



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A DANGEROUS CLIMATE

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

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Published by	WWF Germany
Date	September 2021
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Production	Maro Ballach/WWF Germany

Suggested citation: FIP and adelphi 2021: A DANGEROUS CLIMATE: Deforestation, climate change and violence against environmental defenders in the Colombian Amazon [Executive Summary]. WWF Germany: Berlin.

This report was developed in close coordination with a working group from the following organisations:

WWF Colombia, WWF Germany, Tropenbos, FCDS – Fundación Conservación y Desarrollo Sostenible, FZS – Frankfurt Zoological Society, GAIA Amazonas, ACT (Amazon Conservation Team) Colombia

Funding partners

The production of this report was collectively supported through the Amazon Conservation Team; Fundación Ideas para la Paz; Frankfurt Zoological Society, WWF Colombia and WWF Germany, through the Protected Areas & Peace Project, funded by the International Climate Initiative (IKI) from the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety (BMU).



Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful to all members of the working group and other experts for their invaluable input and reviews: Catalina Riveros (FIP), Jerónimo Pulido (FIP), Rodrigo Botero (FCDS), Alejandra Laina (FCDS), Camilo Guío (GAIA Amazonas), ACT staff members, Tropenbos staff members and Parques Nacionales de Colombia staff members (PNN/DTAM).

The authors wish to thank the indigenous, peasant, social and environmental organisations that shared their knowledge, perceptions and experiences through the interviews that informed this report. FIP is grateful for the support of the UK Embassy through the project “Resilience and capacity to improve the implementation of the Peace Agreement during the stabilisation phase”.

The authors also wish to thank Adrian Foong (adelphi) for editorial support and Henriette Reinhardt (adelphi) for assistance in different phases of the report writing.

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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.

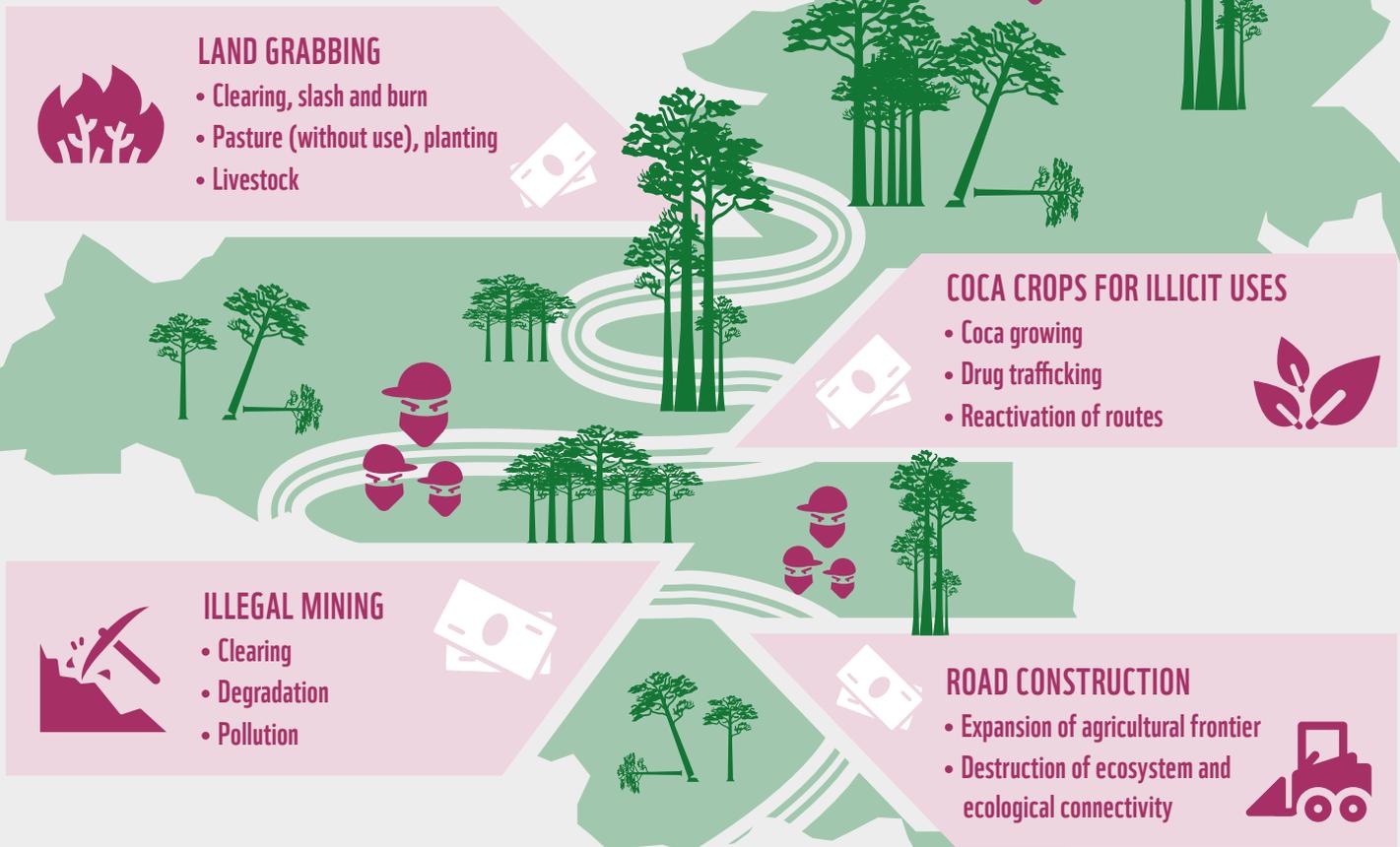
This crisis has been long in the making: It is rooted in over 50 years of armed conflict, illegal armed groups as well as mismanagement and exploitation of natural resources, combined with deep social, economic and political inequalities. However, the dynamics of conflict and environmental degradation 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

Figure 1: 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

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.

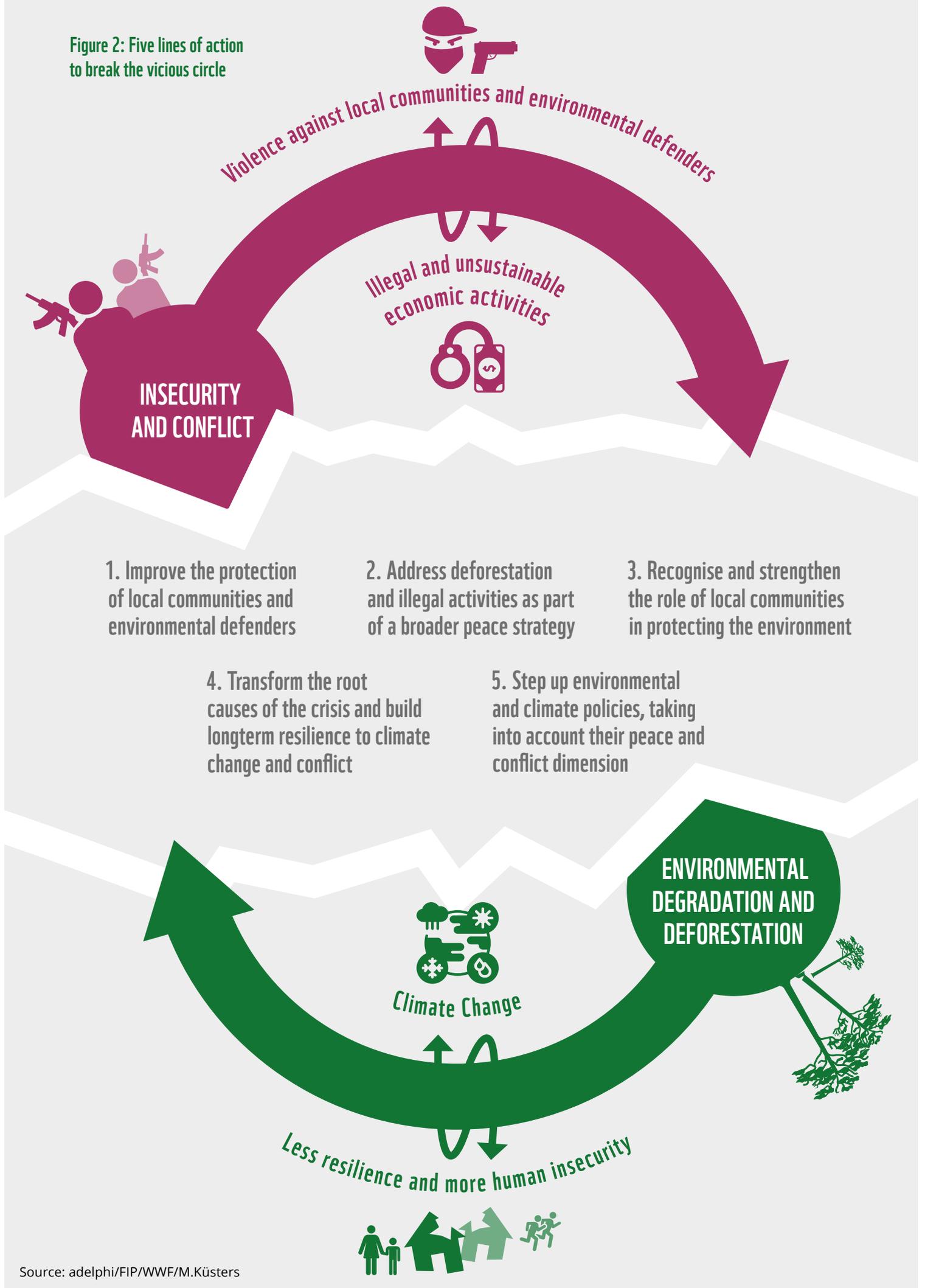
4. Recognising and strengthening the role of local communities in protecting the environment

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.

Figure 2: Five lines of action to break the vicious circle





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