authorities and representative of peasant community, March 2021). Although several actors have underlined the need for its swift and comprehensive implementation (interviews with: members of environmental organisations, representative of local authorities, and representative of peasant community, March 2021, and environmental

official, February 2021), to date, progress has been limited (interviews with: members of environmental organisations, March 2021 and environmental official, February 2021; Procuraduría 2020).

Two recent developments in territorial planning might also help address the different environmental, social, and economic dimensions of the crisis. One is the creation of the Regional Land Management Model for the Colombian Amazon (MOTRA – *Modelo de Ordenamiento Territorial Regional para la Amazonía Colombiana*), which provides key diagnostic information for local, regional and national authorities to guide their territorial planning and management processes. It sets out paths for conservation, restoration and environmental protection (DNP et al. 2019). A second opportunity is the establishment of the Administrative and Planning Region for the Amazon (RAP Amazonía – *Región Administrativa y de Planificación para la Amazonía*), on the initiative of the government authorities of Caquetá, Guainía, Guaviare, and Putumayo.⁵⁴ RAP Amazonía is currently developing the first phase of its Regional Strategic Plan (PER – *Plan Estratégico Regional*), supported by Vision Amazonía funds (Visión Amazonía 2020). The RAP Amazonía would allow the departmental authorities to promote regional responses to the crisis, going beyond departmental borders.

Both MOTRA and RAP Amazonía could therefore be important tools to support local authorities and communities in developing regional and supra-departmental land use planning strategies. But the experience of PDET processes shows that balancing the social, economic and environmental dimensions of development at the local level is difficult. For example, in Macarena and Guaviare, local communities favoured road infrastructure projects (which would allow them to transport their products to the market) that could lead to environmental risks and undermine conservation efforts (FCDS 2020c). Moreover, economic policies at the national level can be contradicting, especially with regards to the expansion of mining concessions. For example, the Strategic Mining Zones (ZME – *Zonas Mineras Estratégicas*) in Vaupés and Putumayo, defined by the National Government, affect the Forest Reserve zones of Law 2 of 1959, their resguardos and their aquatic and wetland systems (DNP et al. 2019). Similarly, the Colombian government has granted mining titles inside national parks in the departments of Vaupés, Caquetá, and Guainía (DNP et al. 2019).

⁵⁴ As per the Colombian Constitution, several departments can form a RAP, which provides coordinated outcomes for several departments that are not mandated by the national government and could therefore be better tailored to meet regional needs (Visión Amazonía 2020).

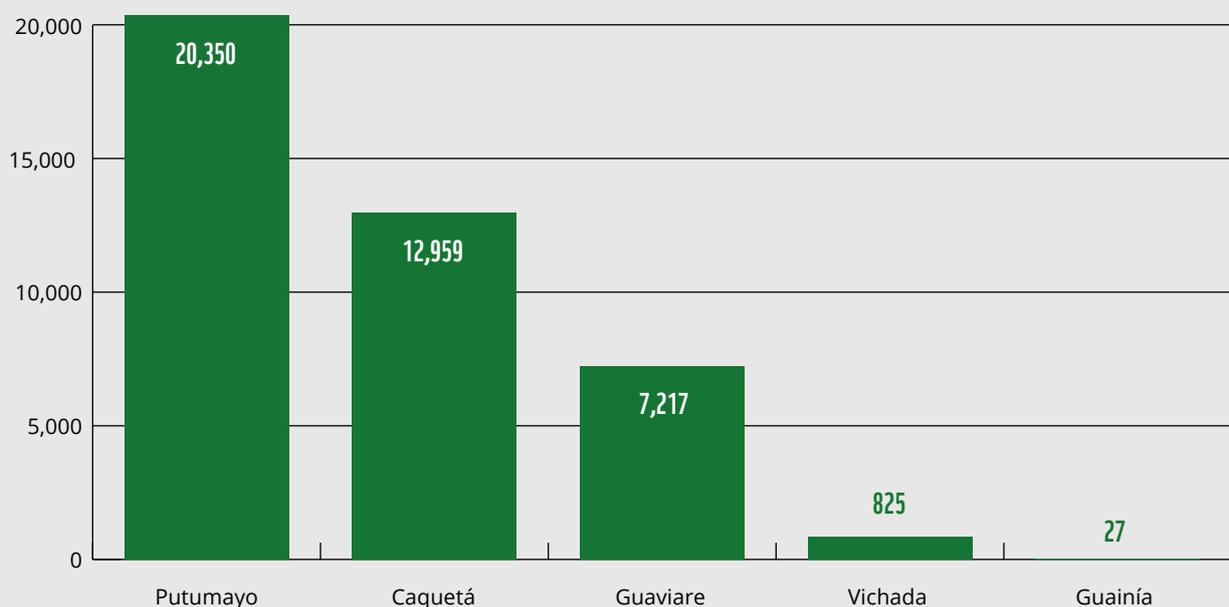
3.1.6. CROP SUBSTITUTION AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

PNIS was launched as part of the Comprehensive Rural Reform, under Article 4 of the 2016 Peace Agreement. It has the broad aim of “creating both material and intangible conditions for welfare and well-being for the populations affected by crops used for illicit purposes” (National Legislative Bodies / National Authorities – Colombia 2016). In particular, its mandate focuses on peasant communities living in poverty who currently rely on coca crops for illicit uses for their subsistence.

PNIS began in 2017 with the signing of collective agreements with those communities that had committed to voluntarily eradicate coca crops for illicit uses. Part of the substitution process consisted in the provision of family income and food assistance, as well as rapid impact and long-term development projects, supported by technical assistance. In the Amazonian departments, by the end of 2020, 41,378 families (61% coca growers, 17% non-growers and 21% collectors) registered for the programme, and voluntarily eradicated 15,848 hectares of coca crops (see figure 7) (UNODC 2021). PNIS also managed to reach coca-growing clusters located in areas that used to be controlled by FARC, and where the state had not been able to make progress due to difficult access and security conditions. As of December 2020, most of the beneficiary families had received their family income and started food security projects (UNODC 2021).

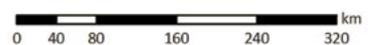
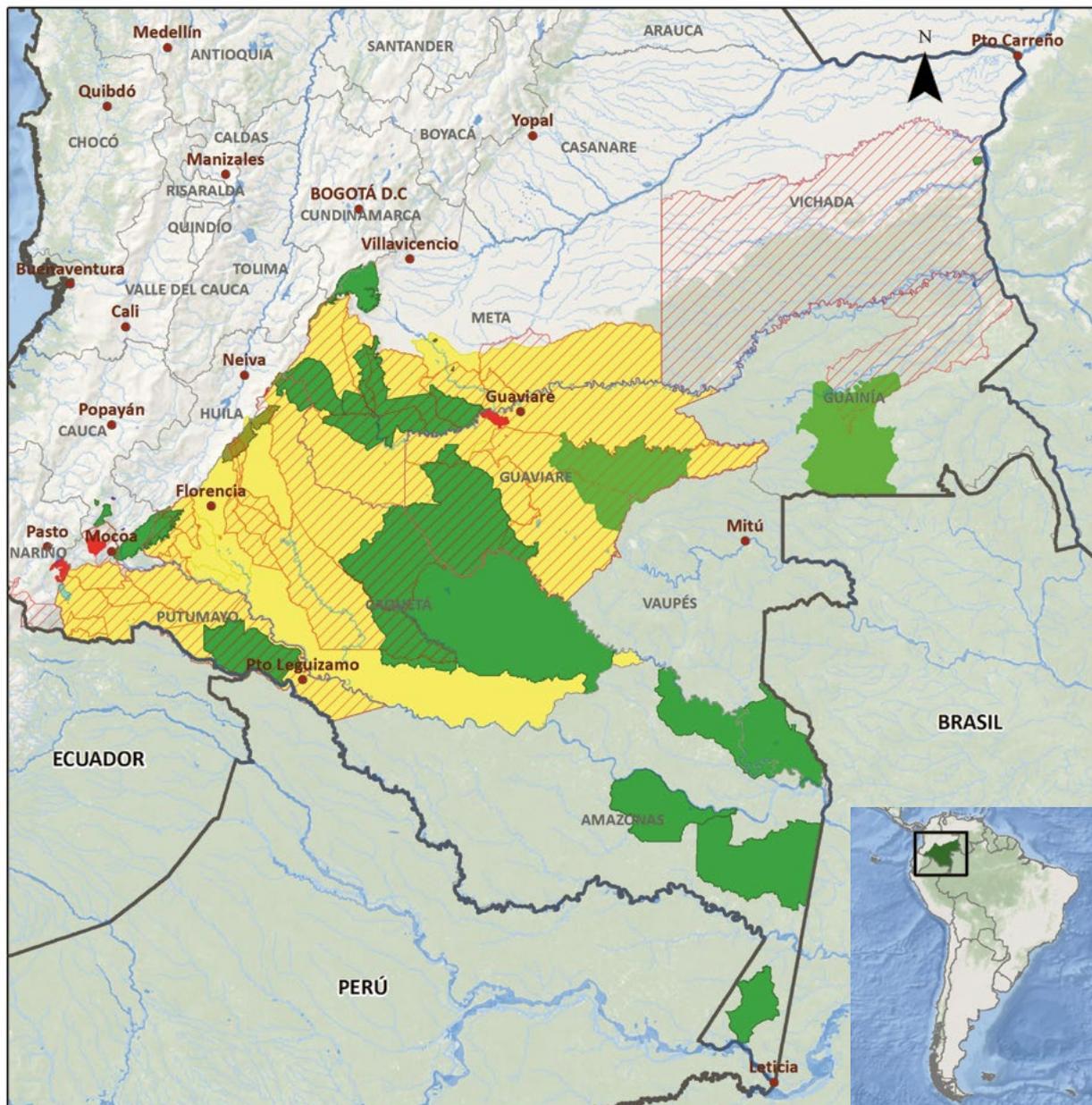
Figure 7: Number of PNIS beneficiary families per region

Source: Prepared by FIP, based on UNODC (2021)
All numbers are until 31.12.2020



Map 4: PDET/PNIS municipalities overlapping with protected areas

Source: WWF



Legend

-  PNIS - Municipalities
-  PDET - Municipalities

Overall, however, PNIS faced significant delays, in particular with regard to the programme's development components. Reasons for this include funding problems, limited operational and implementation capacities, as well as delays in the provision of technical assistance for project development (Contraloría 2020; Procuraduría 2020). Interviewees noted that the state only disbursed the first of the promised payments due to budgetary constraints, and saw this as the main reason why the participation of communities in PNIS waned, even though they initially welcomed the programme (interviews with: environmental officials, members of environmental organisations, representative of peasant community and representative of local authorities, March 2021). Moreover, only a few families received the economic support accompanied by technical assistance for the implementation of development projects (see table 2). This has led to some families having to revert to coca crops for illicit uses, therefore being expelled from the programme (Somos Defensores 2021). It was also reported that due to a lack of funds, the government refused to add families to the programme (Thompson 2020).

Also, as part of PNIS, conflicts between development and conservation objectives can arise; FIP found, as part of its research in 2019, that 72% of the 23,500 families, who had identified production alternatives under PNIS, favoured livestock farming (Garzón et al. 2019). One reason for this choice is that livestock can be brought to markets on foot. This is particularly attractive as transportation infrastructure is lacking in large parts of the Colombian Amazon, especially during the rainy season when most roads become unusable. As cattle farming has a larger environmental footprint than other economic alternatives, however, these dynamics risk pushing PNIS in a direction that is not necessarily environmentally sustainable (Tebbutt et al. 2021).

Finally, the security situation in the areas where the programme operates has deteriorated, putting participating individuals and communities at risk (Garzón et al. 2019, Murillo-Sandoval et al. 2020). Some families and peasant organisations not linked to PNIS have started their own initiatives to develop alternative livelihoods, for example in Putumayo. However, this also exacerbated the risks and threats for communities and social leaders (Somos Defensores 2021).

Table 2: Percentage of PNIS beneficiary families by component and department.

Source: Prepared by FIP, based on UNODC (2021)
Data as of 31.12.2020

| | Households with family income | Food security projects | Development project |
|-----------------|-------------------------------|------------------------|---------------------|
| Caquetá | 95% | 66% | 7% |
| Guainía | 100% | 100% | 0% |
| Guaviare | 93% | 88% | 1.8% |
| Putumayo | 88% | 88% | 1.8% |
| Vichada | 99% | 97% | 30% |



Girl drinks from a water liana, a plant used by indigenous people to extract water. In Araracuara, Department of Caquetá in the Colombian Amazon, Colombia.

3.2. CIVIL SOCIETY AND COMMUNITIES' RESPONSES

3.2.1. SELF-PROTECTION STRATEGIES

Often driven by the absence of or gaps in state-led responses, civil society organisations and communities have used a number of self-protection strategies to address the security and environmental challenges they face.

Often driven by the absence of or gaps in state-led responses, civil society organisations and communities have used a number of self-protection strategies to address the security and environmental challenges they face (see for e.g., Pfeiffer 2015; Chaves et al. 2019; CAFOD 2021). One key element has been the establishment and strengthening of community communication and protection networks. These help local actors identify and communicate possible threats and risks and are, for example, used to decide if areas are safe to travel in, or which kind of precautions should be taken to minimise risk (interviews with members of environmental organisations, March 2021; also see for e.g., Chaves et al. 2019; Wallis 2019).⁵⁵

In addition, environmental organisations have worked to strengthen their own capacities in the field of risk analysis. For instance, they developed risk assessments and risk management protocols for their members and the communities they work with, often with the help of external experts. They also reinforced their internal and external communication strategies and collaboration with local networks and actors to ensure they have real time information on security threats and can address them promptly within their own operations (interviews with: members of environmental organisations, February 2021).

Some of the environmental organisations interviewed stated that these strategies have allowed them to adapt to the constantly changing conflict dynamics and actors. However, they also pointed to areas that still need strengthening, in particular improving their internal capacities to respond to security risks, improving coordination and information exchange with other organisations and supporting local communities to access existing state protection mechanisms (interview with: representative of international cooperation, February 2021). More broadly, they noted that, given the overall situation and scale of the risks that communities and NGOs face, these measures have been limited in scope. They have not been sufficient to protect organisations and individuals from threats or gain them access to certain areas (interviews with: members of environmental organisations, March 2021).

⁵⁵ There have also been examples of indigenous groups outside the area analysed in this report, such as the Nasa in Northern Cauca, which have created *Guardias Indígenas* (indigenous guards). These are non-violent, self-protection organisations whose primary goal is to protect indigenous people and their territories from illegal armed groups. Indigenous guards typically constitute women, men, children and elders, all of whom organise themselves as a collective movement to stand up against armed groups. These mechanisms have been relatively successful in the past, although their members have in many cases also been subjected to violence (Chaves et al. 2019; Wallis 2019).

There is a long history of environmental organisations working closely with local communities to protect the Amazon's environment in the face of ongoing conflict, insecurity and violence.

3.2.2. JOINT APPROACHES TO ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

There is a long history of environmental organisations working closely with local communities to protect the Amazon's environment in the face of ongoing conflict, insecurity and violence. Environmental organisations have specifically focused on the extension of protected areas and have worked closely with indigenous communities and national parks to further this objective.

A key element of these efforts has been the strengthening of indigenous environmental governance. For example, the NGO Gaia strengthened indigenous peoples' self-governments through the establishment of Indigenous Councils in non-municipalised areas (Gaia Amazonas 2020a). FZS worked closely with indigenous associations and *resguardos*, including the PANI traditional indigenous authority (AATI – *Asociación de Autoridades Tradicionales Indígenas del Amazonas*), the *resguardos* of Curare los Ingleses, Nonuya de Villa Azul and Llanos del Yari Yaguará II on actions aimed at conservation and environmental management to improve the connectivity between the Serranía del Chiribiquete National Park and the Amazon plain (FZS 2021; Amazonía Socioambiental 2018). Together with FCDS, FZS supported an indigenous group in the Yaguará II *resguardo* to claim their territorial rights (interview with: representative of indigenous community, March 2021).

At the same time, environmental organisations also collaborate with state institutions to strengthen environmental governance processes that include indigenous communities in the integrated management of protected areas. Generally, successful collaboration around environmental topics has been possible through the establishment of close relationships and inclusive institutional arrangements with both communities and state institutions. For example, the environmental NGO Gaia and the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation provided technical and financial support to indigenous communities in their efforts to expand four indigenous reserves in the Amazonas (Gaia Amazonas 2020b). At the same time, they also supported the National Land Agency and the Ministry of Environment to carry out the process of the expansion of the *resguardos* (Gaia Amazonas 2020b). This two-pronged effort contributed to the protection of an additional 21,000 hectares of land, with important results in terms of restoring the cultural and environmental integrity of the region (Gaia Amazonas 2020b). Another important focus of these actions was the strengthening of capacities, livelihoods and conservation processes in protected areas such as the community forestry projects implemented in Guaviare by FCDS (FCDS 2021).

In addition, many environmental organisations engage in outreach, communication and advocacy efforts at local, national and international levels in order to raise awareness about the Amazon region's biodiversity and its ecological and cultural richness and importance. These have included, for example, research and monitoring of deforestation, as done by FCDS, which issues annual reports on deforestation and provides in-depth analyses of the causes and drivers of deforestation in the Amazon (FCDS 2020c). Similarly, WWF has conducted research on corruption related to several of the economic activities associated with deforestation (interview with: member of environmental organisation, March 2021), and the NGO ACT supports forest-monitoring efforts through the creation of geoportals and digital reports focusing on deforestation patterns and extractive industries (ACT 2021).

However, the processes of creating and strengthening institutional arrangements for the governance of protected areas are not free of tensions and problems. Reaching agreements on conservation objectives is often challenging and requires time. For example, in the case of the Alto Fragua Indiwasi National Park, it took the NGO ACT six years to reach a co-management agreement between the park authorities and the indigenous community of the Ingano people for the protected area (Gorricho and Schultze-Kraft 2021).

In addition, illegal armed actors have forced organisations to adapt. For example, the high levels of conflict in Caquetá undermined the Alto Fragua Indiwasi National Park's administrative capacity, as the presence of illegal armed groups limited the team's access to and ability to work in certain areas of the park. It also posed significant threats to the Ingano community, which withdrew from its formal role in protected area management. In response to these dynamics, the national park team modified its conservation strategy and focused on building new alliances with local communities, including peasants, in and around the park. The resulting associated conservation agreements proved to have important conservation outcomes in and around the national park (Gorricho and Schultze-Kraft 2021).

Alliances between local communities, protected area managers, and environmental organisations are key in order to advance conservation efforts, even under conditions of conflict.

These examples underline the importance of the role of local actors in the environmental governance in and around protected areas. They also highlight that alliances between local communities, protected area managers, and environmental organisations are key in order to advance conservation efforts, even under conditions of conflict.



Aerial view of Amazon deforestation, municipality of Calamar, Guaviare Department, Colombia.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The Colombian Amazon is facing a deepening security, human rights and environmental crisis. The change of conflict dynamics after the Peace Agreement in 2016 has gone hand in hand with increasing deforestation and violence against local communities, social leaders and environmental defenders in parts of the Colombian Amazon. A complex and ever-changing network of illegal armed groups, private actors and corrupt officials has used the power vacuum left by the demobilisation and disarmament of large parts of the FARC to expand their power and illegal economic activities. Resource grabbing and illegal economic activities, such as the cultivation of coca crops for illicit uses and trafficking of cocaine, as well as mining, cattle ranching and agriculture in protected areas, are key drivers of environmental degradation and increasing violence.

In turn, these dynamics are being exacerbated by the impacts of climate change, which are already negatively undermining livelihoods in the region, particularly those of indigenous communities, and deepening existing vulnerabilities. All this creates a vicious circle of increasing conflict leading to more environmental degradation and ultimately more climate change, with climate change further undermining human security and driving environmental degradation.

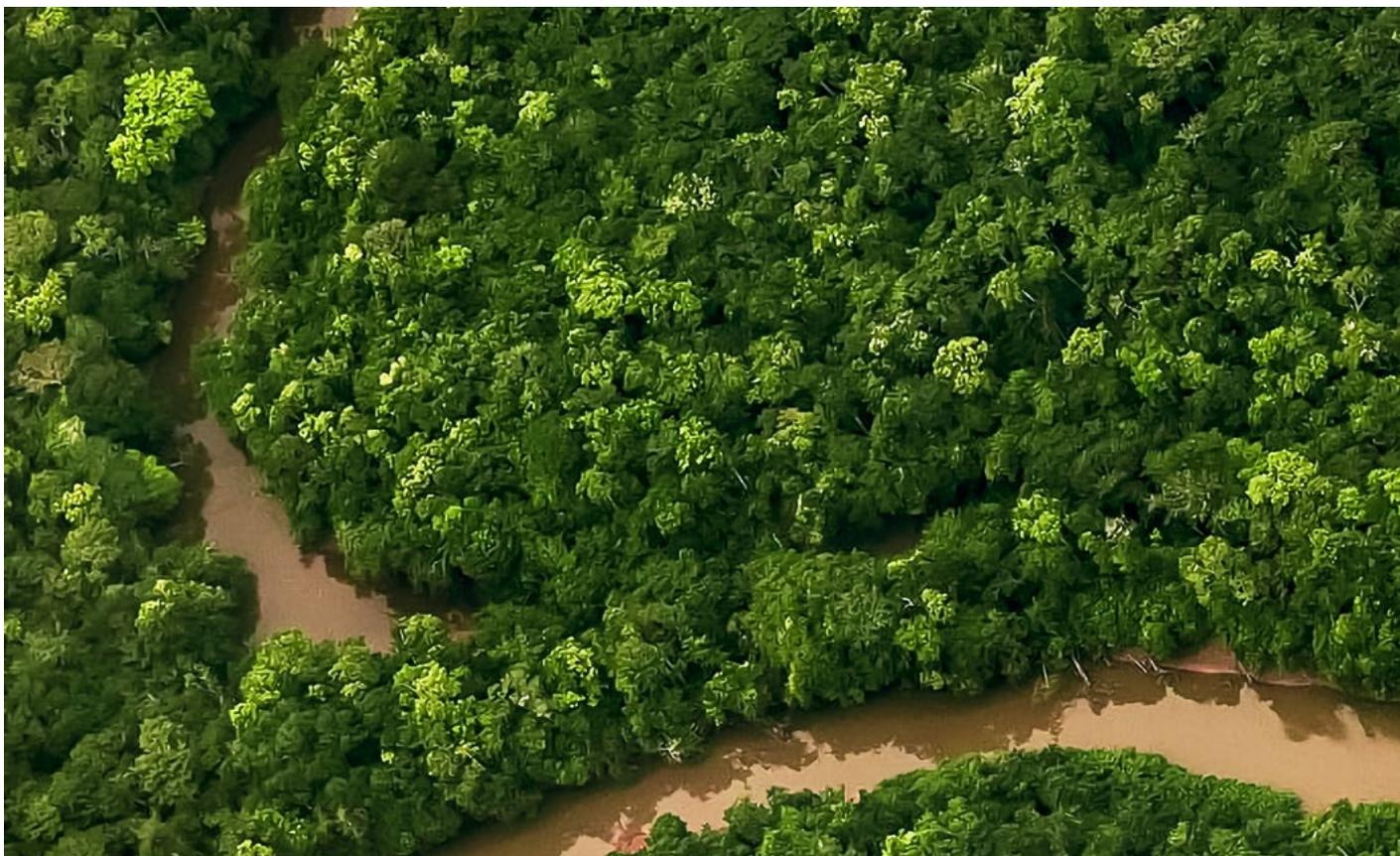
To date, the government's responses to the security, human rights, and environmental crisis in the Colombian Amazon have had limited success. Protection measures have lacked sufficient resources and capacities to be implemented and fallen short of playing a significant role in addressing security risks for those most affected. The military and security operations set up to curb deforestation have also failed to weaken the networks that drive insecurity and environmental degradation in the country. Moreover, they have been a source of concern for organisations, leaders, and communities due to the alleged abuse of force and the tensions generated within the communities.

At the same time, many of the tasks set out in the Peace Agreement still need to be fulfilled in order to address the underlying factors of ongoing insecurity. Progress has been slow, especially with regard to implementing a comprehensive rural reform, as well as the development actions as part of PDET and the efforts to substitute coca crops for illicit uses. In general, all of these efforts are slowed down by the lack of political will and capacity, as well as budgetary constraints. Furthermore, they are not always sufficiently aligned with conservation imperatives.

The current social mobilisation and protests in Colombia reveal the same structural issues of lacking government responses, livelihood insecurity, inequality and a worrying culture of violence and human rights abuses within state security institutions.

While Colombia has made significant progress in terms of its environmental and climate change strategies, environmental governance and protection efforts are also facing problems. In the past, they have often failed to properly include local communities, and to address the root causes of conflict. With the scale of insecurity that the Amazon is facing today, they are not able to effectively protect the environment. In addition, there is a general lack of coordination between different policy areas; for example, it is not entirely clear how security policies contribute to creating conditions for environmental protection and conservation, or to what extent measures and provisions adopted in the environmental and development fields are sensitive to the vulnerabilities and risks faced by communities and environmental defenders.

The crisis in the Amazon is rooted in and connected to the larger sustainable development challenges that Colombia faces. The unequal distribution of economic and political power between elites at the centre and marginalised communities on the periphery is one of the root causes of the crisis – along with an economic development model that relies heavily on the extraction of natural resources. Indeed, the current social mobilisation and protests in Colombia reveal the same structural issues of lacking government responses,



Aerial view of the Cuñaré River in the Chiribiquete National Park, Colombian Amazon, Colombia.

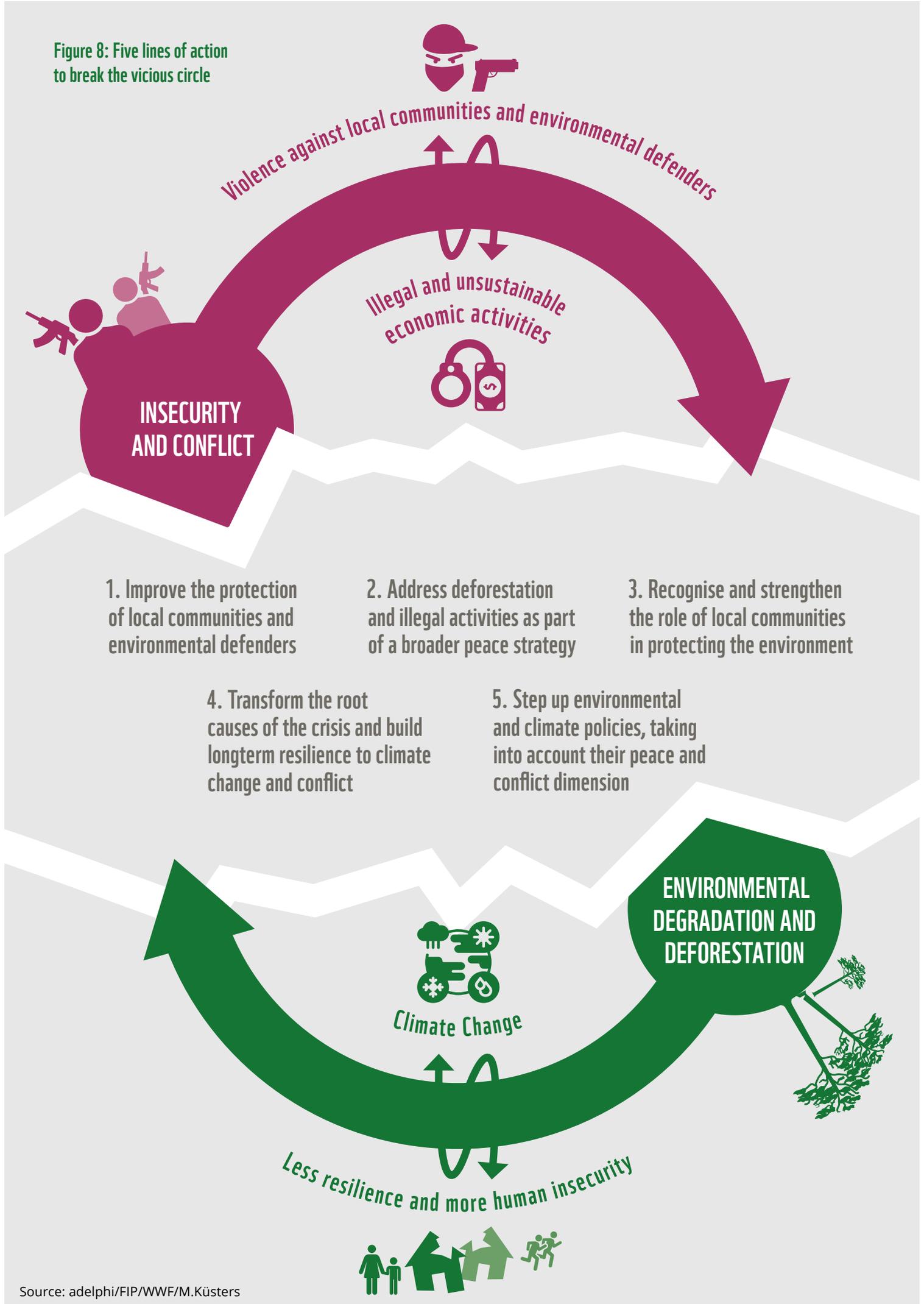
livelihood insecurity, inequality and a worrying culture of violence and human rights abuses within state security institutions (International Crisis Group 2021b). Furthermore, it is important to look beyond Colombia, as the crisis in the Colombian Amazon is also driven by dynamics in the global legal commodity and illegal drug markets, while being embedded in international legal economic networks and structures of organised crime.

Therefore, addressing the root causes of the crisis in the Colombian Amazon cannot be done solely by combating environmental crime and advancing conservation efforts. It requires investing in the broader social and economic needs of marginalised communities and building their resilience to environmental change and degradation, including the impacts of climate change and conflict. It also means addressing many of the governance gaps that are a central feature of the crisis in the Colombian Amazon. A long-term strategy for peace and security in the region needs to enable the sustainable use of natural resources and build strong governance structures for this. This requires not only controlling their illegal exploitation, but also reflecting on how multiple claims on resources can go together in the future: from local people and national elites to the international economic and climate change context.

A long-term strategy for peace and security in the region needs to enable the sustainable use of natural resources and build strong governance structures.



Figure 8: Five lines of action to break the vicious circle



Violence against local communities and environmental defenders

Illegal and unsustainable economic activities

INSECURITY AND CONFLICT

ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION AND DEFORESTATION

Climate Change

Less resilience and more human insecurity

1. Improve the protection of local communities and environmental defenders
2. Address deforestation and illegal activities as part of a broader peace strategy
3. Recognise and strengthen the role of local communities in protecting the environment
4. Transform the root causes of the crisis and build longterm resilience to climate change and conflict
5. Step up environmental and climate policies, taking into account their peace and conflict dimension

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is imperative to respond to the current security, human rights and environmental crisis in the Amazon, before degradation and deforestation reach a tipping point, before the world loses an important carbon sink, and to safeguard local livelihoods. This can only be done by addressing the different dimensions of this crisis: the immediate protection needs of local communities and environmental leaders, as well as deforestation and illegal economies, along with their root causes.

Only by strengthening governance institutions that work for the people living in the Amazon will it be possible to conserve ecosystems storing carbon and make the region more resilient to climate and conflict risks. The most urgent task is to protect people's lives and human rights. However, it is also necessary to work towards guaranteeing their security in a broader sense, combining natural resource protection with public service provision, thus securing the communities' livelihoods and future prospects. Importantly, all the responses to the crisis must take the specific local context and its people as a starting point. They should build upon and strengthen the socio-political institutions and economic needs of the diverse population of the Colombian Amazon, rather than ignore them. Indeed, without harnessing local structures and responding to their needs, it is highly unlikely that this crisis can be resolved.

Five lines of action for an integrated approach

To respond in a timely and effective manner to the security threats and vulnerabilities affecting environmental defenders and to respond to the crisis in the Amazon region, we recommend five lines of action to which different groups of actors can contribute, according to their respective fields of work, skills, and mandates.



1. IMPROVING THE PROTECTION OF ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENDERS AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES

All of the suggested measures above can only succeed if they are embedded within a longer-term strategy for peace and security. Such a strategy should lay out a plan that allocates resources in a way that addresses the broader social and economic needs of rural communities in the Amazon region, while simultaneously restoring trust and cooperation between communities and the Colombian state. Although the activities recommended below are intended to have a longer-term impact, they should start now. They can and should be implemented in parallel with, as opposed to after, actions to protect environmental leaders, combat environmental crime, strengthen the role of indigenous communities and advance environmental protection and climate action.

IMMEDIATE

COLOMBIAN STATE

- **Strengthen protection mechanisms for environmental leaders** to facilitate collective responses, taking into account different local contexts and needs of different groups, in particular indigenous peoples, peasant communities and environmental organisations. This should include consolidating reporting mechanisms for security threats and human rights abuses and security guarantees for people providing sensitive information.
- **Improve security protocols, risk monitoring and emergency assistance for government employees** working in the Colombian Amazon. This includes building, updating and sharing in a timely manner governmental intelligence on which illegal armed groups are present in the region to help mitigate risks for civil servants.
- **Launch and broaden investigations and prosecutions of those responsible for threats or acts of violence** against environmental defenders and local communities.

ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANISATIONS

- **Create a joint sub-regional information system** that provides up-to-date information from different sources and facilitates risk analysis to allow for quick decision-making.
- **Monitor the operations of state security institutions** with regards to their responsibilities under international human rights law and their obligation to protect communities and provide a platform for sharing cases of human rights violations.

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

- **Support environmental organisations** to strengthen their protection strategies, e.g., by providing funding for sharing experiences, external trainings or support, and facilitating exchange with governmental authorities at various levels.
- **Establish a dialogue with the Colombian government** on how it can create an enabling environment for the implementation of protection strategies and cooperate on specific actions.
- **Monitor the Colombian government's performance** in regard to its responsibilities under international human rights law*, and its obligation to protect communities from human rights violations, e.g., by supporting Colombian civil society in creating a **platform to monitor** instances where these responsibilities are not met.



1. IMPROVING THE PROTECTION OF ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENDERS AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES

MEDIUM-TERM

LONG-TERM

- **Strengthen inter-institutional coordination** at national and local levels in the CIPRAT.
- **Ensure that the institutions created by current regulations**, such as the territorial Prevention and Protection Committees, **are active and working** in all municipalities, non-municipalised areas, and departments. This includes providing resources to sub-national jurisdictions that do not have the financial, technical or institutional resources.

- **Strengthen collective self-protection capacities** of environmental organisations. This includes harmonising protection protocols for field work and participating in collective protection mechanisms and in local, regional, and national prevention institutions. It also involves strengthening advocacy strategies for raising awareness of state actors in Colombia and internationally.

- **Share and promote environmental peacebuilding and protection practices**, taking into account experiences from other countries and the knowledge of the international expert community.

COLOMBIAN STATE

ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANISATIONS

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION



2. ADDRESSING DEFORESTATION AND ILLEGAL ACTIVITIES AS PART OF A BROADER PEACE STRATEGY

Tackling deforestation and illegal activities requires a comprehensive approach that critically analyses past experiences from the military and security sectors, together with environmental perspectives. This approach must reflect the underlying causes of conflict and environmental degradation, and draw on a combination of confidence-building, socio-economic development, as well as law and order approaches. To some extent and with precise mandates, such an approach should also draw on hard security measures.

IMMEDIATE

- **Identify, prevent, and mitigate the negative effects of military operations for local communities and environmental organisations based on the “do no harm” principle.** The impact of the security sector’s use of force on environmental authorities, and their relationship with communities, requires special attention. This should include investigating, clarifying, and sanctioning excessive use of force, as well as violation of due process and of the rights of local communities.

COLOMBIAN STATE

- **Re-evaluate the aerial spraying of coca crops for illicit uses,** considering both its effects on the displacement of coca crops for illicit uses to protected areas, and its negative environmental and health impacts on local communities.
- **Prioritise the implementation of the Peace Agreement in areas of greatest conflict,** using actions compatible with nature conservation, ensuring that the benefits reach the most vulnerable populations.

ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANISATIONS

- **Highlight to the government the negative environmental and health effects of aerial spraying,** as well as the fact that, as an unintended side effect, coca production could move increasingly to protected areas and indigenous *resguardos* where spraying is prohibited. Such advocacy should also strongly support voluntary substitution processes and sustainable development alternatives.
- **Continue to provide up-to-date information** on environmental degradation and deforestation and **closely monitor and follow up on the state’s commitments** in these areas.

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

- **Raise awareness of the crisis in the Colombian Amazon and the connection to international organised crime** and value chains and ensure due diligence of transnational companies with supply chain links to Colombia.
- **Continue to support the strengthening of the justice system.** This includes, for example, focusing resources on increasing the capacity to investigate and prosecute environmental crimes and on the training of specialised judges.



2. ADDRESSING DEFORESTATION AND ILLEGAL ACTIVITIES AS PART OF A BROADER PEACE STRATEGY

MEDIUM-TERM

- **Ensure that military and police responses are integrated into a broader peace strategy** that addresses grievances and the root causes of conflict, and is responsive to local needs. Environmental peacebuilding and natural resources should be a central part of this effort.
- **Ensure that economic development, infrastructure, and livelihood options within PDET and PNIS promote rural development as a foundation for peace**, while strengthening ecosystem protection and climate policies, instead of undermining them. This includes prioritising environmental peacebuilding options among the actions identified in the participatory processes of PDET.
- **Strengthen police and court structures to more effectively address environmental crime.** This includes making sure that investigations carried out by the Attorney General's Office and the Judicial Police are conducted by officials who are specialised in environmental crimes. These officials need to be independent and have the necessary financial and technological means to perform their functions. They should also be provided with more training.

- **Continue to strengthen participatory approaches** for the implementation of the Peace Agreement and peacebuilding in the region and to advocate with the national government to create enabling conditions for this.
- **Strengthen monitoring of illegal activities**, harnessing processes that are already in place to help evaluate the scale of the problem and to support decision-making and judicial investigations.
- **Identify, together with communities, legal economic alternatives compatible with conservation goals** in areas affected by illicit activities. This could also include collaborating with the academic community and private sector.

- **Promote and accompany the Action Plan of the Leticia Pact** to advance regional cooperation and expand information-exchange in the fight against illegal activities in the Amazon.
- **Improve coordination of development partners** to ensure that their efforts to address deforestation and illegal activities are effective, well-connected and expandable to the necessary scale.

LONG-TERM

- **Connect the environmental agenda with the transition to the legal economy** of population groups involved in illicit activities driving deforestation. Because much of PNIS's resources come from carbon taxes, the programme should focus on green alternatives that contribute to the Amazon's protection, including reforestation projects, ecotourism, payment for ecosystem services and crops compatible with conservation objectives.*
- **Learn from the lessons of past state interventions to reduce coca crops for illicit uses.** This includes focusing efforts on the strongest links (i.e. those with the greatest capacity for violence and corruption), targeting repressive measures against criminal networks, offering alternatives for vulnerable populations to transition to the legal economy and applying concrete solutions adapted to local realities.
- **Strengthen cooperation with other Amazonian countries** on knowledge and information-sharing across borders, in order to track transnational networks and operations of the region's major criminal organisations. Such cooperation should encompass not only intelligence, but also operational, preventive, anti-counterfeiting, economic and cybercrime responses.**

- **Continue rebuilding relationships and trust between and within communities scarred by violence and armed conflict.** This includes contributing to preventing, resolving and de-escalating local conflicts and disputes in the Amazon Arc area, especially those related to land access and natural resource management.

COLOMBIAN STATE

ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANISATIONS

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION



3. STEPPING UP ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE POLICIES, ACCOUNTING FOR THEIR PEACE AND CONFLICT DIMENSION

The Colombian Amazon is central to achieving the country's sustainability goals and, at the same time, faces enormous conflict-related obstacles to the success of environmental policies. At the very least, environmental protection and climate action efforts need to be conflict-sensitive and account for the region's specificities. Going further, and taking the close links between Colombia's environment and conflict as a starting point, these actions can also actively help build and sustain peace. This would mean integrating environmental and climate action and policies into an overall peace strategy.

IMMEDIATE

COLOMBIAN STATE

- **Provide financial and human resources to the National Policy for the Control of Deforestation and Sustainable Management of Forests (CONPES 4021)**, while ensuring that these resources are not directed to coercive and military approaches and that all actions are designed and implemented in a conflict-sensitive manner.
- **Prioritise the implementation of the multi-purpose cadastre in municipalities with the greatest social conflict** over access to land and that are covered by PDET (Development Programmes with a Territorial Focus).

ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANISATIONS

- Raise awareness of the fact that **conflict and peace in the Colombian Amazon are connected to conservation and climate policies**. Actions that are required from the Colombian government should be highlighted, and there is a need to improve the broader public and policy makers' understanding of current gaps and inconsistencies.
- **Facilitate the participation of local communities** to ensure that government policies on climate and environment are better adapted to the realities on the ground and respond to local needs.

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

- **Integrate conflict sensitivity into all climate finance mechanisms and adaptation projects in the Colombian Amazon**, reflecting the challenges for all stakeholders and impacts of the projects and identifying risk management strategies.
- **Establish strong safeguards** that are appropriate for the context on corruption, participation and the legality of economic activities.
- **Cooperate with NGOs and communities in monitoring conflict sensitivity** and the sustainability of conservation efforts, mediating between them and the government as appropriate.



3. STEPPING UP ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE POLICIES, ACCOUNTING FOR THEIR PEACE AND CONFLICT DIMENSION

MEDIUM-TERM

- **Ensure that national conservation policies, especially CONPES 4021, are conflict-sensitive,** environmentally sustainable and compatible with the sustainable livelihood needs of local communities.
- Strengthen the **peacebuilding dimension of the NDC implementation processes.** This includes designing and implementing specific climate measures that create synergies with efforts to counteract illegal economies as well as to empower and protect local populations and environmental defenders.

- **Promote the restoration of areas affected by deforestation drivers** through participative processes with local communities. This would help establish sustainable economic activities in these areas that are compatible with restoration objectives.
- **Develop and promote intersectoral agreements** with the private sector, government and communities. This would help facilitate programmes for economic alternatives, participatory monitoring on different issues and improved social participation, thus encouraging community empowerment.

- **Provide funding for programmes and projects that specifically integrate peacebuilding and climate action.** This can build on Colombian and international experiences in the field of environmental peacebuilding, all of which can be used and upscaled where relevant.
- **Ensure that forest conservation initiatives are supported by relevant government policies of donor countries** that discourage/sanction economic activities that directly or indirectly contribute to environmental degradation.

LONG-TERM

- **Conduct a conflict- and climate-focused assessment of the government's economic development policies** and their impact on environmental protection and conflict, with a view to developing a coherent national policy framework that covers environmental, economic and territorial issues simultaneously.
- **Outside protected areas, establish appropriate fiscal and land regimes.** These should provide incentives for economic and productive activities that ensure the sustainable use of forests.
- **Coordinate the efforts of all relevant institutions to establish an effective physical and legal presence** around conservation areas, in order to achieve the regional ecological connectivity that is necessary to maintain and restore biodiversity in the Amazon region.

- **Use knowledge and best practices from the environmental peacebuilding field** and climate-related security risks to maximise the peace potential of environmental and climate action. This could be strengthened by, e.g. improving access to information and participation spaces for communities.
- **Accompany and monitor the funding allocated to combatting deforestation and the implementation of the Peace Agreement,** so that resources are implemented properly and with a focus on long-term processes at the institutional level as well as within communities and organisations.

COLOMBIAN STATE

ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANISATIONS

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION



4. RECOGNISING AND STRENGTHENING THE ROLE OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES IN ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

Any policy effort in the Colombian Amazon must be compatible with the needs and perspectives of local – indigenous, peasant, and Afro-descendant – communities, strengthening their governance structures and socio-political institutions. Their management efforts are indispensable to protect the natural and cultural riches of the Amazon region and to develop sustainable livelihoods.

IMMEDIATE

COLOMBIAN STATE

- **Advance the recognition and reparation of indigenous peoples as collective victims of the armed conflict.**
- **Ratify the Escazú Agreement to enable a better protection** of environmental defenders and the inclusion of local communities in environmental governance. In addition, underline the key role of environmental defenders in the implementation of Colombia's international obligations, especially regarding the 2030 Agenda (in Voluntary Reviews) and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (in National Communications).
- **Increase protection of indigenous peoples living in voluntary isolation** through better coordination with neighbouring countries and other indigenous peoples, as well as using satellite monitoring to detect risks and take timely action.

ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANISATIONS

- **Continue and expand political advocacy** at the national and international levels so that the Colombian Congress **ratifies the Escazú Agreement.**

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

- **Maintain a dialogue with the Colombian government on how it can strengthen the role of indigenous and local communities** in environmental protection and management, e.g., by providing a platform for enabling exchange of experiences and best practices with other countries and regions.
- **Advocate for the ratification of the Escazú Agreement**, and highlight the need for compliance with the principles of prior informed consent when negotiating cooperation agreements.



4. RECOGNISING AND STRENGTHENING THE ROLE OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES IN ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

MEDIUM-TERM

- **Recognise the ancestral knowledge of indigenous peoples and experiences of peasant communities** on issues relating to environmental governance, protection, and conservation.
 - Continue **supporting indigenous initiatives to enhance governance in their territories**. This would involve **strengthening the AATIs or Indigenous Councils and *resguardos*** in the departments of Amazonas, Vaupés, and Guainía, as well as promoting the allocation of funding for their operation, their recognition as local authorities in their territories, and the implementation of measures of Decree 632 of 2018.
 - **Strengthen the role of women** in local governance and environmental protection and management, integrating their daily practices and culture of care in local decision-making processes. In addition, it is essential to enable the meaningful participation of **young people**, and to take their potentials and needs into account.
-
- **Support local communities in accessing and using new technologies for monitoring** and gathering evidence of illegal activities, which can be used to make formal complaints. This would enable the strengthening of participatory community monitoring, as mentioned in CONPES 4021.
 - **Continue strengthening environmental governance processes** that include the participation of local communities in the integrated management of various areas with a protected status, as well as in the management of conservation and land use agreements.
 - **Highlight the local knowledge** of indigenous peoples and peasant communities within the environmental governance structure of the Amazon region.

LONG-TERM

- **Strengthen the coordination of conservation roles between national parks and indigenous peoples**, ensuring participation, and developing special management regimes of protected areas that overlap with indigenous reserves.
- **Support the expansion of *resguardos*** as a strategy against deforestation. This should also include promoting connectivity between *resguardos* and protected areas.
- **Advance opportunities for employment, education, and knowledge-building** in the areas of conservation and sustainable production for local communities.

COLOMBIAN STATE

ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANISATIONS

- **Guarantee local and indigenous participation in all cooperation projects** in the Colombian Amazon, particularly in REDD+ projects for which Colombia has established social and environmental safeguards.
- **Highlight the operational principles** defined with *resguardos* under the “indigenous pillar” of the **Visión Amazonía** across the efforts of international cooperation in the region.
- **Support participation of the Colombian Amazon communities in international networks of community leaders** to build capacities and participate in international advocacy processes.

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION



5. TRANSFORMING THE ROOT CAUSES OF THE CRISIS AND BUILDING LONG-TERM RESILIENCE TO CLIMATE CHANGE AND CONFLICT

Any policy effort in the Colombian Amazon must be compatible with the needs and perspectives of local – indigenous, peasant, and Afro-descendant – communities, strengthening their governance structures and socio-political institutions. Their management efforts are indispensable to protect the natural and cultural riches of the Amazon region and to develop sustainable livelihoods.

LONG-TERM ACTIVITIES

COLOMBIAN STATE

- **Accelerate the implementation of the comprehensive rural reform** as foreseen under the Peace Agreement, with regard to land distribution, formalisation of rural land, a multi-purpose cadastre and land use planning. The clarification of property and use rights is especially important for addressing conflict and environmental risks. This implies that protected areas must remain intact and that compliance with protection regulations must be ensured.
- **Improve state presence and interaction with local communities** to ensure that coordinated and legally compliant governmental action prioritises human development needs. It would also ensure that the provision of public goods and conditions to guarantee the economic, social and cultural rights of local populations are prioritised. Improving state presence and interaction would also entail strengthening the “state infrastructure” to guarantee justice and enable the fair resolution of social conflicts.
- At a time when the country is facing severe economic challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is particularly important to **provide support to local communities** and organisations to identify and develop alternative sources of livelihoods, such as sustainable forest management programmes or ecotourism. These activities should be appropriately regulated and monitored in a participative manner by the state, NGOs and communities, so that they simultaneously contribute to, rather than hinder, environmental protection and socio-economic development efforts.
- **Take steps to rebuild trust between local communities and state security institutions.** This could start with an understanding what local communities want and need in terms of security, as well as working together with local authorities in a transparent and open way and providing access to justice.
- **Develop a coherent national policy framework** to integrate and achieve consistent environmental, economic, and territorial policy goals, building on the NDC targets and leveraging the inter-ministerial system of coordination created for climate governance. This will likely require adjusting and reviewing some existing policies, while structurally reforming others, based on multi-stakeholder consultations to ensure feasibility of implementation on the ground. The policy framework needs to be supported by effective compliance mechanisms, sufficient capacities, and budgets for the Amazon region.
- **Establish an action plan to combat corruption** in all activities relevant to the drivers of deforestation, applying the Colombia anti-corruption statute (Law 1.474). To this end, existing analyses of corruption and criminality that propose specific recommendations should be used.



LONG-TERM ACTIVITIES

ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANISATIONS

- **Continue, scale up, and coordinate efforts to reduce the centre-periphery divide** by promoting sustainable rural development, adhering to the principles of environmental peacebuilding, and supporting vulnerable populations.
- **Continue to facilitate cooperation and build trust between governmental institutions and communities.** This would involve supporting local mechanisms of social dialogue for peaceful coexistence, and promoting intercultural agreements for joint management of territories.
- **Strengthen self-governance of indigenous communities** for the management and conservation of their territories, and support their efforts to generate economic income through sustainable activities.

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

- **Provide increased and continuous funding for alternative economic and development strategies for peasant and indigenous communities.** These alternatives should counteract existing pressures to engage in illicit economic activities, and should bring about positive changes in the income and quality of life of vulnerable populations. These strategies include community forestry processes, silvo-pastoral practices, protection of water sources, and employment related to conservation and environmental protection.
- Support **climate- and conflict-sensitive post-pandemic recovery efforts** aimed at long-term regional development, including the improvement of sustainable livelihoods, public services, and sustainable transportation and communications infrastructure. In particular, efforts should aim at linking climate and environmental action with peacebuilding and local livelihoods to increase resilience to climate and conflict risks. Infrastructure development must be accompanied by comprehensive analyses of environmental, social, and economic viability, in order to avoid deforestation and corruption risks.
- **Advocate for and support the government's efforts to bring its economic development policies in line with sustainability imperatives.**
- **Promote the adoption of due diligence measures,** as well as targeted evidence-based interventions to inform consumer behaviour and disrupt markets that traffic and sell illegal products or use illegally harvested raw materials. Additionally, sustainability standards and green markets with governmental, private sector, and community counterparts should be promoted.



Aerial view of Guadua frames for artisanal fishing in the Araracuara Canyon, Department of Caqueta, Colombian Amazon, Colombia.

ANNEX: TYPES OF PROTECTED AREAS IN THE COLOMBIAN AMAZON

The table below provides an overview of the different levels of protection given to ecosystems and the ethnic and territorial rights of indigenous communities in the Colombian Amazon.

| Type of protection | Description |
|--|---|
| <p>Protected area (<i>Área Protegida</i>)</p> | <p>Terrestrial protected areas cover almost 19 million hectares or about 17% of Colombia’s territory. Over 12 million hectares are located in the Amazon region, which is a quarter of its total area. Protected areas comprise the following categories (Parques Nacionales Naturales de Colombia 2021b; RUNAP 2021):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) National Park (<i>Parque Nacional</i>) is an area that is able to ecologically self-regulate, whose ecosystems have not been substantially altered by humans. Its biodiversity, geology and historical or cultural characteristics have national scientific, educational, aesthetic and recreational values and are therefore protected (Parques Nacionales Naturales de Colombia 2021a). Any activity other than conservation, education, recreation, culture, research, recovery and control has not been allowed in these areas since 1959. The territory surrounding and adjacent to national parks must fulfil a buffer function and contribute to conservation objectives (EIA 2021). In the Colombian Amazon, there are 8 national parks, covering approximately 8 million hectares (RUNAP 2021). b) National Reserve (<i>Reserva Nacional</i>) is an area with pristine conditions of flora, fauna and geology, which is intended for the conservation, research, and study of its natural resources (Parques Nacionales Naturales de Colombia 2021a). There are two national reserves in the Colombian Amazon: the Reserva Nacional Nukak (855,000 hectares) and the Reserva Nacional Puinawai (1,092,500 hectares) (Clerici et al. 2020; Parques Nacionales Naturales de Colombia 2021a). c) <i>Área Natural Única</i> is an area which, because of its special flora or geological conditions, is considered a rare natural setting. d) <i>Santuario de Flora</i> is an area dedicated to preserving plant species or communities in order to protect and maintain the genetic resources of the national flora. e) <i>Santuario de Fauna</i> is an area dedicated to preserving wild animal species or communities, in order to protect and maintain genetic resources of the national fauna. f) <i>Vía Parque</i> is a strip of land with a road, possessing unique scenic beauty or natural or cultural values, preserved for educational and recreational purposes. <p>(Guio and Rojas 2019; Parques Nacionales Naturales de Colombia 2021a)</p> |

| Type of protection | Description |
|---|---|
| <p>Forest Reserve of Law 2 of 1959 (<i>Zonas de Reserva Forestal de Ley 2 de 1959</i>)</p> | <p>The Amazon forest reserve areas (ZRFA – <i>Zonas de Reserva Forestal de la Amazonía</i>) are defined by Law 2 of 1959. Accordingly, the land within these areas is partly privately owned, but the state “shall regulate logging in public and private forests, as well as the licensing of sawmills and the granting of concessions. They comprise the three categories A, B and C (IDEAM 1959; Minambiente n.d.a).</p> <p>Type A: dedicated to the maintenance of basic ecological processes necessary to ensure the provision of ecosystem services, the protection of unique landscapes and cultural heritage and to support biological diversity.</p> <p>Type B: characterised by land cover favourable for the sustainable management of forest resources through an integrated management approach of forest, biodiversity and ecosystem services.</p> <p>Type C: biophysical characteristics offer conditions for the development of agroforestry, silvo-pastoral and other sustainable productive activities; these activities must incorporate the forestry component, without reducing natural forest.</p> |
| <p>Indigenous resguardo (<i>resguardo indígena</i>)</p> | <p>An indigenous <i>resguardo</i> is a legal territorial division that guarantees indigenous groups the collective ownership of the territory traditionally inhabited by them (OEA 1993). Therefore, <i>resguardos</i> are not primarily a category for nature conservation, but have lower deforestation rates (CONPES 2020). Some <i>resguardos</i> are located in or overlap with protected areas (Guio and Rojas 2019).</p> |
| <p>Peasant Reserve Zone (<i>ZRC – Zona de Reserva Campesina</i>)</p> | <p>Peasant Reserve Zones are collectively managed territories, regulated by Decree 1777 of 1996 (Moreno et al. 2018). The plan for a ZRC is outlined according to the Sustainable Development Plan, which is elaborated with the direct participation of the communities and the support of a technical team. The communities manage and monitor the implementation of the Plan and its respective projects.</p> <p>In the Colombian Amazon region, there are four ZRCs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – La Perla Amazónica in Puerto Asís, – Putumayo (formerly Bajo Cuembí-Comandante); – El Pato-Balsillas, Caquetá; and – Calamar, Guaviare. <p>(Guia and Rojas 2019; Zona de Reserva Campesina de La Perla Amazónica 2021)</p> |

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to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature.

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